

pray the
scriptures
when life hurts

*Experience Hope and Healing
Through the Power of God's Word*

kevin johnson



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To Lyn
For worse or for better
Always my love

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dream

I knew I needed help when I dreamed I killed myself.

I had long tried to navigate a grim life situation I felt I could neither escape nor change. By day I twisted in pain. By night I tossed in anguish, rarely sleeping more than three or four hours. Several times a week I screamed in my sleep. My wife and I at least found dark humor in her attempts to rouse me from my nightmares. Lyn slapped me. Or pulled away my pillow and let my head drop. Or hosed me with a spray bottle she kept ready on her nightstand. After a while even a shot of water in my face lost its surprise, and I would lie in bed awake but not awake, paralyzed and terrified, until I jolted to full alertness. After many months, my lack of sleep led to exhaustion, then depression, and finally despair.

Years before, I had helped lead a group where hurting students could get and give support. Each week I watched other staff members skillfully coax youth to open up, asking them to

start by sharing a one-word feeling and rate their week from a 10—amazing—to a 0—wretched.

I came up with my own personal scoring system. For years I rarely rose above a mildly happy 6 or 5 . . . 4 was a grinding day-to-day existence . . . 3 meant I wished I could curl up and die . . . 2 meant I was thinking if and how I could make that happen . . . and 1 meant I was on the verge of ending my life. Most months I lived at a 3. For weeks at a time I wavered around a 2. At times I sunk close to a 1.

Mind

I woke from that dream that I had taken my life just as my consciousness was fading away. It was a long time before I told Lyn—my soul mate—about my nightmare. As a pastor I looked around and saw few safe places to bare my soul—not bosses, not co-workers, not church members. I worried about scaring family and friends. So I went to my doctor.

I counseled hurting people all the time. I did what I told them to do when I referred them to specialized help. Cut the crap. Get to the point. No one can x-ray what goes on in your head. You have to speak up. So I handed my physician a list of everything I was thinking and feeling. Some of those blunt realities:

- *I'm in a bad situation that takes enormous energy to face day after day.*
- *Every day brings some new situation that feels like being stabbed by a knife.*
- *We're all suffering but suffering alone.*
- *I don't get joy out of things that should overjoy me.*
- *I could nap at any moment, but if I lie down I feel too agitated to rest.*

- *I want to eat all the time. I have gained thirty pounds in the last eighteen months.*
- *I tell Lyn to hit me over the head with a brick—to make this stop.*
- *I have really good coping skills but still feel deep pain inside.*
- *I have gone from thinking my feelings are a reaction to stress to seeing them as something dark inside me that won't go away.*
- *I think about dying and suicide, but at this time I'm still able to get back to a purely rational response—that death isn't an appropriate response to the situation. These thoughts have been going on for months.*

Everything boiled down to one statement:

- *What keeps me going—what keeps me alive—is Lyn and the kids.*

My doctor offered a concise summary: “Obviously, you’re depressed.” With his simple words he acknowledged where I was at. He promised that I didn’t have to stay there.

Body

For more than a year I fought my way back from mental and emotional despair. But when my head was finally in a better place, my body broke. One morning I felt something like a cell phone vibrating on my calf. Not a phantom ring but an actual buzz. My doctor said it was probably a fasciculation, like an eye twitch but in a different spot. If it got worse, he would send me to a neurologist.

It got worse. Within a week I noticed twitching, buzzing, and electrical sensations all over my body. I felt random freezing and

burning. I jumped at piercing needle stabs. At times my feet felt wet, like I was sloshing through a puddle. Constant spasms in my arches looked like worms crawling under my skin. I was weak and scared.

After a tense physical exam with Lyn watching, the first thing out of the neurologist's mouth was "ALS"—amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, often called Lou Gehrig's disease—a degenerative nerve death that could cause the symptoms I was experiencing. For most of the summer doctors and technicians scanned and poked me. They sent shocks down my legs and arms to measure nerve velocity. They stuck me with needles and listened for muscle noise. I learned that neurologists are known as "vampires" because of the quantities of blood they draw to rule out possible ailments.

Lyn and I knew people who had died of ALS. We happened to know two more who were trapped in rapidly failing bodies even as their minds remained perfectly clear, and we began to anticipate that fate. But in the early fall I got a nonlethal diagnosis—benign fasciculation. It's an annoyance that recent tests again confirmed.

I got my diagnosis in September. Then came October. After more than a week of what seemed like a virus or influenza, I went to an emergency room with a wildly fluctuating fever that one afternoon had left me shaking uncontrollably. At the moment I didn't look sick enough to be in the ER and was almost sent home—until my white blood count signaled a dire infection. After a few days in the hospital on antibiotics (and loaded up with hydrocodone and morphine), I felt pretty swell. I wanted to go home. Then a surgeon got in my face and told me I needed to chain myself to the wall until my team figured out exactly why I was sick and how to treat it. They discovered a sack of infection the size of a tennis ball, a freak abscess in and around my liver.

I stayed in the hospital a few more days and went home with a drain sticking out my side. In late November I emerged from a fog of illness and drugs to realize I easily could have died. In December the drain was removed and I finished a long course of antibiotics. By January I was well enough to have my gallbladder cut out, a bonus from having my abdomen closely scrutinized. Coming out of anesthesia was rough. If there's a video floating around called "Pastors Behaving Badly," I've warned you. By April I was starting to feel normal. Whatever that is.

The fact that life hurts has never been abstract for me—theoretical, unfelt, detached from reality. When I was in middle school my mom barely survived cancer. I later watched my dad grow weary as a lifelong inner-city schoolteacher. I grew up in the best of families—nevertheless in the shadow of tragedy, illness, and death. But my own adult experiences have marked me most deeply. Compared to the pains that many people endure—maybe what you face daily—they amount to nothing. But I've realized firsthand that life hurts. Inside. Out. Body. Soul. And I've observed people long enough to realize that sooner or later we all face pain up close. It's the difference between seeing a storm in the distance and getting struck by lightning.

Prayer

I've been trained to overcome stress. I've counseled people through mind-blowing evil. I've spent years studying and teaching Scripture. I wish I could say my professional and personal background gave me everything I needed to withstand emotional, mental, and physical trauma. But when I read that "the Lord gives sleep to those he loves" (Psalm 127:2 NCV) yet failed to find rest, I felt unloved. Or when I prayed nonstop yet missed "the peace of God, which transcends all understanding" (Philippians 4:7 NIV), I was broken.

One day I had a brutal awakening. In the worst of my distress, prayer often did me more harm than good. Why? Because my conversations with God amounted to little more than grinding on my problems. When I failed to connect with God, all I perceived was condemnation and even hatred. While God invites us to pour out our pain and plead our case with him, there are more ways we need to speak to God when we hurt.

I've written elsewhere that most people pray. Many of us struggle. We wonder what to say and how to say it. We worry if we will get what we ask or if we can speak honest questions. I created the *Pray the Scriptures Bible* to show how all of God's Word teaches us to pray. I wrote *Pray the Scriptures: A 40-Day Prayer Experience* to help people develop their own one-on-one conversation with God. *Pray the Scriptures When Life Hurts* helps us talk to God in our pain.

If one of the most practical reasons we pray is to obtain strength from God, then we need a thorough understanding of how that happens. Prayer is about more than making requests. Scripture teaches us to offer up not only our agony and questioning but also our surrender. We can voice not only loneliness, resentment, and frustration but also peace, hope, and worship. When we allow Scripture to lead us to a breadth of prayers, we begin to be filled with God's fresh life.

In this book I walk through nine key Scripture passages. For each I provide an opening thought, then split up the passage and offer words and short phrases to prompt you to pray Scripture back to God. You can follow these prompts—or cross them out and respond with your own thoughts. This isn't the time for pretty prayers. Talk straight with God. Tell him what you really think and feel. At the end of each chapter come questions to answer on your own or with others. Work through the book at your own pace. There's no rush to this process.

Your own pain might be large or small, inward or outward, public or private, chronic or acute. Wherever your life hurts right now, I pray that this book will help you hope again in God, finding perspective and healing as you pray all of the thoughts and emotions expressed in God's Word. I join the apostle Paul in this ancient prayer:

I fall to my knees and pray to the Father, the Creator of everything in heaven and on earth. I pray that from his glorious, unlimited resources he will empower you with inner strength through his Spirit. Then Christ will make his home in your hearts as you trust in him. Your roots will grow down into God's love and keep you strong. And may you have the power to understand, as all God's people should, how wide, how long, how high, and how deep his love is. May you experience the love of Christ, though it is too great to understand fully. Then you will be made complete with all the fullness of life and power that comes from God.

Ephesians 3:14–19 NLT