I am hurting
I am confused
I am angry
I am scared
I am alone
I am doubting
I am lost
I am struggling
I am betrayed
I am weak
I am STRONG

FINDING GOD'S PEACE AND STRENGTH IN LIFE'S DARKEST MOMENTS

JOHN S. DICKERSON
I Am STRONG

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INTRODUCTION

Hope for the Suffering

Street dogs wandered across the dirt road in Los Algodones, Mexico, just south of the United States border. I was there to write a story for The Scottsdale Times newspaper. Everyone else was there for a different reason—to buy hope.

They had driven RVs and pickup trucks from as far as Oklahoma and Indiana, searching for the Mexican doctor in this border town. The Americans brought hopeless conditions—terminal cancer, incurable COPD, and debilitating headaches—to the clinic.

They lined up to pay $1,000 each for injections advertised as stem cells with miraculous healing properties. Injections that could “save your life.” But, as the sales pitch went, “the FDA will not approve them in the U.S.” So, hopeful, tired, and sick, American retirees had driven thousands of miles. Hard-earned savings in hand, they ventured into Mexico to find the doctor.

In the end, we titled the investigation “Hope Cells.” Because hope does sell. It’s a multibillion-dollar industry. In this case, desperate folks paid to have blood from goats and other animals injected into them. The “doctor” happily took $1,000 every thirty minutes out of the wallets of the vulnerable, the desperate, and the needy.

I hung out in the clinic lobby. Sat next to Bill Thompson, a sixty-two-year-old farmer with COPD lung disease, his John Deere cap covered in Oklahoma dirt from his cornfields. I talked with Gwen Wheeler, a seventy-six-year-old from Sun City, Arizona.
Why would they drive all the way to Mexico? Why spend their day in a dim waiting room, watching shadowy soap operas in a foreign language? Why tolerate the groaning of a window air conditioner churning out lukewarm gusts in the desert heat?

Why? Because they were searching. For hope.

And we search for it too.

Every day we hunt for hope, in ways we don’t realize. We buy new things we hope will bring us joy or fulfillment. We search for love and friendship, hoping a new relationship will bring what the last ones didn’t. Why do we vote? Work? Save our pennies? Spend our pennies? Because we’re wired to hope.

And none of these hopes deliver, at least not entirely.

- The weight loss shake doesn’t slim our waistline.
- “The secret to working from home and making $20,000 a month” . . . never pays off its shipping fee.
- The retirement earned after forty years is so . . . empty.
- The job that seemed so exciting gets so . . . old.

Other times, we grasp for weightier hopes: The hope of self-help. The hope of religion. The hope of “enough faith, and my problems will all go away.” And for so many of us, the hope of distraction. We numb our aching souls with constant busyness.

Our hopes grow from our inadequacies. No matter how strong we are, we all have some situations we are powerless to control: health problems, relationship tensions, addictions, emotional unrest, financial burdens—the list goes on. For each of these, we hope.

Like fish in an aquarium with plastic plants, we swim in a world of plastic hopes.

Some days we realize how desperate we are for hope:
• when we’re lying in the hospital
• when we’re returning, alone, to the cemetery
• when a loved one storms out of the house, or we lose our income

Other days, in the busyness of life, we ignore our appetite for hope. But when we slow down, we sense an underlying emptiness. There it is—our hunger for hope.

God designed you for more than an endless, frustrating search. He designed you to find hope. And He stepped into our world to deliver it. It’s what Jesus was talking about when He said, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.”

He invites the weary and the burdened to come to Him. And what does He promise? “. . . you will find rest for your souls.”

What a claim. What a hope! Rest for our souls. Relief from the tension we carry in our necks, shoulders, and spirits. It sounds too good to be true. After all, we’ve heard plenty of hope-giving promises that don’t deliver.

I was opening my mail when the cover of Time magazine caught my eye. It shouted, in giant type, “How to Cure Cancer.” The cover story carried an even more dramatic subtitle: “Yes, it’s now possible to cure cancer—thanks to a new cancer dream team.”

Wow, I wondered. Had cancer been cured while I was watching TV? Had I missed the big story?

The good journalists of Time magazine wouldn’t lie to us common folk, would they? The nation’s leading news magazine wouldn’t broadcast a false hope, just to sell a few magazines, right?

Wrong. I opened the magazine to learn that, actually, cancer had not been cured. Some headline editors preyed on our hunger for hope. They fed us beautiful, clever words—that were empty.
With age, we wise up. We hear words like “hope” or “strength for the weary,” and we shrug. Or we cringe. It’s not a real hope, we think. Just another sales pitch. Another TV preacher fishing for money. More religious hot air.

Is Jesus Christ and His message of new life just another false hope for the gullible? How about His claim to make weak people strong? Nice, clever words, sure. But might they be as empty as that Time magazine cover? As foolish as the magical “stem cell” injections in Mexico?

God brought this book into your life because He wants you to know that His hope is real. He does have good plans for you. He even has plans to turn your hurts and weaknesses into something good—impossible as that seems. God is reaching out to you today to give you real and meaningful hope that makes sense in the grit of your struggles and hurts.

When God came down among us in the person of Jesus, He didn’t come to sell a shiny false hope. He didn’t come, like so many hucksters, to get for Himself.

He came to give. Jesus spoke of an “eternal life” that begins after we leave this earth. He also spoke of “abundant life” right here and now. Abundant life, we will see, is not a life free from problems as much as it is a life full of peace and a power that outmuscles our problems.

Jesus came to give us “a living hope.” Think about that—a hope that breathes and grows and has muscle. A hope that can advance and fight and fend off the difficulties in your life. Isn’t that so different from the withering, shrinking facades of hope we’ve experienced in the past?

Jesus came to give you a life that even death cannot take away. An entirely new sort of life that begins with peace here in this broken world and then continues in a better place where there are no hucksters, no false hopes, no deaths, no pains, and no tears.
Maybe you opened this book because you’ve already experienced God’s power in your life, and you want more of it. If so, you’ve come to the right place. On our journey, we will venture deep into the life-giving hopes of heaven.

Or maybe you’re skeptical. Maybe you doubt this claim that God’s strength can blossom through your hurt and weakness. That’s okay. In my own moments of pain, I often doubt these promises too. But my doubt has not stopped God from building a firm foundation under my life through the truths expressed in these pages.

Whether this is your first sip of God’s strength or a return to the well for another gulp, here you will find the pure, concentrated hope of Jesus for your life today.

Together we will explore questions like:

- **If God is good, why do I have this pain or disappointment in my life?**
- **If I believe, why have I not been healed or delivered from this suffering?**
- **Does my pain mean God is mad at me? Is He punishing me?**
- **How could God possibly bring any good from this unthinkable evil?**

We will anchor our souls in the sturdy, ancient hopes that have carried people of faith for thousands of years through starvation, torture, physical pain, and emotional agony. We will learn practical ways to find God’s strength in and through our weaknesses.

Whether you are a spiritual leader or not that spiritual at all, God has something for you in this promise of His strength exploding through your weakness and changing your life.

Let’s journey into this mystery—that God’s strength can be “perfected” in your life and in mine. Not through our highlight
reels and trophy walls, but through our darkest secrets, our deepest pains, our replaying regrets, and our biggest fails.

No matter how dark your night or how deep your pit—no matter if your struggles are past, present, or building on the horizon—your heavenly Father wants to give you a front-row seat as He works good in the midst of your difficulty. He is a God who “gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak.”
CHAPTER 4

Children in the Universe

Little ones to Him belong—
They are weak, but He is strong.

Anna Bartlett Warner, “Jesus Loves Me”

My son Jack is four years old and growing fast. Each new day, Jack emerges stronger, smarter, more sensitive, and, at times, more stubborn. I cannot put into words the affection, admiration, and love I have for this stouthearted, blue-eyed boy. My son, Jack.

I’m not a perfect father, but I do my best to communicate these feelings to Jack. I communicate my interest in him by spending time with him, by listening to him, and sometimes by just telling him how proud I am of him.

Jack fell asleep in my arms or next to me, every night, for the first two years of his life. Usually he fell asleep after a nighttime ritual that went like this:

• a bedtime story (adventures involving steam locomotive trains or old cars)
• a bedtime prayer (I used to pray them; now he does)
• the singing of some favorite songs

Jack knows I love him. But at four years old, he has no idea just how much I love him.

Neither do I. Increasingly I find that, when under stress at work or when feeling stuck in a writing project, the most gratifying thing
for me in all the world is to simply be with Jack and his younger
sister, Zoey (with whom I now get to sing those bedtime songs).

Last night, I took Jack to see a new Disney-Pixar movie. We
walked in and discovered we had the entire theater to ourselves.

Jack asked, “Daddy, since it’s just us in here, can I run around?”

“Absolutely,” I said. “The place is ours.”

Jack ran up and down the stairs, his blond flop of hair flapping
as he jolted up and down, right and left. He zipped through the
empty aisles, testing about forty of the ninety seats before returning
to sit next to me in the back row, his original choice of seats.

I half watched the previews for upcoming family films and half
watched Jack bolting through the rows. Him running with such
carefree abandon, such freedom. Such pure childhood.

There’s a strength unlike any other strength in the boldfaced,
carefree confidence of an innocent child thriving under the safety
of caring parents.

Sometimes I tell new friends, “Jack has two speeds: run and sleep.”

So everything seemed normal on a recent Sunday afternoon
when Jack went zipping around the backyard, pushing toy cars,
climbing trees, and jumping off the playhouse. Jack had been run-
nning a slight fever the night before. But he’d been acting normal
all day, so we hadn’t thought to check his temperature. My wife
decided to call him inside and take his temperature, just to be safe.

The first thermometer we used indicated Jack had a tempera-
ture of one hundred and (wait for it) seven. 107 degrees Fahrenheit!
We swiped that thermometer across his forehead two more times,
figuring it was a fluke. Twice more the digital screen read 107.

“That thermometer must be broken,” I said. “Let’s get the old
under-the-tongue one.”
One minute later, the under-the-tongue thermometer beeped. It read, 106.5. Three times in a row it read 106.5.

“Jack, are you hurting anywhere, buddy?”

“Nope. Can I go back outside and play?”

“Sorry, buddy, we gotta get you cooled down.”

We stripped off Jack’s shirt, positioned a fan’s breeze directly on him, and placed a cloth icepack on his head. We gave him both ibuprofen and Tylenol.

Then I called a physician friend.

“With a fever that high he could have seizures,” she said. “You need to get him right over to the emergency room.”

So we did.

At the emergency room, the triage nurses kept marveling that they had never seen a child with that high a fever acting so happy. Jack’s mom and I hadn’t either. Then again, we had never seen a fever that high, period.

After more drugs and cooling, Jack’s fever dropped to 104.5. Since Jack reported no pain or symptoms, the doctors wanted to run some tests.

And Jack was having a blast. He and I were not sitting on a hospital bed, he told me, but on a steam locomotive. And it was my job to dig the coal. Jack was a great sport when he stood alone in a cold room for his chest X-ray. He only smiled and laughed when another doctor poked a tiny stick into his ear canals. She called it “the world’s smallest spoon.” Jack just loved that.

He might as well have been in Disneyland. He was having so much fun. Then a less experienced nurse came into Jack’s room. In a fraction of an instant, her words changed the mood.

“You’re not gonna like this,” she told Jack. “I have to do something to you that you’re not gonna like.”

I looked at my wife. We were both thinking the same thing:
Oh no, you don’t get cooperation from this strong-willed child by telling him he’s “not gonna like” what you’re about to do to him.

The medical terror she predicted should actually have been the easiest of all Jack’s tests, a simple Q-tip of saliva from Jack’s throat. Given the right imaginary scenario (race car driver health screening, perhaps), Jack would have happily complied.

But the mood turned the moment the nurse told Jack he wouldn’t like it.

We were no longer dealing with a compliant, fun-loving explorer. Now we were dealing with a warrior.

Jack now believed this mob of adults intended to inflict pain on him. Indeed, by our own words, we adults had claimed a plot of cruel and unusual suffering that he was “not gonna like.”

It took four of us to hold him down. The scene must have looked like something from a low-budget horror movie. Jack writhing, struggling, kicking, and flailing every limb—his every neck and back muscle resisting as we pressed against his will.

And then, in came the woman who told Jack he would “not like” what she was gonna do to him. Jack—his arms and legs restrained—began spitting all over her.

She got her saliva sample, all right. All over her face and shirt she got it.

Now, while I don’t condone Jack’s spitting on the nurse, I also don’t blame the little guy. What would you do if someone twice your size said, “You’re not gonna like what I’m about to do to you”? And then, a whole gang of towering giants, including your most trusted protectors, turned on you, restraining you like a wild animal?

It didn’t matter how many times I told Jack, “This isn’t gonna hurt. It’s just to help you.” He had been told otherwise. His view of us had shifted. His four-year-old mind could not understand how such terror could possibly be in his best interest.
If we love our children, at times love requires us to hold them down while they get stabbed with a needle or while they watch their own blood escape into a vial. These moments are for me the most heartbreaking moments of parenthood. When loving your child requires you to do something they interpret only as pain and punishment.

In those emergency room moments, our children feel entirely betrayed by us. Their providing protectors suddenly team up with strangers in a scheme to inflict unimagined harm.

We, knowing more than a four-year-old, understand that this medical test or that treatment provides the care they need. We know the temporary suffering will lead to lifelong health. But they cannot see what we see. They have no idea we are guiding them into torture, not because we want to see them suffer, but because we love them and want their best.

Jack felt betrayed and punished by me, even though I was trying to help him. In that emergency room, I realized how often we children of God, in our pain, feel the same way toward our heavenly Father. Betrayed. Punished. Abandoned.

In our suffering and difficulty, we, like Jack, find it difficult to believe that our Father is good, caring, and on our side.

We hear about God the Father’s goodness and love toward us, but we struggle to actually believe it. We especially struggle to think of Him as good when we find ourselves pinned down by troubles. When strangers attack us. In that fraction of an instant when our fun-and-games life turns into a horror scene of medical testing and torture.

Despite facts we learn about God, most of us doubt whether God the Father can really be trusted when nobody is looking. Maybe He can be trusted with other people’s lives, sure, but not with my pain, not with my retirement, not with my children. I’d better keep an eye on things for myself.
Alone at a traffic light or drifting off to sleep, we wonder if God has abandoned us. Given up on us. Left the building.

God wants you to know this in your pain: First, you are loved by your heavenly Father, despite what you may feel. And also, even when it feels as though God has abandoned you or is torturing you, He is actually still with you, for you, and feeling for you—more than you could ever understand.

When I think of the compassion and heartbrokenness I felt for my son, Jack, as those nurses, doctors, and I myself held him down against his will, I cannot put into words the sympathy I had for him. And in the same way, your heavenly Father tells you He is “close” to you when you are “brokenhearted” (Psalm 34:18). He has compassion on you. He hurts with you when you hurt. He holds you as you hurt. He loves you, despite the pain, betrayal, or doubt you feel.

It takes great faith for us to believe we are the four-year-olds and that our Father is not intentionally harming us. It takes great faith for us to trust that, far out beyond what we can see or imagine, He is actually in the process of repurposing these temporary pains for our eternal good.

In a very real sense, Jack cannot fully understand the comparison of lifelong health and a temporary shot or saliva swab. He is a bright boy, but four-year-old minds cannot comprehend time and health in the way mature adult minds can. In a similar way, faith reveals that our mature adult minds cannot comprehend time, health, pain, or redemption like the infinite mind of our good, caring, and loving Father can.
“Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Jesus, Matthew 18:3

The tiny acorn of an oak contains all the data and ingredients needed to produce a towering tree with dozens of branches, thousands of leaves, tons of hardwood, and a galaxy of roots. All that, and yet it’s small enough to fit into a squirrel’s cheek.

Jesus’ model prayer, known as the Lord’s Prayer, is a similar pint-size container of universe-size truth. In it, we find the power for a lifetime of following Christ through a fallen world. And it’s small enough for little creatures like us to carry it with us.

Acorns become mighty oaks by soaking in water, sunlight, and soil, one day at a time. We will become mighty oaks of faith when the ingredients of the Lord’s Prayer soak into our souls, one day at a time, through the various drenching storms and drought-dry summers of life.

This was Jesus’ method for syphoning heaven’s strength through the dimensions of the universe and into His daily life on earth.

The Lord’s Prayer starts with two words: “Our Father.”

But here’s the catch: You can know about Jesus’ way of drawing on heaven’s strength (praying in the manner of the Lord’s Prayer) without ever once experiencing heaven’s strength.

That’s because, like Jack in the emergency room, most of us have a fear barrier blocking our connection to the strength available through our relationship to our heavenly Father.

The barrier is that, in our deep inner person, we do not actually believe our Father is always good toward us in the details of our lives. We do not actually feel, at gut level, that He is looking out for us in our difficulties—at least not the way we would, not when we feel pinned down in life. Many of us suspect, if we’re
honest, that we are more loving as parents toward our own kids than God the Father is toward us.

And almost all of us, if we are honest, think that if we sat at the controls of the universe, we could do a slightly better job of running our lives than God does.

Now, God has patience for that sort of thinking. But it’s we who suffer when we don’t trust God as much as we trust ourselves. If we don’t push ourselves to properly redefine our Father for who He is, we will miss out on the fullness of strength available to us as His kids.

Until we deal with this core doubt, we miss out on the fearless, childlike way of life that Jesus had as He journeyed through this sin-infected planet. Remember Jack running through the movie theater so carefree, fearless, unaware of any worries in the world? God’s children can live with similar confidence, even as we pick our way through the rubble of a jagged and broken world.

But we won’t live that way until we learn to see our heavenly Father as the good Father He actually is.

This is an overgrown, infected wound in our souls—our distorted view of the Father, our unintentionally bending Him to the image of our human authorities. Entire books have been written on this (Abba’s Child by Brennan Manning is a good place to start). We return to our spiritual childhood when we differentiate our true heavenly Father from our earthly authorities and their mistakes, distance, abuse, or plain old human quirks.

We will not exhibit the fearless mind-set of Jesus on earth until we learn His strength of relationship to the heavenly Father. Strength of relationship goes beyond our understanding or even our hope, because it’s a strength that goes beyond ourselves. It rests on Someone greater. Someone who sees more. Someone who has a better plan. It puts us, like children, onto the shoulders of Someone so much stronger. The result is an inner rest and relaxation beyond
anything we can understand, comprehend, or work up in meditation. Why? Because it does not come from within us.

At its peak, this strength of relationship would look like four-year-old Jack saying, as those emergency room doctors and nurses approach, “Okay, Dad, if you say this is for my good, I can handle it.” He would still be afraid, but he would trust. That’s not natural. That’s not normal. Especially in time of crisis. But it’s what strength of relationship can look like in your life and mine.

My challenge to you is this: Right now, tell God that you want to break through the barrier of fear. Tell Him you want to trust Him with your life and your hurts, even when it means trusting Him more than you trust yourself.

Next, at a heart level, ask God to help you see Him as different from past parents or authorities who hurt you, neglected you, or let you down. Tell God you want to know Him for who He is. That you want to have a trusting, childlike faith in His goodness and love toward you. It’s as simple as saying:

God, I want to get to know who You actually are as my heavenly Father. Please help me separate You from the human authorities in my life. I want my relationship with You, God, to be the unshakable strength in my life. I want to know You, not as I assume You are, but as You actually are. I want to live for You, as Jesus did. I want to daily draw strength from my relationship to You, heavenly Father, just like Jesus did.

Jesus’ extraordinary life grew from His strength of relationship with the Father. Jesus referred to Himself as “Son” more than any other way. He constantly filled His inner person with heaven’s strength.
The doctors never did figure out what sickness caused Jack’s little body to fight so aggressively, with its 107 degree temperature. They put him on a strong antibiotic, hoping it would do the trick.

It did. After a few days, Jack’s fever dropped to 99. A few more days, and the fever vanished entirely.

It broke my heart to hold Jack down against his will in that emergency room. He has now seen that all the pain resulted in his healing. But I’m pretty sure that if we repeated the scenario tomorrow, Jack would still throw a fit at the moment a nurse told him, “You’re not gonna like what I’m about to do to you.”

As we journey through this fallen world, we all have times when life says, “You’re not gonna like what I’m about to do to you.” Like that nurse, life could benefit from some lessons in bedside manner.

Our aim is to learn to live as confident, carefree children of a good Father who never forsakes us. We’re learning to trust Him, even when life lacks bedside manner. Because He is there with us, seeing farther than we can see, planning things far better than we can imagine.

Your Father says this about you, “For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the Lord, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope.”

Do you believe it?

I once sat at the bedside of a dying woman who believed that verse with all her fragile, ninety-four-pound being. She believed it, even as I placed small ice cubes in her mouth because she had grown too weak to drink—her throat dry in the final breaths of death.

Earlier, she had asked me to keep reading that verse to her, Jeremiah 29:11.

“For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the Lord, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope.”

As I continued reading those words to her, I saw peace fill her. How gently she left this world of trouble. How triumphantly
she stepped—able-bodied, strong, and young again—into her true home, where things are pain-free, where her husband of sixty years was waiting with arms open in a warmer embrace than anything she had known on earth.

We are praying and working in these next chapters to gain her faith in the heavenly Father. We are maturing our trust of God. So that, even when life pins us down and starts jabbing things into our throats, we will know that our Father is good, that He has our best in mind. He is delivering us out from here. He will sustain us down here. And He is with us, hurting with us in our pain.

We are learning to live as children who are deeply loved. We are learning to live with confidence that every temporary suffering will lead to eternal good, if we just stay near “our Father.”

Even when it hurts.

*Especially* when it hurts.
CHAPTER 12

Rescue from Above

We must meet the uncertainties of this world with the certainty of the world to come.
A. W. Tozer, Of God and Men

When my wife gave birth to our son, she, like generations of women before her, had no epidural or pain medications. I did my best to cheer her along. But really, I was trying to keep myself together. I was witnessing human agony unlike any I’d ever seen.

Having watched the excruciating pain of childbirth, it amazes me that any woman has more than one child. And yet many do. Hundreds of millions do. Why would a smart, experienced person knowingly choose to go through that pain again? Why do so many desire, even ache, to experience one of the worst sufferings known to humanity . . . again?

Second-, third-, and fourth-time mothers willingly invite that pain because they know it is temporary. They also believe that the resulting joy and fulfillment of giving birth to a child will be lifelong. So enduring will that joy be that, even with its ups and downs, the lasting joy of motherhood overshadows the temporary suffering of childbirth.

It is hope that carries a mother through such pain. Hope that momentary, excruciating suffering will lead to lasting, exhilarating love. In a similar way, God promises believers that the worst pain we endure in this life is temporary. That it will someday be
overshadowed by the massively longer and larger enduring good we will experience in His presence.

As a mother in labor fixes her mind on the arrival of her child, so we fix our minds on our future deliverance, the coming moment when our temporary pain will transition into unending joy.

This is the hope of deliverance. For the Christian, our ultimate deliverance will be the moment when Christ returns. We hope in this coming rescue.

Paul thrived in his prison of pain by lifting his thoughts outside his prison walls to this hope of rescue. He wrote, “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.”¹

Along with us, Paul declares that planet Earth is groaning for the rescue that will be ours when Christ returns: “The creation waits in eager expectation . . . in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.”²

When Christ returns, He will re-create the earth to be new again, unpolluted by evil. He will restore us as well into bodies that have no sickness, no sin bent, no need for pain sensors.

Paul likens our lifelong struggle on earth to the grueling pangs of childbirth:

We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies.³
Rescue from Above

We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death.

2 Corinthians 1:8–9

Louie Zamperini was an American track star and Olympian when World War II erupted. He enlisted in the U.S. Army Air Corps and was assigned to a B-24 Liberator bomber. When that plane crashed in the Pacific Ocean, Louie survived on the open water for forty-seven days, fighting off sharks as well as starvation, sunburn, and dehydration. The Japanese then captured Louie, and so began his struggle to survive abuse, torture, and malnutrition in prison camps.

Louie endured unthinkable suffering for three years.

To me, the most fascinating moment in Louie’s story is a brief six-day period. In August 1945, Japan surrendered to the United States—after the U.S. dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

World War II was over. And yet, in prison camps across Japan, sadistic Japanese prison guards continued to beat and torture American prisoners of war—like Louie. These prison guards knew the war was over. They knew they had been defeated. But they weren’t about to let their suffering prisoners know. Louie continued to face beatings from a Japanese prison guard who knew Japan had lost the war.

Louie was a victor, but he was still living in an emaciated, diseased body and in an enemy prison camp. It took a number of days for some Japanese prison guards to admit defeat and abandon their posts.

In the spiritual history of humanity, we Christians find ourselves
in precisely the same moment. When Christ died on the cross and rose from the dead, our spiritual enemy was defeated. Satan came into this world “to steal and kill and destroy.”5 In the moment of Christ’s resurrection, every supernatural being in the universe knew that heaven had won the war. Evil is defeated.

The bloody cross and the empty tomb forever changed the struggle between good and evil. Like Louie in the Japanese prison camp, we now find ourselves in a brief moment after the enemy’s defeat, but before our final deliverance. Satan has been defeated, but he has not yet been sentenced and brought to justice.

In this world, we wait—wounded by our pain and suffering—for God’s rescue to be final and complete. Scripture calls us believers “conquerors” and “victors.” And yet, in our hurting, we surely don’t feel like conquering victors.

Presently, we live in enemy territory, in broken bodies.

Satan, who brought death, suffering and disease into our world, knows he is crushed. But like those guards at the Japanese prison camps, Satan continues to thrash about, inflicting pain until he can no longer get away with it—the day Christ returns to throw him into the lake of fire.6

This is the dark underbelly of Scripture’s “already/not yet” tension. Our enemy is already defeated, but not yet sentenced to the lake of fire, where he will soon be confined to suffer so that justice will be served. He remains on the loose.

Jesus predicted this period of tension, in which we find ourselves. He warned His followers that it would be difficult to have faith during this chapter of the story: “Before long, the world will not see me anymore . . .”7 He explained that, after defeating death and evil on the cross, He would go “to prepare a place for you[.] And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.”8
For a season, we who follow Christ are freed victors—but we’re still living in enemy territory. Jesus continued:

“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.

“You heard me say, ‘I am going away and I am coming back to you.’ . . . I have told you now before it happens, so that when it does happen you will believe. I will not say much more to you, for the prince of this world [Satan] is coming.”

Until studying for this chapter, I had not noticed what Jesus says here: “The prince of this world [Satan] is coming.” You don’t hear Easter sermons about it. When Jesus gives His parting words to the disciples, he warns them that Satan will prowl planet Earth until Jesus returns to judge the world. Because of that, Jesus also warns of persecution and difficulty as we believers await His return.

For six days, Louie and the other American prisoners lived as freed victors, but they were still enduring in enemy territory in malnourished bodies with an enemy who lied, claiming the war had not ended. And this is also where we find ourselves.

Until Christ returns, Satan is making a final furious push to destroy and torture humanity under his sadistic control. The apostle John refers to this in the book of Revelation: “He is filled with fury, because he knows that his time is short.” We know several things about our defeated enemy, who, until his judgment, thrashes about like a snagged fish, hook in mouth:

- He is “now at work” as “the prince of the power of the air” or “the commander of the powers in the unseen world.”
- He blinds the minds of unbelievers and enslaves them in evil.
• He is currently the ruler of this world until Christ returns to cast him out.\(^{15}\)
• He uses unbelievers as slave laborers in his war machine to persecute God’s people.\(^{16}\)
• He works in the unseen forces, influencing the thoughts of unbelievers and influencing world politics, ideas, opinions, and cultures.\(^{17}\)
• He still prowls about like a roaring lion, looking for souls to devour.\(^{18}\)

All of earth, as it were, is his prison camp, full of forced slave laborers. This is why Christ came to set the captives free.\(^{19}\)

We who trust in Christ are free from the power of the deceiver. But if we don’t claim our freedom, the enemy is happy to have us living like he is still in charge—even though he isn’t.

And so we live each day knowing we have “already” been freed from our enemy—but also knowing we are “not yet” home. As Louie and the malnourished prisoners fixed their eyes on the sky, looking for American warplanes to come free them, so we also fix our eyes on the clouds.\(^{20}\) We live in the daily hope of our soon-to-be-completed rescue when Christ will return to take us out of these prison ruins, out of these broken bodies, and into heaven.

Our story is not yet done. Our rescue, which has begun, is not yet completed. Christ has defeated evil. He shared in our humanity “so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.”\(^{21}\)

But Scripture emphasizes for our lifetimes this truth: “Yet at present we do not see everything subject” to Christ.\(^{22}\)

Louie and other suffering prisoners encouraged each other to persevere, to endure, to keep waiting for the day when they would be freed entirely. In the same way, we believers cheer each other
along to persevere during our wait: “Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.”

While Louie’s suffering seemed endless, it was only the illusion of endless suffering. After three years of suffering, Louie returned to America to live a thriving life in California for more than seventy years, well into his nineties.

Even as it felt and looked as though his suffering would never end, Louie’s freedom had already been won. We often feel the same way. Paul felt this way too. He writes in Scripture that he didn’t know how much longer he could make it through his suffering: “We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death.”

But Paul survived by reminding himself that Christ has defeated evil and will continue sustaining us until the moment He removes us out of this war zone: “He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us again. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us.”

Paul fixed his hope on a rescue that is past, present, and future.

- **Past:** Christ already “has delivered us from” evil. Your victory over pain and evil has already been accomplished through Christ’s death and resurrection.

- **Present:** While we live as victors in enemy territory, “we have set our hope . . .” on this: “He will continue to deliver us.”

- **Future:** God “will continue to deliver us.” God is not going to abandon us now.

Like Paul, we continue fixing our eyes on and arranging our lives around the “hope that he will continue to deliver us.”

British writer G. K. Chesterton put it this way: “As long as
matters are really hopeful, hope is a mere flattery or platitude; it is only when everything is hopeless that hope begins to be a strength at all . . . Hope means hoping when things are hopeless, or it is no virtue at all."^{26}

Paul agreed: “We ourselves . . . wait eagerly for . . . the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.”^{27}

And again Scripture encourages us: “Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations.”^{28}

In each of our thorns, pains, and difficulties, we make a decision. You and I decide for ourselves if we will choose this kind of hope. And in that choice, we become one of two kinds of people:

- **negative people** with no hope for the future, constantly weighed down and defined by past and present suffering
- or, like Paul, we “set our hope” on the rescue already begun and soon to be finished; we become joy-filled, peace-filled people, even in our temporary prisons and difficulties.

God cheers us along, encouraging us to make the hope choice:

- “Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.”^{29}
- And “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”^{30}
- Because “[God] has delivered . . . and he will deliver us again. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us.”^{31}
- And “the eyes of the LORD are on those who fear him, on those whose hope is in his unfailing love.”^{32}
For thousands of years, God’s people have been looking to the horizon and fixing their hope on rescue from above. The psalmist prayed, “My soul faints with longing for your salvation, but I have put my hope in your word.”

And Scripture declares this:

For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions . . . in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness.”

Our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Philippians 3:20

One day in the prison camp, Louie heard the roar of massive American aircraft engines. American prisoners of war looked heavenward to see the sun glinting off the polished aluminum hulls of massive B-29 Superfortress bombers.

Soon swarms of American fighter planes darkened the sky in a show of force. Some dropped packages, food, and news magazines that described how the war had ended days earlier.

And in that moment, the tables turned in the prison camps. The Japanese guards, so brazen and bold in the past, fled for the surrounding forests. Prisoners stood tall with authority. They overtook the guards’ offices. They torched fences with fire and feasted on food dropped from above.

In a similar way, believers in Christ today can claim that Satan and his forces no longer have authority to deceive and intimidate Christ’s people. Demons withdraw when we worship in full-hearted
belief that Jesus has actually won the war, when we live with full-hearted belief that our enemy is defeated and will soon be judged.

Of the moment when the American prisoners realized their side had won, Laura Hillenbrand, author of *Unbroken*, writes, “In the midst of the running, celebrating men, Louie stood on waver ing legs, emaciated, sick, and dripping wet. In his tired mind, two words were repeating themselves over and over: “I’m free! I’m free! I’m free!”

No matter how emaciated, sick, or wavering we find ourselves to be in the prisons of our earthly pain, we too can proclaim, because of the cross, “I’m free! I’m free! I’m free!”

As prisoners in skeletal bodies awaited their full deliverance out of the labor camps, American planes continually dropped food provisions from above. And the prisoners, with stomachs that had starved for years, began gorging themselves. Some sang. Some shouted. Some danced in conga lines.

Hillenbrand tells of one prisoner, J. O. Young, who wrote this in his diary: “As four years prisoners . . . there’s no such thing as being satisfied after eating. You either don’t have enough, or as we are all now so darn full you’re in misery. There’s just one thing left to say as we bunk down for the night . . . that it’s wonderful to be Americans and free men. And it’s a might [sic] hard job even now to realize we’re free.”

Indeed, we who trust in Christ can equally celebrate our victory. We feast daily on rations that God drops down from above (see part 2, “Feeding on Heaven’s Strength”). When we gather to worship with other believers, we sing of our freedom (some even dance in conga lines!). And yet in the struggles of this broken, prison shambles of a world, “it’s a might [sic] hard job even now to realize we’re free.”

Louie and the others would wait almost another week before getting physically delivered out of the wreckage of the Japanese
prison camps. Even after the guards fled (and Satan flees you when you submit to God’s plan in your life, see James 4:7), the men still lived among the shambles of the prison. They still lived in the shambles of malnourished and beaten bodies. But they were freed from their captors, and food fell from above.

In the same way, our enemy is defeated. History and humanity wait for Christ and His forces to descend from above and fully enforce that victory, with all its freedom.

We are free in heart but remain tattered in our bodies. We are victors, awaiting our enemy captor’s arrest, trial, and imprisonment. Through our sore rib cages, with tear-filled eyes, some days we doubt if such a victory can really be ours. We naturally wonder, some days, if we will ever see our Savior bursting through the clouds. But we fix our eyes on that hope. We arrange our lives around it. We cling to it by faith. We live knowing that unlimited food, strength, and care await us, as do loving family members who have gone before.

And yet, as we know and claim this, we wait in our worn-out bodies for a final transport, for the day of final justice, for the time when we see with our eyes what we already believe with our hearts—the full restoration of our persons. The full judgment of our enemy. The full joy of a new land, a restored land. All these and so much more await the soul who trusts in Christ.

Isaiah the prophet set his hope on this day:

And the glory of the Lord will be revealed,
and all people will see it together.
For the mouth of the Lord has spoken . . .

See, the Sovereign Lord comes with power,
and he rules with a mighty arm.
See, his reward is with him,
and his recompense accompanies him.37
Jesus put it this way: “I say to all of you: From now on you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.”

In that day Jesus, who is the one true God, will not appear as a sacrificial lamb or suffering servant, but as King of kings and Lord of lords. With an army of angels, a sword of truth, and eyes of fire, He will justly judge the evil one and the evils of history.

Early believers in Christ “turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.”

John the disciple, writing from his literal prison, fixed his eyes on the same hope: “Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him . . . will mourn because of him. So shall it be! Amen.”

Christ’s return will cause mourning for His violent enemies. But for us who trust in Him, our souls will collapse into tears of joy. Conga lines of eternal celebration when we hear our Mighty Savior declare from the clouds, “I Am the Alpha and the Omega . . . who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.”

Until then, He promises this to all who grow tired, confused, and doubtful as they await His arrival:

He gives strength to the weary
and increases the power of the weak.
Even youths grow tired and weary
and young men stumble and fall;
but those who hope in the Lord
will renew their strength.
They will soar on wings like eagles;
they will run and not grow weary . . .
“Run and not grow weary.” Those would have been encouraging words to Louie Zamperini, the Olympian runner, as he awaited his rescue from above.

Let those words encourage you as you await your rescue. Yes, you will be sustained here in these shambles of a labor camp. Even more, fix your hope on this: You will be rescued from above.

Our great hope of rescue is not only that we will be delivered out of the pains of this world; it is equally a hope that we will be delivered into the joys of a new world, the truest land of the free. Revelation 21 describes it:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth . . . prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”

Joni Eareckson Tada, who lives daily with the “thorn” of a wheelchair, broken spine, and paralysis, puts the hope of rescue this way:

“I haven’t been cheated out of being a complete person—I’m just going through a forty- or fifty-year delay, and God stays with me even through that.

I now know the meaning of being “glorified.” It’s the time, after my death here, when I’ll be on my feet dancing.”

We live daily with hope of passage into a world no less alive or gratifying than the present, but infinitely more colorful, fruitful,
warm, positively emotional, and problem free. Thorn-free, anxiety-free, pain-free in ways we cannot imagine. We have, as of yet, never known anything like it.

The prophet Isaiah describes it:

The desert and the parched land will be glad;
   the wilderness will rejoice and blossom.
Like the crocus, it will burst into bloom;
   it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy . . .
they will see the glory of the Lord,
   the splendor of our God.
Strengthen the feeble hands,
   steady the knees that give way;
say to those with fearful hearts,
   “Be strong, do not fear;
your God will come,
   he will come with vengeance;
with divine retribution
   he will come to save you.”

C. S. Lewis, in his essay “The Weight of Glory,” summarizes:

It is promised, firstly, that we shall be with Christ; secondly, that we shall be like Him; thirdly, with an enormous wealth of imagery, that we shall have “glory”; fourthly, that we shall, in some sense, be fed, feasting, or entertained; and finally, that we shall have some sort of official position in the universe—ruling cities, judging angels, being pillars of God’s temple.

We cannot fully know what heaven is like, but we see crude glimpses in the contrast between Louie as a malnourished prisoner of war and then as a postwar American in a land of abundance, freedom, and plenty.

Heaven will be a place where we are delighted in and patted on the back, with the approval that all children long for (and most
grownups long for too). This approval, this glory, will be ours, given freely to nations of people from every century and continent who have hoped in Christ.

The promise of glory is the promise almost incredible and only possible by the work of Christ, that some of us, that any of us who really chooses, shall actually survive . . . shall find approval, shall please God . . . to be a real ingredient in the divine happiness . . . to be loved by God, not merely pitied, but delighted in as an artist delights in his work or a father in a son—it seems impossible—a weight or burden of glory which our thoughts can hardly sustain. But so it is.47

After describing this future glory, C. S. Lewis returned (like the apostle Paul) to our present reality. The shambles of the prison camp in which we presently find ourselves feeding on God’s promises and from which we continually look to the clouds for our final deliverance.

Meanwhile, the cross comes before the crown and tomorrow is a Monday morning. A cleft has opened in the pitiless walls of the world, and we are invited to follow our great Captain inside. The following Him is, of course, the essential point.48

Jesus spoke of the difficulty we endure as we await His return to take us into this better future:

“You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy. A woman giving birth to a child has pain because her time has come; but when her baby is born she forgets the anguish because of her joy that a child is born into the world. So with you: Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy.”49
Postscript: In moments of joy, my wife weeps tears of joy with a freedom and abandon that I envy. Never have I seen her shed more tears of overwhelming joy than in those moments following the agony of childbirth.

After all those excruciating pains of labor, constantly driven forward by hope. Moved and moving through unthinkable pain, driven forward by the hope of future life. In that moment when the doctor cradles new, squirming life and then sets the child on my wife’s chest, tears of joy overcome her. And it is beautiful. A fullness of emotion so powerful that some of us fear it. But it is good. And wonderful.

That overwhelming joy is a glimpse, a small picture, of the joy that will be ours when Christ bursts through the clouds. When all of our waiting and hoping, believing and faith-ing, delivers.

When the birth pains of this world are forever over and we are forever delivered. Forever rescued. Forever in a place of no pain, no suffering—and not only empty of those, but entirely filled with the good of God, with oceans of pleasure, joy, and goodness that we only ever felt droplets of on fallen earth.

Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.

1 John 3:2–3