

When God Disappears

Finding Hope When Your Circumstances Seem
Impossible

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Preface

As a person living with HIV and AIDS, my entire life has been a race . . . a race against illness and disease, against fear and uncertainty, against discrimination and prejudice. A race against time. Yes, “race” is a good metaphor for what, at times, has been a difficult journey with many twists and turns—from growing up a hemophiliac to discovering my HIV status at 16, to watching how the secrecy of my HIV status affected the emotional life of our family and our relationships.

Mine has been a journey marked by spiritual struggles and tension, from watching my denomination wrestle with the decision to ordain me, to being rejected by the first church to which I was appointed as pastor. Not surprisingly, I have suffered great loss and disillusionment, from the loss of dear friends to the disease, to the loss of others to the fear surrounding it.

And no, the journey so far has not been easy, often pushing me to trust beyond what I can see and understand, and even stretching the limits of my faith, not so much in God as in God’s people.

Certainly, this is not a path I would have chosen. I am no martyr and I will never be a saint. Oddly enough, so many miles now into this journey, I would also not trade with anyone what I have learned and lived.

Over the years, I have been asked to speak to groups to share my story, to make real for them what my life has been like as a Christian minister living with HIV/AIDS. Invariably, following each talk, people gather to ask many questions. Some have to do with the everyday details of living with HIV or dealing with chronic illness. Other questions concern my family and how this journey has affected our emotions and relationships. And some questions are more personal and touch upon my health, intimacy and, most fascinating to some, how I can be the father of three healthy daughters.

But the one question, from the moment it was first asked, that has intrigued me and shaped my reflection most is, *What have you learned from living as an HIV-positive person?* Of course, their question and my understanding of it are not the same. Most people are asking about how my life has been shaped by a biological, physical condition. However, I have come to view my medical condition, quite simply, as the doorway through which I take hold of something more valuable—something that shapes my spiritual landscape, affects my view of people, influences my relationships and frames how I view God.

Certainly, my answers to these questions have matured over the years. No longer do I view what God has shown me through this disease as static, but as more of a process, just as is living with the effects of the disease. I don't have one grand scope of God's plan, nor do I see or even look for the "big picture" any longer. Maybe I should, but at what cost? If I were busy trying to make sense of my circumstances, I doubt that I would notice how HIV has provided me with an incredible glimpse into life—into the best of what God offers in this world and the best of what God's people can become. This journey has shown me God's calling for each of us to respond faithfully as God's children, and taught me important lessons that, if all who call ourselves "Christian" learn as well, could change our world. Everyone's journey can do this, if we let it (because don't you learn and live through a tapestry of lives, including yours, others' and God's?).

"Lessons?" you ask.

You bet! Life is learned not from a classroom or study, but from living, sometimes with blessings and opportunities, but more often from struggles and challenges. And it is not a one-time thing. No, the learning does not stop; it is a daily event. We just have to keep showing up.

Lessons?

Yes! Let me give you some examples of what my journey has taught me.

Lessons about *time*. Because of my illness, I am reminded each day that time is a privilege given to us by God, a luxury afforded to us along with the possibility that each of us can make a difference in this world.

Lessons about *relationships*. I am blessed with a beautiful wife, three wonderful daughters, and countless family members and friends who remind me that the most important things we do in this world are not done alone.

Lessons about *simplicity*. "More," "bigger" and "nicer" pale in comparison to simple things like sunsets with those you love and the laughter of children at play.

And most importantly, lessons about real *faith*. Personally, HIV reminds me every day that, with God's grace, what I need, I have—and what I have is sufficient. Sufficient to confront the health struggles of today and the uncertainties of tomorrow, sufficient to meet the needs of others if we, the Body of Christ, agree to meet them together. For still, more than anything I have ever known, the Body of Christ, with all of its imperfections, holds as the hope of the world (when we truly live like it), bearing witness to this amazing gospel that

says God passionately loves the unlovable, the marginalized and the forgotten—oh, and by the way, that means we are to love them, too!

I am not saying HIV is easy for any of us. There have certainly been times when I have felt the emptiness and desolation of a seemingly God-less landscape. But the truth is, I have never been alone there, no matter how isolated the path has appeared. And this path, this journey, offers real lessons for real life—and if I listen carefully, it teaches me much about loving God and loving others.

Your journey is no different. Maybe you have made mistakes in your life that seem irreparable or unforgivable. Maybe mistakes have been made against you that are too difficult to forgive or forget. Possibly the road has been so smooth that you have missed the lessons because it has been easier to enjoy the good life. Or maybe life has been so messy and uncomfortable that all you have wanted to do is get on with the next chapter. I hear you. But more importantly, God hears you, too.

Misery is not all we are supposed to know . . .

Introduction

Living in *Miseri* . . . Abiding in Possibility

Abide in me as I abide in you.

*Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine,
neither can you, unless you abide in me.*

John 15:4, RSV

*I dwell in Possibility—
A fairer House than Prose—
More numerous of Windows—
Superior—for Doors—
Of Chambers as the Cedars—
Impregnable of Eye—
And for an Everlasting Roof
The Gambrels of the Sky—
Of Visitors—the fairest—
For Occupation—This—
The spreading wide my narrow Hands
To gather Paradise—
Emily Dickinson*

By 2010, it is estimated that there will be upward of 40 million AIDS orphans in sub-Saharan Africa. This is a stunning figure—one that is almost impossible to fathom. To comprehend the worldwide effects of this pandemic is to lose the ability to stay neutral or even objective. HIV/AIDS is *the* global Pandora's Box that has already been opened and will eventually affect everyone on the planet in one way or another. It already impacts our national security as well as the global economy.

Recently I watched as one commentator spoke of the incredible difficulty of effectively confronting this disease. For every step forward we take in the fight against HIV/AIDS, two more hurdles appear. We provide medicines for 800,000 new patients, only to discover that 3 million new infections have been reported. Yes, when we ponder the nature of this disease, it is overwhelming and invariably begs the question, *What, if anything, can solve such a seemingly impossible problem?*

Not long ago, at the invitation of Rick and Kay Warren, I spoke at the Global AIDS Summit held at Saddleback Community Church in Orange County, California. Amid the amazing array of speakers, professionals and experts, I determined that the Church, both local and global, is our most potent weapon against the HIV/AIDS pandemic. The Church possesses the greatest mobilization, distribution and motivation potential of any institution on earth. The idea of 1 billion-plus Christians reaching together into the abyss of this unbelievable struggle captivated my imagination.

But as I reflected further, I became convinced that it is more than the organizational possibilities of the Church that makes the Body of Christ so vital in this fight. As with confronting any impossible problem, the answer for how effectively we fight and how well we succeed lies deeper than just the sound principles that are the basis of any well-run institution. No, such answers begin in simple—and many times, overlooked—places.

A Child Who Sleeps in *Miseri*

A friend of mine recently traveled to Kenya to visit a day orphanage for children who have lost parents to the HIV/AIDS crisis. In Kenya, as in other nations in sub-Saharan Africa, the needs created by the pandemic have overrun the institutional services, especially those that serve children. Day orphanages exist as a means of providing basic necessities to those little ones who would otherwise have nothing—truly a last resort for these “least of these” among us.

Arriving at the orphanage, my friend met two workers carrying a small girl. Her body was frail and clearly malnourished, but her face wore the most beautiful smile. Whereas her body revealed every sign of what is most disturbing and troubling about the plight of those in her situation, her face revealed a spirit that was anything but hopeless.

As these contrasting images collided in my friend's mind, she greeted the young child with the help of an interpreter. My friend learned that the child's father had died just after she was born; her mother died when she was three. She lived with an aunt who was also sick and who could not provide much in the way of care. In fact, the child told my friend that *she* cared for her aunt at night, trying to provide her with as much comfort as possible. Like so many in similar circumstances, this child's was a long, lonely existence.

However, every morning, the workers arrived in a "goat cart" and took her to the day orphanage. Here she found not only food and an occasional change of clothes, but also friends and others with whom she could talk and play. Sure, the toys were few, the meals meager and the clothes second hand, but this place in the daylight seemed worlds away from her home at night, and it provided what previously appeared impossible: glimpses of hope.

My friend listened intently as the workers and the little girl described her daily routine. "We pick her up" they said in their broken English, "and bring her here so that she might find a little food, some clothes and some schooling. It is not much, but it is more than she has when she returns to *Miseri* "Where?" my friend asked, not sure that she had heard right.

"*Miseri*" the worker replied. "It is the name of her settlement. The word comes from the Swahili for 'Egypt.' "

My friend realized that although she had not heard our English word "misery," it certainly conveyed the right meaning. *Misery* was more than appropriate to describe the child's life. After all, what hope did she have? She most likely would not grow up to finish school, train for a job, have a family, or for that matter, enjoy an abundant childhood like the kids my friend knew in the States. No, the chances of her having a future were those same impossible odds the disease brings to everyone who suffers from it—but now, for my friend, these obstacles were all the more tragic because now they had a face.

Standing there, my friend was lost in thought, musing on how impossible it all seemed for this little girl. *Where was God? Where was hope? What could effectively confront the wake of this disease, not only for this child but also for all children? What could possibly fill the void left by such desolation of not only a child's present but also her future?* She paused a moment, lost in the realization of such sorrow. But then, as she looked up, she again saw the child's smile and the embrace of the workers, their love and care for this little one. Above all, she saw that in spite of the obvious struggles, this picture seemed full of possibilities, not

because the circumstances she had encountered weren't daunting, but because there was something tangibly hopeful about the scene. Surrounded by so much sorrow and despair, my friend saw something amazing—and she found the answer to her questions.

Her answer was right in front of her, resting in what she had almost missed. My friend realized that despite the disease and the impossible circumstances intended for this child, nothing was set in stone. *No*. Why? Because of these people who loved like Jesus, touched like Jesus, cared like Jesus—who had become Jesus to her—*miser*y was not all she would know.

What Happens When . . .

This book is about genuine, life-altering hope in Jesus. Not just a recounting of healings and miracles, but a real conversation about real people with real problems—problems that have, for one reason or another, convinced us of a desperation, void of solution or possibility for repair. Sure, sometimes we crave the lessons of our childhood Sunday School, but they seem insufficient in the face of certain situations. This book is about something more than easy answers to difficult questions.

Of course, like many people, I read Scripture either looking for easy answers or only willing to ask the easy questions. (Why wouldn't we?) Truth be told, I like the "feel good" stories the best—you know, when God shows up, does some "divine magic" and then moves on to the next challenge. Lepers at the city gates, the blind and the paralytic—their stories, even with their extremely difficult details, seem neat and clean as Jesus fixes the problem. Yes, I confess: I like the stories in Scripture where people see Jesus coming with their eyes (or at least their spirits) open, where their faith is the only ticket needed and where each lesson can be summarily wrapped in a nice, tidy parable.

I like these accounts because this is way I like and want my faith to be. Unfortunately, that is not real life, or at least not life as I have come to know it.

Before we go any further, let me assure you that I am not saying these stories don't resonate or speak to our faith. But too often, our tendency is to stuff Scripture into manageable packages, until everything is complicated when the road gets a little too bumpy, or the way a little too long.

When that happens, we end up treating Jesus like the newest spiritual antibiotic. We read our Bibles, sing our songs and pray our prayers long enough to make our pleas before God and give Him our laundry lists of wants and needs, only to slip again, forget again, “not need” again. Sure, we shed a few tears, wring our hands and kneel to pray, usually only long enough to allow the storm to pass and for the winds to subside.

But (you had to know it was coming!) what happens when the storm does not pass? When the pain does not stop? When the prodigal does not return? When the longings won't go away? When we continue to make the same mistakes and break the same hearts? When our sins continue to taunt us? When children continue to die? When the distance between what we do and what God intends widens until we can't even see the other side? When our consciences once again go silent so as to not wake our demons? Friend, let me ask you, for I have asked it myself: *What happens when we can't find even a trace of God . . . when He seems to have disappeared?*

It can happen overnight, before we know what's hit us. Often the tide of doubt and grief and misery rushes in more quickly than we can imagine, and everything in its path is susceptible to its power and rage. It even appears that God must have vanished beneath the waves.

Just ask my friend Sarah what happens when the water comes pouring in[SS1].

Storm Surge

Sara's life had never been easy. Her path to marriage, motherhood and ministry always seemed battered by life's many storms. Her first marriage eroded as a result of a variety of missteps that left her a single mother of three children, struggling to make ends meet. Her second marriage, to a fellow minister, seemed a better fit, although the tension of balancing her first family with a second one compounded the normal and expected challenges of any relationship.

Sara was also a dedicated minister whose calling to the pastorate provided both an outlet and energy for all the gifts that God had placed within her. She understood the plight of those in need and especially enjoyed the pastorates most unwanted by other pastors, where God would place her to care for those previously forgotten. Like the people living in the inner city of Dallas, Texas—

people who didn't speak her language and in the beginning, could not understand why a 5'11" attractive, brunette, white woman would move her family to their neighborhood. But, like her life, Sara understood her ministry outside traditional norms. She saw life as an opportunity to see the best in God's people, even if the best could only be viewed from the edge, where few others were willing to go.

Just a few years into her new marriage, Sara's family moved to the shores of southern Louisiana, where she and her husband each served churches located within a few miles of each other. It was a return home for her husband, who had moved to Texas after their marriage as a means of providing stability for their new family. But urban Texas had proven itself to be no place to raise their children.

Still, her community here was much like that of inner city Dallas: a mixture of cultures and a clash of economic realities. It also possessed the same scarcity of resources and near-sighted vision that so often plague a people whom prosperity ignores. Yet here Sara knew she had the opportunity to provide a real-life look at God to people who had otherwise become marginalized by many local congregations. Little did she know, her real challenge had not yet begun.

Early on the morning of August 29, the first bands of a serious hurricane came ashore, but they certainly did not seem to herald the end of the world. However, by evening, the latter seemed not only possible but probable: Hurricane Katrina hit the gulf coasts of Louisiana and Mississippi with Category 3 winds and a record storm surge that transcended anything residents had witnessed in prior hurricanes (even the famed Hurricane Camille could not hold compare to Katrina's fierce attack). By the end of the day, thousands were dead. Millions of residents—the lucky ones—were without power; countless others had nothing at all and lacked even the basic necessities of life. On the Mississippi Gulf Coast, most buildings within 1 mile of the shoreline had been either heavily damaged or destroyed completely.

By the morning of August 30, Sara witnessed the magnitude of what was before them. Her church had been destroyed—only a concrete slab and a pile of rubble remained. Ironically, as Sara noted later, the rubble consisted mostly of items that did not belong to her congregation but to homes and businesses located hundreds of yards away. Most of her church's hymnals, pews and the rest landed in a parking lot northwest of the building's location. To make matters more complicated, the building was not accessible by car. The one road that

remained passable was reserved for emergency vehicles, leaving residents to park some three miles away and walk to any destination within what officials called the primary impact zone.

But the physical devastation that Katrina had wreaked on Monday was just the beginning. By Thursday, the devastation was no longer just about physical needs; emotions were frayed to the limits. People walked around like zombies, unable to comprehend the vastness of what had occurred. Mothers, fathers and children of all ages moved through the streets searching for both the necessities of water and food as well as any pieces of “normal life”—anything such as pictures and other memorabilia that might have survived the storm. One observer likened the scene to Hiroshima or Nagasaki after the atomic explosions of 1945. People moved almost in slow motion, wondering if what they were seeing belonged to reality or to some horror movie in which they were unfortunate enough to play a part.

As their despair deepened through the week, people continued to search, but now the searching went deeper. People were looking for meaning—for hope. Yet as the storm of despair and fear rose to the surface, much like the storm surge, residents found themselves surrounded once again by what seemed an insurmountable wall, this time not of water but of grief and loss. Sara saw this in her community and she felt it in herself. Watching the *misery*, she wondered what, if anything, could meet this deep need.

Sara also sensed something familiar. Recalling her ministry in the inner city, she recognized the unmistakable looks of hopelessness. Sara had seen the blank stares and hollow eyes of people who questioned the intentions of others and the possibilities of a world that seemed to have forgotten them. Time and again, Sara had watched families struggle under the storm of poverty, abuse and neglect—certainly not the same as the devastation wrought by a hurricane, but no less destructive. And, time and again, she found the simple offering of herself and her faith as the only remedy, the only way to bring relief.

When Sunday came, Sara did not have a church building, but she was keenly aware that she still had a congregation—maybe not the same worshipers as before, because now her church was made up of those the world had made the “least of these.” These worshipers were still searching on this Sunday morning, searching for food, water, clothes and for deeper things that would soothe their souls. So, as morning dawned on this day of rest, Sara did what she had done before the storm—she got up and made her way to what used to be her church

building, in search of the Body of Christ. She parked near the boundaries of the impact zone, got out of her car and began to walk. She walked for three miles, past downed trees and power lines, piles of rubble, broken homes and shattered lives. She walked past the all-too-familiar markings of orange paint and the barricades. And she walked past memories and into the stories of hurting people, forgotten people and missing people. She walked until she found herself on the concrete slab of the sanctuary and then waited for her congregation to arrive, unsure if anyone would show, but determined that, on this Sunday, on this site, the Church was open for business.

As people gathered—some friends, some strangers, all wandering and wondering—they began to sing and speak the words of grace. They hugged and reminisced about common and not-so-common stories, and they cried and mourned what used to be. By the end of their time together, much longer than their regular church service would have lasted, they joined hands and shared communion, not as some ritual of obligation, but as a promise that the God who had carried them through the storm would see them through this difficult and eerie calm.

As Sara finished praying with the last person on that Sunday morning, she pictured in her mind what had been taken from her community so quickly and tragically. But she also saw what had not been stolen by this storm—the hope of the Body of Christ and the promise that where the people gather, God is in their midst. She realized that this storm was only a footnote in the journey—a powerful impression, mind you—but simply a footnote. And she guessed that all storms in all journeys were footnotes to the greater meaning of it all.

With that, this wife, mother and minister moved toward the street and again started to walk. Not many steps down the road, she turned and looked back at the concrete slab and the makeshift altar and cross. Taking it in, she saw something she had not seen in what seemed months, although it had only been a few days. Sara saw hope, not in the structure that once was, but in a place and a people, who, for a moment, talked about Jesus . . . sang about Jesus . . . and loved like Jesus. In that instant, Sara knew that, in this journey, none of them was alone.

I am not sure the worldly observer would call Sara's life exceptional. I can't be certain that anyone would seek her opinion or advice on significant matters. I am not even sure if the people to whom Sara ministered truly appreciated who she was in their midst. But what I do know is that Sara's life

and story caused me to stop and to think about storms and about God's people and how the two, oftentimes, connect. She made me pause and reflect on how far I would walk either physically or spiritually on the chance that someone might need to hear a word of grace or might need to just have someone else show up. Sara's life caused me to hope and to believe that God understands our journeys, whether along those three miles of devastation or throughout life. To God, nothing is too lost or too far gone to be found or restored. He has the power to change the flood of despair, hopelessness and misery into, once again, life's deep well of possibility.

Finding God

A friend once told me that God is not afraid of our doubts, our questions or our anger. What God does not like is when we turn away and think we can do this on our own. And His sadness deepens when we believe that our journey is just somehow too screwed up to have any redemptive meaning. Why does this sadden God so? Because He knows the need for the *journey*.

Think about the life and death of Jesus: Have you ever wondered why Jesus had to be born, live through a pretty normal life, launch a ministry and *then* provide for the salvation of the world? God didn't just rectify some cosmic, spiritual debt (please excuse me, but God could have mailed that payment in). No, God knew the power of the journey and so became like us, took on a story Himself, to show us that through *everything* there is a reason to survive, something to hope for and something to learn.

Before Jesus, the people of God understood the journey from only one angle: God was *up there* (in the sky, in the fire, on a mountain, in the Temple) and they were *down here*. Calvary changed that. There, the story got personal for God—and for you and me. Just take a look at Jesus' last words on the cross.

Father, forgive them . . . (see Luke 23:34).

Why have you forsaken Me? . . . (see Matt. 27:46).

Take care of My mother . . . (see John 19:26-27).

I am thirsty . . . (see John 19:28).

I am through with this . . . (see John 19:30).

Do those prayers sound familiar to you? They do to me. Why? Because in one form or another, I have prayed them, too. Haven't you?

Reading those words reminds me that Jesus knows what it is like to hurt, to care about others, to be frustrated, to feel forgotten and to be exhausted. And, if Jesus knows all of these things, then He must also know what it is like to wonder if the whole journey is worth it (*Oh, that's right, the Garden of Gethsemane*) or what it is like to lose a loved one (*Yes, I remember Jesus cried for Lazarus*) or what it is like to feel betrayed and forgotten (*Did you just think about Judas?*).

Jesus knows what it's like.

God knows a few things, too. God knows really big projects, like how to cause *really big bangs!* God knows complicated projects, like how to separate light from dark (think about being the first to confront that issue). God knows the solutions to tough dilemmas, like how to reconcile justice and righteousness with unconditional love.

But let me share with you other things that the God of infinite power and knowledge knows . . . God knows what it is like to hurt, both on the inside and outside. God knows what it is like to lose people you love. God knows what it is like to keep saying the same thing and feel as if no one is listening. God knows what it is like to give away with little hope of receiving anything in return. God knows about family and friends. God knows comfortable places like a mother's embrace, cool places like a river bed, and barren, forgotten places like a wilderness and a hill made of jagged rock.

God also knows that things are not lost, just unfound. God knows that tough situations have deeper meanings. God knows that creation comes from chaos and that hope comes from struggle. God knows that one step does not the whole journey make.

Oh, and one other thing . . . the most important thing . . . the unforgettable thing . . . the most incredible thing: God knows *you* and God knows *me*, and that is our new beginning and our hope. Not a hope that we will take the journey perfectly in step, with every missing piece in place and no mistakes made, but a hope that, because God knows the way, where we've been will mean something before the journey is done. For even when God seems to have disappeared, His work to redeem our misery into possibility goes on.

I am not sure where or when you are reading this book, but I'm glad you are. Sit back and relax. Find your favorite drink or snack and plan to stay awhile. I don't know where your life is at this moment, but I know that God has

something amazing in store for you, not because of any words that I could write, but because God desperately wants you to see that no life is beyond restoring, no misery so great that it does not hold within it the possibility of redemption. If this book is the vehicle by which restoration and redemption happen, *so be it . . .* but this journey is not about me—or even you. No, as the life of Jesus shows us again and again, especially as we watch certain encounters unfold in Scripture, the journey is about *us*, together with Him.

Along the way, I will introduce you to friends and acquaintances like Sara who have made an impact on my journey. Hopefully, through their stories, you will see the incredible, working presence of God in each of us. Of course, I will share glimpses from my own story, and just maybe you will gain a sense of why living for Jesus means so much to me. But most important for both of us, I will share His story, and while I am writing and you are reading it, we will once again see why faith in Him is not in vain.

So, friend, what do you say? Shall we find Him together?