

When God Says *no*

Facing *Disappointment and Denial*
Without Losing Heart,
Losing Hope, or Losing Your Head

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Moses

The Climb

Based on Deuteronomy 34

The voice comes to Moses as an old friend—the Friend that Moses has walked beside all these forty long years in the desert: “*It’s time.*”

Moses has known this word was coming. In preparation, he has commissioned Joshua, renewed the covenant, blessed the tribes, and taught them God’s song—but still, it steals his breath. For a moment, he sits with the Lord in the Tent of Meeting, his own face unveiled, picturing all the faces he will miss—so many beloved, so many goodbyes.

He nods and rises. “I’ll leave in the morning.” Pulling his veil into place, he leaves the Tent of Meeting and goes back to sleep in his own tent for the last time.

He rises when night still hangs heavy over the camp, a black and silent drape. He doesn’t need a scene, doesn’t want a mob. They will know he’s gone soon enough.

He doesn’t pack a bag. He won’t be needing it.

He takes only a waterskin, a heavy knife—for cutting, not for fighting—and his staff. With one last, long look around at his tent—his home—he tiptoes out into darkness. The waning moon hides her glow behind a veil of clouds. Moses winks up at her: *I know the feeling.*

As his eyes adjust, picking out the dark shapes of sleeping tents—a city of black rectangles, triangles, and squares—he picks his way to the edge of camp with his staff guiding his

steps. It fits as if molded to his hand, its presence a comfort. Save Joshua and Caleb, this staff is his only surviving companion from the early days, the Egypt days. *We've walked a lot of life together*, he thinks.

As he passes by the isolated tents on the outskirts of camp, the memories flood: many times the thumps of this staff echoed through grand corridors as armored Egyptian guards escorted him to hold audience with Pharaoh; once this staff glinted sun as he stood shoulder to shoulder with Aaron and Hur, holding it aloft as the Israelites battled Amalek; twice this staff drew water from desert rock. He sighs a little at that. *If only I hadn't struck the rock. . . .*

He starts up Mount Nebo, filling his lungs with the sharp, cool tang of predawn air: dirt, leaves, hope. The moon peeps out at last, lighting a silvered path sloping gently upward. Come dawn, come light, the path starts to climb higher, growing steeper; before long there is no path. There is only Moses, pushing and hacking through foliage, making his own path through wild places, as he has always done. And as always, his only constant companions have been his staff and his Lord.

Moses doesn't consciously decide to start speaking aloud, but the words begin to flow, steady as his footfalls: "We've climbed many a mountain together, Lord. First there was the time You nearly stopped my heart with that burning-bush trick." He stops, hacking at a web of vines blocking his way. "The great-grandkids still love that story." His heart gives a little squeeze, thinking about the little ones.

He presses on. "And then when You turned this staff"—he knocks it against a fallen tree, grinning—"into a snake, and I ran—well, that was just unfair. I didn't really know You then—didn't know how You liked to tease." Moses chuckles. "But, of course, I am happy to amuse You. . .and my wife. You know that

was her favorite tale to tell at family dinners.”

He keeps talking to keep his thoughts from dwelling too long on Zipporah.

“And the time I climbed Mount Moriah, and You gave me Your law. I know everyone said I was gone for forty days, but to You and me, it just felt like no time at all”—he snaps his fingers—“and all the time in the world. As though we lived forever in a single afternoon.” He pauses, huffing hard as he clammers over a fallen tree. “And then when I came down, and we found the golden calf”—he stops, shakes his head—“you know, let’s not talk about that one. I don’t want to relive old anger today.”

The sky rumbles agreement.

“Remember the look on Pharaoh’s face when the frogs sprang out of that basket?” Moses mimics the expression, laughing. “And the magicians’ faces when my staff”—again he taps it against a tree—“ate theirs?” Moses points a knobby finger at the sky. “Why don’t people realize how funny You are? I wish they all knew this side of You.”

They start through a lifetime of memories, laughter mingling with tears.

The plagues.

The parted water.

The promises.

When they recall the day at Meribah, Moses stops to rest on a stump, sipping his water, running a forearm across his sweaty brow. “I’m sorry, Lord. Sorry I struck the rock—yes, *twice*. You’re right, I struck it twice. I’m sorry I don’t get to enter the land You promised, though I understand why You said no.” He raises an eyebrow to the sky. “Sure You don’t want to change that plan?”

The sun dips behind a cloud.

Moses nods. “I figured not.” He gives a wistful smile as he stands. “But Joshua—he’s ready. He’ll lead them the rest of the

way. Joshua is a good man.”

He walks on.

Still the memories flood: manna, quail, the deaths of Nadab and Abihu, Jethro’s visit, Miriam’s sickness, the plague of snakes, Aaron’s own last walk up Mount Hor, the renewal of the covenant, the people shouting—their voices as thunder—“We will obey!”

At last he reaches the summit. He is winded but not exhausted. From here, Canaan spreads out from the mountain’s base, a skirt of brown and green. Moses’ eyes, sharp as ever, can see to earth’s ends, or so it seems: the distant sea, glinting with golden sparkles; the Negev, lying quiet on the horizon; the Valley of Jericho, slumbering beneath a blanket of clouds. And as he looks, God peels back the present to reveal a glimpse of future days: the people marching, victorious; farms and settlements filling the land; children running, at home at last.

Moses sits on a boulder, feeling the wind soft in his beard and the sun warm on his head. “It’s a beautiful land, Lord. The people will be happy.” He pauses. “It’s been a good life. A long life. And I am ready.”

When God Says, “No”

Moses had sacrificed everything to get to the Promised Land. From day one in Exodus 3—the epic burning-bush conversation when God revealed Himself and recruited Moses to go back to Egypt—the whole proposal had centered on one goal: leading God’s people to the Promised Land. A good land, spacious and green. Milk and honey for days. (Not necessarily a selling point for a modern homebuyer, but apparently the height of luxury in Moses’ day: “And here in the backyard we have a cow! And beehives! A veritable fountain of milk and honey!”)

Moses risked his life to stand before Pharaoh. Risked his life again to take Pharaoh’s not-so-cooperative response back to the soon-to-be-furious-with-Moses Hebrews. He made it through ten plagues—from the disgusting blood to the comical frogs to the miserable boils to the terrifying death angel. Moses stood between Pharaoh’s army and God’s people, trapped between swords and the sea; he raised his staff, and God parted the waters. He broke the first Ten Commandment stones in protest of the golden calf, convinced God not to kill the rebellious people, then dragged himself back up the mountain to reinscribe the Ten Commandments.

He survived unpopularity and criticism, ingratitude, and coup attempts. At one point, he sent his wife and sons away to keep them safe. Moses wandered for forty years in the desert because of the people’s rebellion. And after all that (plus a zillion other difficulties we don’t have room to list)—after *four decades of sacrifice*—Moses didn’t reap the intended reward of his lifetime of pain. How Moses must have longed to enter the Promised Land, the

goal of his heart all those long, miserable years—but God said no.¹

God did take Moses to the top of Mount Nebo to let him take a look at the land, admire its beauty, envision the life his people would enjoy there—a kindness to take the edge off the disappointment—but Moses himself never set foot in the land. He died there on that mountain. God said no.

You might expect to find bitterness, resentment, accusation, or self-pity in Moses' heart as he stood atop Mount Nebo, admiring the land he would never live in. Perhaps we sense frustration mingled with nostalgia and regret, but not complaint. Why? I think the answer is simple: because the no came from the Lord, and the Lord was Moses' friend. Although no one likes to hear no, no from a friend is different than no from an enemy. No from a friend may still be a bitter pill, but it's a pill we can swallow.



My daughter's eyes behind her Wonder Woman mask are round and bright with tears.

“What's wrong, honey?” I ask.

“The lady—the lady over there wouldn't give me candy,” she says, her voice warbly. “She said I already took some and I couldn't have any. But I *hadn't* taken candy, Mommy! She was mean for no reason!”

I wrap a protective arm around my daughter's caped

¹ Moses' no came as the result of an act of disobedience. With the people desperate for water in the Desert of Zin, God told Moses to speak to a rock to bring forth water, but Moses apparently lost his temper and struck the rock—not once but twice. As a result, God did not allow Moses and Aaron to enter the Promised Land. (See Numbers 20:1–13.) Moses' story does not suggest that all nos in our lives are punishments—we should not blame ourselves for all our nos. Sure, we all live with consequences from past mistakes, but we should not assume that every no God gives us is some kind of punishment we have brought on ourselves. See chapters 2 and 8 for a more thorough discussion of these complex concepts.

shoulders. “Oh honey, I’m sorry.” I feel my eyes shooting rather unrighteous visual daggers at the stranger across the lawn. We don’t know these people or this neighborhood; we are at a fall festival with friends, all of us new to town. I hug my daughter close, whispering comforting words, offering distractions, hoping her whole night isn’t tainted.

Fast-forward a few weeks. My daughter—today she’s head-to-toe princess for no other reason than it’s Thursday, and why not be royal?—runs up to me as I fold laundry at the dining room table.

“Mommy, can I have some candy?” She gives her eyebrows a hopeful wiggle.

I shake my head. “No, honey, you’ve already had enough sugar today. You can have candy another time.”

Her eyebrows take a dive, and mild disappointment flicks across her face, but she doesn’t argue—just sighs then sashays back to the playroom, her kingdom.

In both these situations, my daughter’s quest for candy got a no. The first no was hurtful and cast a cloud over her entire evening; the second no was no big deal, a momentary disappointment in an otherwise great day. What was the difference? The difference was in who said no.

The first no came from a harsh stranger with an unkind spirit; the second came from a trusted family member who had her best interests at heart. The first no felt painful, arbitrary; the second was understandable, even necessary. It was all about who was saying no.

Think about how we read the title *When God Says, “No.”* Our eyes go straight to the no, don’t they? We unconsciously read it like this: *When God Says, “NO!”* All caps. Bold letters. Angry voice.

But what if we changed the emphasis? What if we read it

like this: *When GOD Says, "No"?*

Because where the no comes from makes all the difference. *Who* the no comes from makes all the difference. No from a cranky candy hoarder is different than no from a loving parent. No from a stranger is different than no from a friend. No from an enemy is different than no from Someone who knew us and loved us before we drew our first breath; Someone who saw our unformed bodies—indeed *gave* them form with His careful hands; Someone who has watched over our coming and going, hemming us in behind and before, every day of our lives (Psalms 121:8; 139:5, 13, 16).

No Place Like No

No feels like a roadblock in the life path we wanted to take. The smaller roadblocks are inconvenient and frustrating, but after a delay, we often find a way to work around them or reroute ourselves. But maybe your roadblock towers to heaven and stretches for miles on either side—your very own Great Wall of China—so you can't peer around it. You can't climb up to see what lies on the other side: a sheer drop or a smooth road. And your roadblock is so wide, there's no way around; you just have to hope you find a door passing through. A gateway to the other side of no. As the old children's rhyme goes, "Can't go over it, can't go under it. . . gotta go through it."

Maybe you're grappling with a big no—a before-and-after-everything-was-different kind of no, an I-don't-know-how-I'm-going-to-get-out-of-bed-ever-again kind of no: illness, divorce, abandonment, betrayal, injury, death.

These nos don't just break us in half; they can grind us to powder, burn us to ash. If we can't fight our way to the other side, we run the risk of losing not just our heads and our hope but also of losing our heart for God.

And then there are the “smaller” nos. I say “smaller” not to diminish the pain they can cause but to acknowledge different types of suffering. Certainly “No, you don’t get a promotion” feels different from “No, you don’t get a healing”—but both nos cause pain. Small or large, all wounds need tending. And yet sometimes we discount the smaller nos, trying to pretend they don’t hurt as much as they do: “That’s no big thing. I shouldn’t be sad about that.”

I’ve often told myself that I should or shouldn’t feel certain ways—*I shouldn’t feel heartbroken over my career setback; I should feel grateful that I have a husband even though I can’t get pregnant; I should feel happy with a roof over my head even though the house is filled with mold and making me sick; I shouldn’t feel upset about my friends going to different colleges, because at least I have friends*—but you know what? My feelings rarely listen to me. They show up whether they *should* or not. And when feelings show up, we have to deal with them.

Dating disappointments, career misfires, lost opportunities, unrealized dreams, financial reversals. . .these might sound like “smaller” nos from God—and yet they can hurt our faith and scar our hearts. They can weaken our hope. If we pretend they aren’t big-enough deals to warrant attention—instead stuffing the pain, ignoring the doubts—they may come back to haunt us later.

No one wants to go through no. No one wants to stand at that roadblock searching for a way through, wondering what will be waiting on the other side when they get there. God has told me no many times in my life—some nos have been small, their pain short-lived; others have been huge, their consequences life-altering—and every no, major and minor, has left its mark. Some have made me take a step back from God, wounded and wary. Some have made me scour the scriptures, searching anew for faith, for evidence that God is love after all.

Some have made me fight my way back to prayer after a season of God's silence. Some have looked like this:

I can't hear the other end of my husband's phone conversation, but I don't need to. The shock on Kevin's face says it all: he didn't get the position—the one he'd been told was a done deal.

He says all the right things, the humble things, the trusting-God things: "I totally understand. . . . We've all been praying, so I know God's hand was guiding this decision. . . . We'll be fine—more than fine, we'll be great. . . . I'll be praying for you."

But when he hangs up, his face is a symphony of anguish: he is stunned, embarrassed, insulted, angry. In that look, I see the college quarterback I married twenty years ago—*He starts his first-ever college football game as a fifth-year senior, buoyed by hope, cheered by friends. First play: stopped on the forty; second drive: pushed back by the defense; third drive: four and out; there is no fourth drive*—and the soul-crushing moment he was sent back to the sidelines to ride the bench again, his football dreams in tatters.

"I can't—I don't—" He can't find words. He leans down to put his phone on the table, shouts in pain, grabs his back, and falls, twisting, to the floor.

"What's wrong?" I cry, springing to his side. Panicked and irrational, I half expect to see an arrow or bullet in his back.

“That stupid bulging disk in my spine,” he grinds out, pushing up onto his hands and knees, panting in pain. When he finally turns his face to me, his eyes glitter with angry tears. “Well, this is just *awesome*. I can’t provide for this family, can’t even bend over to put down my phone.”

There’s nothing to say. I sink to my knees, reach for his hand, and curl up beside him on the carpet.



I wake up weeping, though I can’t remember why. I open my eyes—harsh light, white walls, masked nurse—and as the tears slide hot into my ears, memory comes crashing back: *The surgery. The pregnancy. The tiny heart, flat and still.*

“Oh love.” The nurse tut-tuts, bustling overhead, closing curtains around me. As if they could contain my cries. As if they could block the pain. As if they could raise the dead.



I’m pushing a ginormous grocery cart through Sam’s Club—the frozen pizza aisle, three pizzas for thirteen dollars—when my phone rings.

My heart jumps into my throat.

I’ve been waiting for this call for two days, so crowded Sam’s Club aisle or not, I answer.

The “Hi, Elizabeth” is pitched high—the trying-to-put-a-positive-spin-on-horrible-news pitch. And she’s talking fast, pulling-off-

a-Band-Aid style—like if she says it fast, it won't hurt so much. But this is no Band-Aid, and this wound is never going to heal.

Memory loss. . . progressive. . . too soon to give it a name. . .

I know too much to be fooled by the could-bes, the might-not-bes, the it's-too-soon-to-panics. I hear all the things she doesn't want to say about my loved one's condition, and the relentless voice of logic inside me fills in the rest of the prognosis.

I stand rooted, too numb for tears. The tears will come—for months, years, they will come, at odd moments, unannounced—but in this moment, they spare me. Right now time is frozen—I am frozen—in the frozen-food aisle. The fluorescent lights glare hard, turning the world hard-angled and ugly. People shoulder past me, some shooting me confused and irritated glances—how could they know the stone-faced woman blocking their way to the pizza is a daughter in mourning?

We all have “no” stories: times when hopes flew and prayers pleaded—but God said no.

When my publisher first approached me about writing this book, my first response was dread with a side order of terror: *How can I speak to all the big, awful hurts? I'm not that wise. I have my own story, my own disappointments and scars, but there are a million different kinds of loss and pain and no. How can I speak to all the heartaches people might bring to these pages? Please, God, let me out of this.*

Of course, in a case of extreme yet oh-so-appropriate irony, God said no.

But then He reminded me: *“I’m not asking you to be the theologian who writes Why God Says, ‘No’—I’m asking you to be the friend who writes When God Says, ‘No.’ To offer hope and encouragement and reminders of My love. To offer scriptures and strategies and stories people can cling to through desert times and bewildering seasons. To show My children how to stumble back into My arms when sorrow has driven them away.”*

That’s a book I can write. That’s a path I have trod—though *stumbled* and *crawled* might be more accurate.

Whatever kind of no you bring to these pages—be it small or immense, life-annoying or life-altering—please know how much my heart aches with you. Please know how carefully I have weighed these words, trying my best to tread lightly on your anguish. I offer my words with humility, knowing I am only one woman who has lived only her one life; one woman who still loves God and His Word, even through all God’s yeses, waits, maybes, and nos; one woman who longs to comfort others in their pain.

Who Is God?

I have said that what matters most is *who* tells us no. If someone is going to tell us no and direct our lives down paths we wouldn’t have chosen, it helps to know who that someone is—and what right that someone has to make those choices for us. Let’s prepare for our journey to the other side of no by asking, Who is God?

God is almighty

You rule the oceans. You subdue their storm-tossed

*waves. You crushed the great sea monster.
You scattered your enemies with your mighty
arm. The heavens are yours, and the earth is yours;
everything in the world is yours—you created it
all. You created north and south. Mount Tabor and
Mount Hermon praise your name. Powerful is
your arm! Strong is your hand! Your right
hand is lifted high in glorious strength.*

PSALM 89:9–13 NLT

Our God is the almighty Creator, infinite in knowledge, power, and ability. Nothing is beyond His power, reach, or knowledge. He is not bound by mortal time constraints; the past, present, and future stretch out in full view before Him. He sees all—where the world has been and where it will be. How one thing affects another thing that affects another thing, down the line into eternity. How one life touches another life that touches another life, generation to generation. How one choice changes another choice that changes another choice, continent to continent.

The dizzying complexity of infinite choices and possibilities unspools before His fingertips, intertwined yet untangled, with the golden thread of what is best always clear. He sees it all—more than that, He anticipates how it all interacts: which dominoes cause others to topple. He weighs all the options and always chooses the best one for the big picture. He is never surprised, never caught unprepared, never working from incomplete information. Where we see only a tiny corner of the puzzle, He owns the box—designed the box—and knows where every piece fits.

God is righteous

Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne; love and faithfulness go before you. Blessed are those who have learned to acclaim you, who walk in the light of your presence, LORD. They rejoice in your name all day long; they celebrate your righteousness.

PSALM 89:14–16

God always does the right thing—the good-in-the-long-run thing—even if the right thing sometimes involves what isn’t fun, what we wouldn’t necessarily choose, what causes a measure of pain.

God is fair

The LORD is in his holy temple; the LORD is on his heavenly throne. He observes everyone on earth; his eyes examine them. . . . The LORD is righteous, he loves justice; the upright will see his face.

PSALM 11:4, 7

Life isn’t always fair, people aren’t always fair, the justice system isn’t always fair—but God is.

Does that mean God will always make *our* life sort itself out into “fair” and “not fair” from moment to moment? No, it doesn’t. Does that mean justice always reigns, present tense? No, it doesn’t. Even the briefest look at the lives of godly men and women in scripture reveals the truth: although God is fair, we all suffer unfairness on this broken planet, this place so fractured by sin and stained with blood. We suffer unfairness at the

hands of other humans.

Sometimes, when we get a no—or a series of nos—it feels like God is against us. Intentionally tipping the scales. Cheating at cards, stacking the deck so the house wins. Singling us out for suffering, being unfair on purpose.

But God would never do that.

And we can know that in the end, God will sort it out. In the end, God will set things right. It may not happen in our lifetime, in front of our human eyes here on earth, but it will happen. Justice is coming and cannot be denied:

*The LORD works righteousness
and justice for all the oppressed.*

PSALM 103:6

God is in control—but not controlling

I have wrestled and angsted and gnashed teeth over this concept a million times, and you can read all the books and ponder all the theology before you decide where you land, but here's where I stand: God is in control—but He's not controlling. God can do anything—He can take the reins whenever and wherever He wants to—but He made a crucial, game-changing decision long ago. In His love, God gave people free choice. And with that great blessing comes tremendous evil. It means people are capable of choosing love. . . or choosing hatred. God allows them—and us—that choice.

Certainly, the interplay between God's will and people's choices is complex, and it can be difficult—sometimes impossible—to separate the strands. But before we blame God for every no in our life, let's remember: sometimes *people* are the cause of our pain—and God is the One who longs to comfort

us through it. Yes, He saw it coming. No, He wasn't surprised. Always, He wants to see us through it, *love* us through it. Even now, He is working good through it and around it and even in spite of it (Romans 8:28).

And that brings us to our next characteristic: kindness.

God is kind

He revealed his character to Moses and his deeds to the people of Israel. The LORD is compassionate and merciful, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love. He will not constantly accuse us, nor remain angry forever. He does not punish us for all our sins; he does not deal harshly with us, as we deserve. For his unfailing love toward those who fear him is as great as the height of the heavens above the earth. He has removed our sins as far from us as the east is from the west. The LORD is like a father to his children, tender and compassionate to those who fear him.

PSALM 103:7–13 NLT

Take a moment to ponder those words. Let them sit one at a time in your thoughts and on your heart. “Taste and see that the LORD is good” (Psalm 34:8). Let the words melt on your tongue like a piece of chocolate till your spiritual taste buds start firing, one by one:

Our God is. . .

Compassionate.

Merciful.

Slow to anger.

Filled with love—and not just any old love: *unfailing* love. Perfect love that never lets us down.

Love past the heavens.

Forgiveness beyond the earth's ends.

That's the kind of God who draws us close: a *kind* God. A God who shows us a Father's love, a forever love. Even when He tells us no.



Almighty. Righteous. Fair. In control but not controlling. Kind. This is the God we serve. This is the God we trust. This is the One who is *worthy* of our service and trust. This is the One who often tells us yes. . .but sometimes tells us no.

Let us draw near to God—even if He's not giving us the answers we want, the candy we want, the life we want. Let's figure out how to stay close to Him when we don't understand His answers. Even when He feels like the bad guy. The mean parent. The roadblock. Even when we face dead ends and deathbeds.

In the pages to come, we're going to figure out how to walk through a season of disappointment and denial and how to face—and find—life on the other side of the roadblock. What spiritual practices will keep us faithful—and filled with faith—along the way? What inspiration and caution can we draw from men and women in scripture, people who faced “no” many years before us? What perspectives will help us pray when prayer feels like wasted breath? What kinds of prayers *can* we pray when God seems to be saying no? What attitudes will protect our hope when it starts to fade? What tools can save our relationships when “no” drives a wedge between us?

Let's study who God is—why and how we can trust Him even when life turns sideways, upside down, or inside out.

Let's find ways to pray—even praise—through pain.

Let's learn to keep our heads even when our hearts are hurting.

Let's look for the hope that hides in heartache.

Let's keep moving forward, seeking life—and joy—on the other side of no.

More to Know

For further study:

To read a few highlights from Moses' life, you can find his call in Exodus 3 and 4, the ten plagues in Exodus 7–12, the story of the waters of Meribah in Numbers 20:1–13, and Moses' final ascent of Mount Nebo in Deuteronomy 34:1–12.

Prayer prompt:

*“Who among the gods is like you, LORD?
Who is like you—majestic in holiness,
awesome in glory, working wonders?
You stretch out your right hand, and the earth
swallows your enemies. In your unfailing love you
will lead the people you have redeemed. In your
strength you will guide them to your holy dwelling.”*
EXODUS 15:11–13

Journal prompts:

1. Describe the no you are grappling with right now. What specific doubts, resentments, and fears have you faced?
2. We talked about God being almighty, righteous, fair, and kind. Which of these descriptions are easy for you to believe—and which are more difficult?

3. When you picture life on the other side of no (if you are at a point where you *can* picture a life on the other side), what do you hope you find there? Who do you hope to be as you journey through no. . .and who do you hope to become on the other side?

Eve

The Fruit

Based on Genesis 3

Eve sits by the stream, dangling her feet in the water. Afternoon sun spangles the surface silver and gold. Tiny fish tickle her toes. The gurgle of water over rocks mingles its laughter with hers.

A hissing sound startles her, makes her turn. From behind a rock peeks the head of a serpent, speckled and strange.

“Hello,” she calls. “I haven’t met you before. You should find Adam—he’ll want to give you a name.”

The snake slides closer, coils up on a sun-drenched rock beside her.

“Did God really say, ‘You can’t eat from any tree in the garden?’”

Eve tips her head back in a laugh. “Of course not! We may eat from any tree in the garden.”

The snake flickers his forked tongue toward the tree towering on the opposite bank and tips his head sideways, as if to say, *Forgetting something?*

“Oh, right.” Eve shrugs. “Well—any but that one. God did say, ‘You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.’” She nods her head with every phrase, quoting from memory.

The snake uncoils and bobs his head in a silent *Follow me*. Curious, Eve wades after him as he writhes through the water and slides up the bank. Bold, the snake slithers as close as he

can get to the tree without touching it. Nervous, Eve keeps a healthy distance between herself and the tree—at least ten paces.

The tip of the snake's tail points toward the fruit dangling from the branches, heavy and ripe. Eve's stomach rumbles. She didn't realize she was hungry till now.

"You will not die," the snake whispers, his voice breathy, caressing her ear soft as a summer breeze.

"Wh—what do you mean?"

Sun glints off the serpent's beady black eyes. "God knows that when you eat it, your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

"Good?" she asks, stumbling over the unfamiliar word. "Evil?"

The snake slides closer and curls around Eve's ankle. Her skin recoils at his scales, cool and clammy, but she stands rooted.

His touch seems to make images spring to life before her eyes:

Sitting with Adam by a nighttime fire. Talking. Knowing things. Understanding things. Being. . .like God.

And why shouldn't I be? she wonders. Why shouldn't we know as He knows?

A yearning starts in her gut. It swirls around inside, a strange new hunger.

Another image forms: God, standing behind a tree—this tree—watching them. Watching their joy, their knowing, their newness, with something angry flashing in His eyes.

Her stomach twists with a new, sickening thought: *He doesn't want us to have this—this thing that could make us better, make us happier. He wants it only for Himself.*

She doesn't remember stepping forward, but now she is underneath a branch, the fruit dangling so close she can touch

it. She studies the fruit: skin bright with color, shape swollen with promise, scent heady and sweet.

Taste it. The sound is barely a whisper, a brush of breath in the air. She's not sure if she heard the serpent speak or her own mind-voice.

The leaves tremble and ripple like warning cries.

But her hand is reaching, closing around the fruit—sun-warmed, just ripe—and with a small *pop*, it is off the branch and in her hand.

Two-handed, she raises it to her nose, drinks in the rich aroma—intoxicating, better than anything she has smelled in the garden before; she was right to do this—and brings it to her lips.

She closes her eyes as her teeth break the skin. The fruit in her mouth is an explosion of sweetness and ecstasy and horror and almost-memories and words she has never known, but now somehow feels she has always known. *Good. Evil. Sin. Shame.*

When she opens her eyes, the snake is gone. All around her, leaves twist on stems, scratching the air like a terrible laugh.

She glances down at her skin, golden in the dying sun, and a word, a new word, heavy even in mind-speak, comes to mind: *naked*. Her cheeks blaze hot, like she's lying too close to the fire, already burned.

Eve's heart beats fists against her chest; her lungs panic, fighting the air. She grabs a piece of fruit and runs.

Adam must eat too. I cannot bear this knowing alone.

Hours later, she and Adam sit by a fire, uncomfortable in their silence and their new coverings—leaves that scratch and claw at skin she never knew to cover till now.

Footsteps sound nearby—footsteps she has always heard with joy and run to meet on happy feet.

And she hears it, His voice: “Adam! Eve! Where are you?”

He is coming.

He knows.

Another new feeling strikes. Mind-speak names it: *fear*. It steals her breath, speeds her heart, and forces her onto her feet, one hand flung out to Adam.

“We must hide,” she pants. “He knows.”

Adam takes her hand, and together they crash into the heavy growth beside the river path, charging through bushes—old friends that now seem to stretch out sharp branches as if to claw and punish and trap.

Eve pulls Adam down beside her to cower behind a flowering bush. She tries to shrink into the ground, her leaves, her skin.

“Where are you?” calls the familiar voice again—and it sounds different this day, different than all the days.

Her new knowledge gives the sound a name: *sad*. He is sad.

Eve’s heart beats limp in her chest; everything wilts and sags inside, a dying bloom. Her new wisdom knows the name for this feeling too: *shame*.

Eve is ashamed.

When You Know God Loves You

*O*h Eve. What a terrible place to be: naked in the woods, alone with your thoughts. Pretending you're not doubting your decision. Resisting the regret you feel lurking on the other side of defensiveness. Looking away from the awful truth shimmering on the edges of your vision: *I might have made the wrong choice. Might have misread the Father.*

The Problem of "No"

We don't know exactly what prompted Eve's choice, but we do know what often prompts ours: a toxic mix of fear and pain.

Fear and pain make us doubt God's love, question His intentions. And so our suffering is compounded: not only are we hurting; we don't feel safe turning to God for help with our hurt. The very ground we stand on feels unbalanced, unsure. We are suffering *and* we are suffering alone. We are hurting *and* we are unloved.

Doubt comes cloaked in thoughts like these:

A loving father would never do this to his child.

A kind God would never let this happen.

If God really loved me, He would give this. . .do this. . .change this. . .help me.

God must not want me to be happy.

God must not like me.

God must not love me.

Surely Eve must have had some of these thoughts as she studied the Tree of Knowledge with the serpent's insinuations echoing in her ears. The snake had planted seeds of

uncertainty: *Did God really say. . . ?*

Where doubt sprouted, mistrust bloomed:

God is holding out on me.

God doesn't want me to have something He has. Something I want. Something I need.

God isn't letting me make my own choices.

Eve began to doubt God's love, and the choice she made soon cost her everything.

When we don't believe God loves us, it twists our thoughts:

God's not looking out for me; I'm going to have to look out for myself.

I don't have to take God's no—I'll go get that thing for myself, even if it means compromising or ignoring some of God's commands.

Like Eve, we listen to doubt. Make our choice. Reach for the fruit. And end up hiding in the bushes, robed in shame.

If Eve had been confident in God's love, it would have been easier to trust. To take the no and still believe the best. If she had understood how deeply God loved her, how He intended His restrictions as protections, not limitations, would she have made that choice, taken that fruit, broken that trust? When we know we are loved by God—more than that, when we *feel* loved by God—everything changes.

As I was cleaning out a side table recently, I found an old prayer journal. I flipped through its pages, reliving old prayers, old requests, old exhaustion—ah, the toddler days, the sleepless nights. And then I hit a prayer that practically jumped off the page and smacked me in the face—then sent me reeling back in time:

“I know what I need to write next,” I say to Kevin, my breath coming fast with excitement.

“Let me guess,” he says. “Supernatural

thriller meets teenage rom-com.”

I sigh. “No—I’ve been writing that for twelve years.” And for twelve years all I’ve managed is to get my big toe wiggled through the door of children’s publishing—*maybe the door will open, maybe it’s finally happening*—then before I can walk through, someone slams it shut. Breaks my toe—and my heart. Seventy times over—as in, seventy rejections. Not that I’ve been counting. “No, I know where to channel all this”—I twirl my hands around like a tornado—“frustration. All these rejections. I need to write a Christian book about waiting! I even have a title: *When God Says, ‘Wait’!*” I raise my arms in a triumphant flourish.

Kevin is thinking, nodding. “Really? After all these years of saying you don’t want to write Christian stuff. . .you’re finally ready?”

“Yes. I finally have something to say. And I know just the editor to send it to.”

I send the proposal, and—astonishingly—things start moving forward. The update email is ecstatic: “So far we have unanimous approval!”

I know better, but I let my hopes rise. All those years of rejection, all that waiting, all those nos—it’s all been pointing here, to this hilariously appropriate moment: my waiting is finally ending so I can write about waiting.

Just one more hoop to jump through, one final hurdle, and this book is on its way.

“I’ll have an answer by Friday,” says the editor.

All day Friday I check my email a dozen times an hour. No answer.

Friday comes and goes. As does another Friday after that. And then another and another.

After four Fridays, the email comes on a Monday: “They finally met. I’m sorry. They said no.”

It’s days before I can pray properly, but when words find me again, I lock myself in my bedroom, sit on the floor, and write a prayer to God. My pen races across the page, though it can’t keep up with the flood of tears and anger.

Why, why, WHY, God?

Do You not believe in me?

Have I done something wrong? Are You punishing me?

Do You not like me? People say this isn’t personal—but it feels really, really personal.

Every time something good happens, You let bad come with it—or just before the good thing happens, You flat-out slam the door in my face.

I can’t win. Can’t do what You made me to do.

Do You not want me to be happy?

First: My apologies for searing your eyeballs with my attitude. Second: Clearly, I wasn’t yet ready to write the book I wanted to write. And third: Can’t you feel it? The hurt, the doubt, the insecurity? The way the whole situation became somehow inextricably tied—in my mind—to how God felt about me? To God not loving me?

In the days that followed, I had to go back and rediscover

God's love all over again. Search the scriptures for truth and hope in the midst of dreams that had been crumpled up like bad drafts, tossed into the trash can in the corner.

In our minds (perhaps unconsciously), being loved by God looks something like this: *If I live a decent Christian life, I'm going to get pretty much everything I want. I'm not saying I'll get to be rich or whatever (I know God doesn't want me to be a spoiled brat), but God's going to give me the basics: college degree, decent job, godly guy, healthy kids, leak-free roof. Maybe a cute pet.*

So, when God says, "Wait," or outright, "No," it can feel like He's not holding up His end of the deal. Like He's cheating us. Letting us down. Like maybe He never loved us to begin with.

When Life Turns on You

Rachele's life was finally coming together. After stepping out of a ministry career, she decided to start over and head to law school. For several exhausting but fulfilling years, she successfully juggled law school, marriage, and motherhood. When she finally graduated (insert indescribable relief and immense celebration here), she found a great job—actually two jobs—so she and her husband, Steve, could start paying down her school debt and start living the new life they had planned. A calmer life with an actual schedule like "normal people" had.

Rachele entered this new stage with hope—and gratitude—soaring. Life had changed a lot, but God had been kind, saying yes to prayer after prayer. Everything was working out just the way she'd planned.

And then she was late. You know. . . *late*. An unexpected third pregnancy threw a happy wrench into her lawyering and debt-paying plans, but who could complain about the blessing of adding another cherub to their family? Rachele sat down with Steve and reworked the family finances. They could save

enough for the anticipated delivery bill and a decent maternity leave, and then it would be back to work. Back to the plan.

The pregnancy flew by in a happy, healthy blur. At thirty-four weeks, Rachele went in for a regular checkup. She was laughing and chatting with the ultrasound tech, placing bets on birth weights and delivery times—Rachele always had tiny babies who practically delivered themselves—but halfway through the ultrasound, the tech got quiet. She called in a doctor. The doctor called in another doctor. The room filled with people, pointing and whispering, and Rachele waited on the table, arm shielding her belly, fear clogging her throat.

At last they broke the news: “Your daughter has a serious heart defect. We couldn’t see it till now.”

The words hit Rachele’s ears, but her mind refused to make sense of them. “A defect? What kind of defect?”

“The kind that could heal itself. . .or not.”

“What happens if it doesn’t?”

The doctors glanced at each other. “She’ll need a heart transplant. And even a transplant can only do so much: it might buy you five years.”

Five years.

Not even enough time to learn to whistle, tie a shoe, blow a gum bubble.

Shock stole Rachele’s voice. At last she managed, “I need to call my husband.”

And so began a series of waits—dizzying, excruciating, nightmarish. Baby Ava’s heart could heal, or she could need a transplant. A heart could become available quickly, or it could take months. The transplant could go well, or it could cause a stroke. Ava’s body could welcome the heart or reject it. It could go this way, or it could go that way.

It rarely went the right way.

Time after time, Rachele and Steve and everyone who loved them begged God for the best possible outcome, the one that would give little Ava a happy life, a pain-free life, a longer life.

God always seemed to say no.

And Rachele found herself reexamining everything she'd ever believed, ever assumed, about God, about faith, about what she deserved. She often went to God—in hospital rooms, in Ronald McDonald Houses, in the car on the way back and forth from a never-ending procession of medical appointments—praying: *I did everything right in my pregnancy—and in my life. I was faithful to You after I became a Christian in college—and it's not like my non-Christian years were wild and crazy before that. I thought I was supposed to get a fairy tale. No one else at church is going through things like this. I don't see any stressed families or sick kids or bankruptcy. So, does this mean I've done something wrong? Are You mad at me?*

And so began a reinvention of her faith. A reexamination of scriptures she thought she knew. A reconversion of her heart. A journey to discovering God's love in the darkness, His hand in the wilderness, His faithfulness in suffering.

Maybe like Rachele, shuttling her daughter back and forth to hospitals, you're struggling in the midst of God's no. Maybe like me, slumped on the floor of my bedroom scribbling in my prayer journal, you're questioning God's love. Maybe like Eve, hiding in the garden, you're hearing the whispers of doubt.

If so, let's step back to consider God's love and how it works. Let's begin by considering just a small sampling of the people in scripture who suffered nos at God's hand:

Joseph didn't get rescued from slave traders.

Moses didn't get to enter the Promised Land.

Naomi didn't get to grow old with her husband and sons.

David didn't get to build the temple.
Jeremiah didn't get saved from exile.
Deborah didn't get to lead a "normal" life.
Paul didn't get relief from his thorn.
Jesus wasn't spared the cross.

Many of the early Christians suffered horrific persecution because of their faith. The Hebrew writer described it like this:

Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you endured in a great conflict full of suffering. Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. You suffered along with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions.

HEBREWS 10:32–34

Did God not love these people? Of course He did! They are among our greatest faith heroes; we look to them as examples of resilience, righteousness, and faith. When we study their stories, we realize that their lives were difficult and often disappointing, just like ours. With the exception of Jesus, they all made mistakes, just like we do. When we study their lives, we see that their circumstances did not always directly reflect how much God loved them. The answers to their prayers did not necessarily indicate His approval (or disapproval). The status of their dreams did not reflect His faithfulness. Their daily happiness was not a barometer measuring the intensity of His affection.

Blessings versus Punishments

Let's take a quick detour here: Does the Bible sometimes indicate that God showed His approval through blessings? Yes. (See Genesis 22:15–18; Numbers 14:26–35; Deuteronomy 12:5–7; 2 Kings 22:18–20.) But we should also note that sometimes good things happened to “bad people”: the wicked prospered while the righteous languished. In Psalm 73, Asaph lamented, “I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. . . . This is what the wicked are like—always free of care, they go on amassing wealth” (vv. 3, 12). We could list dozens of examples, but we find one of the most blatant in 1 Samuel 18–30, where the evil King Saul retains power and continues to persecute the righteous singer-songwriter-shepherd-warrior-future king David—and this goes on for years in spite of David's integrity and repeated appeals to God to change his situation. (We'll dive more deeply into David's life as the book goes on.)

And let's consider the flip side: Do hard things—nos from God—automatically mean we are in sin, being punished by God? Absolutely not. Sometimes God did punish specific people—or even a group of people as a whole. Many times in scripture, such punishments came after repeated, deliberate rebellion in which people disregarded multiple warnings. People were given second chances, third chances. . . . three hundred thirty-third chances. (The books in the Bible known as the Prophets are like a massive appeal on repeat for God's people to repent and spare themselves the pain of being conquered and exiled. See Ezekiel 33 as just one of many examples of God's appeals.)

Let's take care not to make assumptions or directly apply dire warnings in scripture—which were given to specific people struggling with specific sins at a specific time in history—to our own circumstances. Let's take care not to misapply

biblical explanations of *other people's consequences* to our own lives. (More on this in chapter 8.) Bottom line, the Bible does not indicate that *every time* we suffer a hard thing or a no, it means God disapproves of us or is punishing us.

What does this tell us? It tells us we have to be careful not to assume we understand the reasons behind God's decisions. It tells us we shouldn't try to read God's mind. We have to resist the temptation to play the Interpreting Life Events game:

God is withholding this blessing because I gave in to sin. . .had imperfect faith. . .(insert any one of a million flaws we could so easily identify in our imperfect selves).

Or on the other side: *God is giving me this gift because He is honoring my faithfulness. . .my righteousness. . .(insert something I think I did right in my life).*

For each of the Bible characters we have mentioned—Joseph, Moses, Naomi, David, Jeremiah, Deborah, Paul, Jesus, the early Christians (and we could add many others to this list)—life changed; it fell apart, reformed, reset. But God's love never changed. God's love was the one constant in their ever-fluctuating circumstances. It was the solid ground beneath life's shifting sands.

Listen to this promise God made to His people:

*But now, this is what the LORD says—he who created you, Jacob, he who formed you, Israel:
“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have summoned you by name; you are mine.
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you.
When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned;
the flames will not set you ablaze. For I am*

the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior; I give Egypt for your ransom, Cush and Seba in your stead. Since you are precious and honored in my sight, and because I love you, I will give people in exchange for you, nations in exchange for your life. Do not be afraid, for I am with you.”

ISAIAH 43:1–5

God doesn't say, “*If you pass through the waters. . .if you pass through the rivers. . .if you walk through the fire. . .*” He says “when.”

When you walk through financial disaster.

When you are hurt by someone you trusted.

When you endure a health crisis.

When you lose someone you love.

When God says, “No.”

“In this world you will have trouble,” Jesus said. (Not *might* have trouble—*will* have trouble.) “But take heart! I have overcome the world” (John 16:33).

What peace comes when we realize that God loves us, period! What relief we feel when we realize that our circumstances don't reflect God's approval! Then we can simply hurt without the added miseries of guilt, shame, blame, mistrust, and distance. We can take our pain to God, confident that He hurts with us, knowing He is the safe place for all our tears.

How He Loves Us

But let's get more specific as we counter our doubts: How, exactly, does God love us?

He longs to be close to us

“So you will be my people, and I will be your God.”

JEREMIAH 30:22

This was always God’s dream: *“You’ll be Mine and I’ll be yours.”* It’s the simplest of desires: *“Let’s be close, you and Me. Let’s be family. You and Me, together forever.”* He expresses this desire countless times throughout scripture, the undercurrent that buoys our hope, the golden thread that binds the Bible together:

“I myself said, ‘How gladly would I treat you like my children and give you a pleasant land, the most beautiful inheritance of any nation.’ I thought you would call me ‘Father’ and not turn away from following me.”

JEREMIAH 3:19

“I thought you would call me ‘Father.’ ”

That simple line—that soul confession—gets me every time. The plaintive, vulnerable admission to His people: *“I thought we would love each other. I wanted you to want Me back. I thought you would long to be close to Me the way I long to be close to you.”*

Just as we long for faithfulness from God, so He longs for it from us. The desire goes both ways. God knows what it is to be betrayed, so even though He may sometimes have to say no to our prayers, He would never betray us. He knows too well the pain.

This love is profound. Sincere. Trustworthy.

He doesn’t want to hurt us

*For no one is cast off by the Lord forever.
Though he brings grief, he will show compassion,*

so great is his unfailing love. For he does not willingly bring affliction or grief to anyone.

LAMENTATIONS 3:31–33

“He does not willingly bring affliction or grief to anyone.”

That’s the truth we need to know when we are doubting, isn’t it? The truth that makes all the difference when God says no?

When life hits us hard, knocks us down, and tramples us under a thousand stampeding feet, we need to know that God doesn’t *desire* this pain for us. This isn’t His ideal plan for our life. He isn’t up in heaven indifferent—or worse, secretly gloating.

In my mind, no moment depicts this truth more poignantly than when Jesus stood with Mary and Martha outside the tomb of their brother, Lazarus (see John 11). Lazarus had fallen ill; the desperate sisters sent a message begging Jesus to come heal him, save him. Jesus could have come right away, could have saved His friend, could have spared the sisters their anguish—but instead He intentionally delayed His coming. Jesus let Lazarus die because He planned to call him back from the dead. Lazarus’s death and resurrection brought honor to God—and many people to faith.

When Jesus finally arrived, several days too late, He stood outside the tomb with the mourning sisters. Jesus already had the happy ending planned. In mere minutes, He would call Lazarus back to life. The sisters’ cries of mourning would turn to shouts of disbelief and joy. The mourners would rise from their knees to leap and dance in joyful praise.

And yet, with all that joy only minutes away, Jesus stopped. He stood there beside—I always picture Him between—these two sisters, and He wept with them.

I’ve heard preachers postulate all manner of profound

reasons for Jesus' tears. They can't seem to wrap their brains around it: Why would Jesus cry? What a waste of time and emotional energy—Jesus knew He was about to raise the guy from the dead! There must be more to the tears: Jesus couldn't have been weeping for Lazarus and his sisters; He must have been weeping for the lost world. Jesus must have been weeping as He looked ahead to His own impending suffering.

In my view, those theories are trying too hard. Way too hard. I propose it's as simple as this: Jesus' friends were hurting, so Jesus was hurting. In His tears, I hear these words: "*I hate that I had to let you go through this. I'm sorry it had to be this way. I see your anguish, and My heart bleeds with yours.*" It didn't matter that He was about to do the unfathomable, the wonderful. Jesus' knowledge that He was about to turn the whole scene on its head—turn mourning to dancing, turn a funeral into a party—didn't erase the pain that *already was*. What mattered was their loss, their agony, right there in those tearstained moments. It didn't matter that the pain was almost over—*the pain still mattered*.

Do you see what this means? Jesus hurts with us. Even if He has a happy ending planned for later, He hurts with us today—right here, right now, wherever we are: on the floor or in the car. At a playground or a restaurant. Beside a hospital bed or a gravestone. He stands in our present-tense pain and lives it with us—stands with us, weeps with us, mourns with us. Because our pain is real, and our pain is His pain.

Now that's love. That's a God I can trust when I'm hurting. That's a God I can pray to when life goes sideways. That's a God I can lean on even when He doesn't give me what I ask. That's a God I can cling to even when He says, "No."

Suffering draws Him near

*The LORD is close to the brokenhearted
and saves those who are crushed in spirit.*

PSALM 34:18

How easy it is to feel God's hand at work in blessing; it's harder to feel His presence in sorrow. But suffering calls God near. The greater the pain, the closer He leans. As the Russian poet Apollon Maykov wrote, "The darker the night, the brighter the stars, The deeper the grief, the closer is God."²

He wants us to have joy

"If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete."

JOHN 15:10–11

*They will enter Zion with singing;
everlasting joy will crown their heads.
Gladness and joy will overtake them,
and sorrow and sighing will flee away.*

ISAIAH 35:10

² Although this line is popularly attributed to Fyodor Dostoyevsky, it was likely written by his friend, Apollon Maykov, in an untitled poem published in 1878. The closest existing publication I could find is an online translation by Dmitry Fadeyev, which he titled "Do Not Lose Hope." The wording of Fadeyev's translation is a little different than the popular version of the quote, but the message is the same: <https://fadeyev.net/do-not-lose-hope/>.

When God speaks of the life He wants His people to have—the life He wants you and me to have—it is always a life of joy and health. A burden-free, worry-free, sickness-free, loss-free, death-free, mourning-free life. The phantom life we all are chasing but only brushing with our fingertips—if we even get that close.

God is an idealist: He created man and woman and placed them in paradise. In His vision, their life was going to be beautiful: eternal communion, true fulfillment, everlasting joy. But sin came in and shattered the glass. Dropped it like a snow globe—a world false and frozen—on the floor.

And yet God has never stopped fighting to help us recapture tastes of the Eden He wanted us to live in. The joy He intended us to have. He scrapped His plans in a flood and started over. He found Himself a family to work through. He saved that family from slavery, built a nation, sent that nation into exile (several times over), helped it rebuild (several times over), and finally sent His own Son to sacrifice His life to save us all. God is still fighting to give us that paradise life, that Eden world. In this life, we sometimes get to taste it, touch it, glimpse its shadow as it peeks around the corner—but we can be confident that God still plans to give it to us. He's preparing it for us in the next life, in the new earth.

Love in the Dark

No matter what kind of no you have walked through or are walking through, I pray you see God's love shining through the darkness. When life is at its bleakest, you may have to take His word for it; but many times, if we'll just open our eyes, we'll find that His footsteps were here beside us all along.



Several years into Rachele's journey with Ava, the financial challenges were piling up. Friends and family and church family had given gifts, raised money—lots of money—and the bills were getting paid, but finances were still tight. Heart transplants don't come cheap.

Rachele stayed home for two and a half years, but she would have to go back to work if they didn't want to lose their house. They came up with a solution: invite a young woman from church to move in, pay rent, offset childcare costs. It was a good solution. . .but their house needed work before they could implement it. They would have to finish the basement: put up drywall, install plumbing. Halfway through the project, money ran out. The plan stalled. Panic set in. Steve and Rachele needed another fifteen thousand dollars to finish. Fifteen. Thousand. Dollars.

They'd have to find a different plan.

The canceled project came up in casual conversation one day with a family member—just a vague mention, nothing specific. No dollar amounts, no requests for help—just an offhanded “How's it going?” chat.

A few weeks later, Rachele stood at the mailbox, sorting envelopes. Bills, bills, so many bills. She came to an envelope with unfamiliar handwriting, opened it, and almost sat down in the street. She was holding a check for the exact amount they needed to finish the basement. The family member had told their church about the basement project; the church had taken up an offering. No one in that church had any clue how much they needed—they simply gave as much as they could—but God had known. And God had provided, to the dollar.

Rachele stood in the street, laughing through tears: “I hear

You, God. You can write checks. You can stir people's hearts to generosity. I've been worried for no reason. I see now who You are. . .and what You can do."

And she stored away a promise in her heart: *One day, on the other side of this, I will do the same for other people. I will give back what I've been given. But for now. . .I'm just grateful. I feel so loved. And now I'm going to call my contractor.*



Confidence in God's love can see us through the most agonizing of losses, pains, and disappointments. Confidence in God's love changes everything about how we suffer:

We go from suffering alone to suffering while wrapped in the strong, compassionate arms of the Father.

Our tears still fall, but they fall on broad shoulders.

Our cries still sound, but they are heard. They may even be accompanied by cries of His own.

God loves you forever and for always.

Even when He says no.

More to Know

For further study:

To find a powerful description of our Bible heroes' faith through suffering, read Hebrews 10:19–11:40.

Prayer prompt:

The LORD says, "I will guide you along the best pathway for your life. I will advise you and watch over you. Do not be like a senseless horse or mule that needs a bit and bridle to keep it under control."

Many sorrows come to the wicked, but unfailing love surrounds those who trust the LORD. So rejoice in the LORD and be glad, all you who obey him! Shout for joy, all you whose hearts are pure!
PSALM 32:8–11 NLT

Journal prompts:

1. What specific doubts have you struggled with when God has said no? What scriptures help you address those doubts?
2. How do you feel toward God when you doubt His love during hard times? How do you feel toward God when you believe He draws near and hurts with you?
3. When you first started following God, what did you expect out of your Christian life? In what ways has your journey—God’s nos *and* His yeses—been different from what you anticipated?