

the  
hard  
good



# the hard good

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showing up for God to work in  
you when you want to shut down

LISA WHITTLE



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*To my fathers in the two chairs of my heart . . .*  
*Daddy: the irreplaceable original, who I miss every day*  
*And John: the one I made room for*



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## foreword

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I WISH LIFE COULD JUST BE GOOD. FUN. PLEASANT. MEANINGFUL. Predictable but also adventurous. And that good would last forever—devoid of fear, anxiety, tragedy, heartbreak, betrayal, and grief.

But that's not the way life works. Maybe it's because we live in a sin-soaked world not capable of perfection. Or maybe it's because without the bitter, is it even possible to appreciate the sweet? Without the dark would the light ever be appreciated for the gift it is? And without the hard would we recognize the good as good?

I can't think of a person better equipped than my friend Lisa Whittle to tackle the hand-in-hand partnership of the title of this book: *The Hard Good*. She knows the angst of *hard* in deeply personal ways. She knows the choice of *good* because her heart purely seeks Jesus, and she truly wants to make a holy difference by helping others.

But it's in the combination of both words, *hard* and *good*, that she's learned to wear wisdom like that old sweatshirt that's your favorite because it's so broken in. At times life has broken Lisa, as

## foreword

it has all of us. But while fully acknowledging her heartbreak, she is equally committed to having it work for her and for a good that she pursues relentlessly.

I love her for that. And I am grateful to her since I need this reminder as much as anyone.

Once, while working out together (aka dying and trying to make sure your T-shirt stays pulled down to hide the obvious reality of the back side of life—insert big-eyed emoji), I was asking her questions about this book. I reversed the title and said to her, “Look at us doing the good hard things on this workout.”

She graciously tilted her head and kindly corrected me, “hard good. End on the good. The hard is part of the journey, but the good is where we will land.”

Brilliant.

I’ve thought of this conversation just about every day since.

Some things in my life right now are so hard I sometimes have to remind myself to exhale. I can find myself swept into a panic attack as unexpectedly as a person enjoying the beach one moment and swept away by a tsunami the next. And my deep desire for normalcy is sometimes hijacked by choices that aren’t my own and yet affect me so deeply I want to hide in the nearest bathroom stall.

How can any of this be good?

I imagine you’re asking this same question over something or someone in your life right now. And you’re wondering if it is even worth it to try reading another book. After all, it’s hard to get high on hope only to quickly get knocked down by your circumstances again, leaving your soul questioning everything. We need more than pat answers, plastic suggestions, and an author with too perfect of a life to truly understand our desperation. There is a lot at stake here.

Well, friend, breathe. Settle in. Dare to crack open these pages. Find a friend in Lisa that will be gentle when needed. Challenging

when appropriate. And so very gracious as she cares for your pain. You can, as I do, trust her with your heart. Let's do this. Together we will discover the hard good is the best good—even if, especially if, you seriously doubt that right now. You'll soon see. This will be a book you keep on that one shelf signifying *never give this one away*. If you ever come over to my house, that's the shelf where mine will be.

Speaking of getting together, let's do that sometime! Me, you, and Lisa enjoying chips and queso and cupcakes. I mean, why not? You have a long T-shirt, right? Together we can do the hard good.

Love you!  
—Lysa TerKeurst



## *why* i hope you read this book

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I HAVE BEEN THINKING ABOUT THIS BOOK FOR ALMOST 1,825 DAYS, ever since my favorite person in the world got sick and died. That's when I started a journey of the *hard good*.

My hard-good story had in fact begun long before, but it wasn't until Dad developed a rare brain disorder and slipped away from us with a single breath that my keep-it-all-tucked-tightly-in-there heart was cracked open and God revealed to me how hard things didn't have to shut me down or make me bitter. Before that, I am not sure I could say hard things could also be good (or know how exactly that worked).

The reason this might matter to you is because your life is probably full of hard things, whether currently, in the future, or in the past . . . and you aren't over it.

But it's more than that. I definitely didn't know how hard things were the very keys to my growth process. That, as I had been praying for years, like "God, help me be more humble . . . less jealous . . . more open, loving, and kind . . .," God would answer those prayers through the path of difficult circumstances. Perhaps

## *why i hope you read this book*

you catch clues quicker than I do, but I didn't realize God was using this type of life as on-the-ground training-to-transformation. I find it's common to miss what is often right in front of us.

Our hard places are teaching us invaluable lessons while we are looking for a way to push them away.

If you want to know more about that, I hope you'll read this book.

If you want to get better and stop just existing . . . and even beyond that . . . if you want your life to matter beyond yourself, I hope you'll read this book.

I know right now you might feel as though everything is out of your control and life is simply handing you cards you cannot deal with. I agree that life does often deal us bad cards. This is the promise of God in John 16:33, that "in this world you will have trouble." We certainly know that.

But I hope you will come to know this too: though the world brings trouble, we do still have choice. Specifically, when it comes to our takeaway from the trouble life brings.

God wants to make much of your life. He has anointed and appointed you for a special purpose, yes, even knowing about the hard that would come your way. But you will determine your level of usability for the kingdom of God in how you respond to it.

God also has a great purpose for your life, and that has never changed. It is my belief, based on Scripture, His purpose is the same for every believer (read the book to find out what that is if you don't know!), which might come as a surprise to you. The reason a lot of us make only slim progress in our lives is because we are searching for something that is set (purpose), rather than pursuing our *usability*, which is up to each of us—and what I have firmly come to believe is developed in the things we discuss in *The Hard Good*.

And that is where you find this book: helping us see our hard circumstances—less hard to unbearably hard on the scale but all

humanly difficult—for the good that can result from them. But only with God. That is the deal breaker.

So here are the two last things I want you to know.

1. If you truly want what you say you want in life (Joy! Peace! Love! Hope! Fulfillment! Purpose!), you will have to stay with God through the uncomfortable process to get there. There's no way around. Up to now, you may have thought that the reason you never got anywhere was because life is too hard. But the real reason is because when life gets hard, you keep bailing on where God wants to take you, and you keep having to start over. I hope, instead, you choose not to start over and let the process in this book move you forward. Progress is priceless. It also carries with it the gift of peace. I talk a lot about my father in this book, an endless thrasher who truly found peace in the latter years of his life when he no longer could physically run away; his spirit followed suit, and he was a better man for it. The lessons I learned from watching this process come out now in these pages.
2. If you truly want to be spiritually transformed, you have to redefine *good*. Right now, you may well be operating under a faulty definition of *good*. Culture has a loud voice, and it's hard to hear truth over it. What we've heard are all the mantras: *You are good, just as you are. You create your own good life.* I'd love for those things to be true, but they simply aren't. Just because God loves and accepts us as we are, and just because He has given us many gifts and capabilities, doesn't mean we can swing the pendulum to a destructive narrative of self-heroism. The lies about the good life are pretty but covertly exhausting. It also has us thinking we have done something wrong if we don't have a "good life" like someone else. Creating a good life takes a lot of hard

## *why i hope you read this book*

work and isn't sustainable long-term. Thankfully the Bible provides the common sense we need and gives us a different definition of good—centered not on us or our strength or capabilities but on *God*.

- God is good. Therefore, hard things that lead you to God will be good for you.
- Growth is good. That means that you can't be good without process and progress.
- A good life = a life of kingdom usability. Not fame, fortune, or ease.

And what may be the most important thing to note from that quotable in Romans 8: “All things work together for good” (v. 28 KJV): the most missed word in the verse is *together*, and it's the most important. It does not say that all things *work out*. It says all things work *together*. This means that there will be missteps, disappointments, losses, and things that fall through along the way. Not everything in this world will work out for us. But the hard things will work together for good for those who love God and desire to be usable for His kingdom.

So then what is our role with good if it's all about God? It comes back to that uncomfortable process. It is to stay with God on that journey (hard) He has ordained to transform us (good), not to create a journey for ourselves (we can't, anyway). It is a dependent versus a director role. (PS: Expect the world to disagree.)

So, yes, good is the crucial end here. It is the God-defined one found in godly growth, not in self-gratification or glory. The irony is that godly growth will bring the gratification we have been looking for our whole lives.

And it is, indeed, *a sweet life*. Because unlike a limited good life we might try to make for ourselves by avoiding godly growth through the refinement process, the hard-good process is an



alternative for pointless pain and exhaustion. If hard is going to be a part of my life, and it's proven that it is, I prefer for it to have produced something. I suspect you agree.

*I'm praying* The Hard Good *will help heal you.* We are a tired bunch, and I don't just mean needing sleep. I see you, worn down by life. I see you, brokenhearted. I see you, trying your best. I see you, sick of this same issue . . . over yourself. I see you, wanting to get close to God. I see you, notorious bailer. I see you, scared and lonely. I see you, reaching out for help. Here's the beauty of the hard good: If you feel life has been unfair to you, you can be right. But at the same time, you don't have to concede that life has won. We are doing something new, today, even with unwashed hair.

*I'm praying* The Hard Good *will help change you.* Right now, your first goal may not be for God to use you. You may simply be trying to recover from something, or clinging to the hope that better days are ahead. But at some point, you'll need more than just hanging on. You'll want what's left of your life to matter. When you get to that place, this book will be helpful for you too.

*God, help our hearts who seek your transformative way.*

*Here we are.*

*Here we go.*



CHAPTER 1

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accepting something you wish  
were something different

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All pain's a prelude: to symphony, to sweetness.  
"The pearl began as a pain in the  
oyster's stomach."

—EUGENE H. PETERSON<sup>1</sup>

*January 2019*

I'M SITTING IN A RESTAURANT WHERE IT WOULD BE A SIN NOT TO order the fish, a place overlooking the bay with walls painted in all manner of ocean life. As is becoming my new norm, this evening is a most joyously awkward occasion. Two years ago my favorite person in the world, my father, died. And now I'm here with my mother and her newlywed husband, John.

## the hard good

To make the night's dinner even more sweetly complicated, we've been joined by some of my favorite people—most of my dad's brothers and sisters, who happen to live close by. Everyone's here to eat and catch up, and all but me are of the sixty-five-and-over crowd. John is in his happy place, and just knowing him the short time I have, I would bet my last one hundred dollars he will order the shrimp. (I would have won the bet.) This place is one of John's favorites, and he and Mom are regulars.

I call John my bonus dad after some back-and-forth discussion with my mother and despite her hope I would call him Brother John like most of his longtime church congregants. I resisted that idea, and she subsequently conceded. John is a pastor—was a pastor, for fifty-four years—and when you pastor for that long, I am of the opinion it's not fair to lose that title. But the whole dad-titling thing has been a hard, strange, different story.

We laugh, talk, and eat far too many hush puppies, along with those Club crackers that come before the meal in any fish place worth its salt. John tells preacher stories I've already heard to infinity. I stare at my aunt's profile, which looks hauntingly like my own. Drifting into another world, I glance out the big glass window at a seabird power-walking frantically for a crumb, and I suddenly wish to join him. Everyone on the other end of the table is happy and laughing, but my heart feels detached from the current joy. *It's too loud in here. The jokes and stories are dumb. Please, no one notice I'm not participating, and especially, please don't say my name and make me join in.*

I'm happy they are happy, but I am not happy that everyone's hearts seem to be faring better than my own. My decision to choose the farthest seat by the window is proving the best place to escape with my thoughts into the outdoors and is even more brilliant because it puts me next to Uncle Wade, the greatest uncle of all time. Though just his brother-in-law, Uncle Wade reminds

accepting something you wish were something different

me more than anyone of Dad. His big hands, assertive nature, and memories almost always involving Sansabelt pants. It's been forty years, but if I close my eyes, I can see the black-headed duo, Dad and Wade, aggressively herding us kids along during holiday family reunions. Dad's yelling, "*Mach schnell!*" German words he picked up from his father and probably the only ones he could repeat in front of us kids. He had a few years on Wade, and Wade idolized him. Everyone idolized Daddy.

Or maybe that was just me.

And now here we all are, Uncle Wade, most of the Reimer siblings, Bonus Dad, and Mom. Even that bird outside has shown up for a party.

But the one person I want is conspicuously gone.

No matter how old we are or how much time we had with them, losing someone we love leaves us with a deep sense of longing.

Suddenly and without warning, my head becomes heavy for a place to lie, and it finds Uncle Wade's shoulder. I'm forty-six years old, but I am not. I'm six years old again, and Uncle Wade is my daddy. I know he's not. He doesn't feel the same. But he is, right now, because I need him to be. Tears trickle, and I can do nothing to stop them. This is the wrong moment to cry; John is midway through a good story. Too bad tears never listen. I let my head lie for as long as it needs. Long enough to find rest.

*No matter how  
old we are or how  
much time we had  
with them, losing  
someone we love  
leaves us with a deep  
sense of longing.*

---

Finally my head rises, even while the tears still stream. A smile cracks, without permission. The irony of the moment has not escaped me. *Daddy would love this.*

## the hard good

My daddy, Jim Reimer, moved our family all over the blessed United States, so much so that only a map and the four hearts who rode in the U-Hauls could live to tell it. It was always his dream to move us near his family, this Texas bunch he loved so deeply. But we never made it to live near them except one year when I was in the fifth grade, which was the year I got mono, so I barely remember a thing except not seeing them much after all. And now, this is where Mom lives—in the very same Texas city but without him. With her new husband instead, who also happened to be Dad's good friend. (Keep reading, I'll tell you all about that.)

Over the course of time since Mom started dating John, I've now seen Dad's family more than I probably ever saw them growing up. And tonight we're together, eating shrimp. If there was ever a time I hoped someone could see down from heaven, it's this very moment. No one would love this more than my dad—seeing everyone he loved so much in one place.

Absence and presence. Loss and gain. Deep pain and deep love. Living in the tension of *the hard good*.

Since I was little, it was my daddy who told me I could do anything, and he assured me Jesus would help me do it. He was right. I'm doing something very hard: laughing and loving and accepting a life without him. I wish he could see me now.

You know how you feel when you finally stop pushing back in your heart against something you have been resisting that has been exhausting you?

That's how I felt when I stopped pushing back on the idea of fully accepting my life without Dad and one that included John. This night was a moment in that journey.

Turns out I can miss my daddy and love the bonus dad I have at the same time.

It is hard to accept something we wish were different. But when we do, we exchange pain for freedom.

accepting something you wish were something different

## When You Wish It Were Something Different

April 2, 2017, was the last time I saw my father alive. Ever since that crisp Sunday morning when he left us to go live the better life in heaven, the clock started on a new life of acceptance for all of us who loved him. The four-year acceptance clock has been a real teacher. One of the things I've learned: death is an intruder who rudely interrupts plans, wishes, and dreams, and it certainly cares nothing about relationships you've worked hard on. I knew fifty-two years of marriage was bonding for my parents, but until I saw my mother whisper and weep over my father's body with him already gone, I never really knew. That day I saw till death do us part—a love far deeper than it is on a wedding day.

I've also come to realize that acceptance of something we wish were something different is, perhaps, hardest for humans because of our hidden belief that somehow, if we reject things, even in our mind, we prevent them from being true. *Control*, if you prefer the one-word answer. Except for the one nagging problem: life isn't up for bargaining. My theory is that if we knew what acceptance actually was (and the good it does, which I'll get to later), we might be more open to it. It is our choice for better mental and emotional health, not the ability to play God in the decision-making. It also does not mean that just because I understand it, I still don't miss my dad.

*October 29, 2018*

*Daddy showed up in my dreams last night.*

He was so real he could've popped out of my favorite photo of him sitting on my desk. Dark '70s pinstripe suit, thick black hair combed neatly to one side, tanned cheeks, and perfect, full lips.

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Impossibly good-looking, as always. Except in my dream he wasn't touching a chair and looking so stately. He was reaching out to hold me and looking warmly into my eyes.

This was the first time I've seen him in more than a year and a half. Every day since he took that last breath, I've wished he were still alive.



I don't want you to think you're alone in having a hard time accepting something (or someone). In case you thought my story at the fish restaurant was precious, and before you assume my acceptance of John becoming my bonus dad was all kisses and hugs, you should know this: nobody has a love story like me and my daddy.

Every daddy's girl probably thinks that, at least when we are six and he is the greatest man we know. Daddy and I had the unspoken thing in the eyes from day one, and we kept it until he was so sick it became the one and only way he could speak to me. We communicated a lot in body language through the years. A nod, a knowing grin. We spoke in the language of commonality and the heart although it looked different in the end when his liberty to talk was stripped away. (A preacher losing his voice, of all cruel ironies.) We were Court TV junkies, always up on the latest news, neither of us lacking fire or opinion. Both of us for the underdog, fiercely loyal to our people yet tender to the bone. I've never loved a soul like my daddy, my whole life.

I loved another man since, my husband, who wound up loving my dad almost as much as I did (which became one of my greatest gifts), but never anyone identically. I got Dad, and he got me. I knew he was good even though he sometimes fought wanting to be bad. I knew he held secrets, probably stuff from his past that would hurt me too much to know. I knew he loved us to the very best of



## accepting something you wish were something different

his ability, more than he had been equipped to do himself because of his relationship with his dad. And I knew something else: he loved me special, whatever that meant. He told me this many times even though he deeply loved all his kids.

I believe God had me know him like this so I could write his story.

Daddy was average height, but he was thick. Manly, aggressive, alpha in every way. He *was* the big gun he shot deer with, loud and powerful. He *was* the big truck he drove, sleek and commanding. He *was* the big pulpit he preached behind, charismatic and strong. There was no middle ground with Daddy. He was the renegade, the advocate, and the one every person either was dying to get near or strongly disliked. I've met speakers far more famous than he was but none more electric.

I learned early on what Christian celebrity looked like, long before the social media influencer age, because a Christian celebrity lived in my home.

Daddy was simultaneously buddies with the church janitor and lunch mates with the town mayor. Endearing and polarizing. Absent and dependable. An open book and fiercely private. A true living irony. My father's very life preached to me that two seemingly opposite things could indeed live together at the same time, just like hard and good.

He was complicated and, at times, unstable. So our life with him was full and rich yet complicated and, at times, unstable too.

When I was eighteen, the pedestal my daddy occupied in my mind broke into a million pieces, and he fell hard onto the ground where the rest of us lived. A friend of mine revealed to me one cold Missouri night that she was sure he was having an affair with someone I knew, and she had receipts to prove it. For reasons I still cannot fully explain, though I had loved my father my whole life, something told me to believe her, so I did. The news broke

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me—I did not think I would recover from the pain in my heart. My daddy, the one I thought I knew, the one I loved the very most, had deceived us all. What a fool I was.

Here's something I found out: when we react out of pain against someone who hurts us by turning inward, we turn the knife against ourselves. I didn't tell my daddy he hurt me in words. Instead, I screamed at him silently by doing things to hurt him back—dating bad boys, blowing my grades, lying to his face about where I was going, getting drunk at parties. All the things good preachers' daughters shouldn't do. Every day for about a year, I shoved my anguish in his face without saying a word, hoping he would notice. But by now I was also a good liar, so between that and being busy, Daddy never noticed. This broke me some more.

And then one day, after my sins caught up with me and I could no longer carry on hurting myself, I made a decision that changed my life. I decided to stop wondering if my father had an affair. I realized that I might never know the truth, and either way it didn't matter. Because this didn't have to mess up our love story. I loved him for who he was to me. I loved him for the memories in his huge black truck, the trips to Subway, the way we knew what each other was thinking with a nod and a grin. These things remained true. If the affair was also true, the forgiveness was ultimately God's and my mother's to give. Not mine. I would probably never know the full story, so I let the story go. I accepted the not knowing.

I accepted this father, the flawed version I now knew. I even accepted what I came to call “the night,” the time I heard about his alleged affair—a memory I'd often wished away whenever it replayed in my mind.

This was the first time I remember accepting something I wished were something different and feeling set free.

Maybe this is not your exact story, but you can relate to feeling

## accepting something you wish were something different

that you must let go of the need to know about something. This is an important place of acceptance. It is a transformational moment in and of itself because, in a strange twist, as we let something go, we unloose something that has gripped us. It is also a place we often get stuck—we want to, but we fight it all the way because it feels as if something holding the cards over our life has won. We will not accept not knowing why, why not, or the details. But it truly is one of the most powerful practices when we let go of that need to know. It isn't conceding to do so. It is taking power back from the endless question mark that has punctuated every sentence of our lives.

### **PROBLEM #1: You Can't Accept Life Because You Can't Accept You**

We don't need a perfect bow tied around our stories to be okay.

Even if something doesn't become different, you can live with it. Love your life, even, *despite*.

This is another place we get stuck: we reject our lives because they are not perfect. We don't really believe, deep down, that we can be okay with a less than perfect job, marriage, house, kids, or church, so we stay on a constant hunt or in constant dissatisfaction. Our bent to fix things (aka control or take matters into our own hands) convinces us that to be okay with something, it must first be altered to our level of preference.

It is why our family was basically the Reimer Traveling Band when I was growing up—"gypsies," my mom used to jokingly call us from time to time, except there was no fun band. We just moved. To the tune of double digits, by the time I was in sixth grade, which eventually started to feel normal. My father was trying to "fix" a life that wasn't broken but he wasn't willing to fully accept. Turns

## the hard good

out when you try to fix a life with a moving van, you just pack up and move the issues to a different address.

You willing to dive in with me a bit further? The real thing that was happening with my father was *he couldn't truly accept himself, so accepting his life was then out of the question*. At the core, acceptance of anything can almost always be traced back to some level of acceptance of ourselves. It is usually not about the first thing we blame it on.

Maybe the biggest problem hasn't been your life being a bad life, after all. Maybe it hasn't been that you're not suited for this career, you've had rotten luck, or you don't have the opportunity to turn things around. Maybe you *are* equally gifted to that person you admire and God *does* love you as much as someone else. Maybe you just haven't accepted *you* or God loving you, and that has blocked all other acceptance.

I sensed early on that Daddy didn't believe he was fully loved by God. At least, not in the way that allows a person to accept who they are. This is tied into your entire self-acceptance. Dad's wild boyhood, rebellious youth, and unbridled Navy days were stuck in his head, constantly replaying his unworthiness. This caused a lot of complications—performance issues, running away, and hiding his truth, to name a few—and stifled his full potential. He accomplished a lot while he was here—preached thousands of sermons and influenced an equal number of lives. Many of his sermons were full of powerful words about how much God loves us. He certainly repeated the same message at home to me. Yet I watched him silently wrestle. He lived with unspoken guilt and shame demons—the pesky ones that try to get you to hate yourself by mental reminders that wear you down. I well know the life of a front-row spectator to a man's spiritual battle.

It's important for me, then, to make sure *you* now know that everything you struggle to accept in your life will be easier when you

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believe God loves you. This is foundational. It is nearly impossible to accept a life if you do not first accept being purposefully born into it and if you believe you can't live in the tension of being loved versus feeling loved. Sometimes our humanness throws up baggage barricades that block our receiving end.

I suspect a lot of us are like my father—worn down by mental reminders that hinder our ability to fully experience God's love, so we treat ourselves poorly. This is crucial to note because acceptance and guilt can't coexist. A lot of us want to accept something different about our story, but we are our own worst personal historian. Sometimes we need to take our own history book out back and make a nice campfire out of its pages. Once you've learned where you came from, and how it affected you, those roads don't need to constantly be retraveled. This is different from owning past sin and mistakes and seeking repentance—a necessary piece of moving on. But many of us still struggle even after we've given something over to God, which was the case with my dad.

If you relate to this, may I suggest you start with this two-word question: *What now?*

When *what was* becomes *what now*, it becomes a power move in the right direction.

Take a page from my father's book: if you find yourself chronically dissatisfied with your life, make sure it's not you who you're actually running from, spending year after year chasing after new adventures. The need to accept yourself could also stem from something else. Rather than running from past mistakes or guilt, maybe you wish you were somehow created differently. I relate to that.

I didn't want to be me for years. I wanted to be my mother. I wanted a personality other people had a hard time rejecting, misunderstanding, or getting mad at, which she has. Instead, my little-girl frame had a fire stuck inside with nowhere to go, so I

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ended up inserting myself inconveniently into conversations in which feistiness was not welcome. We may still have further to go in the church when it comes to women, but growing up in the '80s with passionate gifting wasn't the plight a young girl wanted, I'll tell you that.

This whole book could be about my struggle to accept my body, something women are notoriously lifelong strugglers over, no matter how hard we try (prayer does help!). Speaking from experience, people born with the gift of a healthy body can become grossly entitled, nitpicking ourselves to death by the view from our blessed lens. When you don't have to worry about legs that work, you have the luxury of hating the way they look too thick at the ankle. (Teary and sorrowful as I write this.) This leads to such self-loathing and ingratitude. I hated my short legs my whole life. Cruelly pushed them to get them thinner. I've been on every diet that exists, not to mention bulimia and excessive exercise. I've never typed those words before now. But after what I put myself through in college, I owe my body at least enough to say it. Over the years I've come to accept the legs I have, something no amount of deprivation or dieting will change. Yes, you *can* live with things you didn't ask for. Gratitude doesn't require preference; it requires acceptance.

You don't have to choose between knowing your life isn't perfect and being grateful for it anyway. Those two things are equally true. Accepting the parts you don't love will help shape you into a person who no longer needs everything to be perfect.

Maybe you've been waiting your whole life for that magical moment when you finally feel differently about something like a body part. But what if you never do? Or maybe it's something you've done that you keep wishing to redo instead of learning to accept. We can fix a lot of things in this modern age, but we can't fix a broken past we are trying to outrun. The good news for those

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of us who haven't had a great start is this: we choose our level of wellness even when we don't choose every detail of our life. Yes, even when something broke us. Yes, even when someone behaves poorly in our presence. Still. Yes, even when we are reminded of the something every single day because it is part of us.

Accepting things about ourselves we wish were different is the key to accepting the totality of our life. Nothing is well if we aren't at peace with ourselves.

If you're in need of greater belief about or acceptance of something related to you, the ability to do both is covered by the truth of Ephesians 1—in that radical move of Jesus to give us, as children of God, access to the same power that has the *power to resurrect*.

I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is the same as the mighty strength he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. (vv. 18–21)

Game-changing news. Satan may have a lot of us believing we are doomed to weakness, but I'm outing the lie. In many cases we aren't waiting on circumstances. We're waiting on our minds and hearts to change. That's where the power starts. Can you believe we've been waiting on something we didn't need to wait on?

Demanding of ourselves that we be sold on everything about us before we accept it is a big ask. Life is too good to be put on hold by our expectations for perfect circumstances. This is not settling. It's letting go of a standard that's been toxic to our soul. It's not simply

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waving a white flag but a willful laying down of a life that's too long been driven by things outside our control. Acceptance means harnessing the power we already own (Ephesians 1!) and choosing to move on despite preference. It's choosing health and sanity and a more joyful life. I like this news because it means that nothing outside of God owns my future, and yet with Him, things can happen right here and now.

If you've been living under the belief that acceptance requires prior alterations or being completely sold on everything about yourself first, here's your permission to now think differently.

### PROBLEM #2: You Can't Accept Two Things Being True at the Same Time

Living with the demand that only one thing can be true at a time will hinder you. It is crucial to your entire ability to believe good things can also be hard. If both can't be true (*this is/was hard, but God can also use it for my good . . . this was something I never wanted, but God can redeem it*), we are left with many hollow days and eventual ineffectiveness. While we may never *understand* the process, we can still *believe in* the process as we believe in God. Another example of holding two truths at one time.

Please hear me. This is not the same as Satan's marketing of two very different things—one true and one false/anti-gospel—via culture, wrapping them together so that truth morphs into humanism. *We should not live to please other people* (absolutely true and biblical); *therefore, we should do exactly what we want to do* (anti-gospel). We will talk more about this prevalent theme in today's society later in the chapter. We must wisely divide these things to get to the truth. The key phrase is holding *two truths* at the same time, not *one truth and one lie*.



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My social media tells the tale of two truths that live together in a singular moment: in fact, hard, as I read about one friend's enormous grief at the anniversary of her child's death, and good, while moments later I watch a video of another friend shooting off a makeshift backyard cannon full of pink dye, announcing her pregnancy. Life is about that coexistence.

If you want to have a usable, powerful life, you have to begin to accept its nuances.

Sometimes life will have you laughing five minutes after you've cried.

Sometimes you will be close to God, and at the same time, you will still struggle with human feelings.

Sometimes you will be mad at your circumstances and feel grateful to still be alive.

And this goes for others too. Give them the grace you give yourself to be living the reality of more than just one thing.

We all are.

### **PROBLEM #3: You Can't Accept Someone or Something in Your Life**

I didn't pick John to come into our family. In fact, when Dad died, we weren't looking *at all* for another family member to join us.

Some months after my father's passing, Mom mentioned John to me for the first time. We were sitting in the parking lot of the attorney's office having just sorted out some things in her will when she casually slid it into our conversation. "Remember John Morgan?"

Only minutes before, we had been discussing things like powers of attorney around a mahogany table. Dad's death had brought on hard, necessary conversations about her future, postponed by

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his more immediate health concerns. Now that he was gone, we could deal with things. After sorting through details and before going our separate ways for the night, we were spending a few minutes catching up. Mom and I lived just around the corner from each other, and we talked nearly every day, at least through text. But for a week or so I'd been sensing she had been trying to tell me something.

"Of course," I said.

John was a friend of Dad's—a close friend, although they hadn't seen each other in years. In the ministry world, you could have friends like that. He was a preacher friend, running in the same denominational circles, someone Dad considered a great pastor and perhaps the smartest financial leader around. Long before today's popular financial gurus, John was helping folks get out of debt in his down-to-earth, unflashy way, and teaching his own church to stay debt-free. He was also a hunting friend, with a mutual affection for the majesty of deer antlers. A true cowboy who, like Dad, wore real cowboy boots and hats, drove big trucks, and hunted everything from rattlesnakes to grizzly bear. I'd met John several times as a teenager, including during that short stint when we lived in Houston and I was sick for months with that crazy mono. We had attended John's church, although I don't remember it.

Through the years I had also heard a story involving John, one that deeply touched my heart. Back in the late '80s, my father got in trouble with the state's hunting and game commission, having broken a federal law by transporting a deer head over state lines. (If only Dad had known that apparently he could have bought a permit for less than ten dollars.) He sold it to John for his collection, so when the deer head was confiscated in a raid after the IRS stepped in, John was out both the deer head and a large sum of money. (Like fine art, deer heads are worth a lot.) Nearly bankrupt

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from legal fees, back taxes, penalties, and interest owed to the federal government, Dad didn't have any way to pay John back. But John forgave the debt without a further word. Even more incredibly, he continued being Dad's friend. Ironically, the last time Dad preached at a sportsmen's event was at John's church. After that, his health declined to the point he could no longer speak publicly again. Knowing what I know now, the divine timing of this last speaking engagement doesn't escape me.

"What about John Morgan?" I asked my mother.

Hands twisting in her lap, she looked at me tentatively. "John's wife died a month after Dad. He's been calling me. We've been talking . . . a lot . . . these last few weeks."

I didn't need to ask her about what. I could tell by her face. Suddenly a lot of things made sense. They both lost spouses of fifty-plus years just a month apart. They both dearly loved my dad. With the vast knowledge only he had, after Dad died, both John and his wife had reconnected with Mom upon the request of Dad's brother (a mutual friend of John's) to help Mom get rid of Dad's remaining deer heads. Dad and John shared similar faith and belief systems. Being in the same denomination and era, they even had mutual ministry friends. It all added up. They were deeply compatible. And it felt right, somehow ordained by a Power much greater than any of us, even to a mind that didn't want to accept that any of it was true or necessary. I was still freshly wrapping my mind around my father being gone. And I was enjoying having my mother, who had for years given herself fully to his caretaking, back in a daily, active relationship.

I didn't say it at the time, but that day in the parking lot I knew what would one day come. A year and a half later, Mom and John were married in a private ceremony.

I know what it's like to want someone but learn to accept someone different.

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I know what it feels like to have to embrace someone new even as you still wish for the one who is gone.

Sometimes the thing we wish were something different is a person, and the weight of that can feel particularly hard. It can feel like betrayal of the person we wish for, loved first, knew the longest, committed to back when. And now, even though it's not within our power to have them in our lives, acceptance of someone new feels nearly impossible. It is not wrong to struggle to accept. It is human. This is why we need a supernatural God to help bridge the gaps in our hearts.

The beauty of acceptance is we find out how well a closed heart can open and a broken heart can mend. We grow when we defy the beliefs that have made us live below our potential to do such things. And then we crave growth some more. It is a cycle of transformation and healing, a place where God is able to begin to greatly use us.

*The beauty of acceptance is we find out how well a closed heart can open and a broken heart can mend.*

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Maybe for you it's a stepparent you've yet to accept. A new pastor, because you pine for the old one. Adjusting to a new spouse or a new normal in a long marital relationship you are asking God to mend after an affair.

Maybe you struggle to accept someone because they aren't that lovable, or they've hurt you in some way. Even if that someone isn't worthy of your love and acceptance right now, you can let go of your need for the demand of that. Being a worthiness judge is simply too draining of a job. And if they have not been healthy for your life, well, I assume you know about the importance of boundaries.

And for the one who *is* worthy of your love but you just don't want to see it right now so you are resisting: Please don't miss out on the someone right in front of you because you are too busy wishing

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for someone else. Or simply because you feel the need to push back on the idea of new memories. You may never have asked for this gift, but will you trust God to know what you need?

He knows what we need with circumstances, too, like a job we don't get, a relationship that falls through that we were sure was going to wind up in marriage, even some injustice we can't make right. A lot of us have wandered for years, racking our brains for a way to home-remedy our pain over these huge disappointments. It won't work. I've tried the quick fixes myself, so I can say that.

For us, the need for acceptance is often about letting go of an offense, even toward our own life. Yes, you heard me right. *Our circumstances have offended us.* (Hear me out if at first this sounds strange.) A lot of us are in a cycle of offense over something that has happened to us, and, because of that, we refuse to accept anything that comes after. Essentially we are stuck at the point of the something we wish were different in our circumstances, and we have not progressed forward. Four words have become our life mantra: *I can't believe it.* This is the thought that is in the back of our minds every day as we try to progress forward, dream, live, serve God, and love other people. No wonder we find it difficult to produce and always have so much on our minds. Underlying thoughts of disappointment keep us in mental cycles of being mad at our lives. Acceptance is the way to break that.

I'd like to offer one more thing that might help us as it relates to other people in this regard. The ramifications for a lack of acceptance affect more than just us. Because we have a hard time accepting our own circumstances, we tend sometimes to say really dumb things to other people in their pain over things that are hard to accept. God seems to be the most logical go-to for the why of circumstances, so we tend to carelessly throw His name around. One time, when my friend was pregnant with her son,

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someone tried to tell her that God had meant for her husband to cheat on her while pregnant to get her attention. Knowing what I know about God, I feel sure He could have chosen other methods to get in touch besides one that resulted in an STD, my friend going into premature labor, and a marriage breaking up. God isn't responsible for man's choice though, as our Creator, He anticipates the fallenness and stands ready with the help. We will cover so much more about hard circumstances in the coming chapters of this book, but the one thing you can count on is that as you accept what you didn't ask for or want, it changes you for the good—it does not affirm an unwelcome decision.

*As you accept what you didn't ask for or want, it changes you for the good.*

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In that way, disappointment and pain become a very strange but powerful gift.

Nearly a year after my father's death, when Mom had quietly started dating John, I flew to Texas with my family and mother so we could get truly acquainted and he could meet my husband and kids. After months of private grappling, late-night prayers, and tears for God to help me accept this new man in my mother's life, and even as I mourned for the man I wanted but couldn't make come back, something surprising happened to me that weekend. John's schedule kept him going at a rigorous pace, even in his late seventies, and he rarely got sick, but John wasn't feeling well on our visit. Hearing him cough, looking into tired eyes, and knowing he was sick, I found myself worrying about him, a man I barely knew.

Feelings of love washed over me. As I sat on his back deck watching him talk and laugh with my family like an old friend, my mind brought me a thought. "There's room." I knew what that meant, and it meant a lot. He wasn't my father, and he never

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would be. I hadn't stopped wishing my father were still here. But I had space in my heart for John Morgan too. I *could* accept the man standing right in front of me. And God could use it to change me.

Sometimes we have more room in our heart than we think.

Have you made room for yourself?

Have you made room for someone you never went looking for or circumstances you didn't prefer?

Most important: Will you choose to believe that though acceptance is hard, it is a powerful good that God can use in your life to shape you?

I hope you at least said yes to the last one because I'm about to show you more.

## ☞ GOOD: ☞

Your defeating *what ifs* will turn into joy over *what is*.

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*If you are tired and ready to lose some inner turmoil, be willing to eliminate these two words from your life: what if.*

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Our defeating *what ifs* are most often centered on these three questions:

*What if they . . . ?*

*What if I . . . ?*

*What if God . . . ?*

See if any of these common questions sound familiar: What if I had more money? What if I had been born into a different

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family or with a different personality? What if I hadn't wasted those years? What if God had stopped that tragedy from happening? What if God had given me what He gave them? What if they hadn't hurt me? What if they had given me another chance? The list goes on.

*What ifs* hinder us as we journey through life. They stifle our motivation, hold us back from progress, and keep God's greatest work from being done in and through our lives.

As you do the hard work of accepting things you wish were different, know it is not for naught: it is to your great benefit. Your defeating *what ifs* will turn into joy over *what is* as you release expectations of controlling something uncontrollable. It is a most worthy exchange of power.


In this exchange your hard transforms into something good. As support to this hard-good process, I find it particularly helpful to pray the serenity prayer by American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. Perhaps you know it.

*God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I  
cannot change,  
courage to change the things I can,  
and wisdom to know the difference.*

I remember hearing this prayer in college, back when I was in the throes of being manically self-critical. A bad relationship with an equally critical boyfriend sent me into mental loops about my body, which led me to food deprivation. I tried to receive the truth of the prayer. But I felt helpless, as if maybe I could never accept the things I was stuck with, and that sent me further into rejection of myself.

When we are in a state of denying acceptance to ourselves about one thing, the list of critiques can grow incredibly silly.





Your defeating *what  
ifs* will turn into joy  
over *what is*.

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Our cruelty to ourselves snowballs. Fast. Before we know it, we're rejecting things about ourselves that normally would have never made the list. That's the irony about human acceptance: the more we look to a source other than God for peace, the less peaceful we will be.

*The serenity to accept the things I cannot change.*

Serenity is defined simply in some places as "the state of being untroubled." This helps me understand what my goal is in accepting something I don't prefer. To be untroubled about something doesn't mean I necessarily like it any more than I did at first. It means I do not let it overwhelm my thoughts and take over my life. No disrespect to Niebuhr, but this isn't a new idea. It's the very words of Jesus to His disciples when He was preparing to leave the earth. "Do not let your hearts be troubled," He said, over an intimate dinner meant to comfort them before He went away (John 14:1).

They couldn't change His going. They couldn't stop fear of the great unknown from creeping in. But they had the power within them, through trust in Jesus, to live with untroubled hearts in acceptance of *what was*. Despite their natural desire to have the Lord physically present with them. No doubt they lived with the rub of these two truths long after He was gone.

Don't let the parallels to our own current reality escape you. We're living in the same difficult world with the same Lord inside us, longing to have His tangible, physical comfort. Sometimes not having a God we can touch leaves us frustrated, wishing for more. I get that, and, more importantly, He does too. But this is where faith grows. We can experience the closeness of His presence even while wishing for more. And we will get it one day, in heaven, which keeps us from getting too comfortable down here.

We, too, can choose to live untroubled, despite the troubles we

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cannot change. Living untroubled while surrounded by trouble is possible only with a God perspective. And, yes, it *is* possible.

### *Courage to change the things I can.*

As a there-is-always-a-way-it-can-be-done type of person, I love this part of the serenity prayer. Victimization doesn't sit well with me. If it's in my power to change something, ten times out of ten, I will. You may not share my personality, but you probably share the universal need not to feel stuck.

One reason we resist the idea of accepting something we don't like is that we may feel as though we have conceded to a bully, and that bully chose for us when we had no say. If that is the way acceptance is seen, I can fully understand rejecting the idea. But acceptance has nothing to do with cowering before the ideas of someone else. If you've read my book *Jesus over Everything*, you know I am retired from what I call "the deadly overs." These are overdone behaviors, such as *overapologizing*, *overexplaining*, and *overanalyzing* (still working on this one), habits largely rooted in the need to please other people. Acceptance is not about that.

Acceptance is for you. Therefore, it is to your benefit. It is about not wasting your life pining over things you literally do not have the power to change, so your mind and heart can be free.

Many of us get stuck because we aren't willing to shift to things we can change and instead stay stubbornly convinced (for years!) that our willpower can work miracles. Acceptance is not giving up on something. It's making a decision to do what works. It's being courageous enough to move to something better: better fruit, better mental health, better perspective, a better life of hope and positivity.

Courage is also not a new idea, but one God Himself came up with many thousands of years ago. One of my favorite verses, the reference of which is tattooed in Hebrew on my son's arm: "Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not

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be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go” (Joshua 1:9). God gave this charge to Joshua in the wake of Moses’ death, not to talk Joshua out of wishing Moses was still there to lead him. He gave it to help him accept the new call on his life to take the lead, even while he felt inadequate. Even as he missed Moses’ leadership. Courage to overcome his fear. To move forward, even in a state of discouragement. To change his mind and heart and course of action. These were the things Joshua could actually change in the wake of those he could not.

Acceptance is about courage, not concession. When we are ready to take our life back from the what if, we will courageously accept the what is.

### *Wisdom to know the difference.*

This may be the most crucial part of the serenity prayer: discerning between things we truly can’t alter and those we can. Society tells us to approach our fate from one of two extremes, and both are incorrect. As with most things, secular culture tries to skew our focus in the direction of self rather than God, so it’s no wonder things have gotten confusing.

- We must simply accept the cards we’ve been dealt and do nothing to improve ourselves or our situation.

This approach goes along with the false and damaging humanistic “spiritual” narrative that God accepts us no matter what, and there is no spiritual standard or expectation that comes of a personal relationship with Him. Grace is an evergreen, no-strings-attached expectation. God just wants us to be happy; therefore, we can live however we want.

If we believed this lie, many of our powerful testimonies

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would be nullified: survivors of toxic home environments and abuse who worked to become great parents, for instance, or those without good resources who managed to become accomplished job holders. We are not victims to what we were born into. We may not control how we come into the world or, often, what happens to us, but we do have an absolute measure of control over what we do next. This is the beauty of free will and speaks to the possibility of new life with Christ. The odds may be against us, the road may be unclear and even obscured, but God can work miracles with our story.

- We are the masters of our own destiny; therefore, we must take all matters into our own hands and hustle our way through life.

By now we know how hustle culture has all but destroyed us. Hustle and hard work are two different things, and much of the time we have chosen the frenzy and self-reliance of hustle. The pandemic of 2020 yet again (and maybe even in a new way) taught us how much we resist rest, despite saying it's what we want. If we had anything when the world shut down for a while, it was more time, less travel, less opportunity to hustle. And it drove most of us crazy.

If nothing else, this proved that our reasons for not slowing down haven't really been about having more time; they've been about not wanting to slow down for one reason or another. For many of us, the pandemic gave us the out, and we fought it all the way. *Bring back our life and normalcy*, we demanded . . . after one week of enjoying an excuse for a slower pace. Maybe hustle has been a scapegoat for us not having to face the hard things. In the past we felt confident that "being too busy" was a safe and accepted reason for all manner of situations we didn't want to deal

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with. We gave it to people so they wouldn't question or press. And our payoff: we got out of having to work through complicating issues.

Believing everything is up to us, that we can indeed change, create, and control our life circumstances, renders God unnecessary. On the other hand, working hard can coexist with trusting God. We can strike a balance between acceptance (trusting God) and pursuit (working hard) when we invite God, and only when we invite God, to help us live within this tension. He helps us learn to accept the things beyond our control and deal with them so we approach our work and life in a healthy manner. This is godly balance, which brings serenity from the inside out, not the other way around. While the world preaches production, in order to become secure, we who have tried it that way know a well soul is the real producer. The world can't touch the peace of God protected by the walls of a settled heart.

The serenity prayer claims wisdom will be the decider between knowing what things we can and can't change. Wisdom and knowledge are different, as you may know. The wisdom of God is more than gaining information. It is discerning information under supernatural leadership and behaving accordingly. This means complete reliance upon the Holy Spirit, who is within us and leading us as our guide.

It is hard to accept things we wish were different. But it is good because the result is a surrender that allows our life to become unbridled. Believers in Jesus understand this process differently than the world. The world will tell us to simply *live unbridled*. That sounds great, but it's not possible without God because our sinful choices will eventually put us in chains once again. We consecrate ourselves to God, and in that we gain freedom. Remember: Godly acceptance isn't settling. It is becoming settled by letting Him lead our heart.

I've lived both ways—rebellious and surrendered—and I can

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testify that the places God has asked me to lie down were for the good of my soul.

Acceptance has set me free to do things I otherwise could not. To create. To dream. To love. And to grow. And honestly? To get up in the morning.

Acceptance is how I came to love and enjoy a man named John, a man I now call my bonus dad and have grown especially fond of teasing and going on rattlesnake hunts with.

Acceptance is how I learned to become me, rising in my gifts and strengths while remaining utterly hopeless without God to help me with my weaknesses.

Acceptance is how I stopped restricting my eating as I did for so many years in college and even after.

Acceptance is how I moved on to enjoy a precious relationship with my father, even after mentally agonizing days and months over whether he'd had an affair and, in turn, harmfully acting out against myself. Accepting the fact that I might never know what actually happened and whether the affair story was true completely turned my life around.

Sometimes we wish for a baby, and we don't get pregnant, and we never know why.

Sometimes we lose someone we love, and it makes no sense. Even if we could make some sense out of it, the loss still feels unjust.

Sometimes we lose a job for no good reason.

Sometimes we want to get married, and it doesn't happen or at least not yet, and we feel unlovable, unheard, and unseen by the God we keep asking for it. Or sometimes we get married, and it doesn't work out the way we want.

Surrendering that need to know is hard, but it is powerful. If we want our minds to become free, this is how that happens.

Hard good is holy payoff.

And if I could say just one last thing? We so often want the

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benefit of a seasoned life without the seasoning. But life doesn't work that way. To live in acceptance means to live with the understanding that, at the end of it all, even the hard things will have been for our good. Then and only then can you and I repeat the words of that often-quoted saying: "A lot of things broke my heart but fixed my vision."

We are profoundly changed when we don't let the hard harden us but become goldened by its fire.

