

FOREWORD BY NANCY GUTHRIE

Therefore

I HAVE HOPE

12 TRUTHS THAT
COMFORT, SUSTAIN, & REDEEM
IN TRAGEDY

CAMERON COLE

“Cameron Cole candidly offers practical and biblical advice for those who mourn in *Therefore I Have Hope*. An easy-to-read work without heavy theological language, this book can be understood and immediately applied to make a difference in a mourner’s life. Cole openly shares lessons he’s learning following the tragic loss of his son and does not shy away from gradually and carefully pulling back the curtain on very real and present pain. The principles he shares apply to those who suffer various losses—the loss of a job, a parent, a child, one’s identity, one’s confidence, or one’s friends.”

Robert Smith Jr., Charles T. Carter Baptist Chair of Divinity,
Beeson Divinity School, Samford University

“With both sensitivity and skill, Cameron Cole proves in this book that the central truths of the Bible actually matter for those of us who have ever encountered the often unspeakable tragedies of life. While our words to ourselves and to those who encounter suffering and loss sometimes fall flat, Cole reminds us that the profound realities found in the person and work of Jesus Christ and his resurrection can lift us to new heights of faith, hope, and love. Every Christian needs to read this book to discover anew that God is both great and good—no matter what may befall us.”

Julius J. Kim, Dean of Students, Professor of Practical Theology,
Westminster Seminary California

“Suffering and grief accumulate. No wonder we live in a time when many have lost the landmarks of faith, hope, and love due to overwhelming heartache. Cameron Cole’s book *Therefore I Have Hope* does not shirk from confronting tragedy. His own story of loss is almost unbearable. *Almost*. But this book does not leave us drowning in the inevitable question of, “Where is God?” or suffocating in trivial answers. Cole deftly intersects God’s own stories with ours to light the lamps of faith, hope, and love.”

Sharon Hersh, Adjunct Professor of Counseling, Reformed
Theological Seminary, Orlando; author, *Begin Again, Believe Again*

“Having lost my father when I was eighteen and my brother several years later to suicide, I’ve walked the lonely road of grief. I only wish I’d had a resource like Cameron Cole’s book, which is hopeful without being trite and biblical without being preachy. This book will be of such immense encouragement and help, not just because it’s hopeful but because it’s *human*. I marvel that Cole bears such compelling witness to God’s grace in the midst of his Worst, and I can’t wait to put this book into the hands of people who, like Job, wonder if God has disappeared.”

Jen Pollock Michel, author, *Teach Us to Want* and *Keeping Place*

“*Therefore I Have Hope* chronicles Cameron Cole’s journey into one of the hardest stories a parent will ever experience, the death of a child. But, thankfully, it’s a journey that didn’t get sabotaged by graceless cynicism or religious cliché. The gospel of God’s grace is more beautiful and believable to me having read Cameron’s book. I cannot wait to share this story, these painful tears, and this profound joy.”

Scotty Ward Smith, Pastor Emeritus, Christ Community Church, Franklin, Tennessee; Teacher in Residence, West End Community Church, Nashville, Tennessee

“The problem of suffering is a plaything for philosophers but a reality for humans. Here, in the raw pain of grief, Cameron Cole shows God’s way of enabling Christians to face the reality of suffering. Cameron shows how the great truths of God’s Word prepare, enable, and equip us to live by hope in the midst of tragedy. A good book to read before our Worst confronts us.”

Phillip Jensen, Former Dean of Sydney, St. Andrew’s Cathedral

“In a world on the precipice of despair, we need a clear theology of suffering so we might truly live out a transformational theology of hope. Stories like Cole’s embody the type of flourishing available on the other side of our very worst fears, and this book offers practical ways to find a hope that does not put us to shame no matter what storms may come.”

Jay and Katherine Wolf, Founders, HOPE HEALS; authors, *Hope Heals: A True Story of Overwhelming Loss and an Overcoming Love*

Therefore I Have Hope

Therefore I Have Hope

*12 Truths That Comfort, Sustain,
and Redeem in Tragedy*

Cameron Cole

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Therefore I Have Hope: 12 Truths That Comfort, Sustain, and Redeem in Tragedy

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To my precious little boy, Cameron,
I will see you again.
And to my wife, Lauren, an amazing friend,
and, in the end, a courageous one too.

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Foreword

I wonder how I would respond if the worst thing I could imagine happened to me?

Those were my thoughts, many years ago, that I expressed aloud to a small group as we studied the book of Job. As we read together that Job's initial response to the loss of everything he owned and nearly everyone he loved was that he "arose and tore his robe and shaved his head and fell on the ground and worshiped" in Job 1:20, I wondered, *How did he do that?* As I read the words he uttered in his worship, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD" (v. 21), I wondered, *How could he be so open-handed with what God had given to him?* I couldn't help but wonder what my initial response to incredible loss might be if and when it came my way. I didn't think it would be worship. But I wanted it to be.

Two weeks later I gave birth to a daughter we named Hope. On the second day of her life, we found out that her life would be very short and very difficult. I remember waking up the

following morning and thinking to myself, *I guess this is my chance. This is where I'm going to find out how I will respond when the worst thing I can imagine happens to me.*

Perhaps you've been there too, or find yourself there right now, wondering how you are going to respond to, as Cameron puts it in the pages that follow, "your Worst." Or perhaps your life has been relatively sorrow-free, and you find yourself living with a nagging fear of the day when your Worst happens to you. Perhaps you find yourself wondering what impact the inevitable losses and sorrows of this life will have on your happy life, your sense of self, your relationships, and your ability to trust in God.

As I studied the book of Job during my daughter's brief life, I discovered that a key to Job's faithful response was the tight grip he had on what he knew to be true about God. He also admitted that his understanding of who God is and what God is doing in the world—especially in terms of suffering—was incredibly limited. It was his security in what he knew about God and his submission to what he didn't understand about God that enabled Job to be confident that, "when he has tried me, I shall come out as gold" (Job 23:10).

What is stunning to me, however, is how little revelation Job had to go on. He didn't have the writings of Moses, or the psalms of David, or the promises of the Prophets. He didn't have the record of God himself entering into the suffering of this world that we have in the Gospels, or the application of gospel truths in the epistles, or the confident hope of suffering one day coming to an end that is provided in Revelation.

But we do!

We have so much more than Job had to help us endure difficult days and emerge from this broken world and our Worst with solid hope and confidence in God.

It is this divine Word, this rich revelation, that Cameron Cole has mined, not only to make sense of his own loss and sorrow, but to help all of us make sense of our own. Sometimes when we find ourselves in the confusion of difficulty and the heartbreak of loss, we know that we're supposed to find strength in reading the Bible, but we can't figure out where to start to find it. We know there are truths in it that are meant to instill hope in the midst of heartbreak, but we hurt too much to search for it. We need someone to serve up truth we can chew on. We need someone to point the way toward genuine hope. That's what Cameron does in the pages of this book.

My prayer for you as you begin is that the truths in this book will bring comfort to the deep hurt, sustain you for the long haul, redeem the unimaginable, and fill you with hope in who God is and what he has promised.

Nancy Guthrie
April 2018

Introduction

Like most people, my mind sometimes wanders to places of doom, to places where my imagination entertains (what I perceive to be) *the Worst*. In my adult life, I had made this mental journey enough times that my Worst had developed with vivid detail.

My Worst was likely the same as that of many parents: the persistent fear that my child would die. But my Worst had a second layer for me.

As a youth pastor, I worried that my faith did not possess enough fortitude. God had given me a relatively comfortable life. Any white American male like me, raised in an affluent, stable Christian family, for whom friendships, sports, school, and career had come easily, surely would believe that God is good. I feared that if my Worst occurred, I would lose my faith. I would turn my back on God and walk away from Christianity, and, consequently, my spiritual failure would shatter the faith of hundreds of students to whom I had proclaimed the promises of Christ for over a decade.

My Worst, indeed, entered my life as tragically as I ever imagined it could.

My Worst

On Sunday, November 10, 2013, finding my three-year-old son's lost Lego ax prompted the most magical conversation of my life. After recovering his coveted toy, my three-year-old son, Cam, exclaimed, "Thank you, Jesus! Thank you, Jesus!"

Out of nowhere, my little boy started to ask serious spiritual questions. He asked if we could go see Jesus. When I explained that, while we couldn't see him, Jesus is always with us, he asked if we could drive to see Jesus. After explaining to Cam that we would see Jesus when we got to heaven, my son turned his attention to heaven.

Cam asked if we would see Adam and Eve in heaven. He then declared, "I'm not gonna eat that apple."

My wife and I reminded Cam that we all "eat the apple." We reminded him that God sent Jesus because we all make the same mistake as Adam and Eve did: we all sin.

The conversation ended with my son saying, "Jesus died on cross. Jesus died my sins." In the minutes following that sweet proclamation, my wife, Lauren, and I realized that we had witnessed the dearest dream of every Christian parent—our son had professed faith in Christ.

That night I went on a short, overnight campout with a leader and some students. I awoke on Monday, November 11, to three missed calls from my wife in the span of a minute. I then encountered a voice of terror.

My Worst had entered.

My wife pleaded for me to drive to the children's hospital as soon as possible but offered no explanation. I pressed her for more information until she reluctantly delivered the worst news of my life: "Cam is dead."

Lauren had found our perfectly healthy child lifeless in his bed. Paramedics were attempting to resuscitate him, but she as-

sured me that it was futile. In what remains a medical mystery, our three-year-old child inexplicably died in his sleep, something that occurs to one in a hundred thousand children over the age of one. My child's profession of faith was the last meaningful conversation I ever would have with him on earth. Our son's life had ended in the blink of an eye.

The first half of my dreadful daydreams had become a reality. I had imagined this moment hundreds of times. Here was the point of departure between God and me. Here was that moment when my faith would crumble. In my imagination of doom, here was when I would curse God, resign from ministry, and pursue a life of self-interest as a bitter, faithless man.

But the Lord put a word in my mouth that surprised me. When Lauren delivered the tragic news, I said to her, "Lauren, Christ is risen from the dead. God is good. This doesn't change that fact." God gave me faith and hope while I stood squarely in the middle of my Worst.

The Narrative of Hope

That initial proclamation stood as the first of many moments of hopefulness as I discovered that God had been preparing me for such a tragedy during my entire life. Knowing that this day would come, God used lessons from Bible studies, conversations, theological reading, sermon podcasts, and previous trials to build a foundation that would stand when an overpowering wave of tragedy struck my life.

Throughout the journey of my worst nightmare—my descent into a dark, sad valley—the Holy Spirit would remind me of truths that comforted my soul and sustained my life. Very often in the month after Cam died, I would say to my wife or a friend that I could not conceive how anyone could

survive such pain if they did not believe certain biblical principles.

How could a person survive if one did not know the gospel? How could one subsist if one did not accept the sovereignty of God? How would one function if one did not know the possibility of joy in suffering? How could one move forward without the hope of heaven?

There are some truths that mean nothing to a person who is gasping for existential air. When tears seem to flow continuously in your life, the nuances of the Trinity or the particulars of a certain end-times theory do nothing to comfort. However, other biblical concepts can walk a person back off the metaphorical or literal ledge when jumping seems so reasonable and appealing.

One night I sat down and wrote down all of these comforting theological principles as a personal creed. I began to realize that the Lord had embedded these individual truths in my heart that collectively constructed a narrative under which I could live during my Worst. This narrative gave me hope.

This Book

This book is my attempt to share my narrative of hope with you. One can view theological concepts as academic, arcane doctrine. Theology can seem so dry and lifeless at times. But theology breathes and becomes more than just information in a confession or textbook when it becomes the story of your life and when it constitutes bread in a desert.

The gospel is not just an evangelistic principle; it is a message that gets you out of bed in the morning. The sovereignty of God is not some debatable proposition; it is the assurance that your child's death is not a meaningless accident. Grace is not simply a word in a hymn; it's the very thing you rely on when you are

so bereaved that you cannot imagine living another day. Faith is not just a cliché term for religion; it is the thing that picks you up off the carpet where you have been crying for over an hour.

My intent is that God's Word will offer you the most essential thing you need in the face of your Worst—*hope*. Hope is difficult to define until you are starving for it.

Hope is the substance that assures you that life is worth living when you simply cannot find a reason to make it to the next day. Hope is that expectation that maybe things will be better down the road. Hope is what tells you that—no matter how bad it seems—redemption is possible. Hope is that little light at the end of the tunnel that suggests that all of this misery is temporary when you're desperate for patience. Hope is the voice that says, "Don't do it," when suicide seems like a legitimate option.

In reality, all hope flows out of the person of Jesus Christ. Doctrinal truth offers no value whatsoever if it does not connect us to the heart of the precious Healer and Redeemer. This book is worthless if it does not elicit trust in and worship of the true and great Savior, Jesus Christ.

The first section, "The Initial Shock," includes what I consider the pivotal truths you need in the moments of trauma when your Worst enters your life: grace, gospel, resurrection, and faith. The second section, "The New Normal," contains theological concepts you need as the initial shock wears off and living with your Worst becomes a daily challenge: empathy, providence, doubt, presence, and sin. The final section, "The Long Haul," discusses important doctrines that help you persevere meaningfully and hopefully when you consider living the rest of your life with the wound that the Worst has inflicted upon you: joy, service, heaven. At the end of each chapter is one

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component of the narrative of hope, all of which are listed in their entirety at the end of this book.

To the person for whom life's buzz saw has not yet come, I intend this book to prepare you for the dark night, which no human being can elude. To the person dwelling in the gutter of misery, I hope this book grants you comfort and companionship. To the non-Christian, I pray you can see the unrivaled hope that Christianity offers.

Regardless of who you are, this book has been written for one purpose: that you may have hope.

Section 1

THE INITIAL SHOCK

Therefore the LORD waits to be gracious to you,
and therefore he exalts himself to show mercy
to you.

Isaiah 30:18

Grace

As a pastor, I frequently find myself walking into the vortex of tragedies. Being at the hospital when someone has died or entering a family's home hours after tragic news constitutes one of the great privileges and challenges of pastoral ministry.

When I walk down a corridor toward an ICU room or pace through the grass to a front door, the same anxiety always arises over this question: *What do I say?*

What do you say to a mother who has just lost her son? What do you say to a boy whose father has finally lost his battle with cancer? What do you say to parents whose child has been crippled in a car wreck? Is there really any sufficient word in such shock and darkness?

The nervousness in these situations has diminished (if not disappeared) for me since my son died. I now know the most daunting question that one faces in the immediate aftermath of tragedy.

Having left the hospital after doctors pronounced Cam dead, Lauren and I sat in Cam's room on Cam's bed, our eyes flooding with tears and our minds dizzy with disorientation. Eighteen hours earlier I had played on this bed with my son. One hour ago I saw his lifeless body on a gurney.

With our heads shaking, we repeated a question that expressed confusion, powerlessness, despair, and sorrow.

What are we going to do? Where do we go from here?

I repeated the question to a point that I felt like a zombie in a trance. We felt wholly incapable of putting one step in front of another. Who has any concept or wisdom for how to navigate tragedy? These fields of shock and sorrow are utterly uncharted for most people. Nobody ever taught a Sunday school lesson about the first steps immediately following a tragedy. Nothing can prepare you practically to answer the question, "What are we going to do? Where do I go from here?"

Furthermore, an existential boulder instantly lands on your back. You hardly can breathe with the shock of the current pain, and unfortunately, hundreds of decisions, responsibilities, and trials begin to mount.

When will the funeral be? Cremation or burial? Do you have life insurance? Can you talk to the police investigator? Have you seen the hospital bill? What will we do with his clothes?

One can only feel paralyzed with the overwhelming weight of your Worst.

For one woman, the challenge of coping with the loss of one twin in pregnancy would have been enough. Finding out that the surviving child had severe hearing loss added another level of stress and lament. One month after this diagnosis, her father died in a car accident. The wreck also seriously injured her mother. This woman had to plan her father's funeral while

attending to her wounded mother. Her father owned a business that she had to manage and prepare to sell. (Yes, making payroll, canceling appointments, and filing taxes while also running to the hospital.) In addition, a criminal investigation focused on the drunk driver who hit her parents. All in the span of a year: the loss of a child, the loss of a father, the discovery of a child's disability while caring for kids, a wounded mother, and a business.

At ground zero, in the hours following the realization that she and her husband had lost a baby *in utero*, this woman never could have known that this tragedy constituted only the tip of the iceberg of burdensome, painful challenges ahead. Surely she would have collapsed and folded in despair if she could see the cumulative pressure and sorrow beyond those awful, initial hours. Surely we all would collapse and fold if God presented to us all of the trials and pains that the future holds.

Right out of college, I struggled with some health issues that required me to resign from a job. As I tried to put together a plan for a next step, I met with an older man from my church over coffee. Rather than putting the pen to the paper for a game plan on moving forward, he told me his story.

And in his story, I learned the simple, helpful answer to the most daunting question we face in the wake of tragedy.

He explained that his wife had a medical condition where she would fall into a debilitating depression for four to eight days every month. She literally could not care for herself during that monthly episode, to the extent that he would have to take off of work until his bride was restored to health.

Given how much this man's wife totally depended on him, she often would spiral into a panic when she wondered how she would survive if her husband were to die. Who would care for

their kids? Who would provide for and serve her during her monthly depression episode? How could their family function? The fear of such an event paralyzed her.

This gentleman said that he offered her the same word of comfort each month. He explained that the reason she could not conceive of survival is because she was not in that situation: he was still alive. He said that God only gives us the grace for the situations to which we are called. He reassured his wife that if something ever happened to him, then God would give her the grace for *that very trial*. His wife would have vision, wisdom, and ability for that challenge because God would give her the grace she would need.

He called the concept *provisional grace*.

In my season of grief, I identified in many ways with the Israelites' journey in the book of Exodus. After the Lord released his people from bondage in Egypt and led them through the parted Red Sea, they awakened to a stark situation: they were in the desert with no food. The people began to grumble, demonstrating that their attitude toward God was not trusting (Ex. 16:2). They complained that it would have been better for them to remain in slavery in Egypt, where at least they had food, than to face certain starvation in the desert (Ex. 16:3).

Let's be honest: Do you blame the Israelites? Would you, like me, be wondering, *What have we gotten ourselves into?* They were refugees standing in a foreign, lifeless desert. They had no infrastructure for sustenance and no real direction. Numerous enemies posed a military threat, and they had no army for defense.

They still lived with the question: *What are we going to do? Where do we go from here?* The concern of basic survival existed.

God responded to their grumbling by making a promise that he would provide day by day and night by night. Each day, bread—called “manna”—fell from the sky and nourished the people (Ex. 16:4–5). In a place where there was absolutely no food and where the Israelites had no ability to provide for themselves, God’s provisional grace in the form of manna met their need.

Furthermore, the Israelites had no direction in this unfamiliar land. The Lord provided a cloud by day and fire by night in the sky to guide and direct them. God supplied grace to sustain and lead the Israelites forward in their plight.

In the initial moments of your Worst, envisioning yourself as a pilgrim following God in the desert may be the wisest perspective you can embrace. You, like the Israelites, have embarked on a new journey into uncharted territory. You have left behind familiar places of security. The land around you lacks any sources of life and nourishment. You have been reduced to struggling for basic survival. Worst of all, in this barren place, you have few (if any) internal resources to aid yourself. Continuing on without miraculous means is impossible.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus declared, “I am the living bread that came down from heaven” (John 6:51). The Jewish audience to whom Jesus spoke would make no mistake about his analogy. He likened himself to the manna of the desert during the exodus.

Jesus made a provocative and clear statement with this proclamation. He said that the world is a desert with no sustenance. Furthermore, he positioned himself as the only nourishment on offer for the soul. He framed himself as the ultimate source of help for the weary heart.

In our Worst we must learn to ask constantly for God’s help. We must look to Jesus, the manna who constantly falls upon us.

We must turn our eyes to Christ, the cloud and fire in the sky that leads us forward.

In order to seek God's grace, we must remember the gospel. Even if our Worst is the making of our own mistakes, the Lord desires to show mercy. Isaiah proclaimed to the Israelites, at a time of their greatest failure, "The LORD *longs* to be gracious to you; therefore, he will rise up to show you compassion" (Isa. 30:18 NIV). Notice the passion behind God's desire to extend grace to the humble who ask him for help.

God *wants* to be asked for grace. God *wants* to support you.¹

Paul wrote to the Philippians, "My God will supply *every need of yours* according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4:19). He does not say "some" needs but "every" need. He does not say it is because you got your act together. It is because Jesus, through the cross, has enabled God the Father to supply generously to those in need who ask for help.

As Lauren and I sat on Cam's bed in those first horrible hours of our Worst, thinking about the utterly miserable and seemingly impossible road ahead, I began to give myself the same advice I had heard right out of college. I said the only thing I honestly could say to Lauren: "All we need is grace for today. That's all we need."

And so we asked God for sufficient grace, and the Lord made it rain.

Roadside Grace

When I visit people immediately after tragedies, I tell them that they need to rely on God's help every step of the way; they simply cannot survive on their own strength. In addition, I offer a critical qualifier that came to me the week of Cam's death.

In the first hours after Cam died, I remembered a couple, Angel and Hunter, with whom I attended church in my early twenties. Their son, Lawson, went in for a relatively safe surgery at three months of age and simply never came out of it. I hardly knew this couple, but recalled wondering how in the world they were functioning in the year after their child's death. I observed them from afar and was amazed that they were still breathing. I moved to another church a year after their son passed away, but when I saw them in public from time to time over the next ten years, I remembered them as "those brave people who lost a child and survived."

Now Lauren and I were in similar shoes and struggling to conceive of how we would make it through life. This couple became a monument of hope to me. I really wanted to connect with them and seek their counsel.

Two days after Cam's funeral, as I pushed my daughter's stroller through our neighborhood, I saw a Chevy SUV cautiously slow down. As I made eye contact with the driver, I realized it was Angel. She recognized me too and stopped the car.

Even though we did not know each other formally, I wondered if maybe she had stopped by our house. Word about Cam seemed to travel fast in Birmingham, and perhaps she wanted to reach out to us. We lived in totally separate areas of town at the time—there would have been no reason at all for her to be in our townhouse complex on the other side of the city. Or so I thought.

In reality, our meeting was purely providential. At the perfect point in time and space, I was outside on a walk just as Angel was leaving a relative's house, driving on the same road we were walking. Angel represented manna, and then she became a cloud in the sky.

In that brief conversation, Angel offered the best words I heard along the journey. She told me to focus on the day, or even just the hour. She said that, in the morning, I might need to ask God for the grace to make it to lunchtime. In the afternoon, ask for the grace to make it to dinner. At night, ask for the grace to make it to bedtime. At bedtime, ask for the grace to sleep. And the next day, do it all over again.

The “grace for this hour” mentality, which emerged from this instrumental conversation, served as a foundation for our lives in the early stages of our grief.

Jesus provided similar wisdom in the Sermon on the Mount. He addressed the anxieties that people experience when they ask, “What shall we eat? What shall we drink? What shall we wear?” In essence, Jesus tackled the basic survival question of the Worst: “What are we going to do? Where do we go from here?”

Christ first reassures his followers of his constant care for them. He rhetorically asks if the birds, the lilies, or the grass of the fields worry about what they will eat, drink, or wear. Jesus affirms that God abundantly supplies for these creatures; he then asks how much more will the Lord graciously provide for his beloved children.

Jesus ends this lesson with a strict order: “Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble” (Matt. 6:34). Christ calls us to a “grace for this hour” discipline. He tells us to repent from worrying about tomorrow, because we simply cannot handle tomorrow. With his help, we can only bear the difficulties of today.

When Jesus instructed the disciples on prayer through the Lord’s Prayer, he called them to ask for “daily bread” (Matt.

6:11). Not for weekly or annual bread or “enough for retirement.” He called them to focus on daily provision.

In order to survive your Worst, you must heed this admonition of Christ. When you find your mind wandering to the concerns of tomorrow, next month, or next year, you must repent and remind yourself, “I am only called to today. God has given me grace for today, not for tomorrow. Stay focused on the present.”

God says in Psalm 119:105 that “[his] word is a lamp to [our] feet.” Notice, this is not a flashlight or a spotlight; it is simply a lamp for our feet. Just enough light for what is immediately before us. This means that he intends for his Word to guide us for the next step. Not for the month or the year. Just the next step.

An alcoholic friend of mine once told me the story of an Alcoholics Anonymous old-timer who opened up about his mentality for sobriety. He admitted that if he ever found himself thinking about having a long streak of sobriety or planning on making it through the whole month without drinking, he knew he would relapse. He said, “When I’m not focused on sobriety for today and today alone, then I know I’m finished.”

Each day and every week, Lauren and I had to make impossible journeys where only God’s grace could sustain us. Writing an obituary, returning to Cam’s school, walking by his Sunday school room, navigating genetics testing, boxing clothes—all of these were miserable, unbearable challenges. More so than these unique trials, just proceeding through the daily misery and sadness of grief was the greatest difficulty for which we needed God’s help. You too probably have similar challenges—birthdays, anniversaries, holidays, recovery, etc.—where the Lord has sustained you, and you certainly have trials that loom in the future.

Life after Cam's death became a depressing journey through a melancholy desert of sadness. Each day, though, at just the right time, God would provide sustenance for the soul to carry us to the next hour. This "bread" may have looked like a meal provided, a text message with Scripture, an invitation for dinner with friends, some news about the birth of a friend's baby, a free pass to the local pool, a poignant letter, the empathetic tears of a neighbor, night-nurses, a friend sleeping on our daughter's floor, or simply a beautiful day. Regardless of the form, the help came from heaven, and it carried us through dry, lifeless territory.

Grace in Your Worst Nightmare

Life is utterly brutal in the season of your Worst. Repeatedly you will come to the conclusion that you simply will not make it. God calls us to very short-term thinking. Jesus tells us to remove tomorrow from consideration and to trust him solely for today (Matt. 6:34).

When you start to think about managing your suffering beyond this very moment, you will feel overwhelmed and depressed. By looking so far down the road, you are assuming a role that God claims. You cannot handle such a burden. Focus on trusting God for the grace of this very hour.

Remember that God is on your side. He is for you. His love for you is more than a tepid fondness. His love is a passionate, intense, self-sacrificing affection that fills his heart. It is the love of a proud father holding his beloved baby for the first time.

Furthermore, God's love moves him to offer help to sustain you in the desert. As you may sadly find, you may look for help in all kinds of places—busyness, liquor, vacations, etc.—and nothing in the world comforts your soul in a lasting, satisfactory

manner. Only the grace of God can meet your desperate need in this season of darkness.

Given how horrific your circumstances may be during this period, you may react to this talk of God's love and grace as nonsense. Surely God hates me if such misery consumes my life? Rather than giving me help, my experience says that God has hung me out to dry! These feelings are fully understandable in times of suffering.

The life and death of Jesus is the greatest reassurance of these promises of God's love and help. Jesus descended from his throne in heaven and lived as a disenfranchised, oppressed, poor person, all in the pursuit of your heart. He laid down his life on the cross to provide the only satisfactory help for destitute sinners. He was separated from God the Father to the point of hell, so that you never have to feel alienated from the Lord.

The face of Jesus and the torture of the cross tell you that God is on your side. They say that he adores you. They say that he will do whatever it takes—no matter to what extent he must go—to give you the help you need. Remember that he was providing grace for you before you were even born. He did this at a time when we were sinners, actual enemies of God, as the apostle Paul says in Romans 5:10.

As you encounter challenges and repeatedly ask the question, *What are we going to do? Where do we go from here?* you know exactly what to do: Trust your Lord Jesus for his grace for this hour. Just for this hour.

The Narrative of Hope

My need is so deep; I am desperate for help. God longs to be gracious to me. He rises up to show me compassion.

The Initial Shock

He has called me to focus only on this hour, only on this day. The Lord deeply loves me. He is on my side. Out of this love comes his burning desire to help me. I can call on him, and he will give me just the grace I need for this hour of darkness. He will supply the grace for the next step. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus assure me that God cares for me and that he will go to the greatest extent to meet my needs.

“THROUGHOUT THE JOURNEY OF MY WORST NIGHTMARE—MY DESCENT INTO A DARK, SAD VALLEY—THE HOLY SPIRIT WOULD REMIND ME OF TRUTHS THAT COMFORTED MY SOUL AND SUSTAINED MY LIFE.”

After the sudden death of their three-year-old son, Cameron Cole and his wife found themselves clinging to Christ through twelve key theological truths—truths that became their lifeline in the midst of unthinkable grief. Weaving together their own story of tragic loss and abiding faith, Cole explores these twelve life-giving truths to offer hope and comfort to those in the midst of tragedy.

“Stories like Cole’s embody the type of flourishing available on the other side of our very worst fears, and this book offers practical ways to find a hope that does not put us to shame no matter what storms may come.”

JAY AND KATHERINE WOLF, Founders, HOPE HEALS; authors, *Hope Heals*

“The gospel of God’s grace is more beautiful and believable to me having read Cole’s book. I cannot wait to share this story, these painful tears, and this profound joy.”

SCOTTY WARD SMITH, Teacher in Residence, West End Community Church, Nashville, Tennessee

“This book will be of such immense encouragement and help, not just because it’s hopeful but because it’s *human*. I marvel that Cole bears such compelling witness to God’s grace in the midst of his Worst, and I can’t wait to put this book into the hands of people who, like Job, wonder if God has disappeared.”

JEN POLLOCK MICHEL, author, *Teach Us to Want and Keeping Place*

CAMERON COLE (MA, Wake Forest University) serves as director of children, youth, and family at the Cathedral Church of the Advent in Birmingham, Alabama, and is the chairman of Rooted, a ministry dedicated to fostering gospel-centered student ministry. He is the coeditor of *Gospel-Centered Youth Ministry*.

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