

“This book is a help not only for grieving parents but also for those called to help bear with them the burdens of such loss. And that call is for all of us.”

**Russell Moore**, Editor-in-Chief, Christianity Today;  
Author, *The Storm-Tossed Family*

“I cannot recommend this book highly enough. A wonderfully helpful, honest and practical resource for all who grieve the loss of a child, and for those who want to support them. Dan and Anna have walked this path and their writing combines authentic first-hand experience with profound spiritual and biblical wisdom. Please read this brilliant book and then pass it on to someone you know who is grieving.”

**John Wyatt**, Emeritus Professor of Neonatal Paediatrics,  
University College London; Author, *Dying Well*

“This book is so practical, thorough and encouraging. I wish I had had it when I lost my daughter to cancer several years ago, as I had to wade through so much of this alone. Dan and Anna’s words are like a friend who gives it to you straight—no nonsense, yet steeped in love. This book is relevant to anyone who is grieving loss or who loves a grieving person. Read it with an open heart, and let hope wash over you.”

**Kate Merrick**, Author, *And Still She Laughs* and *Here, Now*

“This book is a beautiful example of the sharing of Christ’s comfort (2 Corinthians 1 v 3-6). We give thanks for the life of Jed, which enabled his parents to write it. It is friendly, warm, clear, deep, personal, challenging and immensely practical. Not only is it a great resource for grieving parents, it should be read by all Christians who want to be prepared to walk alongside the broken-hearted in their church family. We urge you to read it.”

**Elly and Dan Strange**, Director, Crosslands Forum

“Navigating the waves of grief can be overwhelming, especially following the loss of a child. In this vulnerable, honest, sensitive, and biblically rich book, the Martins help fellow sufferers deal with their sorrow. They show over and over again that lamenting is good, but it is not the end. Even in the loss of a child, Jesus is near. Whether you need *Near to the Broken-Hearted* for the encouragement of your own soul, or as a resource to care for others who are dealing with grief (or for both of these reasons!), you will find it a faith-building, hope-giving read.”

**Tony Merida**, Pastor, Imago Dei Church, Raleigh, NC;  
Author, *Orphanology* and *Love Your Church*

“Those enduring the excruciating pain of child loss don’t need empty promises and hurtful clichés, but words that breathe hope and comfort into their shattered world. This is what *Near to the Broken-Hearted* provides—giving space to acknowledge what’s been lost and grieve what may never be, yet also to find comfort in Christ’s presence and the hope of what’s to come.”

**Sarah Walton**, Author, *Hope When It Hurts* and  
*Together Through the Storms*

“This book isn’t theoretical. Every chapter—every word—is the result of walking a path of immense pain and trauma. The counsel given here isn’t trite or superficial but warm, compassionate, practical and God-centered—and rich with gospel hope for those facing the worst sort of loss. It will help give voice to your lament and show you the hard questions the Holy Scriptures ask and contemplate. You will find truthful conversation partners in Dan, Anna and Chris. I highly commend *Near to the Broken-Hearted*.”

**Joey Tomlinson**, Author, *The Day of Trouble*;  
Pastor, Deer Park Fellowship, Newport News, VA

NEAR  
*to the*  
BROKEN  
HEARTED

DAN & ANNA MARTIN  
WITH CHRIS MOURING

  
thegoodbook  
COMPANY

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# Foreword

*by Tim Challies*

**I**t was in November of 2020 that my family endured our greatest sorrow. For it was in November of 2020 that the Lord very suddenly and unexpectedly called my son Nick to himself. Nick was a student at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He was newly engaged. He was looking forward to a lifetime of marriage and ministry. And then in a moment he was gone. And our hearts were broken.

But we learned very quickly that the Lord is near to the broken-hearted. We learned that he saves those who are crushed in spirit. We learned that he does not break a bruised reed and he does not quench a smouldering wick. We learned that he extends to his people all the compassion of a father to his children.

One of the ways the Lord extended his comfort to us was through his people. Particularly, through people who had endured the very sorrow we were enduring. We learned there is a sweet ministry through the written word.

Among those who reached out to us with words of comfort, compassion, and challenge was Chris Mouring, who has contributed a chapter to the book you are reading right now. And I know that if we went through our tragedy again today, this very book—the chapter he contributed as

well as those written by Dan and Anna Martin—would be a source of great blessing to us.

Whether you are grieving the loss of a child, coming alongside someone who has, or simply preparing yourself to better serve others in the future, this book will be a steady and faithful guide. It will lead you to the word of God, it will assure you of the character of God, and it will comfort you with the purpose of God. It will assure you that our God is true to his every promise. He is near to the broken-hearted.



# Introduction

*The LORD is near to the broken-hearted  
and saves the crushed in spirit.*

Psalm 34 v 18

**G**rief can make you feel that you are in a storm from which you doubt you will ever emerge. You might be in the midst of a darkness so empty and bleak that you doubt it will ever clear. The heartache—the broken-heartedness—is an exhausting, crushing, daily reality. It lingers for a long time.

Maybe you have just learned some devastating news that puts the future of your child in the balance. Maybe you have lost a little one through miscarriage or stillbirth. Maybe you have had the joy of knowing and holding your child—but it has given way, far too soon, to the desperate grief of loss. Maybe the storm has long since passed according to the calendar, but the grey clouds remain. You feel broken-hearted and crushed in spirit. This is a book for you.

Or maybe you are not a parent in this situation, but a grandparent, a brother or sister, a friend, or a member of their church family. The ripples of these kinds of grief are deep and wide. This is a book for you, too.

If you doubt that comfort will ever be possible, that's ok.

Part of what it means to be “crushed in spirit” is that you struggle for hope itself. But hope doesn’t rest on your ability to perceive it; hope rests with the living God. “The LORD is near to the broken-hearted and saves the crushed in spirit.” God has the ability to comfort those who have lost all capacity for comfort; he has a special, tender nearness for people like you.

People like *us*. We had a baby son, Jed, who died after living for three weeks. We learned the news at our 12-week pregnancy scan that he had very significant health issues, likely to result in his death. We know what it is to have prayed, pleaded, and fasted for God to heal, and for those prayers not to have been answered. Chris, who writes in chapter 6, knows these things too: he lost his 20-year-old son, Brian, in a sudden tragic accident. Throughout the book, the three of us will share some parts of our own stories in the hope that they will offer some comfort, connection and practical help to you.

But this book is not primarily about our stories. And we are not claiming to know everything there is to know about grief. Nor are we setting out to give in-depth intellectual answers to questions about suffering. There *is* practical help for grief here, and there *are* answers to serious questions, but our main aim is to point you to the Lord Jesus. We are claiming that his grace will be enough to sustain you. We want to show you the nearness of God, in Jesus, to the broken-hearted.

You don’t necessarily need to consider yourself a follower of Jesus to read this book. But we are writing this as people who have known, loved and followed Jesus for many years. And so we write to commend his tender mercies to you, whatever your journey and story.

In the famous children's book *We're Going on a Bear Hunt* by Michael Rosen and Helen Oxenbury, a group of children go out to hunt a bear. They have to pass through various obstacles—like rivers, mud and snowstorms—along the way. At each obstacle they repeat the line:

*We can't go over it. We can't go under it. Oh no! We've got to go through it!*

How on earth do you prepare for a pregnancy you had never thought you would have; one which will likely end in death? How do you navigate parenting a severely ill child? How do you cope with the daily acknowledgment that the one you loved has gone? Much as we would wish to go over or around this obstacle, there is no alternative: we have to go *through* it.

But we do not go alone. Jesus, the great and gracious Shepherd, is the one who carries his people *through*.

This book has eleven chapters, and not every reader will read all of them! They focus on different situations, moments, questions and experiences. Choose the ones that will be the most helpful to you; read slowly if you need to, giving yourself space to return to other chapters weeks or even months later. But please do at some point consider the final chapter. There, we reflect on the life to come—life beyond death—brought about by Jesus' resurrection. It is this which underpins and makes sense of all the other chapters.

We have written this book because there is something worth writing about, and it is this: there is comfort for the broken-hearted because Jesus died and rose. He calls out:

*Behold, I am making all things new!*

*(Revelation 21 v 5)*



# 1. Weeping with Jesus

*For those who've heard bad news*

**H**ave you noticed how bad news has a way of reorganising your life in an instant? It carves a home for itself in the centre of your heart and moves in without your permission. Grievous news about a person you love is a plague of locusts which chews at everything, removing the life you knew.

We will never forget the day we learned the news about our son Jed's health problems. It was New Year's Eve 2018. We were attending our 12-week pregnancy scan when we found out. A few weeks prior, an early pregnancy scan had shown us the surprising and delightful image of two heartbeats. Our daughters, Lois (then aged four) and Esther (aged two), were overjoyed at the prospect of not one but two babies joining the family, so we brought them along to the second scan, expecting it to be an all-round joyous occasion of seeing twins on the screen.

It was a freezing cold, dark evening and we'd had to park quite far from the hospital as there were no spaces nearby. Dan sat both girls on his lap while Anna got started with the sonographer. From the moment the scan started we knew

there was a serious problem. The sonographer stopped talking altogether, as did her trainee. And on the screen we could see a large black space in the middle of one of the babies' bodies; a problem we would soon learn was called *megacystis*—a huge bladder filled with urine. The urine was slowly accumulating as there was no way for it to drain out; a tiny outlet valve hadn't developed properly in Jed's body. Over the coming months, the pressure from his huge bladder would damage his kidneys and prevent his lungs from developing normally.

The staff said it would be easier to explain what they were seeing without the children in the room. I (Dan) hastily picked up our two girls and took them out. We walked back to the car through the freezing cold. I was barely able to say anything to my daughters, who were full of questions and worry.

We learned that evening that *megacystis* was *bad news*. The problems it would create for Jed's lung development meant that he would likely die shortly after birth. I called both our parents to let them know the terrible news. My mother-in-law later told us that she thought to herself that day, "We'll never laugh again".

Perhaps you feel like that too. You, or someone you love, have received some devastating news. You know that your life will never be the same again now—it can't be. As you reel, we want to invite you throughout this chapter to notice just one thing: when terrible tidings crash into our lives, *the Lord Jesus is present to weep with us*. Where others may be silent, distant, flippant, superficial and clumsy, Jesus is present, sure-footed, tender and true. The God of the Bible weeps *with us* at bad news.

## THE TRUE LIE OF THE LAND

One thing which surprised us as the bad news sank in was how uncomfortable some people were with the sadness of our situation—as if they were unable to allow it to occupy a part of their world. One person responded to the news of Jed's medical problems with “Oh, you have to think positive, and it will be fine.” Maybe you have had a similar experience. Such an insistence on flippant speech and superficial positivity can be crushing for those who are hurting. The same problem is revealed when people ask if you're feeling “back to normal” or if you've “got over” your grief. If you're like us, you want to cry out, “There never will be that old normal again!” Truly bad news is not like a pebble dropping into a still pond, which after a while returns to its stillness. Truly bad news is not an inconvenience which we have to wait out. Truly bad news reorganises everything, in a way we can't control. It's why we talk of being *devastated*. It's why we never move on from grief, but move on *with* grief, thankfully in changing forms.

In contrast, one of the most comforting things someone said to us during that time was simply, “Oh, I am devastated for you.” He said it like a knee-jerk reaction—immediately, sincerely, and without deep thought. He honestly communicated his reflex, honest feeling. He didn't try to pretend to live in a dream world or try to pull us into a deceptive trance of positivity. He was prepared to feel sad for us and sad with us, because we should feel sad about sad things.

Your trial—and our trial—begins with bad news. And part of the trial is the simple fact that our culture doesn't know what to do with bad news. But the Bible most certainly does.

Have you ever had to walk a journey you'd normally drive? When you walk, you notice aspects of the journey which

you'd previously always sped past and missed. Now, walking, you have no choice but to hear, see, and smell *the true lie of the land*. In the same way, suffering invites us into the true lie of the land of Scripture. In the Bible's pages we see a God who knows suffering. A God who comforts those who suffer. A God who gives us words of lament to help us express our grief and loss. We see a God who ultimately suffers in our place to remove suffering altogether. In the past we may have sped past these things, but now we're forced to stop and look.

We tend to distort Bible figures into superhumans, assuming that they didn't feel the same kind of pain we feel. But when we do that, we miss out on the comfort of knowing that many of them too were devastated by bad news—and were held by God through it all. Think of Naomi, who asked people to call her “Mara”, meaning “bitter”, because of the bitterness of losing her husband and two sons (Ruth 1 v 20). Think of David when his family had been kidnapped, and his army, having lost their families too, talked of stoning him (1 Samuel 30 v 1-6). Think of Stephen's death, and the godly men who buried him and “made great lamentation over him” (Acts 8 v 2).

And think of Jesus, weeping as he entered Jerusalem (Luke 19 v 41-44), and Jesus “greatly distressed and troubled” the night before his crucifixion (Mark 14 v 33). Jesus is prepared to be very sad about very sad things. He is the Lord who comes *especially* near to the broken-hearted and knows *especially* the pain of sad things.

The God of the Bible knows all about bad news. He is not taken by surprise. He does not stand far off and aloof when we are devastated by it.



## WEEPING WITH JESUS

The story of Jesus and his friend Lazarus, found in the Bible in John 11, became one of many precious passages for us. The story begins with Jesus hearing that his friend Lazarus is dying. One reason the story is so famous is that Jesus says those wonderful words, “I am the resurrection and the life” (John 11 v 25), and then proves this by raising Lazarus back to life. But here let’s focus on another reason the story is famous: Jesus arrives at his friend’s tomb, and weeps.

*Now when Mary [one of Lazarus’ sisters] came to where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet, saying to him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled. And he said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” Jesus wept. So the Jews said, “See how he loved him!” (John 11 v 32-36)*

Jesus went. Jesus wept. Jesus was “deeply moved” in spirit. That last phrase, “deeply moved”, is worth us pausing on. A more literal translation would be, “He was outraged in spirit” (see D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, p 415). Originally coming from a verb referring to the snorting of horses, this word has the sense of profound indignation and outrage. Jesus feels this “in his spirit”, in himself: his inner reaction to this tomb, and the grief that surrounds it, is to be outraged and troubled.

What is he troubled and angered about? At the complete package of brokenness that this situation represents. His friend, dead and buried. People weeping all around.