

# THIS CROWN OF COMFORT

God's seven calls to  
women in distress



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**And provide for those who grieve in Zion – to bestow on them  
a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead  
of mourning.**

ISAIAH 61:3



To every generous person interviewed in this book,  
thank you for sharing the deep things of your lives.

To everyone who read this book on its formative journey,  
thank you for making it the richer.

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## Preface



For years I searched the Bible for those places where God spoke with women. I knew that Jesus related with many women in his time, and I clung on to his words, receiving them as if spoken to me. They brought me comfort and guided me. Yet I found very few God-to-woman conversations in the Old Testament. Had I missed something? Surely the heart of Jesus and God were entwined as one, and both deeply cared about us women.

One rainy holiday as my family and I hunkered down in our tent, I sat in my sleeping bag and flicked through the Bible. I started at chapter 1 of Genesis, the first book in the Bible, and then, 700 pages later, in the book of Isaiah, I finally found it. I read an outpouring of God's heart towards a city called Jerusalem. He called her a beloved woman!

My heart jumped as I read familiar passages, as if for the first time. I saw God's heart for women. I saw his tender response to our brokenness and sadness. And as I read, I discovered seven places where God called out to Jerusalem amid her tears, seven places where he repeated himself – his caring double imperatives.<sup>1</sup> He deeply loved her. He wanted her to find joy and hope. Then it occurred to me: those seven double imperatives had already been a part of my life for years, like seven jewels in a crown, encircling me with his grace.

God once again validated me. He confirmed his love for me as a woman, for I too had been broken like Jerusalem. And because I finally saw it in the book of Isaiah, it gave me courage to share it. Many of us women may still wonder if God loves us, if he cares deeply about what happens to us.

He does.



## Introduction



We all have experienced troubles in one way or another. And even though each of our stories is different, we may all have prayed the same – for God to rescue us. I constantly did, especially as a young woman living in the USA, as I lived through homelessness, isolation and harsh treatment. Later in England and overseas as a Christian worker, I went through other troubles – loneliness and five miscarriages.

Thankfully for all of us, God sees the bigger picture. He answers our prayers, but he also comforts us and helps us grow strong. He enables us to move forward in life and overcome the heart consequences these troubles will cause.

In the book of Isaiah, God calls out seven double imperatives to a broken Jerusalem. She too experienced terrible times, but God didn't leave his beloved Jerusalem there. He didn't abandon her. Instead, his seven calls opened a way towards living in wholeness. They became like jewels in a crown on her head. For in Isaiah 61:3, God promises to 'provide for those who grieve in Zion – to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning'. And as we stay close to him, we too can receive his crown of beauty, his comfort and restoration. For without a doubt, we too are his beloved.

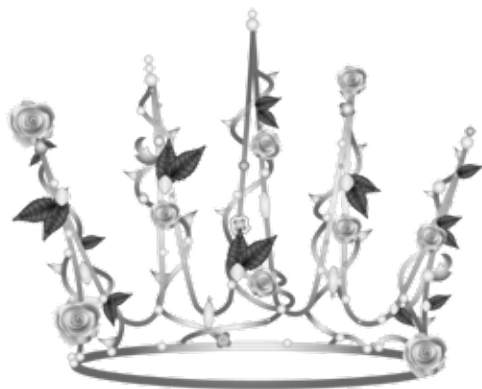
The seven calls of God form the seven chapters in this book. To explore them more deeply, each chapter comes in two parts and includes a time for personal reflection.

- **Call 1 – Comfort!** God tenderly cries out to a hurting Jerusalem. And it is a tender call for each one of us, for his comfort is there for hurting hearts.



- **Call 2 – Awake! Rise up!** God shows Jerusalem what is going on in her life. And the same is true for us. For in order to heal, we must understand why we hurt.
- **Call 3 – Awake! Get dressed!** God lovingly provides Jerusalem with clothes to wear. And we too can accept them, putting on strength and courage.
- **Call 4 – Depart!** God earnestly desires for Jerusalem to leave behind everything which holds her back. And the same is true for us. We can't move on until we have let go.
- **Call 5 – Build up!** God called his beloved Jerusalem to himself, desiring a relationship with her. And we too can experience this by drawing close to him.
- **Call 6 – Pass through!** God gives Jerusalem the confidence to step back into the world, a new person. And he gives us the confidence to be our new selves.
- **Call 7 – Build up!** Like Jerusalem, God wants us to share his seven calls, enabling others to draw close to him. And as we do, our hearts will grow in confidence.

All the stories in this book are true, taken from interviews with other women, from my own life and from the Bible. Some are situations many of us may have experienced; others are extreme. Yet despite everything we go through, God's seven calls are relevant today. For in his tender love, he shows us our beauty and worth. In his powerful love, he gives us strength.



# 1

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## GOD'S FIRST CALL: COMFORT!

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**Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem.**

Isaiah 40:1-2

A tender call to comfort a broken and hurting Jerusalem. And a tender call to each one of us. For comfort is only required when our hearts hurt.



## God's comfort: am I worth it?



**Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem.**

**M**y troubles seemed to settle after I set myself a goal – to get rid of every conflict and grief in my life. I had seen what troubles did to others and had experienced too many already in my growing-up years. So I came up with a plan and congratulated myself. But it turned out to be one of the biggest mistakes of my life.

What was this plan? I decided to agree with the disagreeable to avoid conflict. I conformed to what people demanded of me to foster peaceful relationships. I even determined to under-achieve, so as not to get noticed, for when I stood out, I became a target. It was a peace at all costs, so I could feel somewhat safe. But it didn't work out as I had hoped. As my teenage years rolled by, the consequences grew. By the time I reached adulthood, they broke me and spewed me out. Thankfully, God was there the entire time, collecting the pieces, waiting for me to ask for help. He had another plan for me.

I have talked with others who also shared stories of incredible heart-break and trouble, some things they couldn't help in life and some things they could. Tragedy. Bereavement. Sickness. Abuse. Accusations. Betrayal. Mistakes. Yet many of those people had one thing in common – they dared to let God come close and help. They dared to accept his other plan. Sure, they acknowledged that they had changed as people, but here they gave a surprised smile. For even though they would never be able to turn back time, never be unhurt again, God did something extraordinary.

A few years back my husband, Derek, and I took our children to the States to celebrate our 25th wedding anniversary. While there, we came upon a real-life example of what trouble looks like in nature. We drove down Highway 40 in the Arizona desert and noticed a sign saying, 'Meteor Crater Road'. Out of curiosity, we turned off and drove out into what seemed like endless desert. What a surprise to find a crater, and even a visitors' centre.

The billboard out front said it was the best-preserved crater in the world, so we walked around the exhibition and read the facts. We marvelled that this meteor had travelled at an incredible 26,000 miles an hour when it slammed into earth! Apparently, it totally altered the place where it struck. We studied the diagrams, and I started scribbling down notes. This sounded too much like real life.

Then we gathered in a group at an appointed time and waited for a guide to take us up to the actual site. About 30 of us filed up, and I gasped in amazement. The hole spanned a mile across and sank down 500 feet. The ground had literally exploded on impact, and what had been on the inside ended up outside. Not only that, but the impact changed the constitution of the ground, searing it into pockmarked, glass-like rock. Now, tens of thousands of years later, I stood there in front of the evidence!

I stared at the gigantic hole, thinking this is exactly what happens. Metaphorical meteors strike us down and leave us sprawled on the floor. Each of us gets turned inside out and shocked into permanent change. My mind jumped back to my first major 'meteor strike'. I was 17, and only months before I graduated from high school, I was ordered to drop out due to a family situation. I had dreamed of becoming a doctor, not quitting and working in a menial job.

I remember standing in front of my bedroom mirror that awful day, getting changed from school clothes into work clothes. I stared at myself. No one would see the distress in my heart, that my dreams had just been hacked to pieces. My outside appearance lied to everyone

around me, for physically I still looked well. I still had all my limbs, but I had been wounded and knocked over by a metaphorical meteor, one that altered the entire course of my life.

Strangely, it took years to grasp the depth of brokenness and the long-lasting effects of having tried to keep a false peace. When Derek and I got married, I hardly talked about my past. We lived in another country, I had new friends and no one other than Derek knew what had happened. I kept it a secret and I wanted to keep it that way. I thought I could simply forget, and it would leave no residual effect.

Then one day my own precious daughter turned 17, a beautiful, gentle, gracious young woman. And the locked door to my memories exploded open. I saw my own life in hers. I saw that my heart still hurt profoundly all those years later, and I wept in agony behind closed doors, sprawled on the floor once again. No amount of forgetting could change the fact that my troubles had altered me. I could never go back. I too had changed.

I reached for my Bible. Was there anything God could say that would wash away the pain? I doubted it. I couldn't change the past, and God wouldn't. It would always remain my history and could never be undone. But as I read, I finally understood; Jesus suffered meteor-sized troubles as well.

His enemies maligned him. They hurt and wounded him. They killed him. After his resurrection, Jesus told one of his disciples, 'Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side' (John 20:27). The traumas Jesus suffered had changed him as well. His scars, just like mine, were deep, and he would carry them throughout eternity.

I can't tell you how much this comforted me. If Jesus could accept and embrace his changes, so could I. If he could get up and keep on living, so could I. If he didn't need a healing miracle to get rid of his scars, then neither did I. Just like him, brokenness didn't have to handicap my living.

Pain, however, did. It clouded my emotions and mind. And it can stop any of us from seeing God's bigger picture. It can hinder us from understanding how all is not lost. God doesn't just pat us on the arm and say, 'No worries. It wasn't that bad.' He does what any of us would do if we noticed a person about to step on to a road with a car headed their way. We would shout, 'Stop! Stop!' We would run and wave our arms. We would repeat ourselves until we caught their attention.

And God feels the same urgency in calling out to us within our pain. He wants to grab our attention and will repeat himself until we get it. Each of us can understand his heart because we too have agonised when our loved ones have suffered from metaphorical meteor strikes.

I could compare it to when Derek and I helped run a summer conference in an old Welsh manor house. The laburnum trees within the gigantic gardens had already produced long, brown seedpods and I pointed out one of the trees to my two young boys. 'Don't eat those seedpods,' I told them. 'I know they look like the peas we grow at home, but these ones are poisonous. Stay away from them.'

A week later, on the way home my youngest son complained of not feeling well, and then he threw up. I put it down to car sickness on those winding Welsh roads. But when he turned white, I asked, 'You don't look so well. Do you hurt somewhere?'

My other son piped up: 'Just before we got into the car, I saw him by the other laburnum tree, the one you didn't say we couldn't eat. I think he ate some.'

Derek and I gasped. People had died from this. 'We need to find a hospital!' I cried, and I pulled out a map. Derek sped down the road. 'Hurry, Derek! Please hurry!' I begged.

'I am! I am!' Derek responded. He pulled up to the front door of a hospital. I jumped out and picked up my now limp son. I dashed through the open front doors. 'My son just ate laburnum seeds,' I cried.

The receptionist pointed back out the front door. 'Go back out, turn left and knock on the brown door.'

I looked at her, horrified. Didn't she care? How could she send me away? I repeated myself. 'My son just ate laburnum seeds! They're poisonous!' I lifted him up higher to show her his limp body just in case she hadn't noticed.

She nodded and pointed again. 'Go back out, turn left and knock on the brown door.'

I hurried out and turned right. 'Turn left! Turn left!' she called.

I found a normal-sized door with no handle on the outside. I stared at it, perplexed. I couldn't even get in. So, I did as instructed and knocked. It opened instantly. 'Come in! Come in!' said a man in a white coat, as if he had been expecting us.

I laid my son on an examining table, and the doctor asked, 'How did you know to come to this hospital? We specialise in poison victims.'

'I didn't,' I replied, and suddenly I understood how God had guided us. More so when the doctor told us we had almost lost our son. We had arrived just in time.

My little son didn't have the ability or capability to save himself, but Derek and I did, the medical staff did. If you noticed, all of us repeated ourselves. All of us used double imperatives: 'Hurry! Hurry!', 'Turn left! Turn left!', 'Come in! Come in!' We had an urgency that demanded attention right now. We had a life-and-death situation, and we rallied around him. We didn't put it off.

God too has this same urgency for our lives. He loves us, just as I loved my little son. He calls out to us urgent words in our pain. He keeps calling out, just as he did to Jerusalem, to the one he had chosen to be his own,<sup>2</sup> the one he called perfect in beauty (Ezekiel 16:14). He loved her.

But despite God's heart for her, Jerusalem had withdrawn from him. She had moved outside his protective love and an enemy army had destroyed her. They had exiled and murdered her people. She was broken. Her past had finally caught up with her. But God refused to let her suffer on her own. He called out to her, with not just one double imperative, but seven in total. His Jerusalem was in pain and perishing.

'Comfort, comfort, my people,' he cried out first of all. 'Speak tenderly to Jerusalem' (Isaiah 40:1-2). He knew that his beloved Jerusalem needed emergency attention, and he was ready to step in. He knew that she couldn't find healing in her heart without his tangible tenderness towards her.

Thankfully, he didn't add, 'Pull yourself together' or 'Get over it.' He simply threw his arms around her, without judgement, without accusation. He knew she had already suffered enough from the consequences of her plans and actions.

Twice in the book of Isaiah God gave Jerusalem the same promise. In her brokenness, he gave her this assurance: 'Those the Lord has rescued will return. 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; 51:11). His rescue of her would be so glorious and real that it would become like a precious crown on her head. Just as this crown was his seal of love, so God gives us the same seal as he rescues us. His crown demonstrates his greatest comfort to our hearts – our worth.

Yet we might be thinking, 'This is nice, but I don't want to wear a crown. I just want God to get rid of my troubles. I want him to free me from all that pain, then my worth, comfort and joy would be there anyway.' But God understands our hearts, for even if those troubles were suddenly removed, our hearts don't instantly repair.

Imagine this Bible scene from 2,000 years ago: Paul, a missionary, was at sea (Acts 27). A storm had been raging for days and the ship was in



peril of breaking up. But those sailors had the experience to know what to do. They frapped the ship, that is, 'they passed ropes under the ship itself to hold it together' (v. 17). They knew the life-and-death importance of that ship staying in one piece, and God knows the importance of holding us together with his comfort. It enables us to take the next step towards healing our hearts.

Frapping comes in many forms. For the ship, it came from heavy ropes. For Paul, it came from God. An angel appeared to him on that ship, saying, 'Do not be afraid' (v. 24). For us, it could be a hug from a friend, a Bible verse, a smile.

God's encircling comfort is very real. I asked a friend how she had experienced it, and she told me this extreme and unexpected story. Yet it is a story we can all relate to, maybe not in the same level of threat, but all of us have felt unsafe somewhere in our lives.



In my job I trained and supported overseas aid teams. I happened to be in one country during an election and the region where I stayed voted for the losing party. So government soldiers decided to punish the region. They did terrible things.

The aid teams carried urgent medical supplies to the suffering outlying villages, but the government soldiers arrested some of them. And when I and the others heard of this, we immediately hurried to the officials. We told them they should have arrested us instead because we had sent out those teams. I knew we had to do it, but I was filled with dread because of what they could do to us women.

Afterward, we hurried back to our compound, but even there we weren't safe. Only a chain link fence separated us from the soldiers. And when we heard they planned to kill the only male aid worker staying with us, we helped him slip away in the dead of night. How we prayed he would make it to the border safe.

But now, with only women left, we noticed soldier footprints inside the compound. They even rattled at our locked doors. We knew we would be next.

We hid in my bedroom and dressed in layers of clothes, to make it more difficult if we were attacked. We even tucked our documents inside our underwear. Then I telephoned the head office in the capital. I cried as I spoke. 'Please ask my parents to pray. Tell them I probably won't be coming home.'

We crawled under the mosquito net hanging over my bed and clung to each other in fear. We read Psalm 91:

'Surely he will save you from the fowler's snare... You will not fear the terror of night, nor the arrow that flies by day... No harm will overtake you, no disaster will come near your tent.'

Suddenly, we felt calm! We started singing praise songs to God. We laughed. We weren't alone.

The soldiers usually made their attacks between 3.00 am and 4.00 am, the darkest part of the night, but my father had emailed saying he and my mother were praying. He reminded me of 2 Kings 6:13-17, where Elisha and his servant had also been surrounded by enemy soldiers, but God's angel army protected them.

I started praying that this would be true. 'You know,' I said, 'angels are out there protecting us.' And they did. We waited all night and nothing happened, even though dogs barked at the soldiers just outside our fence.

Early the next morning we asked the villagers, 'Why didn't the soldiers attack?' They shook their heads. 'We saw them surround the compound, ready to storm in, but then they left!'

That day a peace-keeping helicopter escorted us out. The man who had to escape in the dead of night got to safety. The imprisoned aid workers were released.

My friend finished her story and we sat in silence. God had comforted her with verses from the Bible and the prayers of those who loved her. She had a hope that defied all logic, and comfort became a precious jewel in her crown, an encircling that held her together. The Bible says, 'Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles' (2 Corinthians 1:3–4). God showed my friend her incredible worth.

Comfort is like that. It is a powerful and active word. It is a tender word. The original Hebrew word meant 'to sigh, breathe strongly, to be sorry, to pity, console, to avenge'.<sup>3</sup> It was a word with strong emotions, speaking directly to the heart. It showed the absolute worth of a person, no matter how broken or wounded, no matter their past or hurts.

A young man had just graduated from university and as he looked for a job, he stayed short-term with a family. They noticed his sadness and prayed for him often, that somehow he would experience God's love.

Then one evening their young son fell down the stairs. The mother came running and checked her son. Then she sat down beside him on the floor and hugged him, rocking back and forth. The guest also heard the thumps, and he hurried over. But he remained silent, not saying a word. He just stood there watching.

The mother looked up and assured him that her son was alright, but the visitor didn't seem to hear. Instead, he fixed his eyes, not on the

hurting son, but on the mother-son embrace before him. ‘When I was a child,’ he finally whispered, ‘my parents never hugged me. I didn’t know it was possible for a parent to love their child like that.’

God saw this young man’s deepest hurt and showed him what he needed to see. God reaches out his arms to us, saying, ‘As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you’ (Isaiah 66:13). When we get knocked over by troubles and grief, the first thing he does is comfort us.


## A time to reflect

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Take a few moments to think about Isaiah 40:1–2: ‘Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins.’ Consider the following questions:

- What is happening in your life right now? What storms are raging?
- What does the word ‘comfort’ mean to you now?
- How is God holding your heart together today?
- How can you come to accept your precious worth?

Throughout your day, reflect some more on Isaiah 40:1–2. Write down your thoughts in your journal.



## God's comfort: is there hope?



**Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem.**

**G**od's desire to comfort us is ever so real. He calls out to us in our lowest ebbs, for he knows and understands our hearts. He sees our grief, no matter the reasons we are hurting. Yet God's comfort is so much more than simply handing us a tissue and patting us on the back.

It could be compared to an experience I had when I reached my late 20s, with my peace-at-all-costs plan still ruling my life. I had hoped that in time I would get used to my plan, that if I silenced my heart long enough, it would finally stay silenced. But it didn't work. I still had this continuous throbbing knot in my chest, begging me to shout out against the injustices I experienced. But I refused to listen to my inner pain. I didn't dare, for if I did, either grief would overwhelm me or I would have to do something about it.

Then someone sent me a birthday card. This person had never done so before. I tore the envelope open and out fell a ten-dollar bill. I read the message written in the card: 'Dear Eva, it's time you started standing up for your rights. This is for piercing your ears. But, if you don't, I want my money back!'

I almost burst out laughing. The audacity! But this person had judged correctly. I should have fought this battle years before, but as I counted the emotional cost, I doubted I could do it. If I stood up against those long-entrenched injustices, I knew that whatever little bit of me still remained would get shredded. Was it worth it? Was I worth it?

Also, as for piercing my ears, I had been told that real Christians didn't do it, even though no one could substantiate why. So, as I turned the ten-dollar bill over in my hand, I whispered a prayer, 'God, what should I do? I have wanted to get my ears pierced for ages.'

Nothing came to mind, so I slid the bill inside my Bible. I used it as a bookmark and underlined verses with it. Then I came upon a verse about how God had dressed Jerusalem. To my utter surprise, it said, 'I will put a ring on your nose, earrings on your ears and a beautiful crown on your head... You became very beautiful' (Ezekiel 16:12-13).

It gave me such comfort. All this stifling of myself didn't fit in with God's character. All this severity didn't come from his heart or his love. In fact, God wanted me to pay attention to that pulsating knot in my chest. Since I knew I couldn't change the system around me, I would need to do the changing myself.

About three months later, as I drove home from work, I was overwhelmed by a sudden understanding of my worth in God. I could go with him and break free from the ache I carried in my chest. 'I'll do it!' I whispered. Maybe the ten dollars would be enough to pay for piercing my ears, because I had no money of my own. All my wages went towards paying the family bills.

I detoured to an earring boutique. 'How much does it cost?' I asked, my voice wobbling with uncertainty.

'Ten dollars, my dear,' the lady said. I sighed and laughed, all at once. God had just sorted out the final confirmation, and I handed the lady that ten-dollar bill.

But, as I walked out of that boutique, my earlobes throbbing with pain, I began to shake. What had I just done? What of the repercussions? But God comforted me as I drove away with something I hadn't felt in a very long time - hope. I would be okay. My life belonged to me. I could choose to give it to whom I wanted, and I chose God.

God wants us to listen to our hearts, but he also wants to take us one step further. He desires for his comfort to produce hope in us. 'Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed' (Isaiah 40:1-2). He promised this to his beloved Jerusalem, and he promises it to us. The hard times will end, whether they are self-inflicted or other-inflicted. He promises a future.

A few years ago, I conducted a survey of women at various stages in life and with different beliefs. I wanted to know which felt more important to them – faith, hope or love. I figured every single woman would say, 'Of course, it is love.'

The answers astonished me. They all said, 'Hope.'

'Why?' I asked one woman.

She explained it well. 'Faith comes and goes, and I have learned to live without love. But hope – if I didn't have hope, I would die. There would be no reason to live.'

How I identified. If hope didn't exist, I would have crumbled in impossible situations. If hope meant nothing, comfort could not have comforted me. Romans 15:13 says, 'May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.' For us to find comfort, God gives us hope.

So what is hope? Psychologists say that it isn't an emotion.<sup>4</sup> We can learn it and can be taught it. They also say hope is situation specific. We don't need to hope when we feel safe, only when things spiral out of control. We don't need hope when our desires are fulfilled, only when they are outside our grasp. The Bible puts it so well. 'Hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently' (Romans 8:24-25). Hope is specific to what we don't have.

Yet hope is much more. It is easy to put our hope in people or things that eventually let us down, and through hard experience we find out if we have misplaced our hope. But hope in God is based on fact, that ‘the Lord is good, a refuge in times of trouble. He cares for those who trust in him’ (Nahum 1:7). It is based on relationship, for ‘the Lord delights in those who fear him, who put their hope in his unfailing love’ (Psalm 147:11). He wants us to trust in him.

And God never fails. For ‘faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see’ (Hebrews 11:1). We can be certain God has our best interests at heart. We can be certain he will give us what is best. He will save us as is best, not necessarily from difficult circumstances, but from the lies that destroy us within those situations. He shows us another way to live.

There is a problem, though. Our mistakes and troubles might have become part of our identity. Several years ago, my family and I stayed in a Welsh mining village in Snowdonia National Park. We wanted to take a break over the Easter holiday and planned to climb a mountain or two.

Very early one morning, while everyone still slept, I went out alone for a prayer walk, down a quiet road that wound around a lake. I sat on a bench overlooking it and I raised my gaze toward Snowdon, the highest peak in Wales. A translucent mist obscured its middle slopes. When the sun finally rose from behind, it shimmered like a wedding veil. I gazed at it, hardly able to breathe.

Then I listened. The silence around me was almost complete, with only the rustle of grass from the marshes behind me. I turned to look, and my eyes rested on the marshes, then on the huge black hills of mining waste behind them. I burst into sobs, weeping not just for the land, but for myself as well.

I had just finished recording my story, about escaping harsh treatment, homelessness and isolation, and those waste heaps visualised my life. The damage done to both of us would remain there forever. Those



savage, ugly scars were a permanent part of our landscape, and for me, no amount of comfort or kind words could ever take them away. They couldn't be buried; they would remain with me till my dying breath.

Unexpected emotions surged up inside me. Hopelessness. Horror. How could I live on with such devastation within me? How could I move on with that weight attached to me?

I wanted to scream and pierce the perfect silence. But then I heard a sharp, 'Caw! Caw!'

Turning, I looked again at the waste heaps. A seagull had just spread its wings in flight and the morning sun caught it. It shone bright white against the black. The beauty of light upon dark, of life above carnage, startled me.

I couldn't take my eyes off that seagull as it rose above the devastation and headed towards Mount Snowdon, flapping its wings with lazy ease. It was as if God spoke to me through that bird as it called: 'Caw! I never intended for your past to happen. But the past doesn't have to hold you back. Caw! Fly into all the rest of your life. Follow me into the mountains and all its beauty. Caw! You see, scars don't define you. I do.'

I looked around me with new eyes. The waste hills only took up one-fifth of the landscape. The rest remained untouched and free. My broken past, my thwarted longings, my failings – they took up only a part of my life. The rest remained new and unwritten, a place where I could find meaning and beauty. God had just opened another doorway for me, a doorway into hope, into a mystery yet to be unveiled!

I stretched out my arms in thanks, my wounded heart deeply comforted. I lived! Now I could choose what I did with it! If I wanted, I could stay buried in those barren waste hills, or I could fly away with God, like two seagulls on the wind. Without a moment's hesitation, I accepted God's invitation.

Oh, how often we cry out like Jerusalem, 'The Lord has forsaken me, the Lord has forgotten me' (Isaiah 49:14). But God responds, 'See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands; your walls are ever before me... Then you will know that I am the Lord; those who hope in me will not be disappointed' (Isaiah 49:16, 23). Hope comes from believing God. Hope comes from knowing that as we stay close to him, he will never leave us. God's comfort is that way. He shows us the truth that he is in charge, and then he helps us to move on emotionally. He enables us to find hope even if our circumstances remain the same.

One young woman shared her story of how God has comforted her, even though her situation hasn't changed.



I wasn't well as a child and spent a lot of time in and out of hospital. Yet no one could figure out what was wrong. I kept passing out, my limbs would go stiff and I felt constantly so exhausted I could barely move. Finally, the doctors decided the attacks were simply growing pains. Then, at age ten, the symptoms stopped.

But when I turned 16, I caught the flu. I never recovered. The attacks started again, but finally the doctors figured it out. They told me there was no cure. I would never get better.

I felt completely lost, as if facing an uphill battle. I had exams to take, I had unexpected problems at home and the stress exacerbated my symptoms. It didn't help that I had no faith back then, no hope. I already felt depressed, and it got a lot worse. I couldn't drag myself out of it.

I began going to a youth group at the local church and one of the leaders sat down with me. 'Where is God in all of this?' I cried out.

The leader didn't get upset. She told me how God uses our difficulties and struggles to build us up into better people, to become more compassionate. But I thought what she said was a load of rubbish. 'Couldn't there be another way?' I asked.

That lady read some verses to me: 'Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us' (Romans 5:3-5) .

And even though I didn't believe her, I kept going back to these verses.

Now, God is a big part of my life, and I want to follow him. But having a chronic pain condition breaks a person down. It makes me exhausted emotionally and physically, and I get into some really low states of mind. I feel so useless. Yet God sees me totally differently.

I am his daughter, and it is something I can't quite comprehend. In my head, I am always striving to be a better person. I never feel good enough, especially when I compare myself to those around. But if I look just at God, I feel there is a purpose for me. In God's sight, I feel pretty perfect. Yes, I am full of sin, but to God I am perfect. This is something I can't register in my head. It is a strange feeling, that unquestionable love of God towards me, and it fills me up when I feel so empty.

This young woman's reality hurt, but she dared to accept God's comfort. She dared to look to God and see his perspective, his bigger picture. She dared to believe him, even in her constant physical pain. She could choose to step into his loving arms. This can be true for us as well.

In our troubles we can hear God say, 'I will lead her into the wilderness and speak tenderly to her. There I will give her back her vineyards, and will make the Valley of [Trouble] a door of hope' (Hosea 2:14–15). In the Bible, God took the hand of his beloved people, and he takes ours. Just as he held them close, he keeps us close. Sure, our troubles might remain, pain might continue, but God has our hearts. We can walk with him through that doorway of hope. A hope and a reminder that, 'Those the Lord has rescued will return. 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; 51:11). His crown of comfort – that beautiful symbol of hope.

## A time to reflect

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Once again, read Hosea 2:14–15: 'I will lead her into the wilderness and speak tenderly to her. There I will give her back her vineyards, and will make the Valley of [Trouble] a door of hope.' Take a moment to reflect on the following questions:

- Of all places, why does God choose to place this door of hope in your valleys?
- What about God gives you hope?
- How can you personally walk through this door of hope?

As you are able, throughout this day, continue to think on Hosea 2:14–15. Record your thoughts in your journal.



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Living Faith  
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# Living whole with God, even when broken by life

God deeply cares for those of us who are broken and hurt. And just as he helped his beloved Jerusalem find healing in her brokenness, he does the same for us. For he cried out seven double imperatives to her in the book of Isaiah, seven steps to restore her to wholeness, and he cries out the same to us. But he doesn't begin by scolding us; instead, he comforts. His first double imperative is, 'Comfort, comfort,' despite what has happened in our lives.



In *This Crown of Comfort*, Eva Leaf shares stories from her own life and from the lives of other women of how God met them in their brokenness.



Eva Leaf became a Christian at the age of 14 and attended a Canadian Bible college in her twenties. She has been a rep for The Navigators missionary organisation for over 30 years and for part of that time also led their publications team. She lives in Warwickshire, is married and has four grown-up children.

