

What
Now?

In his book, *The Wounded Healer*, Henri Nouwen wrote that “The great illusion of leadership is to think that man can be led out of the desert by someone who has never been there.” Kaitlyn has been in the desert of great pain and loss. And she’s emerged as a wounded healer—able to speak with both awareness and hope for those who find themselves in the throes of grief.

Christie Cole

Author of *Redeeming Sexuality* and *A Woman’s Words*

In *What Now?: Finding Renewed Life in Christ After Loss*, Kaitlyn shares her pain, struggle, and personal wrestling with grief, love, and hope with courageous vulnerability. Although her story is her own, she invites us to find our own stories in it and, by doing so, we find hope outside of ourselves. She doesn’t deny her trauma and pain, nor does she rush her healing or that of her readers. She creates space. Kaitlyn writes as if she is introducing us to her family, her home, and her hope. She has found Christ sustaining, patient, and present and introduces Him as one friend introduces another. Her value of children, their emotions, grief, and the need for ways to engage their trauma with or without words reminds us and challenges us to enter in and give space for all.

Lee Anne Cavin

Grace Church Campus Support Staff

Kaitlyn Odom Fiedler

What Now?

*Finding
Renewed Life
in Christ
After Loss*



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What Now?

Finding a Renewed Life in Christ After Loss

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Emerald House

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United States

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The Mount

2 Woodstock Link

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Northern Ireland, United Kingdom

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Dedication

*In memory of The Odom Family: Taylor, Mary Ann, Allie, Mary Taylor, Lacey,
and Kirby*

*To my husband, Jordan, for lovingly supporting me through this very
emotional journey*

To my brother, Abel, who has modeled steadfast faith

*And to my children—a testament of God's grace. Watching your lives unfold
will be my greatest joy.*

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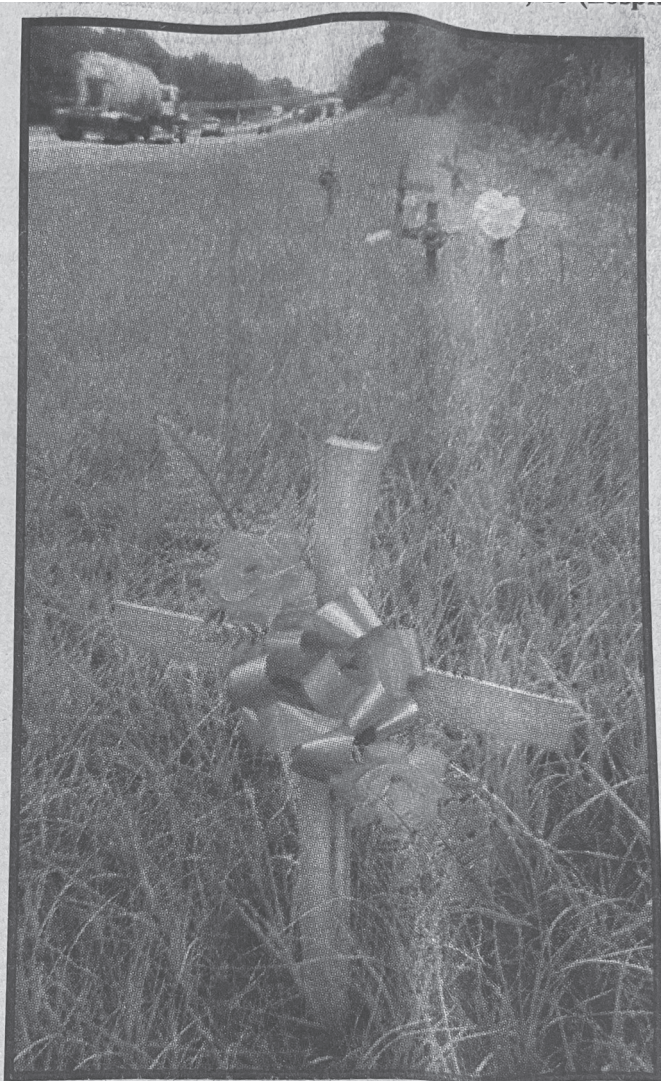
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Foreword

TWO OF MY INSPIRATIONS FOR writing this book came from the kids I've been honored to know both at New Haven Residential Treatment Center and the SHIFT class I volunteered with at Grace Church. The New Haven girls have been through the rough parts of life. They've seen and felt much of what I will describe in these pages, and they've put in the hard work to heal and overcome. The kids from SHIFT class have all experienced tremendous loss. They come to class because they want to heal and learn more about how to navigate their new normal. Both groups have inspired me, so I kept them in mind as my audience while I wrote. For all of those who have been through the hurt and the hardness of life—the loss, loneliness, confusion, desperation, and disappointment—this book is for you. To those who have felt grief, fear, or abandonment—that's all of us, isn't it? No one is exempt. Life is just plain hard. But we're in this together because we've all been there to some extent or another.



ERIK CAMPOS/THE STATE

Seven crosses on the shoulder of the eastbound lanes of I-26 at milepost 93 mark the site of the collision in which seven people died Monday.

Introduction

“God reveals himself in rearview mirrors . . .

In time, years, dust settles.

In memory, ages, God emerges.

Then when we look back, we see God’s back.”¹

THIS BOOK HAS BEEN A very slow four years in the making. I was in a coffee shop meeting my friend when she asked, “How have you been doing?”

I blurted out, “I’m writing a book!”

I had been working on it for only a few weeks at the time, but it was constantly at the forefront of my mind. This new, exciting undertaking has challenged me to be vulnerable and dig deep in order to bring to the surface the parts of my story that I had stuffed away for so long. Writing this book meant that now everything I have been through will be known. *I* will be known. Revealing my plan to my friend meant there was now accountability. I really had to do this thing!

Later, I told more friends, and then my Bible study girls. Then my church group, my seminary classmates, and then my family. Things went well for a while. Weeks, months, and years passed, and this whole book-writing thing looked a lot different than I thought it would. Life had taken its many twists

¹ Ann Voskamp, *One Thousand Gifts: A Dare to Live Fully Right Where You Are* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 156.

and turns, and my project has been put on hold many times. But the Lord always brought me back to it.

In all the sermons, messages, songs, and books—you know, the ones that ask, “What is it that God is calling you to do?” “What is it that you can no longer ignore?” “What is the next step you need to take in obedience toward God?”—I knew the answer. Every time those questions were asked, my heart would race, and that clear voice of God reminded me to “just write your story.” Over and over, the Voice persisted, and I knew without a doubt, sharing my story was something I could no longer ignore.

I have wanted to write a book since a young age. I just didn’t know how or when or exactly what to write about. When I was twelve years old, I wrote this entry in my journal: *“I love writing. I think when I grow up, I might want to be a book writer. I could write about my life and everything I have gone through; and even though it’s been very hard, God still brought me through it, and I had faith in Him. I trusted that He would lead me and guide me where I needed to go. And He “has brought me this far”² and blessed me this much! And I still have a long way to go to spread God’s love over all the earth.”* Now twenty years later, my first book is finally finished. Only God could have made this happen. His timing is perfect. He’s been slowly molding me my whole life, not only to write this book, but to follow His leading in all areas of my life.

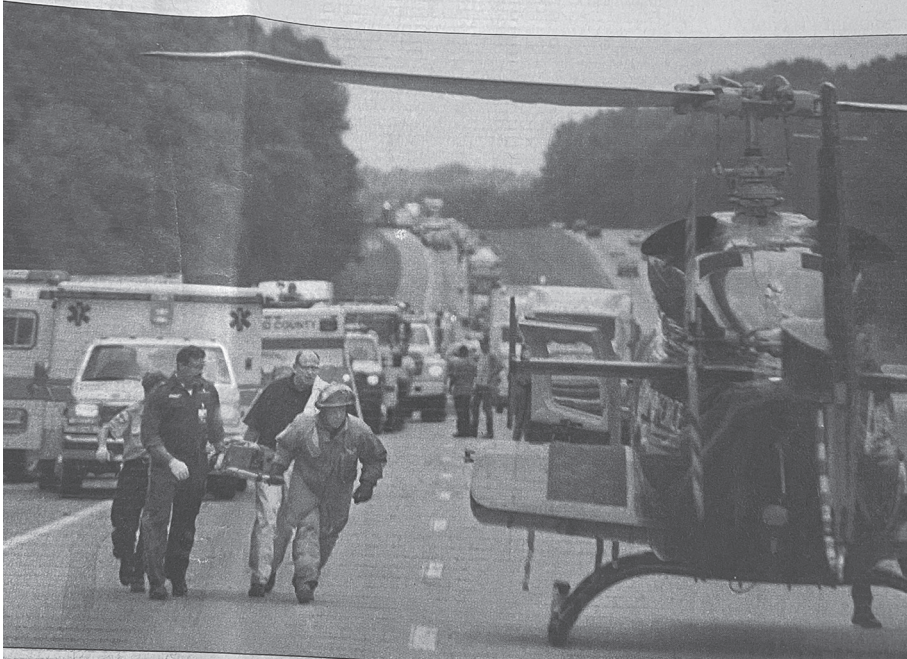
I want to share my story with you in these pages as if I were talking to a friend. If I were sitting across from the table from you right now, just like my friend asked me in the coffee shop that day, I’d ask you, “How are you doing? Really, how *are* you? Where are you in your journey of life?”

Then I’d want to go further. I’d want to know, “What motivates you?” Because our motivation for everything we do usually comes out of the hard places of life we’ve been through. It’s out of the hard places that we overcome—the places that mold and shape us, and help us grow the deepest. I would want to know about those times because then I’d understand where

you were coming from. So, what “hard” (hurt, pain, suffering) have you been through? And what is God teaching you? I’d love to dig into that part of our souls together.

My hope is that in these words, through my story, you will understand my motivations, the hard places from which I operate. My desire is for you to know that Jesus *can* shine through the darkest rain, and His joy can be overwhelming even through the greatest pain. May God meet you in your darkest pain and fill you with the greatest hope there is—His great hope. I’ve found this hope firsthand, and I long for you to have it, too.

I-26 collision leaves 7 dead



Emergency rescue personnel rush a wreck victim to a helicopter waiting on Interstate 26.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY RICH GLEICKS

ck crosses median, hits Suburba

CHAPTER 1

The Beginning

IT'S EVERY MOTHER'S DAY, EVERY anniversary of the accident, and every holiday. My high school graduation, my wedding day, and the birth of my son. These are the times when grief has hit me the hardest. And even when it's not a significant day, small things, like chickens and a garden, take me back to our little house on the farm in the hills of North Carolina. Making mom's casserole transports me back to the smell of our kitchen. Cobbler, bread, pie . . . always something baking. I remember coming in hungry from playing in the creek. As soon as the back screen door swung open, the sweet aroma of fresh homemade bread filled my nostrils, and I would close my eyes, breathing in deep. "Mmmm!" We would lather the butter onto the bread and be filled. Completely satisfied.

And blue trucks . . . well, seeing blue trucks always remind me of the "mailbox smasher" we would hear coming down our curvy, country road. And rain? Bright yellow, plastic jackets and jumping in puddles barefoot. Shrills of laughter.

Snow brings memories of heads leaned back and tongues out as flakes landed cold on our eyelashes while we made angels and how the blanket of white sounded as it crunched beneath my boots as my short legs sank in a hole thigh-deep. I remember at only three years old, having to practically swim through our backyard covered in that fresh Colorado powder.

Every time I see blackberries, I see in my mind the bushes that lined our driveway and blackberry juice all over our cheeks.

To me, using Windex means smears on the bathroom mirror as we all helped clean on Wednesdays. And Sunday mornings was our drive to church—late every single week.

Chickens, blue trucks, rain, snow, blackberries, Windex, and Sunday mornings—a list of seemingly random, everyday things. They weren't sentimental to me in the least at the time, but now, looking back, the memories they hold are pure gifts. If you've lost a loved one, you may have your own list of small things like these. Ordinary to everyone else but magical to you.



Six of my immediate family members live in a home I cannot visit.

Life is fragile. You don't realize this until you're hit with something that shatters your whole world. I've lived this fragility of life, and I know what shattered feels like. I have been without some of my family for over twenty years, and oh, how I long to see them and hear their voices and catch up on all the time we've missed. I miss them so much, and I think about them almost every day. But they don't miss me because they are perfectly content, not in need of anything. They are full and whole and complete because they are all in Heaven praising our Father every second of every day.

This thought makes me smile, but it also brings a sting of jealousy. Sometimes grief can feel like jealousy. I'm jealous because there is a deep longing in my soul to be where they are. There is a deep longing for the reunification of my closest blood. Sometimes this life feels like a painful waiting game. It feels like I'm on a trip to a magical destination (like Disney World or Hawaii). But the trip continues on and on without ever reaching the destination. Or like a movie you're being forced to watch. You know there's a good ending, but the ending never comes. It's torturous. This waiting. It's agony.

This is the waiting of a young girl for her mother's return, to pick up where they left off. This is the longing to hear her voice, to smell her aroma, to feel her smooth skin, to run fingers through her hair, to hug tight and share kisses, to experience a mother's presence again just as it was.

This is the waiting of a young girl for her father's return to pick up where they left off—the longing to be embraced by strong arms, to feel a prickly beard, to have a hand to hold, and to behold a laugh.

This is the waiting of a young girl for her siblings' return to pick up where they left off—the longing to skip barefoot across the yard, to race up and down the driveway and squeal with delight, to roll up pants and wade in the creek, to bicker with, and to whisper goodnight to as the lights turn off.

Everything in me wants to skip to the good ending—to be with my family again and to pick up where we left off. I want to see what they are seeing. I want to do what they are doing. I want to join them. I want to be full and whole and complete with them. They are all in a place that is perfect in every way. But I am here, stuck in a world that is affected by the Fall, a world that feels tremendous hurt and pain and suffering, decaying more and more every day.

I've had to learn how to navigate life through loss—how to keep living here when they are there. I've surpassed all the ages that my siblings were when they died, and I have no choice but to face the rest of my life with the pain, the void, the gap, the incomplete, the loneliness, and the longing that will never be fully met on earth. I've learned how to survive and eventually thrive in life when everything feels just plain wrong because the people I love most in the world are not in it anymore. Loss happens in so many different ways, whether through death, divorce, or other life-altering circumstances. All loss is painful. In my case, the loss was sudden and tragic, and it turned my whole world upside-down.

Why couldn't I have been warned? No one came to me as a child to alert me as to what my life was going to look like. I wasn't handed a step-by-step

instruction manual on how to navigate the events that were to unfold. No one told me when I was six years old that I had only two years to prepare for something horrible that would drastically change my life—that my wonderful family would be torn from my life in an instant. There was no time to prepare for the shock that was to come, and even if someone had told me, there was no way I would have believed them.

No, I was just a little girl—innocent, imaginative, a dreamer. I had a small frame, blonde curls, fair skin, and wide, green eyes. And I always wore a smile that others said would light up the room. I was living my life in pure bliss as if it were heaven on earth. And it *was* heaven to me. The creek running through our backyard was my own slice of paradise. Any time I wanted, I could dip my toes or toss stones. I would roll down the big hill in the front yard laughing and squealing at the top of my lungs without a care in the world. And I would run through the wide-open field in the back. My days were filled with pure delight. I knew I was safe. I knew I was loved. And nothing else mattered.

I'm not sure if I actually have memory of those few seconds right before we were hit or if I've just imagined the scene of what it *would* have felt like so many times in my head that it seems real. Regardless, I sensed some type of commotion, and I started to stir from my sleep. My eyes cracked open from the far-back seat. Through the slits of my eyes, I could see my mom grabbing Dad's arm.

Mom shrieked, "Oh, Taylor, no, no!"

A horn sounded loud and long. By that point, all the kids in the car were screaming. I thought I was dreaming, and yet, somehow, I felt completely at peace. All of this happened in seconds. Then the world went black.

Sometime later, my eyes opened and then shut. *Blink. Blink. Blink.* So blurry. So bright! They couldn't focus. I heard noise. I slowly began to make out shapes. There were people in the room. There were faces hovering, looking down at me.

My vision finally cleared, and I could see there were maybe three or four of them. Some of them I knew, some I didn't. There were others in the distance sitting down. I was too tired to care. I closed my eyes and went back to sleep. I woke up again, and before I had time to think, someone was standing over me asking me a question.

"How old are you? What number?" They were holding up their hands like they were using them to count. I wanted to laugh.

"I'm eight," I had said, confused. There seemed to be some sighs of relief among the people in the room when I answered.

This is a really weird dream, I thought to myself. I recognized three of my aunts on my mom's side in the room. I looked down at my body lying on the bed as if it weren't really me and saw I was wearing pink Hello Kitty pajamas. They were comfortable, but they seemed a little silly for an eight-year-old. Where did they come from? I knew they weren't from *my* dresser. I felt a bit self-conscious. *But why? After all, it was just a dream.*

I remember Aunt Lynn pulling up a chair beside my bed. "We have to tell you something, Kaitlyn. You were in a terrible car accident. Your parents, Allie, Mary Taylor, Lacey, and Kirby have all gone to be in Heaven with Jesus. I'm so sorry."

Only God knew that this moment was ahead of me—that my life would take such a radical turn in the flash of a second. And there was nothing I could have done to prevent that moment in time.

This Is Grief

Maybe you've been through something similar or something hard and devastating to you in its own way. You might be wondering how I got from that point to where I am now. To put it shortly, it's been years and years of learning and growing and making hard decisions. All the small, incremental changes in my life over twenty-plus years have accumulated and have led me

to where I am now. First, let's talk about grief, as it has obviously been the primary emotion that I've carried with me for so long.

I'm glad God created human beings with the ability to feel. It's a good gift He has given us. We can feel so many different emotions, both good and bad. Jesus Himself experienced different emotions while He was on earth. We read about Him rejoicing in verses such as Luke 15:6: "Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep." But we also find in Isaiah 53:3 that He was "a man of sorrows, acquainted with deepest grief." We, too, feel these range of emotions. We can feel happiness and great joy or anger and frustration. We can feel compassion and empathy toward others or fear and disappointment. We can feel peace and comfort, or we can feel confusion. Life is full of these widespread emotions.

As Christians, we know that we can hold differing emotions simultaneously. We may feel sadness and sorrow, but we can also feel joy at the same time because we know Who holds our lives. We can feel loneliness and confusion but also great hope and peace because we know for Whom we are living. Our life doesn't have to crumble when we feel despair because we know that even in the darkest times and the deepest pain, there is still a Light shining through the darkness.

This Light is the Lord, and He is always with us, even now in our pain. I didn't come to this belief overnight. Choosing to believe that God is always with me, even in the hard times, has been—and will continue to be—a gradual journey. It's a conscious choice to trust Him over and over and over again, even when it doesn't make sense.

Grief is the one feeling I know all too well. I wish that weren't true, but I am deeply familiar with it. You wake up one day after the next with this pain in your heart that won't seem to go away. Your eyes are constantly clouded over, and you feel completely numb inside. You don't care about anyone or anything. You don't care about yourself or what you're going to do that day. You feel frozen. You don't want to do anything, not even think. When

you do force yourself to do something, you just go through the motions, not fully engaging. When someone cracks a joke, other people laugh, but nothing is funny to you. You fake a smile, wishing you could just fade away and disappear from everyone and everything. You feel like nothing will ever bring you joy again.

When grief comes on suddenly, it begins with a hollowness right in the middle of the gut—a gaping void, like someone cut out a hole the size of a cereal bowl and just left it there. When it rises to the chest, that’s where it really hurts—a stabbing followed by a dull ache, a tightness like someone’s trying to squeeze the breath out of you. Sometimes it sits there—for moments, days, or weeks. And if it stays inside, it’s safe. *You’re* safe. It can’t be seen or shared. No one has to know.

If you’ve experienced deep grief, you know the feeling; you also know that sooner or later, it has to come out. In my home, I have many books I have accumulated over time. Many of them sit on my shelf as books I haven’t yet read. They catch my eye every now and then, reminding me to one day pick them up and read them. Like those books, you may be able to ignore your grief for a time, but it can’t stay on the shelf collecting dust forever. Eventually, it will have to be taken out, dusted off, opened up, and examined, so the real healing can begin to take place inside you. Otherwise, if it’s left to sit, it will eat away at you, numbing you from feeling it or anything else.

Leaving grief alone will eventually cause it to resurface. This was true for me. For years, I left my grief untouched, afraid to “go there.” But like grief does, it eventually forced its way out. Now, my feelings of grief usually happen in times where my mind isn’t distracted elsewhere and I’m left to my own thoughts. It could be at night when a memory of my family flashes through my mind as I lay in bed or hearing the hymn my mom used to sing to put me to sleep. I could be going about my day not feeling sad at all, and then I run into someone who knew my parents. They smile with tears in their eyes and tell me, “You look just like your mom.”

Their words strike me hard, and then suddenly out of nowhere, I am a puddle of tears in the grocery store aisle. That's how grief works. It's always there; but some days, it hides away, and other days, it shows itself strong.

The minute the grief rises up from the chest, it moves to the throat—a giant gumball but really, it feels more like a cantaloupe. When this happens, my brain becomes flooded, like it's put in a state of shock, unable to think clearly or process anything. In these moments, I am paralyzed. Suddenly, everything is too hard, even little things. I can't eat. I can't drink. I can't speak. And I feel my body start to respond. My face becomes flushed. I try not to let it show by swallowing hard to keep my emotions intact. Briefly, I glance around with a tight smile to see if anyone is noticing what's happening to me.

Once grief reaches my throat, it's coming, I can't control it any longer. It's only a second before water begins brimming out of my eyes. More tears. Fountains that never seem to end. These fountains bring release, and it's my body's way of coping. It means I'm letting go. I'm not afraid to show it, because finally, this pain I've bottled up can be shared. Finally, I am not alone any longer. I can be seen. I can be known. I can be real. This is grief. And I know it well.

Perspective Matters

What twenty-something-year old keeps a framed photo of just their mom beside their bed? Only one who has lost hers. As someone who has lost both of her parents, I'm especially sensitive to others who have gone through the same type of loss—especially as children. You don't have to search very hard to see or hear about a child who's lost their parents. If it's not you or someone you know, it's someone you've heard about in the news or elsewhere. We see it daily. One statistic I ran across shows that one in every twenty children will lose one or both of their parents before age sixteen.³ Many times, these losses are due to a car accident. I am one of these statistics. Maybe you are, too.

3 "Did You Know: *Children and Grief Statistics*," Children's Grief Awareness Day, Accessed June 1, 2022, <https://www.childrensgriefawarenessday.org/cgad2/pdf/griefstatistics.pdf>.

Whenever I hear of a young child who has lost his or her parents in a sudden way, my heart stops. I know the pain and grief that child will feel, and I know the hard road ahead.

Just recently, a good friend of mine lost her sister and brother-in-law in a car accident leaving behind their three young children—the oldest a six-year-old girl. The reality of that news hit really close to home with me. Anger burned inside of me at the news, and a pit formed in my stomach that knocked me to my knees for days. The next Sunday in church, as we sang out songs about death having no sting and the grave having no hold, I wanted to roll my eyes.

I know exactly where death's sting is. It's the piercing feeling in my heart and the water flowing out of my eyes. Death's sting is felt by my friend, her family members, and especially in the lives of those three precious children. *Is this an example of God's rule in the world?* I looked around and wondered how everyone else could be smiling and singing when this family's whole world had just been turned upside-down. Three young children will now have to navigate a whole new life without their beloved parents. I wonder how God could let this happen! What kind of God can truly say He loves us when He allows something like this to happen?

Sure, when everything is going good in our life, it's easy not to think these thoughts; it's easy to be filled with joy *then*. But when we or someone near us is going through a tragedy, the emotions are quite real, and joy is hard to find. In fact, joy can feel completely unattainable. We think, *What's the point? What does it matter? How can I be singing songs of praise when another family is experiencing great tragedy? Could God be that sick and twisted?*

When I have these thoughts, I know my perspective has shifted away from the truth. My view of God has been clouded and I'm not able to see His goodness rightly. I know the truth, but it's hard to see it through a blurry lens. Thankfully, Jesus welcomes me to get angry, to doubt and question Him, and to cry out to Him in my confusion about how He works. When I do, He

gently shifts my perspective, reminding me that I'm not made to understand the innerworkings of why He does the things He does. For His ways are not our ways, nor His thoughts our thoughts (Isaiah 55:9). And though I can't personally help every single individual who experiences a loss, God reminds me that it's not up to me; He is the one "who heals the brokenhearted" (Psalm 147:3). We are His patients, and He is our great Physician. When we experience a loss, our hearts break, but God heals our broken hearts and binds up our wounds! He alone has the healing power that we do not possess. He is continually healing us from the inside, making us completely whole and longing for nothing. Everything else that we go to in our search for healing fails in comparison to God's great love and grace.

Now you might be thinking, *Okay, Kaitlyn, this all sounds great. But how can I reach this perspective, too?* Hang in there with me. I'll get there. But first, let me take you back to the very beginning.

Seeking God in Trials and Sorrow

My story begins with God's story. Sometime after He created the world, sin entered in. Adam and Eve, the first people God created, disobeyed God by doing exactly what they were told not to do. This is known as the Fall—God's people fell away from Him—and since then, nothing has been right in life or how God intended it to be. Because of sin, my story—my life and all of our lives—is hard. No, worse than hard. Devastating. Heartbreaking. It's difficult to even find the right word to describe the pain we experience.

You see, this is why there is suffering. This is why there is sorrow and hurt. This is why we can never feel *fully* loved, *fully* accepted, *fully* content, or *fully* safe on this earth. We are living in a broken world. We're in the between-time until God returns and His followers are united with Him in a perfect world with no sin once again.

This journey we are on is not supposed to be easy. It hasn't been from the beginning. It's a long, weary, and often painful voyage. John 16:33 tells

us, “In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.” God tells us troubles will come our way. We should not be surprised when they hit; instead, we seek to trust God with how He will use them. This verse should serve as an encouragement to us that whatever we have yet to encounter, God has already overcome. It should give us a greater dependence on Him as our Guide as we walk with Him step by step.

Some suffering we experience is intentional harm either placed on us by another or the result of our own doing, but other times, it’s unintentional. It just happens to us. In my case, someone wasn’t purposefully trying to harm me nor my family; it was a complete accident. It wasn’t anything anyone could have prevented. It was simply the result of a broken, fallen world where nothing is ever quite right and hurt and harm is all around us.

This is a pretty grim reality. But what I’m here to tell you is that there’s hope! There’s hope because God is working in our lives. Just like Joseph told his brothers in Genesis after they had sold him into slavery as a young boy, “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives” (Genesis 50:20). This is how God operates. He is always working in order to turn our bad situations into good and in order to save lives!