

COMPANIONS
IN SUFFERING



COMFORT FOR TIMES OF
LOSS AND LONELINESS

WENDY ALSUP

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ON THE OUTSIDE LOOKING IN



“It’s not catching.”

A dear friend spoke these words to me over dinner as she lamented a divorce she did not want that had torn apart her life. She had first heard the phrase from another friend who was a widow after her husband died of cancer. Both expressed feeling like an outcast, a pariah, among former friends. Though friends initially endured with her widowed friend, over time her suffering seemed to mark her as *other*.

Those around her seemed unsure, even afraid of her, like her suffering would rub off on them and bring their lives down. But widowhood and even unwanted divorce are not communicable diseases. Despite that fact, the alienation felt by those who have gone through either is real. Sufferers often feel on the outside, looking in at the happy people they know enjoying the normal ups and downs of life.

I sat across the table from my friend, talking of her pain and loneliness, not realizing how quickly I would be overcome by my own. But soon I too would feel the same—like an outcast in the

cold, watching through a window all the happy people enjoying each other's company around a warm, cozy fire. It is the worst kind of lonely feeling.

MY STORY

I grew up in Bible-teaching churches, and my parents were faithful to see I was in church every Sunday. Along the way I developed a sincere faith in Christ. But at some point during my teenage years, I learned in youth group what I now call the “Prosperity Gospel of Conservative Evangelicals.”

Among churches that strongly condemned the health, wealth, and prosperity movement characterized by televangelists, I found a more subtle prosperity gospel can still quietly infiltrate the minds of immature believers. Though lots of people around me were suffering (if I looked hard enough to see them), I wrote off their suffering with some reason from their past. I assumed that perhaps their parents or they themselves had made poor choices at some crucial turn in life. Now, that mindset toward others seems quite immature and offensive.

My faithful Christian parents sent me to private school to protect me from perceived bad influences that would lead to instability. They were setting me up for a good life, so I thought. The underlying assumption in my youth and college years among youth leaders and my peers at Christian college was that if I (1) went to Bible college, (2) made wise choices while dating, and (3) generally sought God's will for my life, then I would have the foundation for a good, stable life serving God. I would be in the warm house with other happy Christians around the warm fire of God's love and Christian fellowship. That warm, cozy experience would be the natural result of making wise choices



in my youth, or so I thought. I experienced this subtle but very real teaching at many points in multiple ministries well into adulthood.

But in my thirties that idea took a serious hit after church conflict tore apart the ministry I thought God had called me to. Things continued a slow downward spiral over the next few years, new trials added to old while few of the previous trials resolved. In particular, in my forties I walked a painful road in my marriage resulting in a divorce that I did not want. After I moved closer home to help my aging parents and receive their help as a single parent to my boys, I was diagnosed with breast cancer. A few months later, a CT scan found a large mass in my abdomen, and a few months later precancerous cells were discovered in my uterus. Multiple painful surgeries followed.

How could I raise my children or help my parents in my own ongoing medical crisis?

Didn't God know I needed to be strong for others?

Didn't God know that, as a single mom, my children and I didn't have the safety net for physical turmoil on top of relational problems?

What had I done to bring this all on myself? Why had God turned away from me?

As trial piled upon trial, my understanding of my place in God's kingdom was seriously challenged. I fought to get out of crisis mode, unable to envision my part in the body of Christ in such a state. I wanted to minister to others. I wanted to serve God through teaching or writing, through Bible studies in my home and outreach activities in my community. Instead, I was consumed by doctors' appointments and relational crises. I felt swallowed by the storm, drowning in the depths of stress and sorrow. Joy and happiness seemed forever out of my reach.



PARIAHS

At the most intense moments of my suffering, the only joy around me was the one just beyond my reach, among those whose suffering had let up. I stared at them as through a foggy window, praising God for the reconciliation of their struggle while I sat outside freezing in the cold, wondering how to reenter their warmth. When my suffering didn't let up and the things I hoped in dissolved, leaving me in the same or worse circumstances, I did not naturally say as the apostle Paul did in his letter to Corinth that I was overflowing with joy in all of my afflictions. As my own struggle endured, *I could only see the happiness of those around me who weren't suffering the same way*. Others seemed to flourish. Their relationships seemed happy, their bank accounts secure. They seemed healthy with happy children and secure homes. Their social media accounts showed happy families on happy vacations with happy friends.

By contrast, I felt like a pariah, on the outside looking in. Derived from a Tamil word for those kept from joining the drum line of a religious ceremony, the word *pariah* indicates one who is an outcast, dehumanized by their suffering and low status in the caste system of India.¹

The friend I mentioned in the opening paragraph, whose husband left her after an emotional affair with a coworker in Christian ministry, drew my attention to this alienation sufferers can feel, like pariahs with a communicable disease. For unknown reasons, perhaps irrational fear that it might happen to their marriages as well, her friends distanced themselves, her circumstances challenging their own expectations and hopes of how their lives would turn out should they get too close to her.

Have you felt cast out by your circumstances, looking through a window at others enjoying life, whether at work, at church, or in

your neighborhood? You can see their joy through the glass between you, but they don't seem to see your pain on the other side. Or maybe they see you on the outside but seem to back slightly away from the window in fear that your pain will seep into their lives. They politely distance themselves as if from one with a communicable disease that they are not vaccinated for.

I felt cast out by my own life circumstances—first as I walked into church weekly to sit in the pew on the row that our family of four had usually sat. Now we were only three, obviously missing a vital member of our family. While other families grew, mine shrank. Weekly I was confronted with that difference between me and those my family had previously fellowshiped with.

I felt other.

After I moved home and was diagnosed with cancer, this feeling of being on the outside looking in descended on me again. Though I didn't need chemotherapy for my breast cancer, I wore down as I recovered from one major surgery just to discover I needed another. And then another.

I missed one Sunday, two Sundays, then three, four, and a half dozen more over a nine-month period. I realized, like it or not, that our Sunday sermon series, Sunday school lessons, and women's group in my church, which I had previously been an integral part of, all went on without me.

This wasn't an evil conspiracy on the part of my church family but a simple fact of life. I could not blame folks for moving on with their lives. The churches I attended on both coasts were full of lovely people who sincerely cared for me physically and spiritually. But neither could I ignore the alienation I felt as I was left behind while they moved on with the normal rhythm of church life. Whether from medical necessity or broken relationships, feelings



of alienation in the midst of a long season of suffering are quite normal, and they can have devastating consequences for our emotional well-being.

I have felt such alienation in the midst of pain quite often. Looking back at those times, though, I recognize that my feelings didn't reflect the truth among those in my church and community, and the rest of this book will reinforce the real ways we find community in suffering with others in the body of Christ, living and dead. But for a long season that feeling of alienation endured. I felt outside. I felt other, an orphan left on my own to navigate a path I didn't understand.

ATTACHMENT DISORDER IN THE BODY OF CHRIST

I have heard sad anecdotes about babies neglected in orphanages who have learned not to cry when they have a need because no one will come to help them. They ran out of tears, but their needs were still there. They often develop attachment disorders that make it extremely hard for them to attach to adoptive families when the time comes. I have at times found myself feeling weariness and detachment in my own long story of suffering. Why cry? Why call out to friends for help? And more devastating to consider, why pray?

I found there comes a point in our journeys when the tears cease, not because circumstances got better or the weight on our shoulders lightened, but simply because we are dehydrated. We don't have any tears left, and the weights on us keep us from even lifting our heads to see where we are in our journeys. Detaching from dark emotions seems the only way to survive. Yet how can we survive if we detach from God, his body, and his Word?

It is likely that you are reading this because you are carrying the heavy weight of suffering on your shoulders or love someone else



who is. Maybe the weight is in the form of an unrelenting illness. Maybe it is the loss of a loved one in death or a broken relationship that you cannot mend on your own. Each of these is a heavy weight of suffering that seems to alienate us from others. Some find excuses for not being around us because deep in their psyche they perceive suffering as a communicable disease they don't want to catch. But sufferers often alienate themselves as well.

This book is for anyone enduring a long marathon of suffering who despairs of finding help or hope again. This book is for folks who don't cry anymore because their emotions are spent. And this book is for those persevering with their suffering loved ones. It can be as emotionally draining to watch a loved one suffer as to experience the suffering directly yourself.

If you have run out of tears and feel alone in your ongoing grief, if you are so weary from crying you feel detached from your emotions, God has not left you as an orphan. You have companions on this journey, first and foremost with Christ himself. But there is also companionship with his body, your brothers and sisters in the faith. We find companions among brothers and sisters still living and among those who have gone on before us. Finally, there is companionship and fellowship found in the words of Scripture, preserved eternally for us for our instruction, our comfort, and even our tears.

Come sit with me for a while in the pages of this book. In the midst of the alienation and detachment that long seasons of suffering can cause, may you too find deep community as I have with Christ, his Word preserved eternally for us, and fellow believers who encourage us with their testimonies of suffering, endurance, and hope. You need these varied avenues to community desperately, as each gives different resources that help you to



persevere. God hasn't left you alone to find these resources on your own.

Jesus promises in John 14:18, "I will not leave you as orphans, I am coming to you."

REFLECT

At the end of each chapter you'll find a set of questions. They are designed for personal reflection, but you are also invited to discuss them with a friend or a small group.

At the most intense points of suffering, we are often surrounded by family and friends. But as time goes on, feelings of loneliness, being on the outside looking in, can invade more and more. How have you felt being an outcast because of the weight of your particular suffering?

In what ways are these feelings based on your physical reality (for instance, being separated from friends or church while you undergo chemotherapy)?

In what ways do these feelings stem from your own inner grief (such as feeling alienated from friends with children after you have lost one of your own)?

Jesus told his disciples in John 14:18 that he would not leave them as orphans. He would not leave them fatherless and motherless. He would not leave them bereft of guidance, comfort, and support. Have you felt like an orphan as you navigate your long road of suffering?

In John 14:16 Jesus promises that God will send the Holy Spirit. How does Jesus' promise to his disciples of this Counselor (or Comforter) in John 14 apply to you as you navigate the road before you?

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