

SHARON JAYNES

Bestselling Author of *Enough: Silencing the Lies That Steal Your Confidence*

WHEN YOU
DON'T
LIKE YOUR
STORY



*What If Your Worst Chapters
Could Become Your Greatest Victories?*

Praise for *When You Don't Like Your Story*

“I deeply understand the pain of not liking parts of my own story. Yet time and again, I’ve seen God restore and redeem my life even when it doesn’t end up the way I would have chosen. The stories and hope within the pages of *When You Don’t Like Your Story* are a gift to the world, and I’m grateful my friend Sharon has written this treasure for us all!”

—LYSA TERKEURST, #1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING
AUTHOR AND PRESIDENT OF PROVERBS 31 MINISTRIES

“If we’re being honest, we all have parts of our story that we don’t like, that we don’t want, and corners of darkness that if we knew were coming would cause us to back away slowly, then turn and run as fast as we can. In *When You Don’t Like Your Story* Sharon so graciously and practically illuminates how it’s God’s specialty to use our darkest days and turn them from trash into triumph. This book will invite you to look at your story with fresh eyes and walk in the freedom that comes from trusting God with every page.”

—JENNIE LUSKO, LEAD PASTOR OF FRESH LIFE
CHURCH AND BESTSELLING AUTHOR

“Sharon Jaynes knows how to offer kind and wise encouragement for those times when life brings an unexpected turn or a painful circumstance. With grace and gentleness, she points us to the certainty of divine providence as our source of hope and peace.”

—BOB LEPINE, COHOST OF *FAMILYLIFE TODAY*

“If you are living in the middle chapter of a painful story right now, I cannot recommend this book enough. So many of us attempt to wrap our heads around God’s goodness and sovereignty, while our hearts continue to take a licking. Sharon Jaynes’s *When You Don’t Like Your Story* is the balm you need to heal the hurts and the courage to continue. This literary journey will give you the courage to persevere in your own journey.”

—WENDY SPEAKE, AUTHOR OF *THE 40-DAY SOCIAL MEDIA FAST*,
THE 40-DAY SUGAR FAST, AND COAUTHOR OF *TRIGGERS*

“Sharon’s introductory words gripped my heart and held it to the last page. *When You Don’t Like Your Story* will help you see that no matter who you are, what you have done, or what has been done to you, the world needs to hear your story of redemption, forgiveness, surrender, and grace. This book will not only help you see why your story matters but will also help you tell it.”

—PAT LAYTON, AUTHOR, *LIFE UNSTUCK: FINDING PEACE WITH YOUR PAST, PURPOSE IN YOUR PRESENT, AND PASSION FOR YOUR FUTURE*

“If your story isn’t turning out the way you planned, Sharon Jaynes will help you have hope for the future, strength for your current circumstances, and peace even when you don’t understand. This book is a powerful and encouraging reminder of what’s true no matter what: the Author of your life is good, you are loved, and He alone holds the pen that gets to write ‘The End.’”

—HOLLEY GERTH, LIFE COACH AND BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE POWERFUL PURPOSE OF INTROVERTS: WHY THE WORLD NEEDS YOU TO BE YOU*

“Most of us have an imperfect life story but too often we stay stuck, waiting for the ‘happily-ever-after’ to magically happen to us. But every epic narrative has a heroic guide that helps lead the characters to their victory! Sharon Jaynes is that wise, trusted, and experienced mentor who God *will use* to transform your tale into triumph. *Your Worst Chapters CAN Become*

Your Greatest Victories. I know, because God did it for me, for Sharon, and is waiting to give you a life story that will be used to bless and build others too. This book is the key to your future.”

—PAM FARREL, AUTHOR OF BESTSELLING *MEN ARE LIKE WAFFLES, WOMEN ARE LIKE SPAGHETTI*

“For every season of life you wish you could forget, every choice you carry in secret shame and the anger that burns for what’s been done to you, Sharon Jaynes has a message: God wastes nothing! In *When You Don’t Like Your Story*, Sharon takes you on a journey through personal and biblical stories that will show you how God is using everything that has happened to you to prepare you for an extraordinary destiny! This is a book to read and reread as God’s Truth poured through the pages will restore your heart for what is ahead.”

—GLYNNIS WHITWER, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF COMMUNICATIONS, PROVERBS 31 MINISTRIES

“Few things are as lonely as an unexpected story. Faced with a reality that doesn’t look at all like you imagined, it’s oh-so-easy to slip into a pit of regret and despair. *Is there any hope? Will I ever feel real joy again?* With both truth and grace, Sharon Jaynes offers you the comfort of her presence and experience, gently reminding you that in even the hardest of stories, there is still Hope. And His name is Jesus.”

—MICHELE CUSHATT, AUTHOR OF *RELENTLESS: THE UNSHAKEABLE PRESENCE OF A GOD WHO NEVER LEAVES*

“Almost all of us have parts to our story we would like to erase. I know I’ve made mistakes, said wrong things, and taken some wrong turns that I only wish I could undo. This is why I am thankful for Sharon Jaynes’s new book *When You Don’t Like Your Story*. I am reminded that God is always working, even in hard-to-make-sense-of histories. Grabbing hold of the truths within these pages has encouraged me to give the broken pieces of my life to God and watch Him do amazing things.”

—KELLY BALARIE, AUTHOR OF *REST NOW: 7 WAYS TO SAY NO, SET BOUNDARIES, AND SEIZE JOY*

“*When You Don’t Like Your Story* is a powerful reminder that God’s redemptive grace can rewrite the most tragic of tales—including yours. God invites each of us beyond our broken to His beauty. These pages give clear, biblical direction to help you move forward and step into a better story.”

—GWEN SMITH, HOST OF THE *GRACEOLOGIE* PODCAST,
AUTHOR OF *I WANT IT ALL* AND *BROKEN INTO BEAUTIFUL*

WHEN YOU
DON'T
LIKE YOUR
STORY

ALSO BY SHARON JAYNES

*The Power of a Woman's Words: How the Words
You Speak Shape the Lives of Others*

Enough: Silencing the Lies That Steal Your Confidence

*Take Hold of the Faith You Long For: Let
Go, Move Forward, Live Bold*

*A Sudden Glory: God's Response to Your Ache for Something More
Knowing God by Name*

Trusting God

Becoming a Woman Who Listens to God

Building an Effective Women's Ministry

BOOKS ON MARRIAGE AND FAMILY

*Lovestruck: Discovering God's Design for
Romance, Marriage, and Sexual Intimacy*

Praying for Your Husband from Head to Toe:

A Scriptural Guide to Daily Prayer

A 14-Day Romance Challenge

Becoming the Woman of His Dreams: Seven

Qualities Every Man Longs For

Being a Great Mom, Raising Great Kids

WHEN YOU
DON'T
LIKE YOUR
STORY

*What If Your Worst Chapters Could
Become Your Greatest Victories?*

SHARON JAYNES



NELSON
BOOKS

An Imprint of Thomas Nelson

© 2021 Sharon Jaynes

All rights reserved. No portion of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, scanning, or other—except for brief quotations in critical reviews or articles, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Published in Nashville, Tennessee, by Nelson Books, an imprint of Thomas Nelson. Nelson Books and Thomas Nelson are registered trademarks of HarperCollins Christian Publishing, Inc.

Thomas Nelson titles may be purchased in bulk for educational, business, fund-raising, or sales promotional use. For information, please e-mail SpecialMarkets@ThomasNelson.com.

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version[®], NIV[®]. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.[®] Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.Zondervan.com. The “NIV” and “New International Version” are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.[®] Scripture quotations marked AMP are taken from the *Amplified Bible, Classic Edition*, Copyright © 1954, 1958, 1962, 1964, 1965, 1987, by the Lockman Foundation. Used by permission (www.Lockman.org). All rights reserved. Scripture quotations marked ESV are from the ESV[®] Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version[®]). Copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. Scripture quotations marked THE MESSAGE are from *The Message*. Copyright © by Eugene H. Peterson 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 2000, 2001, 2002. Used by permission of NavPress. All rights reserved. Represented by Tyndale House Publishers, Inc. Scripture quotations marked NET are from the NET Bible[®]. Copyright © 1996–2006 by Biblical Studies Press, L.L.C. <http://netbible.com>. All rights reserved. Scripture quotations marked NLT are from the Holy Bible, New Living Translation. © 1996, 2004, 2007, 2013, 2015 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved. Scripture quotations marked CSB are taken from the *Christian Standard Bible*[®], Copyright © 2017 by Holman Bible Publishers. Used by permission. *Christian Standard Bible*[®] and CSB[®] are federally registered trademarks of Holman Bible Publishers.

Any Internet addresses, phone numbers, or company or product information printed in this book are offered as a resource and are not intended in any way to be or to imply an endorsement by Thomas Nelson, nor does Thomas Nelson vouch for the existence, content, or services of these sites, phone numbers, companies, or products beyond the life of this book.

ISBN 978-1-4002-0970-5 (TP) ISBN 978-1-4002-0971-2 (eBook)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Jaynes, Sharon, author.

Title: When you don't like your story : what if your worst chapters could be your greatest victories? / Sharon Jaynes.

Description: Nashville : Nelson Books, 2020. | Includes bibliographical references. | Summary: "Bestselling author, cofounder of Girlfriends in God, and writer for Proverbs 31 Ministries Sharon Jaynes reveals the secret to living a better story: understanding that the worst parts of our past are the very things God uses most"-- Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2020021814 | ISBN 9781400209705 | ISBN 9781400209712 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Self-actualization (Psychology)--Religious aspects--Christianity. | Success--Religious aspects--Christianity. | Regret--Religious aspects--Christianity. | Providence and government of God--Christianity. | Trust in God--Christianity.

Classification: LCC BV4598.2 .J395 2020 | DDC 248.4--dc23 LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020021814>

Printed in the United States of America

21 22 23 24 25 LSC 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To Linda Butler
For shared stories and shared lives
Forever friends

Contents

| | | |
|-----------------------|--|-----|
| <i>Chapter One</i> | May I Please Have a Different Story? | 1 |
| <i>Chapter Two</i> | Why Me? Why This? Why Now? | 9 |
| <i>Chapter Three</i> | There's Always a Meanwhile | 29 |
| <i>Chapter Four</i> | The Scab You Won't Stop Picking | 47 |
| <i>Chapter Five</i> | Changing the Ending to Your Story | 65 |
| <i>Chapter Six</i> | Leaving the Shame Place | 83 |
| <i>Chapter Seven</i> | When Forgetting Is Not Enough | 105 |
| <i>Chapter Eight</i> | Why Your Story Matters | 119 |
| <i>Chapter Nine</i> | Speaking Up When You Tend to Clam Up | 139 |
| <i>Chapter Ten</i> | Disqualified? Says Who? | 157 |
| <i>Chapter Eleven</i> | Lens One or Lens Two? Which Is Better? | 177 |
| <i>Chapter Twelve</i> | The Perfect Ending to an Imperfect Story | 187 |
| | Acknowledgments | 195 |
| | My True Identity in Christ | 197 |
| | Prayer for Forgiving Others | 200 |
| | Prayer for Receiving God's Forgiveness | 201 |
| | Bible Study Guide | 203 |
| | Notes | 233 |
| | About the Author | 239 |

Chapter One

May I Please Have a Different Story?

*Your life story is a biography of wisdom and grace
written by Another. Every twist of the plot is for the
best. Every turn he writes into your story is right.
Every new character or unexpected event is a tool of
his grace. Each new chapter advances his purpose.*

—Paul Tripp, *You Are Not the Author of Your Story*

Mommy, tell me a story.”

That was a common request when my son was a little guy. Whether riding in the car, getting a haircut, or being tucked in at bedtime, Steven loved for me to tell him a story. The one requirement for my made-up tales was that Steven had to give me the first line. “Okay, buddy,” I’d say, “what’s the first sentence?”

“Once upon a time there was a leaf . . .”

“Once upon a time there was a snail . . .”

“Once upon a time there was a tree . . .”

“Once upon a time there was a dragon . . .”

WHEN YOU DON'T LIKE YOUR STORY

And so, the tale would begin.

Everybody loves a good story, but not everybody loves their own story. Mistakes pile high like weeks-old laundry. Shame whispers, "If they only knew." Tear-stained pages warp and cause the volume to fall open to unwanted pages. Dog-eared corners mark traumatic happenings we keep going back to in order to make sense of it all. Some pages have spots worn thin from rubbing a mental eraser over words that won't go away. Lines we've tried to cross out instead stand out and taunt us. We've all got them—unwanted pages. *Yes, I'd like a different story, please.*

For most of us, it is not the whole of our stories that we don't like, but just certain parts. Our tragedies, traumas, and too-dark-to-tell memories may be different, but the pain is the same.

A husband left.
A boyfriend cheated.
A friend betrayed.
A parent abused.
A boss misused.
A disease ravished.
A steering wheel jerked.
A gunshot fired.
A child died.

I don't know the difficulties you've been through, but I do know your story didn't end there. There is more to be written, and God is even now dipping his pen into the inkwell of wholeness, writing your story and mine into his larger story. God turns broken stories into beautiful prose and unwanted pages into stunning narratives of victory. That's not just a promise; it's a bedrock truth—one I know from personal experience.

MAY I PLEASE HAVE A DIFFERENT STORY?

HOPE IN THE HIDING PLACE

I grew up in eastern North Carolina in a nice neighborhood and a nice house. But much of what went on behind the door of our ranch-style house was anything but nice.

My father didn't drink every day, but when he did drink, he got drunk. When he got drunk, he grew violent. Yelling and violent outbursts were common occurrences in our home. My parents fought both verbally and physically in front of my brother and me, and we lived much of our lives in fear. I saw many things a little girl should never see and heard

words a little girl should never hear. I didn't know what some of the words meant, but I knew how they made me feel.

On many nights, I went to bed, pulled up the covers around my quivering chin, and prayed I would quickly fall asleep to escape the yelling in the next room. On my dresser, I had a musical jewelry box with a ballerina that popped up when the lid opened. Many nights, I tiptoed over to the jewelry box, turned the wind-up key in the back, and opened the lid in hopes the tinkling music would drown out the fighting in the next room.

The builders who constructed our house had neglected to put a wall on the far end of my closet, between where my closet stopped and my brother's closet began. Some nights, I hid in that secret passageway. Other nights, I crawled through the tunnel to hide in my brother's room.

The worst nights were when my momma ran into my room and yelled at Daddy, "Do it in front of her! I want her to see you do it!" My mom wanted me to hate my dad, and this was her way of exposing the monster within. The next morning, I'd wake up to find my mom

God turns broken stories into beautiful prose and unwanted pages into stunning narratives of victory.

WHEN YOU DON'T LIKE YOUR STORY

covered with cuts and bruises, the furniture scattered like Tinkertoys, and my dad crying and begging forgiveness, swearing it would never happen again. But it always did.

I felt that I was always in the way, a poor excuse for a daughter, and a burden to be tolerated rather than a child to be loved. If your own parents don't love you, then who in the world would? I concluded I wasn't smart enough, pretty enough, or good enough—just not enough, period. Insecurity, inadequacy, and inferiority dogged me, shouting accusations and heaping condemnation on my little-girl soul.

Now that I'm an adult, I understand that the story of my life isn't a stand-alone volume but one in a series. My parents both had their own stories. Mom was the middle child in a slew of twelve kids raised on a farm in one of the poorest counties of North Carolina. My father's dad died when he was six. Dad and his five siblings were raised by a single mom on the heels of the Depression. They had their own childhood disappointments, struggles, and heartaches scribbled across the pages of their lives. And when these two teenagers married, their hardscrabble stories got only harder as they tried to make a life together. I'm sure they loved me the best they knew how, but neither of them knew how to make a family work.

That's where our family story began, but God didn't leave us in that sorry state. I can't wait to tell you what happened. For now, know that there are some parts of my story I spent many years desperately wishing I could rip from the narrative. But here's what I've discovered: the parts of my story I wish had been edited out have become the ones God has highlighted as his most amazing work in my life.

We cannot delete, discard, or amend the past, but we can re-purpose and reclaim the present. And when we do, we get something better than we ever imagined—a masterful work of God's redemption and grace to share with the world, a world that needs to hear the story that only we can tell.

SCARS OF GRACE AND REMEMBRANCE

Have you ever heard of the art of Kintsugi? It offers one of the most beautiful metaphors I know for what God does when he makes a masterwork of redemption from our stories. Kintsugi is the centuries-old Japanese art of fixing broken pottery with resin-dusted precious metals, such as gold, silver, or platinum. When the piece is mended, it becomes a work of art with shimmering veins connecting the broken shards. The art form of Kintsugi celebrates seeing beauty in the flawed or imperfect. The golden “scars” convey that broken and repaired objects are not something to hide, but to display with pride. In the end, the pottery is more valuable with the gold inlay filling the cracks than it was in its original state.

I thought about Kintsugi when I looked down at the young man’s wrist and saw them—scars. It was hard to believe that just fifteen years earlier, this laughing man now beating my socks off at Gin Rummy had been lying in a hospital bed after attempting to take his own life. And yet, here he was—healthy and whole. Redemption at its best.

But redemption was the farthest thing from my mind when it happened. At the time, it seemed as if God had hijacked his happiness and flown him in a nosedive to lands unknown. It was so hard to watch it all unfold. *How could you?* I cried out to God. *Why would you?* I questioned. *You could have stopped this!* I accused. *Where are you?*

And yet, fifteen years later, I could see the faint reminders—the golden veins filling the cracks in the form of two scars. They were slight, but present. A reminder of how God had used his grace to fill the broken places and make the young man’s life a showcase of redemption.

Do I wish the scars weren’t part of this young man’s story? Absolutely. But do I wish the scars were gone? Absolutely not. Does he? Not a chance. They represent the worst part of his story that God has used for the best parts of his redemption. God has used every tear

WHEN YOU DON'T LIKE YOUR STORY

shed to make the young man's compassion for others run deep and his knowledge of redemption concrete. God has used it all. Every crack of the broken pottery. Every shard. Every chip. Every slip.

Yes, there are great possibilities when we refuse to stop in the middle of a story and determine to keep moving forward with the flow of God's pen. We have great potential when we do not allow our present circumstances to determine our future destiny.

THE WHOLE STORY

I think we've all looked at our lives and wanted to rip a few pages from the narrative. But it's difficult to understand a story if there are missing chapters. Each chapter helps explain why characters are the way they are—why you and I are the way we are. We can't tear out a page or skip a chapter and still make sense of our story. But we can learn to embrace the story we were given and to trust God to keep writing our story into his.

I wouldn't have written my childhood story the way it now appears on the page. Instead, I would have had a daddy who loved me, a momma who cherished me, and a big brother who was my best friend forever. We would have spent holidays eating turkey, weekends playing board games, and quiet moments before bed saying goodnight prayers. But that's not the story I got.

I would have had a passel of children, a calendar overbooked with after-school activities, and walls full of picture-framed little ones all grown up. But that's not the story I got.

I would have had best friends who stayed friends for life, a happy-go-lucky personality that never struggled with discouragement, and all my books would have become *New York Times* bestsellers. But that's not the story I got.

What's the story you got? Whatever it is, I'm guessing there are

MAY I PLEASE HAVE A DIFFERENT STORY?

pages you wish you could rip out of the narrative. I've never met a soul who didn't feel that way. But what I want to tell you is that the whole of it matters. Every crossed-out word. Every worn-thin erasure. Every ripped-out page. I believe that with my whole heart, because I believe you still *can* have a better story, even with the marred pages intact. You can change the ending of your story, even if it feels like you're trapped in a chapter that has come to a dead stop. There is a way to transform the worst parts of your story into a work of art. Your biggest mistakes have the potential to become God's greatest miracles.

Writing a better story is not an elaborate game of pretend. I'm not talking about dressing up an old story in new clothes and pretending it wasn't so bad. I'm not talking about packing it away somehow and acting like it never happened—or isn't happening still. No. What I'm talking about is how we can wrest redemption from the jaws of brokenness and then allow God to use it for good. It may be hard to believe that's possible if you're still living through a bad story, but don't give up hope. I have experienced it and witnessed it in the lives of others so many times—how God takes the hard things and uses them to showcase his mercy, grace, and forgiveness to create a new beginning. Yes, our worst scenes *can* become God's best. Our pain *can* become a portal of God's grace. Our ravaged pages *can* become God's redemptive masterpiece.

Our ravaged pages can become God's redemptive masterpiece.

Artist and poet Terri St. Cloud once wrote, "She could never go back and make some of the details pretty. All she could do was move forward and make the whole beautiful."¹ That's what we're going to do—discover how to move forward and make the whole of our stories beautiful. If that seems like an impossibility at this point, I understand, but I promise you it is not. Together, we're going to discover the keys to having a better story, even with the parts we wish weren't there.

Chapter Two

Why Me? Why This? Why Now?

What we see now is not the whole story. If we could see what God sees and know what he knows, our hearts would be at peace.

—Nancy DeMoss Wolgemuth, *You Can Trust God to Write Your Story*

My son, Steven, and I sat on the floor in his room playing a card game. This summer was proving to be the best ever. Our golden retriever, Ginger, had just delivered seven adorable puppies, Steven was enjoying his sixth summer of life, and after four years of negative pregnancy tests, God had surprised us with a new life growing inside my womb.

But as Steven and I sat cross-legged on the carpet, I felt a warm, sticky sensation run down my leg. A trip to the bathroom confirmed my greatest fears—I was bleeding. Later that afternoon, the doctor voiced the weighty words, “There is no heartbeat.”

What do you do when heartbreak slams into joy? When your soul cracks open and there just aren’t enough tears? When hurt steals your hope and you want to give up on life? When deep soul lesions make a mockery of your faith?

WHEN YOU DON'T LIKE YOUR STORY

I wish I could tell you I left the doctor's office quoting Romans 8:28 about how "all things work together for good" (ESV). I wish I could tell you that I calmly accepted the loss of my baby with faith, trusting that even this was somehow part of God's plan. I wish I could tell you I spent the rest of the day singing "It Is Well with My Soul." But I didn't do any of those things.

I went home, crawled in bed, and pulled the covers up over my empty womb and broken heart. I didn't want to talk to anyone, especially God. And what I did say to him wasn't very nice.

How could you do this to me? If this is how you treat those you love, then just forget it! You answered my prayer only to take it back! Why me? Why this? Why now?

After my tearful outburst, I gave God the silent treatment, as if I could somehow pay him back. I mourned for my child and felt the ache of empty arms. I never realized until then how desperately I could miss someone I had never met. But, oh, how I missed her. We never knew for sure, but in my heart, I felt that the baby had been a little girl.

God and I had a lover's quarrel that summer. Actually, I was the only one arguing. I felt betrayed by the one who was supposed to love me most. Pierced by the one who was supposed to protect my heart. And while I gave God the cold shoulder, his warm embrace refused to let me go. He stayed right by my side, waiting, wooing, and drawing my hurting heart back to him. God always wants to heal our broken places and fill our empty spaces. I can see that now, but I couldn't see it then. So, as God persisted, I resisted.

Author Ann Voskamp wrote, "I wonder . . . if the rent in the canvas of our life backdrop, the losses that puncture our world, our own emptiness, might actually become places to see. To see through to God."¹ I had been thrust into one of those rents, a see-through place, but until I opened my eyes, I would not see God through the loss of my child.

Holocaust survivor Corrie ten Boom often quoted her sister

WHY ME? WHY THIS? WHY NOW?

Betsie's words, "There is no pit so deep, that God's love is not deeper still."² After a time, God's love lifted me from the muck and mire and set my feet upon the rock. But even rescue didn't come without struggle. Just as the biblical patriarch Jacob wrestled with God in his dark night of the soul, I wrestled with God to make sense of why bad things happen.

WHY DO BAD THINGS HAPPEN?

Before we delve into how to have a better story—how to transform our worst chapters into our greatest victories—we need to acknowledge the proverbial elephant in the room. Why are bad chapters part of our narratives in the first place? Why does a loving God allow such pain?

There's no easy answer to why bad things happen. But the Bible does acknowledge at least three reasons we might experience pain: God's discipline for disobedience, consequences of our own poor decisions, and fallout from the devil's deception.

God's Discipline for Disobedience

The Bible says, "Know then in your heart that as a man disciplines his son, so the LORD your God disciplines you" (Deuteronomy 8:5). God disciplined Miriam for gossiping about her brother Moses by inflicting her with leprosy (Numbers 12). He disciplined Moses for striking a rock rather than speaking to it as instructed by not allowing him to enter the promised land (Numbers 20:10–13). He disciplined David with three days of pestilence for depending on his army rather than on God's power (2 Samuel 24). Every time we read about God disciplining someone in the Bible, that person knew that the pain they were experiencing was God's discipline for disobedience.

If what we're suffering is God's discipline, we probably won't

WHEN YOU DON'T LIKE YOUR STORY

have to wonder why it's happening or why God allowed it. If it's not clear, then it's probably not discipline—even though the devil will want us to always blame God for every bad thing that happens in our life.

Consequences of Our Own Poor Decisions

Sometimes bad things happen because of our own poor decisions. A decision to have an affair leads to shattered lives. A decision to betray a confidence leads to a broken relationship. A decision to be chronically late for work leads to getting fired. If you jump off of a tall building, you're going to get hurt, or worse. Period. That's not God's doing; it's just the result of a bad decision. Author and psychologist Henry Cloud once said that we are ridiculously in charge of our choices. We can choose to make poor decisions, but we can't choose the consequences of those decisions.

Fallout from the Devil's Deception

Bad things also happen when we succumb to the devil's deception. He's called the "father of lies" (John 8:44 NLT), "the accuser" (Revelation 12:10), and "the thief" (John 10:10); and in Genesis 3:13 he is a deceiver. Jesus tells us, "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy" (John 10:10).

We've all seen evil. We know what it looks like and what it feels like, but do we believe that the source of evil is an evil being? When a Barna poll asked American Christians what they believed about the devil, 40 percent "strongly agreed" that Satan "is not a living being but a symbol of evil," and another 19 percent said they "agreed somewhat" with that perspective. Only 35 percent said they believed Satan to be real, and 8 percent weren't sure what they believed about the existence of Satan.³ If we don't believe in the devil's existence, he's already got a foothold in the fight.

The apostle Paul wrote: "For our struggle is not against flesh and

WHY ME? WHY THIS? WHY NOW?

blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Ephesians 6:12).

Yes, there is an active invisible realm of evil that we cannot see. There is also an active invisible realm of warring angels working on our behalf (2 Kings 6:11–17). And while Satan’s ultimate battle is against God himself, his schemes play out within the human story. To understand the big picture of why bad things happen, we need to go all the way back to where it first went wrong: the garden, where Satan plays a leading role.

WHERE BROKEN BEGAN

When God fashioned, fitted, and filled the earth, there was nothing but goodness. The lion and the lamb lay side-by-side. Adam and Eve lived a harmonious existence without a hint of discord. God and human beings communed with no barrier between them. All creation ebbed and flowed with the rhythm of the tides and the breath of God. There was no lack, only abundance; no fear, only calm assurance; no violence, only peace; no hatred, only love; no sickness, only health. “God saw all that he had made, and it was very good” (Genesis 1:31). In fact, the Hebrew word that is used for “*very good*” is better translated “*exceedingly good*.”⁴

God gave Adam and Eve just one restriction within a bounty of freedom—a restriction that was for their protection and provision. But he also gave them free will: the choice to obey or disobey—to stay within the protective boundaries of his perfect plan or step beyond them.

Adam and Eve had unveiled communion with God, unadulterated community with each other, and unlimited access to all that God had made . . . except for one little thing.

WHEN YOU DON'T LIKE YOUR STORY

The Tree.

As Lysa TerKeurst pointed out in her book *It's Not Supposed to Be This Way*, it's interesting to note the first three words in God's command to Adam about not eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil: *You are free*. "You are free," he told Adam, "to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die."⁵ God always speaks the language of freedom. His commands are for our provision and protection because he wants us to live in freedom.

But we know what happened next. Genesis 3 begins with the daunting words, "Now the serpent . . ." The devil slithered into the garden and tempted the pair with the one thing they didn't have. Isn't that just like him? Whatever we don't have, the devil will tell us, "You'd be happy if . . ." He wants us to believe that God is holding out on us:

"You'd be happy if you were married."

"You'd be happy if you were married to someone else."

"You'd be happy if you had children."

"You be happy if those kids were gone."

"You'd be happy if you had a bigger house, more money, a thinner body."

Unfortunately, the "you'd be happy if" lie has introduced a destructive detour into many stories.

The devil launched his plan of deception in the garden by asking a question. "Did God really say, 'You must *not* eat from any tree in the garden?'" (Genesis 3:1, emphasis added). Did you catch that? I loved this nuance when Lysa pointed it out in her book. What God had said was, "You are free . . ." The serpent twisted God's words and said, "Did God really say you must not . . .?" The devil speaks the language of restriction, twisting God's words to stir up feelings of dissatisfaction.

WHY ME? WHY THIS? WHY NOW?

Anytime we have a thought that essentially begins, “Did God really say,” we need to stop and ask, *Where did that thought come from?* Many self-destructive decisions have begun with the question, “Did God really say?” *Did God really say I shouldn’t watch that movie? Did God really say I shouldn’t reconnect with my old high school boyfriend on Facebook? Did God really say I shouldn’t spend money on . . . ?*

In the garden, boundaries God had established to protect Adam and Eve were used by Satan to provoke them instead. He turned God’s loving protection into destructive manipulation. Twisting it. Turning it. Bending it. Redefining God’s protection as restriction.

Eve’s first mistake was engaging the serpent in conversation at all. “We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden,” she said, “but God did say, ‘You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die’” (vv. 2–3).

Eve got it mostly right. God never mentioned not *touching* the fruit, even though that would have been a pretty good idea. However, we should never add what we consider common sense to God’s truth. It is true enough standing on its own.

Satan’s next words are the first lie recorded in the Bible: “You will not certainly die” (v. 4). In other words, *God is not telling the truth. Sin has no consequences.*

Satan went on to say, “For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (v. 5). In other words, *You can be your own god.*

Eve bought what the devil was peddling and made a disastrous decision that led to the downfall of all creation.

When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was

WHEN YOU DON'T LIKE YOUR STORY

with her, and he ate it. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves. (vv. 6–7)

As soon as Adam and Eve sunk their teeth into the forbidden fruit, shame entered the world. The man and woman who were previously naked and felt no shame became the man and woman who covered and were consumed by shame. Shame blanketed the earth and creation was never the same.

THE FALLOUT OF THE FALL

There were universal consequences of that first cataclysmic decision to disobey God. The Bible says that since that time, the whole earth has been in bondage to death and decay (Romans 8:19–22).

We certainly see that, don't we? Cancer, COVID-19, disease, violence, plane crashes, broken relationships, child abuse, natural disasters—these were not part of God's original good design. And while there are still good things in the world, and while God is still good, creation's good has been tainted with the stain of imperfection, corruption, and decay that God never intended "in the beginning."

Here is how author Philip Yancey described the consequences of what happened in the garden of Eden:

By their choice they put distance between themselves and God. Before, they had walked and talked with God. Now when they heard his approach, they hid in the shrubbery. An awkward separation had crept in to spoil their intimacy. And every quiver of disappointment in our own relationship with God is an aftershock from their initial act of rebellion.⁶

WHY ME? WHY THIS? WHY NOW?

The original sin of Adam and Eve is often referred to as “the fall.” And while it might seem unfair that we have to pay the consequences for someone else’s sin, the truth is that we all “fall” every day. The Bible tells us, “For all have sinned and *fall short* of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23, emphasis added). Just as Adam blamed Eve and Eve blamed the serpent, we tend to look for someone to blame for our difficulties, disappointments, and distresses. Many are quick to blame God when bad things happen, but many bad things happen simply because our world is broken. And our individual stories play out against the backdrop of that brokenness.

It is so important for us to grasp the importance of the fall and its consequences. Without the backdrop of Genesis 3, the question of why bad things happen has no context, which means it will haunt us and halt us at every turn. But when we understand that the whole earth groans as it awaits its liberation from bondage and decay, we know that there is a bigger story to be told.

IT’S NOT ALWAYS GOING TO BE THIS WAY

Here’s the good news—I bet you’re ready for some good news. Before everything fell apart, God had a plan to put it back together. He didn’t leave us in our hopeless state. Jesus, God’s Son, put on flesh and stepped into the human story so he could pay the price for our sins, conquer death, and restore our union and communion with God.

One day, the consequences of the fall will be reversed. Jesus will come again, and we will live in the New Jerusalem for all eternity. There will be no more tears, no more death, no more mourning, no more pain. He will make everything new.

I love how author C. S. Lewis described both our current condition and our hope for God’s new world:

WHEN YOU DON'T LIKE YOUR STORY

At present we are on the outside of the world, the wrong side of the door. We discern the freshness and purity of morning, but they do not make us fresh and pure. We cannot mingle with the splendors we see. But all the leaves of the New Testament are rustling with the rumor that it will not always be so. Someday, God willing, we shall get in.⁷

I can't even imagine no more strife, no more disappointment, no more anger. I can't imagine *not* waiting for the other shoe to drop as I make my way on the rocky paths of this life. But I know that day will come. Until then, all of us live in what theologians refer to as "the already but not yet." We live in the in-between space—between when all that was right went wrong, and when all that is wrong will be made right again.

Being followers of Christ does not give us immunity from the effects of living in a fallen world, but it does give us a future and a hope. While our present pain is very real, it is also very temporary—the blink of an eye in the face of eternity. Until Jesus returns, pain will persist, hurts will happen, and tragedy will tear holes in the canvas of our lives. But Ann Voskamp is right—every tear, every rent in the canvas, can become a window through which we see the hand of God.

THE SEE-THROUGH PLACE

Months after losing our baby, God gave me a sweet gift. I was lying in bed trying to picture her in heaven. I wondered what she looked like. I wondered what she was doing. I wondered if I'd recognize her when I get there. Then I pictured her with Jesus, playing. She wasn't sad at all.

In my mind's eye, God pulled back the curtain separating the

WHY ME? WHY THIS? WHY NOW?

physical from the eternal and gave me a glimpse of her. It was a see-through place in the torn canvas of my life.

My season of deep mourning ended that night. I stopped asking, “Why me?” and started asking, “What now?” Like a miner with a pickax, I was ready to look for the veins of gold buried in the dark and rocky soil of my suffering. I was ready to learn whatever God wanted me to learn about myself and about trusting in his unfailing love, even when my life felt like it was falling apart.

Just to be clear, I am not saying that I believe God allowed my baby to die just to teach me a lesson. Absolutely not. Life on this side of heaven is filled with loss and disappointment—the consequence of living in a post-Eden world. Jesus meant it when he said, “In this world you will have trouble” (John 16:33). No, I’m not saying God did it; but I am saying God could use it for my good—if I let him.

During those days, I sensed God asking, *Will you trust me?* I didn’t understand why my narrative was unfolding as it was, and I didn’t like this painful twist in the plot, but I did believe that in the end my story would be a good one. I believed it because God is good, and his ways are good. And I believed it because I knew even then that when God allows hurt to happen, he uses the healing of that hurt to give us a purpose we might never have known without it.

I still have days when I long for the little one I never met. Some days, I look at our family portrait of three and see the shadow of a fourth. I know I’ll meet her one day. Meanwhile, I trust in the goodness of God who redeems every ounce of pain for our ultimate good. I hold on to the truth that if God says *no* to my plans, it is because he has a greater *yes* in store for me, even though I might not like it or understand it at the time.

We live in the in-between space—between when all that was right went wrong, and when all that is wrong will be made right again.

A BACKSTAGE PASS TO SUFFERING

Job was a man who had no idea why bad things were happening to him, but we have a backstage pass to watch and learn as his story of suffering unfolds. He lived somewhere between one thousand and fifteen hundred years before Jesus. The man had it all. Seven sons, three daughters, seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen, five hundred donkeys, and a slew of servants. That's a lot of mouths to feed. The Bible says that Job was the greatest man among all the people of the East.

Not only did Job have great wealth, he was also a godly man who made it a habit to pray for his kids every morning. He was "blameless and upright" (Job 1:8). I can't think of anyone I'd call "blameless," but that's how God himself described Job. One would think that a guy like this would receive only blessings from God, but Job's righteousness didn't prevent him from experiencing pain. In fact, it actually made him a candidate for extreme testing. He had no idea why bad things were happening to him, but the pages of Scripture reveal what was going on behind the scenes. Here's how Job ended up in the worst "why me?" experience of his life:

One day the angels came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came with them. The LORD said to Satan, "Where have you come from?"

Satan answered the LORD, "From roaming throughout the earth, going back and forth on it."

Then the LORD said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil."

"Does Job fear God for nothing?" Satan replied. "Have you not put a hedge around him and his household and everything he has? You have blessed the work of his hands, so that his flocks and herds

WHY ME? WHY THIS? WHY NOW?

are spread throughout the land. But now stretch out your hand and strike everything he has, and he will surely curse you to your face.”

The LORD said to Satan, “Very well, then, everything he has is in your power, but on the man himself do not lay a finger.” (vv. 6–12)

Does that scene bother you a little bit? I’ll admit it makes me squirm. But hang on. There’s more to the story, so let’s keep going.

Satan went out from the Lord’s presence and got busy. In one day, Job’s enemies killed all but a handful of his servants and stole all eleven thousand head of livestock. Then a strong wind collapsed his son’s house and killed all ten of Job’s children. What was Job’s response? “Job got up and tore his robe and shaved his head” (v. 20). In Job’s culture, this was a sign of deep mourning. But then he did something that gives me pause: “he fell to the ground in worship.” Wait, what? He worshiped? Yep. From the depths of his grief, Job said:

“Naked I came from my mother’s womb,
and naked I will depart.

The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away;
may the name of the LORD be praised.” (v. 21)

Does it seem odd that Job worshiped God in the midst of such a loss? Perhaps at first. But a broken heart and raised hands are not mutually exclusive; instead, they are a sweet offering to the Lord—perhaps the sweetest. Job was honest with his pain. He didn’t sugarcoat it, ignore it, or numb it. Rather, he walked right through it.

Over the next few days, Job broke out with painful sores all over his body. About the only things Job didn’t lose were his bitter wife—who told him to “curse God and die” (Job 2:9)—and a handful of friends he would have been better off without. Yet, Job continued to trust God: “Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him” (13:15).

However, when Job was at his lowest point, he couldn’t help but

WHEN YOU DON'T LIKE YOUR STORY

cry out in anguish. He blamed God for destroying his honor, his health, and his home—for stripping him of his family, his friends, and his fortune. All the while, God remained mysteriously silent. And while Job *felt* that God had forgotten him, he *knew* that God hadn't. What Job *felt* and what Job *knew* collided.

I've been there. I wonder if you have too.

I *felt* that God deserted me, but I *knew* he would never leave or forsake me.

I *felt* that God didn't care about what was going on in my life, but I *knew* that even one hair on my head didn't fall to the ground without his knowing it.

I *felt* that God wasn't listening, but I *knew* that he was attentive to my prayers.

I *felt* that God wasn't working to remedy my situation, but I *knew* he was always working to bring about my greater good.

Job *felt* that God had deserted him, but he *knew* God hadn't.

Finally, Job reminded his feelings of the facts: "I know that my redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand on the earth" (19:25). The word translated "redeemer" is the Hebrew word *go'el*. In context it means "kinsman redeemer." In the Old Testament, a kinsman redeemer is a male relative who takes responsibility to act on behalf of a relative who is in trouble, danger, or need. He is one who rescues or redeems a relative from a minor or major emergency. Job knew that God would rescue him; he just didn't know when or how.

Toward the end of Job's story, God broke his silence by posing a few questions of his own to Job:

Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation?

Tell me, if you understand.

Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know!

Who stretched a measuring line across it? . . .

Have you ever given orders to the morning,

WHY ME? WHY THIS? WHY NOW?

or shown the dawn its place,
that it might take the earth by the edges
and shake the wicked out of it? (38:4–5, 12–13)

And that's just a small sampling. The list of God's questions for Job goes on for more than seventy verses across three chapters (38–40). When God finally takes a breath and asks Job to answer, the only thing Job can say is, "I am unworthy—how can I repay you? I put my hand over my mouth" (40:4).

Whenever I read those words, I can't help but bow my head with Job and take a deep breath of my own. *You're right, God. I don't know nothin' 'bout nothin'. You are God and I am not. You don't owe me a thing. I owe you everything. I put my hand over my mouth. As a matter of fact, I put two!*

In another time and place, God would speak these words to the prophet Isaiah: "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Isaiah 55:8–9).

A human being trying to analyze the mind of God is like a flea trying to analyze the mind of a human being. It's just not possible. But here are two truths we *can* be sure of even when we don't understand God's ways:

"All the ways of the LORD are loving and faithful" (Psalm 25:10).

"Now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known" (1 Corinthians 13:12).

Here's what hits me every time I get to the end of Job's story: he never knew the *why* of it all. He never got the answers he was looking for. And most likely, on this side of heaven, we won't either. Until then, we place our trust in what we know about who God is—loving and faithful.

THE OTHER SIDE OF WHY

We read the story of Job already knowing how it is going to end—the Lord not only restores what Job had lost, but “gave him twice as much as he had before” (Job 42:10). But can you imagine what it was like to live through it in real time? Job was stuck in a bad story and he saw no end in sight. He had no idea why it was happening. He didn’t know God would give him twice as much as he had before. All he knew was loss, disappointment, and pain. That might be where you are right now, stuck in a story you don’t like. But hang on, God’s pen has not slipped. He’s still in control. There’s more to come.

My favorite line in Job’s story comes at the very end. Job said to God, “My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you” (v. 5). That is my prayer in every difficult circumstance of life. I don’t want to simply hear about God; I want to see God and have communion with him in the midst of it. Sometimes the only way to open the unseeing eye and hearken the unhearing ear is through struggle.

A houseful of children was not how my chapter of infertility and the loss of a child ended, but I can still say it had a good ending. One day, I was reading Song of Songs in the Bible. I read it as if I were the bride and Jesus were my bridegroom. At one point, the bride says to her beloved, “I am a rose of Sharon” (2:1).

What did she call herself? God seemed to ask me.

“A rose of Sharon,” I whispered. “My name.”

Prompted by the Holy Spirit, I looked up the rose of Sharon in my Bible dictionary. I was surprised to learn that Sharon was a fertile valley near Mount Carmel. As I continued to read, God showed me that even though my medical chart had “infertile” stamped across its pages, he had chosen a name for me that meant “fertile valley” long before I was even born.

No, I don’t have a houseful of children. God didn’t fill the empty rooms of my house as he did Job’s. But God has given me spiritual

WHY ME? WHY THIS? WHY NOW?

children all around the world. Through ministry and simply obeying God's nudges, I have experienced the joy of birthing spiritual children and nurturing them to maturity. "He gives the barren woman a home," declared the psalmist, "making her the joyous mother of children" (Psalm 113:9 ESV). And, oh, how I love my kids! And when women come to me trying to make sense of the disappointments in their lives, I can say, "Come, sit with me. Let me tell you a story."

Someone once asked me, "Which would you rather have—a house full of biological children or a heart full of spiritual children?"

"I would rather have what God wants me to have," I replied. "Because I know that God's plans for me are much greater than anything I could ever come up with on my own."

Is God still good when his answer is "no"? Yes, he is. Sometimes we have to let go of our plans to take hold of God's purpose.

CRYING IN THE CORNER

Steven was three years old when he contracted a severe case of the flu. His slumped body snuggled listlessly in my lap like a worn-out rag doll. When I carried him into the medical clinic, the doctor took one look at my boy and sent us straight to the hospital. Steven was dehydrated and needed fluids immediately.

My heart ripped wide when the nurses taped a support board to Steven's little arm and inserted the needle for the IV. *Not his thumb-sucking arm*, my heart winced.

"Mommy, Mommy," Steven cried. "Make them stop! They are hurting me!"

"No, honey," I tried to assure him with tears streaming down my cheeks. "They're making you all better."

"Mommy, help me!"

Steven cried. I cried. The nurses cried.

WHEN YOU DON'T LIKE YOUR STORY

I could only imagine what was going through Steven's mind. *Why are these people hurting me? Why doesn't Mommy make them stop? She must not love me. She's not protecting me. If she loved me, she wouldn't let them do this.*

Standing in the corner watching my little towheaded boy cry, I wondered if God feels something similar when I am in a painful situation. I cry out, "God, help me! Make this stop! Why are you letting this happen? Why are you allowing this person to hurt me? Don't you love me? Don't you care about me? I know you could get me out of this situation if you wanted to. Why don't you make it go away?"

Then I envisioned God speaking to my pain-filled little-girl heart. *You might think I've deserted you, but I will never leave or forsake you. You might think I don't love you, but I love you to the height of heaven and the depth of the sea. You might think I don't care about what's happening to you, but I am orchestrating your days and care about every hair on your head. My ways are higher than your ways and my thoughts are higher than your thoughts. Yes, I do care about you and what is happening to you. In the end, this will make you better. I am not doing something to you; I'm doing something in you.*

Pastor Steven Furtick once said, "We worship a God who can best be explained as a mystery, and yet we live in a culture that worships certainty."⁸ However, the very definition of faith is an intertwining of mystery and certainty. The writer of Hebrews penned, "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1 ESV). The word translated "conviction" is the Greek word *elegchos*, which means a proof or test. It can also be translated as "evidence," and yet, faith is belief in something we cannot prove.

There's nothing wrong with trying to understand why bad things happen, but we have to recognize that our understanding is limited. The Bible clearly states, "Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding" (Proverbs 3:5). In other words, don't try to figure out everything on your own. When we hold loosely

WHY ME? WHY THIS? WHY NOW?

our need to know the *why*, we can trust fully in the *who*. Since God's ways are higher than our ways, we shouldn't expect him to write our stories the same way we would. Often, the twists and turns of the plot won't make sense until we're on the other side of this life. And here's a promise from the Lord himself: "Those who hope in me will not be disappointed" (Isaiah 49:23).

The devil will try to fill in the gaps of what you don't understand and poke holes in what you do. Refuse his input into your situation. Let faith fill the gaps of what you don't understand and the full assurance of God's goodness seal up what you do.

I don't understand why certain parts of my story have played out as they have, and I'm guessing you probably don't either. But one day we will. In the meanwhile, I trust that God loves me and knows what's best for me. That doesn't mean I'm going to like every situation that comes my way, but after I fuss about it for a while, I will settle down and remember that God is not absent in what is happening. I can choose to believe that God will somehow use my pain for a purpose.