

Struck: One Christian's Reflections on Encountering Death

Available March 2017

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978-0-8308-4494-4

"In the beautiful telling of his own brush with death and the process of recovery, Russ shows us, in a most moving and lovely and hopeful fashion, what it means to find joy in the sorrow, beauty in the ashes, light in the darkness, intimacy in the fear, love in the losses, water in the wilderness, music in the sorrow, and yes, even life in the dying."

—From the foreword by Scott Sauls, senior pastor, Christ Presbyterian Church, Nashville, author of *Jesus Outside the Lines* and *BeFriend*

What happens when a pastor comes face-to-face with his own mortality?

As you battled a life-threatening illness, what made you think to write a book in the midst of it?

Russ Ramsey: This book began as a short series of blog posts I wrote to keep family and friends aware of my sudden health crisis. Some of these posts got circulated beyond my circles, and people started telling me I was putting into words the experiences they also had with their own seasons of suffering and dealings with mortality – even though the circumstances were different.

As a writer, I latched onto the idea that I could serve others by chronicling what I was experiencing as I experienced it. I wanted to give a testimony of walking through affliction in real time – and I wanted to explore what happens when a person of faith comes face-to-face with their mortality.

What questions bubbled to the surface as you wrote about your experience?

Russ: What happens to a person's faith, and to a person of faith, when they come face-to-face with their mortality? Does their faith tuck its tail and run, or does it hold?

What did you hope to communicate and accomplish by sharing your story?

Russ: This book is written in the present tense. When I write about subjects like depression, recovery, the sudden shock of learning I needed major surgery to save my life, I write about them in the present tense. This freed me from having to provide all the answers or switch into a teacher's voice.

I am vulnerable and willing to share personal details about my life, my experience, my emotions, my medical journey, and my recovery. I tried to be as transparent as possible.

I tried to treat my own story as a setting to talk about experiences others universally tend to have when they walk through affliction – their own or someone's whom they love.

I wanted this book to be evangelistic – something that would show the Gospel to people looking for comfort.

And *Struck* is very much a love story about a twenty-year marriage.



Russ Ramsey is the author of *Behold the Lamb of God* and was awarded the 2016 Christian Book Award from the Evangelical Christian Publishers Association for his book *Behold the King of Glory*.

Russ grew up in the fields of Indiana and studied at Taylor University and Covenant Theological Seminary (M.Div., Th.M.). He is a pastor at Christ Presbyterian Church in Nashville, Tennessee, and his writing has appeared at the Rabbit Room, the Gospel Coalition, the Blazing Center, and To Write Love on Her Arms.

Learn more about Russ at russ-ramsey.com.

Follow him on Twitter: @russramsey.

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What are the main things you want readers to take away from your book?

Russ:

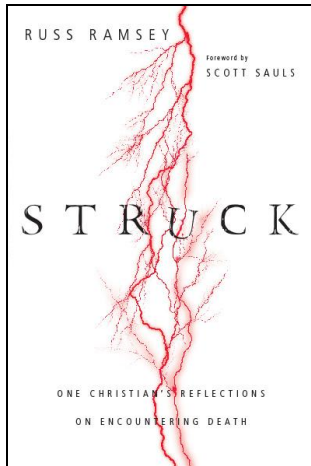
- It is okay to struggle in seasons of affliction, and we do well to deal honestly with ourselves and our experience.
- God is faithful to keep and preserve his people through all kinds of trials.
- I wanted to awaken a hunger for the life to come by way of talking about this life with a child-like sense of wonder and curiosity.
- I want the book to be a comfort and a companion to the suffering. This book is not so much a book of answers as it is a book that aspires to put language to the experience of walking through affliction – which in turn reassures people they are not alone.
- I want the book to challenge the notion that a Christian has to have their life pulled together. This is a messy story, and I lean into the mess.

What is your hope for the readers of *Struck*?

Russ: I hope this book will be a comfort and a companion for people who are walking through seasons of affliction – and for the loved ones who walk with them. Affliction has come to every single person I know. I wanted to give an honest, orderly account of my own journey and bring the comfort of the Gospel, through my own story, to others who may feel lost in the process.

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Russ Ramsey was struck by a bacterial infection that destroyed his mitral valve, sending him into heart failure and requiring urgent open-heart surgery. As he faced the possibility of death, he found himself awakened to new realities.

This profoundly eloquent memoir gives voice to the deepest questions of the human condition. In the midst of pain, we can see glimpses of eternity.

When my doctor told me I was dying, I came alive.

Three days before my fortieth birthday I was admitted to the emergency room. A bacterial infection had destroyed my mitral valve and I was in the early stages of heart failure.

That day and the two years that followed are the setting for this book. They are the setting, but they are not the subject. This is a book about what happens when affliction and faith collide.

I am a husband, father of four, pastor, and author living in the greatest “big small town” in America – Nashville, Tennessee. I lead a simple life. I get up early for work. I am rarely awake past 11:00 p.m. My wife and I go to bed tired. I have never dug a well in Africa or jumped out of an airplane. I am suspicious of people who use the word “epic” to describe their desired life. I am a simple man, and I do not presume that my story of affliction is all that unusual.

But it is not the uncommon parts of our suffering I am drawn to write about. I want to explore the common experiences afflicted people share – the onset of a sense of frailty, the fear, the grief, the humor, the routines, the new ways of relating to people who love us and are afraid for us and for themselves.

I have committed myself to the work of paying as much attention as I can to the medical, spiritual, relational, emotional, pharmaceutical, and physical experiences of this journey my failing heart has set me on. I have asked a lot of questions and taken a lot of notes and used them to write the chapters that make up this book.

Affliction awakens us to things we might not have seen otherwise. When I first learned of the severity of my condition I felt afraid, of course. But the prevailing sensation wasn't fear. It was wonder – curiosity, even exhilaration. I felt that I was at the beginning of a great adventure – one I instinctively did not want to miss. I have discovered that many in my position have felt the same way.

I want to interrogate my affliction. What happens when a person stands at the edge of their mortality and looks out into the eternal? What happens when a doctor tells a man he is dying? If that person believes in God (which I do), what will become of his faith? Will the spiritual premises he trusted as dependable foundations all those years earlier suddenly fail? Will he require certain personal outcomes in order for his faith to hold? And if so, is that even faith? Or is that nothing more than a house of cards too easily toppled by the winds of suffering?

I do not want simply to endure my affliction. I want to experience it – to receive it as an

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BOOK EXCERPT

"Affliction shapes our lives. It comes for us all – in our own personal distress or in the sufferings of those we love. It has come for me, and I know it will come again. The least I can do is pay attention."

adventure and follow it to its end. I find the whole business fascinating. Knowing that I come to this season having seen the world only through the eyes of the well, I ask God to help me see whatever this struggle might reveal. . . .

For my whole life I have seen the world through the eyes of the well. This is all I have ever known. But now, I have been lifted and struck, and I want to hear what resounds in me. Though I may stumble for a time like a man reaching for his boot, I want to learn to see the world through the eyes of affliction.

This will be a challenge because I see this world and my place in it through the lens of what I already know. I can't help it. A dog is a dog and a pear is a pear. I can't see "Eden before Adam gave names." But affliction has the power, I believe, to quiet the voices in my head that think they already know everything. Seeing through my suffering won't show me a new world. Rather, it will show me more of the world I think I already know.

Affliction is bound to find us, and when it does whatever faith we profess, along with all its convictions regarding the meaning of this life and the next, is tested. Some affliction comes suddenly and lasts only a moment. Other affliction comes and takes us out of this world. Often though, affliction grabs us like an unsuspected wave and tosses us around in its currents for a season before washing us back up onto our familiar shores.

What then? Do we thank our lucky stars that we survived and try to return to the life we knew before any of this happened? Is that even an option? And if so, at what cost?

Affliction shapes our lives. It comes for us all – in our own personal distress or in the sufferings of those we love. It has come for me, and I know it will come again. The least I can do is pay attention.

I do not wish to waste my pain.

– Taken from chapter one, "Learning to See"