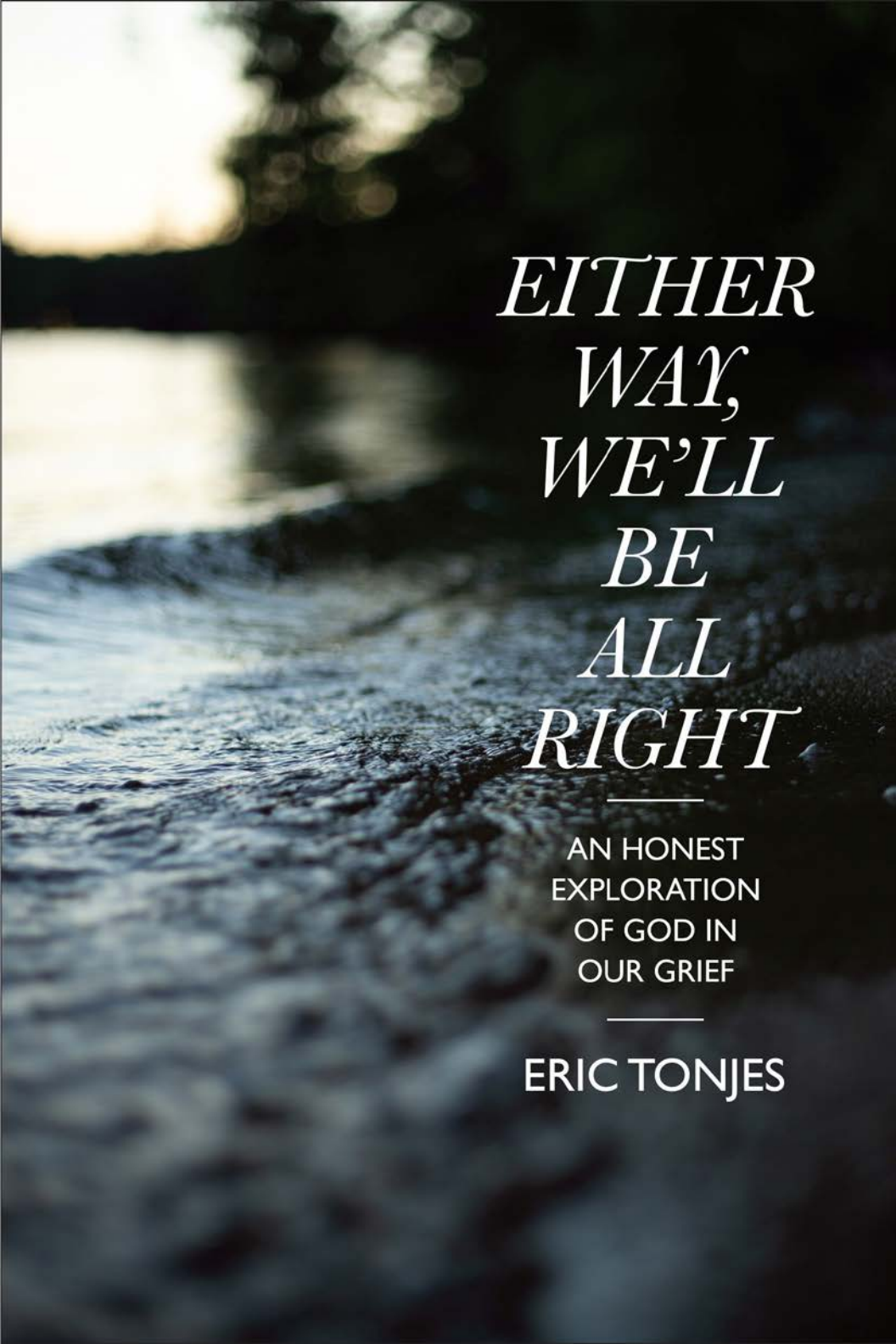

EITHER WAY, WE'LL BE ALL RIGHT
AN HONEST EXPLORATION OF GOD IN OUR GRIEF
ERIC TONJES

This book is a gift. It's gorgeously honest, offering the reader both solidarity and rapport. It's hopeful, in the most down-to-earth, truthful sense. And it's an inspiring call to meet God in the midst of the sorrow we all eventually become acquainted with. Having my own grief experience, I found Eric to be a true brother, a fellow traveler, and one who offers a rich variety of truth to feed on. You won't find empty platitudes here. Please read. Enter the search for God in suffering, the beauty of pain, and the offer of strength.

KATE MERRICK, author of *And Still She Laughs* and *Here, Now*

Because I was in their wedding, I was a witness to the first things of Eric and Elizabeth's life together. Over these past years, I have witnessed the terrible beauty of a couple that is now, too soon, facing the last things together. They have borne this calamity with courage, fidelity, and honor. How have they done that? It is not through comforting themselves with trite answers or finding techniques for making the horrors of our cursed world somehow less awful. What they have done is humbly rely on God's grace to sustain them, always reflecting on the truths taught by Christians for millennia, the truths that Eric writes about so beautifully in this book. Reading this will help you learn to love the God that Eric and Elizabeth love, the God who is their (and our) comfort, even in the deepest darkness.

JAKE MEADOR, editor-in-chief of Mere Orthodoxy

In his refreshingly honest book, Eric Tonjes shows us what it means to preach the gospel to ourselves in suffering and grief. I appreciate his candor because it will encourage the body of Christ to run straight to Jesus in their pain, not away from him. I'm happy to recommend this beautiful book to those who are hurting since a vision of our glorious, always-present God and our eternal future with him is what we most need.

KRISTEN WETHERELL, author of *Fight Your Fears*, coauthor of *Hope When It Hurts*

I don't believe I've ever come across something quite like this: the sophistication of a pastor-theologian who obviously knows a great deal about the nature of God combined with an individual who is personally gutted with grief. In these tender, wisdom-soaked pages, follow Eric Tonjes, who has gone to the depths of human anguish and lived to tell the honest story of how he and his wife were met by the God who suffers with us and who ushers us into a deeper intimacy with life itself. Eric is the kind of pastor everybody wants at their side when facing inexplicable pain.

REV. DR. ERIC E. PETERSON,
pastor of Colbert Presbyterian Church, author of *Letters to a Young Congregation* and (with Eugene H. Peterson) *Letters to a Young Pastor*

Numerous forces at work in modern Western culture shape us to be people who avoid the waves of grief for fear of being overwhelmed. Many Christians in this context attempt to keep God at a distance as well, as if even God might be overtaken by the helplessness of loss. Eric Tonjes shows us a different path. In his poignant and direct way, Tonjes welcomes us on an experiential and theological pilgrimage: Amid our gasping in the waves of loss, the Lord of creation enables us to breathe, to both wrestle with and rest in him. In a book about loss and hope, mortality and divine glory, Tonjes bears witness to human and divine mysteries we so often suppress or ignore.

J. TODD BILLINGS,
author of *Rejoicing in Lament* and *The End of the Christian Life*

This is a book Eric Tonjes never wanted to be qualified to write, but one the rest of us urgently need to read. Grief comes calling on us all, and we have no choice but to open the doors of our hearts to the agony of eventually losing someone we

love. In *Either Way, We'll Be All Right*, Tonjes takes us with him as he experiences the searing pain of seeing his wife eaten alive by cancer. In brutally beautiful prose yet without self-pity, he eloquently wraps language around deep sorrow while pointing the way to a loving God who meets us in our grief.

MAGGIE WALLEM ROWE, speaker, dramatist,
and author of *This Life We Share*

Here, written by one who is suffering, is a book that will serve the suffering. And in a fallen world, all of us will tomorrow find ourselves in that category, even if we are not shedding tears today. Reflecting on his own journey, Eric Tonjes explains with the heart of a pastor how the tears of grief are a lens through which we can most clearly see the beauty and glory of Christ such that we recognize, in Eric's words, that "our vision of God on the throne provides a resource like no other for moving forward under the weight of grief." Eric's thoughts are not just the raw journal entries of a man whose wife has cancer. Rather, his reflections are built on a foundation of rock-solid theology. This is a book that will serve both our minds and our emotions. I highly recommend it.

CHRIS BRAUNS, D. MIN, pastor of The Red Brick Church,
author of *Unpacking Forgiveness*

It is tempting to say that what qualifies someone to speak meaningfully about suffering is their experience of suffering. But I don't think that's right. For the believer, what qualifies us to speak meaningfully about suffering is our knowledge of God in the midst of it. Eric Tonjes does this brilliantly. No whitewashing, no side-stepping, no false hope. Just the gospel of God-with-us, God-for-us, forever.

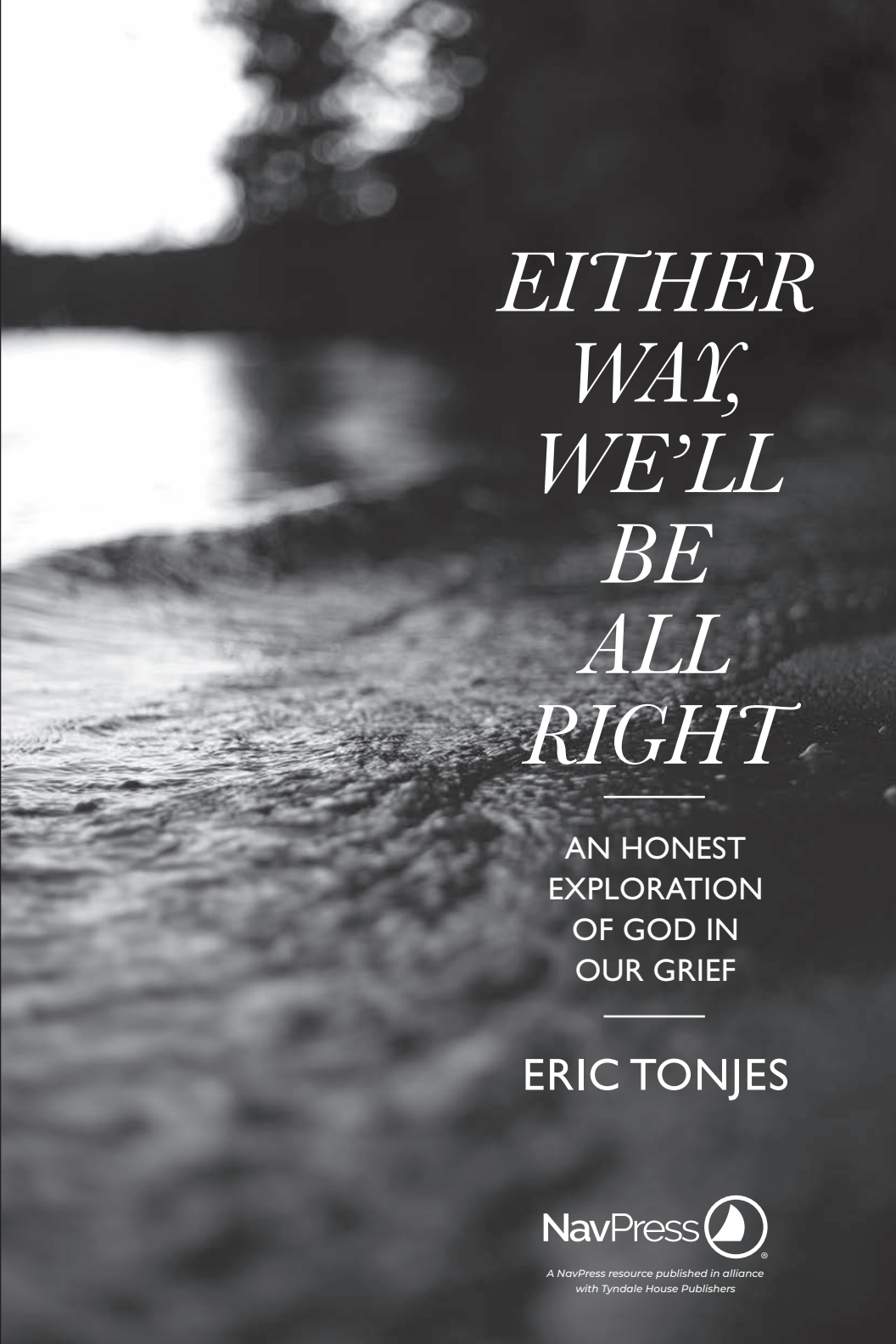
ANDREW ARNDT, lead pastor of New Life East, author of *All Flame*

I waded into Eric Tonjes's manuscript with honest dread—another account of the sad journey of a loving couple into cancer's darkness. I have read it before, lived it before, wept through it before, and did not welcome the weight of it again. And then I began to read. Contrary to my expectations, I found joyful love, honest—really honest—grief, sweet family bonds, humor so out of place that it helps, profound faith, hope to share, and remarkably compelling writing. The long day's journey into night never materialized. Instead, I found myself cheering these champions of the race that will be lost—and then won.

BRYAN CHAPELL, pastor and author

By the time this book is published, our music pastor will have died. His family has watched him diminish in front of their eyes as cancer overtakes him. He watches it himself and mourns. It is one of the most impossible of situations imaginable. Fears and questions abound. This book sits in their home as a companion for their unplanned journey in uncharted territory. Who understands this path better but one who is on it as well? Eric Tonjes offers himself as a fellow pilgrim, traveling on a road none wish to take. He wrestles openly and unapologetically both with the fears and questions entwined with death and with the God who is sovereign over all. His message to you: *Take heart; you do not walk this path alone*.

SARAH VAN DIEST, author of *God in the Dark*



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For Elizabeth.

Even knowing the last pages,

I'd gladly write the story again.

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Introduction

I AM WATCHING my wife die of cancer.

That reality has defined the last few years of our lives. There are moments where it has a strange, stark beauty. We have learned something like wisdom from the pain. It has kindled a deep affection we never would have tasted without teetering on the brink of her mortality. She has shown a grace and peace in her suffering that has displayed Jesus to me and to many others.

Cancer's reality has also been brutal, leaving in my soul churning pools of existential despair and spiritual rage.

As a pastor, I don't think I'm supposed to admit that last bit. People are willing to accept an "It's hard," a long-suffering grimace and blithe platitude. They get uncomfortable when you admit the horror of suffering. It doesn't fit with their picture of spirituality as something upbeat and encouraging. Yet anything less than the ugly truth is an injustice to the reality of a wife and mother in her mid-thirties being eaten alive by warped parts of her own body.

At the same time, as a Christian, I mean the first part too. Amid cancer's agony and wrongness, I have found graces that tear praises from my pressed lips. God has shown up for us, not in some sanctimonious way, but for real. I have yelled at him

and wrestled with him and found his arms around me still, hugging me until the turmoil subsides. He has been a Father to us both, and a fellow sufferer, an adversary, and a lover.

I write this book out of the collision of those realities. We are in the middle of the pain and the provision. I am not reflecting on some tragedy long past, observing with the tranquilizing distance of time. These words are immediate and soaked with tears. In part, I'm writing to try to make sense of the agony and hope that both grip my heart. I'm also hoping that, if you are on a similar road, you might find something familiar that helps you survive.

Here is what this book is not:

- This book is not a solution for the pain you are feeling. There is nothing that can make life's wrongness okay.
- This book is not a book about asking for and receiving miracles from God. He can provide healing, but he also sanctifies suffering.
- This book is not about practical strategies to cope with sorrow, although we'll talk a bit about some practices that are helpful.
- This book is not about holding myself up as an example. If there are lessons here, they have been learned through my own sins and mistakes.

I write this book out of two convictions. One is that all of us, especially those of us in pain, need honesty. I find

something soul nourishing in encountering a pilgrim on Christ's road who is willing to show their callouses and scars. In these pages, I will do my best to reveal mine.

The second is that, even more than such authenticity, we need an experience of God. Every human problem is ultimately theological, not in the sense that we can find an explanation in thick books with Latin phrases but in that our response flows from how we think about God. What we need in our grief is to encounter him. He meets us in our heartbreak and carries us toward healing, although healing is not the same as being whole.

We cannot "solve" sorrow, especially in its first staggering waves. At the beginning of grief, there is nothing someone can do but feel it. And nothing in these pages will change that. Grief, after all, is a process. Just because you and I might both be experiencing it doesn't mean we are side by side. I can only speak out of my experience, and maybe yours is different. That's fine.

But there comes a point where we must move forward and maybe even look for answers. Some of what I write is aimed at those in that latter place. If that isn't you yet, I understand. Read or don't read, as much as you feel is helpful. Give yourself the freedom to simply feel what you need to feel.

In the later stages of grief, while the initial all-consuming shock has passed, it can still be painful to confront what we feel head-on. One of the most difficult things for me has been realizing that sometimes we need to be challenged, even when we are in the shadowy valley. Tumors must be cut out

before healing can come, but my heart aches, knowing how painful that can be. It is destructive to lock our grief away in a closet, but we will also be destroyed if we let it rush in all at once. Walk slowly, leaning on Jesus.

A few words about where we're going. This book is divided into several sections. The first two chapters will address some general ideas about God and the world that set the stage for our journey. The next eight chapters, divided into pairs, will then invite us to explore from several angles how God meets us in our grief. The final three chapters offer some practical discussions about walking through sorrow and then sum up the vision of God we need.

My prayers, as frail and stammered as they sometimes are, are with you. I hope you find some comfort here, and some truth, and the strength to walk forward in the valley of the shadow of death. In this season, I have frequently returned to an old collection of Puritan prayers. Its first supplication reminds us that "the valley is the place of vision." And so we pray,

Let me find thy light in my darkness,
thy life in my death,
thy joy in my sorrow,
thy grace in my sin,
thy riches in my poverty,
thy glory in my valley.[1]

This is what I have found and what I hope you do as well. Our tears, when we gaze through them, can transform from a veil for our eyes to a lens that brings into sharper focus the deep things of God. And as we so behold him, he will meet us and carry us until the day he at last dries our weeping eyes.

PART I

The Journey of Grief

Talking about sorrow is like catching a jellyfish barehanded. It is rigid words grasping at amorphous reality, the fullness of it squirting through my fingers (as I get repeatedly stung in the process). Even if, with words, I manage to pin it to a few of these pages, the dried-out husk left behind fails to express the creature swimming in my gut.

There are various biblical images of grief. It is a sleepless groaning, a twisting of the stomach, a swollen tongue that chokes the mouth, and a drunken bender of the heart. It pierces us with arrows. It dissolves our bones, leaving us slumping bags of flesh. As I seek to wrap language around

sorrow in these pages, understand that no one is more aware than I of the limitations of such an endeavor. To truly name a thing is to comprehend it, to have a sort of power over it. Grief is the ultimate powerlessness. The man who pretends to control it will be quickly proved a liar.

Yet though I cannot truly name the thing, I hope to gesture in its direction. What we are discussing is a journey. I cannot capture every painful vista in these pages. I certainly cannot give shortcuts or clear directions. What I can do is describe the landmarks of sorrow, the vistas and valleys I have experienced along the way. Perhaps, as a fellow traveler, some of it will look familiar—and together, we can learn that we are not alone.

1

CONFRONTING SUFFERING

God first kicked us in the teeth seven years ago. I was finishing seminary. My wife, Elizabeth, and I were expecting our first child. We went to the OB-GYN for a routine visit. Moments after entering the room, the doctor hurried out with a worried look. He returned a few minutes later and told us that Elizabeth was about to give birth. We needed to get to a hospital as soon as possible.

She was twenty-seven weeks pregnant, on the cusp of her third trimester.

A numbness took hold as those words seeped into my brain. Careening along the shoulder of the highway past rush-hour traffic, I felt detached. I was an observer, sitting outside my body. We staggered into the emergency room. I

gave a matter-of-fact explanation to the tired nurse behind the glass. Unable to halt the labor, they transferred her to another hospital. I followed the ambulance, still in a daze.

I remember our daughter's birth in vivid moments. Doctors arguing with surgeons. Hymns I softly sang. Her scream as she was born, tiny and gray. My joyful sob because that feeble cry meant our daughter's lungs were at least developed enough to hold air.

Then the numbness returned.

For the first time in my life, I was confronted by mortality and the terror and sorrow that accompanies it. We didn't know if our daughter would survive. Her beating heart was visible through gossamer skin. Some moments as she lay in the NICU, it paused, forgetting to pump, and we would shake and cajole her back to life. We watched her, in a sense, die and be reborn again and again.

In seminary, they make you give practice sermons to fellow students. Like most young men studying for ministry, I was far too confident of my prowess. I had chosen, a week before our daughter's birth, to preach on Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac. It seemed poignant and courageous when my wife was five months pregnant. Now, realizing that God may well be asking us to surrender our child in a literal sense, the story left me gutted. I felt the horror of those words: "Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son" (Genesis 22:10). Seeing my daughter laid out in her incubator, tangled in wires, I knew the fear and trembling that must have seized the patriarch.

Numbness became my shelter as I confronted the specter of death. My emotions seemed too big, too incomprehensible to confront, so I shut down. I locked my heart behind steel blast doors, unassailable and unfeeling. In one way, it worked. The numbness helped me survive. It was only later, over the months we lived at the hospital, that I began to recognize it came with a cost.

C. S. Lewis comments—in *The Four Loves*—on the dilemma I faced: "To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one. . . . Lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket—safe, dark, motionless, airless—it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable."[1]

About two months after our daughter's birth, I had a moment of clarity. Holding her fingers, stroking her hair, I realized I felt nothing. My hands were performing the actions of a loving parent, but my heart was a sealed room. What started as a tool for survival was beginning to turn me distant and cold. Unless the sorrow and fear I felt were confronted, I knew I would forever be a mere facsimile of a father to our girl.

That recognition didn't instantly change my heart. I was just holding on from day to day. It took months of counseling and years of reflection to name what I unconsciously realized in that moment. There was something wrong with

how my heart responded to suffering. Something planted deep in my soul by the culture I had grown up in kept me from appropriately entering into grief.

Our Culture's Silence

Our world doesn't know what to do with sorrow and death. While nobody likes these painful realities, they pose a special problem to our way of thinking. Our sophisticated Western civilization is rendered speechless before the grave.

I've seen it firsthand as we've confronted my wife's terminal diagnosis. There's that word, *terminal*. It, like *incurable* and other euphemisms, has an appropriate sense of finality but avoids the awfulness of the truth. When I get tired of doublespeak, I sometimes start using the *D* word in those conversations. "My wife is dying." "After she dies." I can see people flinch when I say it. We cannot handle naked statements of mortality.

Part of this discomfort is simply that death is invisible to many of us. Sure, we see it on the television, but there it is mediated to us by the smooth, perpetually youthful faces of actors and newscasters. In our personal lives, it is almost entirely absent. We put the sick in hospitals. We ensconce the elderly in nursing homes. Many people I know have never seen a corpse, at least not before the alchemy of embalming restores its lifelike luster.

That isn't how it used to be; for most of history, doctors came to houses and disease was on semipublic display. As infant mortality has plummeted and life expectancy has

stretched and technology has made us safer, consciousness of our fragility has drained away.

Of course, these advances have great benefits. Our premature daughter would have been dead in minutes if she had been born twenty years earlier. But somewhere along the way, we crossed a threshold. Disease and dying became too alien, so we hid them away.

In the past, grief was a public process. The bereaved would wear black clothes and veil their faces. They would weep in the streets. Torn shirts, sackcloths, and ashes on their foreheads were intentionally visible marks of sorrow. We have banished such public grieving. When we encounter it today, which is rare, we seem to think the person must have a disorder. *It can't be healthy to wear pain so openly*, we think, judging those people for a lack of self-restraint. As a result, sorrow ends up hidden. It festers in our hearts, but we suppose we must be abnormal in how we experience it because we do not see it in others.

Our efforts to hide grief and death from view, though, are not the root issue. We shut our eyes because our way of viewing the world can't handle people dying. It exposes the lies we believe.

For most of history, people received meaning in their lives from something outside themselves. Maybe it was in serving family and community. Maybe it was in the invisible currency of "honor." Maybe it was in serving a higher power. Each of these approaches came with issues, but they could all handle mortality. Family and community would continue

after someone was gone. Dying an honorable death was the goal of an honorable life. The gods live on, and perhaps in death, a person lived on with them.

But in our world today, things are different. We get meaning from within ourselves. We're chasing self-realization and self-fulfillment, becoming our best selves and living the American dream. There are good things about this individualism, but it starts to unravel when it faces the grave. Death is the final self-dissolution. It is the end of the pursuit of happiness. Our culture offers no comfort in death, just a fatalistic acknowledgment that even the best party ends someday. "Have fun while it lasts," we are told, "and try not to notice the ticking of the clock and the aging face in the mirror."

Our form of Christianity is equally unhelpful. We have reimagined our religion to fit the world we inhabit, starting with the things it values and then making Jesus meet those desires. Sometimes this is obvious. Our culture tells us the goal of existence is finding yourself and being comfortable; we make Jesus into the ultimate guru of self-esteem. The culture desires material possessions; Jesus' promised blessings turn into Porsches and McMansions, and all that biblical stuff about the perils of wealth doesn't really mean what it says. The world wants to sin without repercussions; Jesus is all about being welcoming and never judging.

However, the compromise can also sneak in at the edges. One of the good things the church seeks to do is answer the questions of the surrounding culture. It seeks to be relevant, to contextualize Christ's message in a way that people will

understand. That goal is noble, but it comes with a hidden cost. If we only respond to the world's inquiries, we lose significant parts of the Christian message. Jesus stands to the world as a question before he offers it any answers. He is a provocation, a mirror within which we recognize what is broken about our way of thinking and living. The cross wasn't Rome's response to a failure to adequately contextualize but an attempt to kill the question Jesus posed.

Because our culture cannot bear to look at death, and because the church has sought to meet the culture on its own terms, we often fail to speak of dying. Aphorisms ("They're in a better place") are aimed at ending discussions, not beginning them. "Heaven is real," we say, as if what that means is, "Don't worry about the fact that in a few short years, your body will break down, worms will eat your flesh, and you will vanish from the earth and have to give an account to your Creator."

Of course, it hasn't always been this way. In fact, the reality of death and dying used to be ever-present in Christian literature and poetry. A bestselling genre of books for centuries was *ars moriendi*, the "art of dying." Old hymns are full of refrains about suffering, pain, and mortality. Past saints lived in eras when death could not be hidden, so they confronted it. We do not.

Christians, just like the broader world, try to hide life's dark corners. You can feel it in the ways we often try to give comfort. "It will be okay," we might say, and while in a sense that is ultimately true, it is also definably false. There

is nothing "okay" about children losing their mother or the world losing the unique blessing of a human life. "We're here for you, whatever you need." The help is welcome, but what we really need, a cure for cancer and the deeper disease of mortality, isn't on offer, and a frozen casserole can't take that away. What we almost never say is what should be our starting place: "Death is terrible. I am sorry. This is not how it should be."

I understand that it is hard to know what to say. I've learned to regard such responses with sympathy and even appreciation for the heart they show. What they reveal, though, is a discomfort with the reality of the world. Death and anguish, disease and mourning are all guaranteed parts of the human condition. Christians, more than anyone, should be able to acknowledge them directly.

Learning Lament

Smack dab in the middle of the Bible is the book of Psalms, a collection of poems that formed the hymnbook for ancient Israel. These were the songs they sang together in worship, the lyrics that were furrowed into their memories. The book of Psalms is not uncomfortable with grief or hardship or death; it is its constant refrain.

Just start flipping through the Psalms: "O LORD, how many are my foes! Many are rising against me" (Psalm 3:1); "Give ear to my words, O LORD; consider my groaning" (Psalm 5:1); "Be gracious to me, O LORD, for I am languishing; heal me, O LORD, for my bones are troubled. My soul

also is greatly troubled. But you, O LORD—how long?" (Psalm 6:2-3); "Why, O LORD, do you stand far away? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?" (Psalm 10:1). Of the first ten psalms, seven are cries of heartache or repentance in the face of suffering, and there are 140 to go.

As an extreme example, read Psalm 88. Go ahead, you can pause and read through it. Try doing it out loud; taste the words. The Sons of Korah, who wrote it, start with a cry to the Lord and then recount a life full of struggle. They feel like they are teetering on the brink of death (Psalm 88:3-6). They are drowning under an ocean of grief (Psalm 88:7, 16-17). Their friends have abandoned them, and God himself seems to have turned his back (Psalm 88:8-12). The psalm wallows in anguish—and at the end, they are still in that terrible place. No happy ending tied up in a bow; rather, "You have caused my beloved and my friend to shun me; my companions have become darkness" (Psalm 88:18).

Few of the Psalms sit only in the darkness, but many pass through it. Consider Psalm 22, which Jesus himself quoted from the cross. It starts with the most gut-wrenching cry: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Psalm 22:1). What follows is a picture of a person wrestling with God and with his own heart. The psalmist names something true: "Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel" (Psalm 22:3). Then he collapses back into the reality of life: "I am a worm and not a man, scorned by mankind and despised by the people" (Psalm 22:6). Another note of hope: "Yet you are he who took me from the womb; you made

me trust you at my mother's breasts" (Psalm 22:9). Another tormented cry: "I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax; it is melted within my breast" (Psalm 22:14). This is, consistently, the pattern of these "psalms of lament." They call us to find hope in the Lord, but they do it while also acknowledging our broken hearts and circumstances.

These divinely inspired songs stand as a rebuke to our discomfort with grief. The Bible doesn't shrink from pain; it names our sorrows and brings them before the throne of God. Even more shockingly, it invites us to sing of them to God and together as God's people. Just imagine what it would communicate if we stood with our brothers and sisters in worship and sang, "Why have you forsaken me? I am a worm and not a human being."

A dear friend who has struggled with depression tells me what comfort he finds in these psalms. He feels like, in our world, the darkness in his heart is something he must disguise. Others would judge him or try to fix him if he shared it. The way we handle depression is symptomatic of our broader failure to confront the darkness. This is especially true for Christians who treat it as something to be dismissed: "Snap out of it. Get over yourself. Just cheer up and trust in Jesus!" As if it were so simple. Our failure can also be manifested in more therapeutic solutions. As much as counseling and medication can be sweet balms for those trapped in the cycles of clinical depression, at times, they become excuses to fix rather than reasons to feel. Sorrow becomes like a variant

strain of influenza. Neither those in denial nor those rushing to remedies are willing to confront the deeper truth that life can bring great sadness and that we ought to feel it.

Of course, the Psalms don't leave us with only despair. Most of them also come with an invitation to move toward God. Psalm 22 does arrive at a place of hoping for divine deliverance. It calls those who fear God to praise his name and ends with a heart-lifting picture of God's Kingdom covering the earth and gathering the nations. Even Psalm 88 brings its darkness before the Lord, repeatedly seeking his presence.

Yet this pattern does not mean that the psalmist's struggle is over. Instead, this movement of grief to praise is meant to be repeated over and over. The Psalms are not transcriptions of a counseling session or a self-help talk, offering a method to solve our problems; they are the daily cries of God's people. They are a hymnbook. Over and over, week after week, those singing them would confront the darkness and remind themselves of their hope.

Entering Grief

Which brings us back to my stony heart as I stood beside my daughter's hospital bed. I was doing everything in my power to stay aloof from grief, keeping it safely contained and out of sight. What I had missed—what the Christian culture I had grown up in had failed to teach me—was that, while there is hope in Jesus, we can only experience that hope by entering the darkness.

As a pastor, I sometimes counsel people with significant wounds from their past. Their tendency is to "stuff it," to lock away the hurt in some hidden corner of their brains. This response is normal. When they first experience those traumas, it is even necessary. If any of us bore the weight of all the sadness in our lives at once, we would be crushed.

The issue with this approach is that it can change over time from a survival mechanism to a habit. We stuff everything into that compartment, deny it is there, and throw away the key. Yet grief will not be ignored. Pressure builds against the walls we erect. Cracks start to form. The only way to keep it in is to make ourselves harder and harder. Any emotion becomes a risk, any attachment a potential chink in our armor, so in the name of avoiding sorrow, we end up losing joy and love—and finally, the capacity for any feeling at all.

We must realize, when we talk about beginning to lower that barrier, that things will get worse before they get better. The only way to relieve the pressure is to face some of the pain. This was certainly true of my own experiences. The way I handled my daughter's near death was the culmination of years of compartmentalization. As I started to confront what I was feeling, it wrecked me. I was plunged into the waters of despair. It was miserable.

On the other side, though, lay something that was worth it. By walking into those wounds, I became able to break through numbness and feel my love for our little girl. Even more, it gave me the tools to be present amid the further grief Elizabeth's cancer has brought.

In John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, the Pilgrim (Christian), brought at last to the end of the expedition, confronts the waters of death alongside his companion Hopeful. Before them is the Celestial City, the object of their quest, but between them and its gates is a deep river with no bridge. Their companions tell them that they cannot reach the city except by passing through its churning depths. They don't have to make this final journey. They can turn back and live a while longer. Yet what Christian and Hopeful both recognize is that only by passing through the waters can they reach the joy of the far shore.

For Bunyan, the river is an image of physical death. Yet it speaks also to the many smaller deaths we confront every day. Christian's dilemma teaches us a crucial principle: The way to life always lies through death. The way to healing always passes through pain. We must step into the Jordan before we can reach the far shore.

Our modern world teaches us to avoid sorrow, to drown it out with distraction or self-medication or positivity. Modern Christianity seeks to use Jesus for this same end, as a way to stay positive and be encouraged and never confront the river that looms. These approaches can help us keep it together temporarily, but they can never offer us life. Only by plunging into the waters, half-sure we will drown, can we reach the city of light.

Here is the question I have been confronting these last years as I have faced my wife's impending death: Is this a river I will seek to cross, or will I hide here on the shore? I

am writing this book in an attempt to walk into the water, to name the sorrow in my heart and wade deeper into the Jordan's currents.

How do we make such a painful journey? In the middle of the river, Pilgrim is overwhelmed by doubt and despair. He is convinced that he will drown. Hopeful, though, finds sure footing and helps his friend. What makes the difference is that Hopeful is sustained by a set of truths deep in his heart—truths of Scripture that he cries to his sinking friend—and by a vision of their destination. "Brother," he says, "I see the gate and men standing by it to receive us."[2] If we fix our eyes on the hope of life on the far shore and walk forward with God's promises in our hearts, the water ceases to be a barrier and becomes instead the road to life.

Christianity does not remove our suffering. It calls us to plunge into sorrow up to our necks. The good news is that it also offers us a vision of the world and of God that provide the resources we need to survive.