

MIDNIGHT MERCIES

*Walking with God
through Depression
in Motherhood*

CHRISTINE M. CHAPPELL



P U B L I S H I N G

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For my mother, Diane, and my husband, Brett

The darkness never could manage to separate
me from God's faithful love,
nor from yours.

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FOREWORD

“Some days, it feels so hard to breathe. Other days, I just wish my breath would stop coming.”

I sat across from my husband, trying to piece together words that might at least scratch the surface of my inner turmoil. But it was clear—as much as he wanted to understand, we were speaking different languages and looking at the world through completely different lenses. While my world was painted in black and white, his was painted in color. While mine was filled with distortions, his was filled with clarity. While mine was covered in clouds, his was illuminated by the sunlight. Deep down, I was convinced that no one would ever be able to truly enter into the dark void that left me feeling like a stranger to myself, a burden to others, and a faithless Christian. The light of hope seemed to have vanished.

Hope—it can seem like such a distant and empty word at times, can’t it? This dark and disorienting pit of depression can leave us floundering, lost, detached, and ashamed. And as moms, we carry the guilt of knowing it doesn’t only affect us—it affects those we love the most: our children.

If this is where you find yourself now or where you’ve found yourself in the past, you are *not* alone—despite how lonely it feels. The dark night of depression can taunt us with accusations and doubts, whispering in our ear that *good* Christians don’t despair and, *if we just had more faith*, then the light of hope would break through the darkness that surrounds us. But the truth is, there is far more to

the story, and that hope we long for is not so much dependent on how much we *feel* its presence or see it in our circumstances, but in Someone outside of ourselves—the person of Jesus.

So, from one who has endured many *midnight* seasons to another, my hope and prayer is that you will not only feel seen and heard on the pages of this book, but that you will come to find Christine’s honest, real, and compassionate words to be a balm to your heart, soul, and mind, as they have to mine. Not because she has all the answers, but because she has been there—where depression has threatened to consume and define her—and yet has found the treasures of Christ’s comfort, nearness, and grace in her own dark night of the soul to be sufficient—even precious.

The hard but beautiful truth is that although these midnight hours may come with a vengeance, leave us disoriented, and often seem to have no end in sight, the sun shining again is not where our true hope and strength is found. As Christine so beautifully shares, our hope and strength is found in the light and presence of Jesus, not in the absence of darkness.

Although depression has been a frequent and unwanted visitor in my life, I have experienced the preciousness of walking with my Savior and seeing firsthand that he will never let me go—no matter how dark things may appear. By God’s grace, these midnight seasons no longer define me and they certainly haven’t been wasted. Yes, they have been immensely painful, but God has also redeemed them—shaping me in a way that has kept me tethered to him. And for that, I wouldn’t want it any other way.

One day, my friend, the darkness will lift and the sun will shine again—either in our lifetime or the next—but until then, you and I can be assured of this: when midnight comes, his mercies will meet us there.

Sarah Walton
Coauthor, *Hope When It Hurts*

Introduction

STARTING OUR JOURNEY

What did you expect when you found yourself expecting?

Years ago, I imagined motherhood would be full of joyous milestones and memorable moments. What I didn't expect was so much hurt, heartbreak, conflict, and disappointment. I've often felt clueless and incapable. I've beaten myself up for not being the mother I thought I *should* be—the kind of Christian woman who can handle whatever comes her way with pep in her step and a smile on her face. That's one of the reasons that I wrote this book. I wanted to debunk the notion that faithful believers never groan as they wearily plod through the miserable muck of life. God knows they do. Frequently.

Although much of what I share in these pages is relevant to suffering saints in general, I offer *Midnight Mercies* specifically to depressed mothers because there are so few biblical resources that give voice to their experiences of despair. Suicide attempts among pregnant and postpartum women are a real and pressing issue. That “mommy needs wine” to cope with stress and sorrow has become a highly marketable and socially acceptable message in the United States—even among professing Christians.¹ As a mother whose story includes suicidal ideations and alcohol use in depression, I want to bear witness to Christ's light in the dark night of the soul.

Depression is no respecter of persons—moms of all ages and stages can find themselves walking through a season of unexpected and lingering misery. So if you're a Christian mother whose world has gone dark, and you feel guilty or ashamed that you can't figure out how to turn the lights back on again, I pray that the Lord will use this book to lift that burden off your back. Let's not focus on how you think you "should" be feeling right now. Instead, let's start by giving voice to the hurt in your heart.

Maybe today it feels like you're being forced to bear up under the impossible. Maybe you feel so utterly burdened beyond your strength that you despair of life itself. Or maybe you just feel sad and disheartened by the trouble and disappointments you've faced as of late. It's okay to admit where you are right now. It's much more helpful to be honest than to pretend that life isn't hard for you today. The sorrow, pain, and confusion you're going through *are* hard—you *are* suffering.

Maybe your groans sound like these:

I'm misunderstood and mishandled by others.
If only I was different, I'd be worthy of love.
If God was good, I wouldn't be suffering.
I'm a failure and a burden to my family.
No matter what I do, nothing changes.
I feel like I'm praying to a brick wall.
I feel unwanted, unseen, and unclean.
My sorrow has swallowed me whole.
My life has no meaning or purpose.
I should be doing better than this.
I've forgotten what happiness is.
I can't live like this anymore.
I must not be saved after all.
Life will never be different.
God is disappointed in me.

I'm at the end of my rope.
I've ruined everything.
The future is bleak.
There's no hope.

I know *I've* groaned each one of these statements before. Sometimes silently with a stiff upper lip. Other times with red cheeks and a roar of rage.

Although you too may identify with some (or all) of these statements, what can be harder to identify are the emotions that underwrite them. You may look at these words and conclude, "I'm depressed"—and that's not an incorrect phrase to describe how you're feeling. But the word *depression* is a term that encapsulates a multifaceted human experience. This means that much more could be said to describe what it feels like to be you today. Maybe you're feeling hopeless, or weary, or sad. Maybe you're angry, or anxious, or ashamed. Maybe you're feeling lonely or some muddled combination of the entire lot.

Because depression skews our perception and interpretation of reality, it can be difficult for us to see ourselves rightly or describe our experiences accurately. But with God's help, acknowledged emotions can become more manageable emotions. Thus, I'd like to help you to connect your groans to someone who went through a similar experience and consider if their groans reveal something meaningful about your own. I'll do this by sharing my own story, as well as composite characters based on real people and their real experiences that give us glimpses into the lives of mothers in the throes of despondency. More important, I'll focus on unpacking biblical narratives that provide a big-picture view of how God mercifully engages desperate people. By selecting key stories—ones that depict raw and relatable moments of human distress—I hope to bring you comfort for your journey and counsel for your next steps.

As you read the stories that follow, you may be tempted to think you have it easier than those who are walking through “more severe” suffering. But I want to caution you against this comparison trap. Just because it could be worse for you doesn’t mean it isn’t hard for you. And what’s hard for you specifically—be it a trial, trouble, or temptation—is a real affliction that has God’s focused attention. If it burdens your spirit, it burdens him. Because Jesus loves you and cares about the war waging within you, don’t discount the difficulty of your problems by comparing them to someone else’s (1 Peter 5:7).

You’ll see that I often make summary statements—just like the one in the paragraph above—that reference specific Scripture verses or passages. I encourage you to look up these parenthetical references. If it’s too cumbersome to search for them as you read, consider revisiting them as fuel for personal devotions.

Sister, there are no new problems under the sun. Although no two experiences of depression are exactly alike, despondency is a distinctly *human* problem. Though the path through this darkness is daunting, it’s also well-traveled. Generations past have made it *through*, and *out*, and, by the grace of God, *up*. It’s true. The “huge cloud of witnesses” (Heb. 12:1) includes despondent believers who made it through the dark, and out of the dark, and up from the dark *alive*. The light of life came to them in time. And by God’s midnight mercies, it will come to you too.

You’re going to make it. You’ll see.

And I will lead the blind
in a way that they do not know,
in paths that they have not known
I will guide them.
I will turn the darkness before them into light,
the rough places into level ground.
These are the things I do,
and I do not forsake them. (Isa. 42:16 ESV)

HOPELESSNESS

A Dangerous Fire

After weeks of languishing, I told my husband what he already suspected: I was in urgent need of help. I can't remember if we took a picture of her or not—all I know is that our daughter's first day of sixth grade was also the first of my seven days in the psychiatric hospital. After she got on the bus, I packed a small bag and got into the car, uncertain when I would see her again. Acting on the advice of our insurance provider, my husband and I drove to the emergency room for an immediate evaluation.

This wasn't the first time I'd been hospitalized for self-harm and suicidal thinking, but it *was* the first time I limped through those double doors as a believer in Christ.¹ And as much as I'd like to say my faith was a comfort, my Christian identity seemed only to compound my shame. After all, why would I want to die if I'd been raised to new life in Jesus? Why did it seem like God had abandoned me after he'd promised he wouldn't? Where was he? Why was he silent? And why, after all my trying—after all my Bible reading and praying and studying and memorizing and repenting and serving—hadn't I better learned how to sail the seas of sorrow when they stirred?

The only answer I could see at the time? The Holy Spirit must have packed up and left me.

When this darkest of midnights fell, I was thirty-four years old, a married mother of three at the end of her rope. The months leading into this season of darkness had taken our family through a cross-country move on a shoestring budget. Our relocation meant saying goodbye to the only church family I'd ever known and saying hello to a season of overwhelming distress and uncertainty. In the midst of these major life changes and the conflicts that accompanied them, I was assailed by unprocessed griefs, festering relational wounds, and the everyday noise and chaos of raising three children. Tantrums. Arguments. Accidents. Relentless late night wake-ups. Early morning emotional blow-ups. The physical, emotional, and mental drain of it all was suffocating.

I didn't want to live like that anymore.

PUSHED TO THE BRINK

Sometimes heavy onslaughts of grief and trouble overpower our ability to cope with everyday responsibilities. Are you feeling buried alive under your burdens? Suffocated, trapped, and desperate for escape? Hopeless? Maybe you don't know how you're going to manage the next fifteen minutes, let alone persevere through the trials God has brought you to. You may feel as though you are on the brink of a total meltdown.

Some Christians think they should never experience this kind of overwhelm. But the reality is that life is often hard to handle—even for believers (2 Cor. 1:8). We all have disordered hearts. We all engage in disordered relationships. We moms are all raising children with disordered affections in a world of disordered hope and power, and we do it in the fragility of disordered bodies—vessels originally built to last that now must die. The futility of living a hard-to-handle life in a fallen world is one reality that depression sees clearly.

MOSES'S MELTDOWN

The Scriptures recognize the pain of our disordered reality as well. God's Word is replete with stories of real believers who really faltered under the weight of what God was calling them to do or go through. Because these raw accounts narrate the history of God's people, they're a part of your history as well; the hindsight afforded to us through them can provide deep insight in seasons of darkness. When we observe how God faithfully engaged his desperate people back then, we learn much about the means he uses to care for us now.

Numbers 11 offers a candid account of this overwhelm-in-action. Moses was a man who spoke with God face-to-face as a man speaks to his friend (Ex. 33:11). But in this passage we find him at the end of his rope. Months earlier, God had chosen him to lead the nation of Israel out of slavery, through the wilderness, and up to the promised land. But as he obeyed God's calling, he grew increasingly overwhelmed—particularly when it came to managing the needs of the people entrusted to his care. Nothing ever seemed to be enough for the wilderness wanderers. All they did was constantly complain.

One day, in a fit of hopeless desperation, Moses snapped. Frustrated and desperate for relief, Moses had what we might call a total meltdown.

Why are you treating me, your servant, so harshly? Have mercy on me! What did I do to deserve the burden of all these people? . . . I can't carry all these people by myself! The load is far too heavy! If this is how you intend to treat me, just go ahead and kill me. Do me a favor and spare me this misery! (Num. 11:11, 14–15)

Does Moses's frankness before God surprise you? It certainly dispels the notion that "real" believers are always calm, cool, and collected in overwhelming situations. This man had spent more

time in the presence of God than any mortal! They had an intimate friendship, no less! And yet Moses was just a man after all. Fully human. Fully finite. Fully capable of succumbing to hopeless desperation—just like the rest of us.

NO ONE IS IMMUNE

Do you know what it's like to feel as Moses did that day? Like God is expecting too much from you? Like he's treating you unfairly? You're not the only believer who knows what it's like to groan, "I can't carry all these burdens by myself—they're too heavy! If this is how life's going to be for me, I quit! I can't live like this anymore!" Our desire to escape from the overwhelming aspects of life—and our tendency to despair when we can't—is an innate part of the human experience. All of us know what this is like to some degree.

And that's an important point, particularly for those of us who feel ashamed about our struggles. No born-again believer, however advanced in her spiritual maturity, is immune to buckling under life's unrelenting pressures. As Charles Spurgeon said, "This disease of soul-dejection is common to all the saints—there are none of God's people who altogether escape it."² Scripture makes a point of highlighting the truth that even believers at times would rather quit life than continue to slowly suffocate under the weight of their burdens.

I'm not saying this is a right response to suffering, but it's a real one. We do ourselves no favors by getting stuck on the idea that true Christians never feel like this. They do.

OUR RESPONSE, GOD'S RESPONSE

I deeply resonate with the response we see squeezed out of Moses's overburdened heart. Under the weight of his calling, he totally lost his composure. He buckled under the incredible

pressure he felt and lashed out at God as a result.³ I've experienced total meltdowns like this, to be sure. It is discouraging when all your toil and obedience appear futile. It is defeating when nothing works the way you hoped, no matter how faithful you try to be in your God-given roles and responsibilities. And when the pressures and pains of motherhood become too burdensome to bear—when it seems like God is failing you or has fallen asleep on the job—it is natural to want to “fly far away” (Ps. 55:7), to take it upon yourself to find the relief you're looking for.⁴

But as we move through this narrative in Numbers, see how God responds to his dear friend's despair. Frankly, he wasn't accountable in any way to Moses. God didn't owe the man an explanation, nor did the accusations of Moses put him on the defensive. And yet, being quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger, the Lord graciously chose to *counsel* Moses in the midst of his meltdown:

Gather before me seventy men who are recognized as elders and leaders of Israel. Bring them to the Tabernacle to stand there with you. I will come down and talk to you there. I will take some of the Spirit that is upon you, and I will put the Spirit upon them also. They will bear the burden of the people along with you, so you will not have to carry it alone. (Num. 11:16–17)

God's response was not severe or merciless but rather full of “grace, understanding, and assistance.”⁵ He wasn't enraged by his servant's frustration and confusion; he didn't rebuke Moses for his resentful, unrighteous attitude (although he did so in a separate instance; see Num. 20:12); in the heat of the moment, he didn't lecture Moses about the bitterness bubbling up in his overburdened heart. God knew Moses's meltdown would not be corrected by an immediate spiritual dissection. Figuratively speaking, the man was on fire! *Extinguish first, investigate later.* That's wisdom.

That's mercy.

GOD'S COUNSEL IS PERFECT

You probably know how unhelpful poorly timed counsel can be. The right words spoken at the wrong moment only add to our burden. But when God himself counsels hopeless and desperate people, the words he speaks are both well-timed and well-seasoned with grace and understanding. He's not shocked when we're shaken—"he knows how weak we are; he remembers we are only dust" (Ps. 103:14). So when his people become frustrated and confused by the weight of their circumstances, his manner toward them is neither harsh nor hasty. The Wonderful Counselor only ever says what we need to hear—what's going to be most helpful.

In this exchange, the counsel he gives to Moses is something for us all to consider, especially when it feels like we "can't do this anymore." After all, if anyone knows how to help you when you're falling apart, surely it's the One who knit you together.

THE NECESSITY OF SUPPORT

So what was God's counsel to his despairing servant? The Lord knew Moses was overwhelmed and discouraged by his circumstances. Yet rather than offering this weary man escape or deliverance, God helped Moses by telling him to seek the support of Spirit-filled people. And when we're feeling hopelessly overwhelmed, this is often our most immediate need as well.

God brings light to our darkness through the care of other people.

I realize this counsel may sound trite or even make you feel uneasy, and I don't suggest it lightly. Some of our burdens are so private, so shrouded in stigma, or so painful that it can take time to determine whom to trust them with. Maybe you've tried asking for help before, only to be misunderstood or disappointed. To be sure, we need to exercise wisdom and discernment when looking

for care and counsel. But discretion needn't keep us from seeking the support of Christian community, particularly in the context of a healthy local church whenever possible.

We don't have to immediately disclose every detail about our situations to receive the practical help and ongoing spiritual encouragement we need in this season of life. Brothers and sisters in Christ can still minister God's Word to us, sit with us, pray for us, listen to us, share a meal with us, direct us to relevant resources (such as books, support or advocacy groups, or mercy ministries), and help with chores or childcare.

Although we were designed to do life together in a local Christian community, sometimes this can be a source of pain and grief. We may crave connection with other Christians but have trouble finding it. But however discipleship and fellowship might look like for us in this dark season, we need to know that God doesn't expect us to carry our burdens alone or to navigate depression on our own. Rather, he's calling us to seek the kind of care and counsel that comes from outside ourselves. We can't do this. We haven't "got this."

We need help.

PRIORITIES

Think of it this way: If you noticed your house was on fire, what would your first response be? Would you search the internet for videos on fire safety and prevention? Grab a piece of paper and map out a detailed evacuation plan? Curl up in a closet and wait for the flames to go out on their own? No! When my family's house caught fire a few years ago, the very first step I took was to dial 911 (while screaming for my kids to get outside). In the literal heat of the moment, my most immediate priority wasn't to determine what had caused the fire—it was to call for the help of first responders.

What *wasn't* I thinking as our roof melted down? "We shouldn't be having a fire!" or "Real Christians never have house fires!" or "If

only I had prayed the right way—if only my faith was stronger—then we wouldn't be homeless right now!" House fires can happen to anybody, and the time to analyze them is not while the flames are raging.

The same holds true with hopelessness—it can happen to anybody under the “right” circumstances. So if you're having a total meltdown—if you feel overwhelmed beyond your ability to cope and want to give up—recognize first that you're a woman on fire. Sure, you may be thinking, “I shouldn't be feeling this way” or “Real Christians never feel hopeless!” or “If only I had prayed the right way—if only my faith was stronger—then I wouldn't be so depressed right now.” But such thoughts only serve to stoke the fire. They don't help you to put out the flames.

Hopelessness can quickly become dangerous—especially when we try to fight against it alone.

Yes, there is investigative work to do when you feel hopelessly overwhelmed by life, but timing matters. Your steps forward need to be prioritized. Whereas your most urgent priority may be to seek escape or relief, sometimes the best “way out” (1 Cor. 10:13) of meltdown moments is to call out to God *and* other people for help.

Sister, God isn't asking you to toughen up, get your act together, and figure out how to manage life on your own. He's not expecting you to extinguish the raging flames of hopelessness in solitude. He knows you cannot carry these burdens by yourself and continue to function in your God-given calling. Although it's right for us to pray for mercy when we're having a total meltdown, there's another fire-quenching step we can take as well.

Call out to the nearest “first responders” you know.

MOVING TOWARD SAFETY

The morning I disclosed the extent of my hopelessness to my husband, a new chapter in my story began. Though he couldn't deliver me from my overwhelming despair, I was no longer carrying

its full weight alone. Neither of us knew exactly what kind of help I needed just then, but God used my husband as a first responder—as a means of midnight mercy to me. As he began to make phone calls on my behalf, my downward spiral slowly started to stall. In less than an hour, my next step came into focus: *go to the ER*. And although this was a step I was extremely reluctant to take, I feebly took it for Christ’s sake. He had bought me with a price—I was not my own (1 Cor. 6:20).

Sister, if we saw the holy temple in Jerusalem burning to the ground, wouldn’t we cry out for someone to help? “God’s house is on fire! Quick! Somebody grab the water!” Hopeless desperation in depression is no different. Your body is God’s temple, and you’re burning (1 Cor. 6:19). Though it can be dangerous to try to fight the fire on your own, you can move toward safety through the ministry of Spirit-filled helpers—those who are wise, understanding, and experienced (Deut. 1:13; Prov. 11:14). Seeking the practical help and ongoing support of Christian community doesn’t specifically address the reasons that we feel the way we do, but it’s a step of first importance—an immediate priority.

Your need for help is not a character flaw—it’s God’s design.

Drew Hunter writes, “When we’re left to ourselves, we quickly descend into the dark places of our souls. This is why we need good companions who stay with us and who empathize with us. When they join us in our downcast moments, they may not feel like they’re doing much, but they’re holding a candle in our darkness.”⁶

God knows how quickly we descend into dark places when life feels like it’s too much to bear. But he also knows that we have need of “candle holders”—those who’ll support and steady us as we walk through this darkness. The journey ahead *will* be too much for you without them. A mother who stands alone in depression “can be attacked and defeated, but two can stand back-to-back and conquer” (Eccl. 4:12). Get someone’s help to fight the urge to quit when you can’t carry on.

NEXT STEP

Cry out to God for mercy, then call out to someone you trust and tell them how you're feeling.

Listen to my prayer, O God. Do not ignore my cry for help! Please listen and answer me, for I am overwhelmed by my troubles. (Ps. 55:1–2)

REMEMBER

When I feel hopeless and overwhelmed by life, I will remember that God doesn't expect me to suffer stoically in solitude but instead instructs me to immediately seek the fellowship, counsel, and support of Spirit-filled people.

REFLECTIONS FOR PERSONAL APPLICATION

1. Describe how you're feeling today. Did any words or phrases in this chapter resonate with your experience?
2. Note one insight you gleaned in this chapter about your experience of hopelessness.
3. Note one step you can take today to apply what you've learned in this chapter to your own situation.
4. What have you learned today about the mercy of God toward those who feel hopeless?