

A P A I N F U L
P A S T

HEALING
AND MOVING
FORWARD

31-DAY DEVOTIONALS FOR LIFE

LAUREN WHITMAN

When we've had a particularly painful past, we often need a companion as much as we need answers and direction. This is why God so frequently reminds his people, "I am with you." This is also why Lauren Whitman's thirty-one-day devotional on healing can be so helpful. A gifted counselor, Lauren offers a daily touch point with the Bible that brings hope in bite-sized pieces. I believe you will walk away with two powerful messages: "You are not alone" and "There is hope."

—**Brad Hambrick**, Pastor of Counseling, The Summit Church, Durham, North Carolina; Author, *God's Attributes: Rest for Life's Struggles*

Does the past sneak up on you—stabs of pain, whispers of shame, bold sins, and deep regrets? With deft writing and a delicate touch, Lauren Whitman turns her years of counseling experience toward our painful pasts with thirty-one days of truth, care, reflection, and application. If you need a devotional that helps you to heal and move forward, start here. In fact, start today.

—**Dave Harvey**, President, Great Commission Collective; Author, *When Sinners Say "I Do" and I Still Do*

Whether you have experienced shame, guilt over past choices, or mistreatment at the hands of others, it will be difficult to read this book without seeing yourself. It will be equally difficult to miss God's very present help and presence waiting for you. If you've ever experienced pain from your past, come and let these words comfort you. Come and soak up the grace given to you in this devotional.

—**Julie E. Lowe**, Faculty and Counselor, Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation; Author, *Child Proof*

Hurting hearts will find help here. Each day Lauren tenderly encourages you to consider how Jesus comforts the pains of your past and how he lovingly secures a new and better story for your

present and future—a story in which Jesus’s love for you is featured, shame is lifted, and you are cherished.

—**Darby A. Strickland**, Counselor, Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation; Author, *Is It Abuse?*

This has well-known Scripture, songs, and hymns that will surprise you in the best possible way. The pace anticipates and answers questions you have. By Day 3, Lauren was anticipating questions I barely even knew I had, and each Scripture and song landed in my soul.

—**Edward T. Welch**, Faculty and Counselor, Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation; Author, *Created to Draw Near* and *Shame Interrupted*

A PAINFUL PAST

31-DAY DEVOTIONALS FOR LIFE

A Series

DEEPAK REJU

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AND MOVING
FORWARD

LAUREN WHITMAN



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Tips for Reading This Devotional

EARLY IN OUR marriage, my wife and I lived on the top floor of a town house, in a small one-bedroom apartment. Whenever it rained, leaks in the roof would drip through the ceiling and onto our floors. I remember placing buckets in different parts of the apartment and watching the water slowly drip, one drop at a time. I put large buckets out and thought, *It'll take a while to fill them.* The water built up over time, and often I was surprised at how quickly those buckets filled up, overflowing if I didn't pay close enough attention.

Like rain filling up a bucket, this devotional will surprise you. It may not seem like much—just a few verses every day. Drip. Drip. Drip. Yet a few drops of Scripture daily can satiate your parched soul. The transformative power of God's Word will build over time and overflow into your life.

Why does a devotional like this make such a difference?

We start with Scripture. God's Word is powerful. Used by the Holy Spirit, it turns the hearts of kings, brings comfort to the lowly, and gives spiritual sight to the blind. It transforms lives and turns them upside down. We know that the Bible is God's very own words, so we read and study it to know God himself.

Our study of Scripture is practical. Theology should change how we live. It's crucial to connect the Word with your struggles. Often, as you read this devotional, you'll see the word *you* because Lauren speaks directly to you, the reader. Each reading contains at least one reflection question or practical suggestion. You'll get much more from this experience if you answer the questions and do the practical exercises. Don't skip them. Do them for the sake of your own soul.

Our study of Scripture is worshipful. As you study your Bible, you will learn that God has a lot to say about a painful past. Maybe your experience includes something on this list: feeling hurt, pain, anger, bitterness, or shame; experiencing flashbacks; replaying scenes in your mind; asking “what if?” or “why, God?” questions. Perhaps your sins and foolish decisions of the past still affect you. Or perhaps the wrong things people did to you resurface as hurt and confusion in your heart. Regardless of which description is more apt, know that God’s story—the great story of Jesus coming to rescue a people for himself—applies to you. It’s not just an abstract truth. It’s a tender and sweet whisper of a God who says, “I know you are hurting. I know your past. I care so much I sent my one and only Son for you.” What you’ll find as you read the Bible is that this gentle, compassionate, loving call of our merciful God is written all over the pages of Scripture. It’s probably hard for you to imagine moving from a place of hurt and deep pain to a place of healing. But through Christ, it *is* possible. My hope is that God’s words, as you read them over the coming month, will provoke you to worship him.

If you find this devotional helpful (and I trust that you will!), reread it in different seasons of your life. When hurt or pain resurfaces in your life, work through the devotional again. Read Lauren’s book this coming month, and then come back to it a year from now to remind yourself about what God and the gospel teach us about dealing with your painful past.

After reading and rereading Lauren’s devotional, if you want more gospel-rich resources about dealing with your painful past, she has listed several at the end of the book.

That’s enough for now. Let’s begin.

Deepak Reju

Introduction

“Everyone has something in the past that they’re not proud of.”

“We all come to Christ as broken people.”

“What happened to you in the past doesn’t define you if you are a Christian.”

Have you ever heard statements like these? My guess is that you have, and that they didn’t help you. It’s not that they’re untrue—in fact, they are true—it’s just that when you hear them, they sound like they couldn’t possibly be true *for you*. Sure, everyone has something in their past. But your past, your history, feels different. Sure, other people have sinned or had bad things happen to them, but what happened in your life isn’t a run-of-the-mill story. So while other people might hear those statements and be comforted, you hear them and have a different reaction. Your internal dialogue revs up:

“Yeah, but not everyone has the past I have.”

“Yeah, but some of us are more broken than others.”

“Yeah, but you don’t know how people hurt me. It most certainly set the course for my entire existence.”

These “yeah, buts” are why you picked up this devotional. Though it is true that no one comes to Christ clean, maybe you feel like a special case. Your past seems to stick to you, even though you have heard words of comfort many times before. You might be able to accept that these truths are true for others, but you’re convinced that they can’t possibly be true for you. You hear the words, but no comfort is in them. Nothing seems to shake your sense that you are scarred, dirty, shameful.

And so you’ve decided to read this book. But is it for you?

After all, a “painful past” could mean many different things. Indeed it could. I have written this book for you if

you feel a lot of *regret* about the past—

- choices you wish you had not made
- choices you wish you *had* made
- opportunities you lost
- dreams you did not accomplish
- failed relationships
- missed chances

you were terribly *sinned against* by others—

- who abused you
- who bullied you
- who harmed you emotionally or spiritually
- who were unfaithful to you or betrayed you

your history includes pain borne from *your own sinful choices*—

- sexual immorality
- adultery
- an addiction
- substance abuse

Do you see yourself in one of these lists? Maybe you even see yourself in more than one category. I do. This issue of a painful past is true for so many of God’s people for so many reasons. And thankfully, he has much to say to each of us. The curse of sin reaches far and wide, but the Lord’s kindness and concern go farther still. You and your suffering are on his heart. Because you are on his heart, he stands ready to both comfort you and bring you hope.

The title of this book uses the words *healing* and *moving forward*. Think of these verbs as being in the present progressive tense. What does that mean for us? It means that the process of healing and moving forward is a work in progress. Because it is a work in progress, I have sought to write the book in such a way that it’s helpful to you no matter where God has you on the healing path. It may

be the first time you are seeking to understand and work through your history, or you may have done a lot of work already to heal from the past. No matter where you are, this book can help.

God has already begun his work of healing you, and he will continue to heal you over a lifetime. He uses a myriad of ways and people to help you to grow and flourish. So see this book as one tool he can use to bring about greater healing in your life. It will serve you well alongside other means of grace, such as sharing your life and story with trusted believers or working through your past with a trusted counselor over a season of months.

To prepare you, know that this book may stir up upsetting emotions, especially on days I ask you to think about details of what happened and how you have been impacted. I know both personally and from walking with others in my role as a counselor that facing the past can lead to distress or grief, even if you have reckoned with the past before. To prepare for that possibility, will you identify someone today for you to reach out to if you need to talk? If you find yourself battling hopelessness, that is definitely a time to reach out to someone. I don't want you to face heartache alone.

As you get started, will you also identify small ways to take care of yourself on days you feel sad, such as eating a favorite meal or watching a fun movie? I want you to find some relief and enjoyment if you are struggling. Know, too, that it is OK to step away from this devotional for a day or a few days to get some emotional rest. Go at a pace that makes sense for you.

Although the journey we are on may be hard, I believe it is worth it because it is based on these foundational truths:

- When we carry *a sense of regret* that our lives do not amount to all they could have, the Lord has compassion on our broken hearts. He has compassion for you.
- When we have been *mistreated by others*, the Lord cares and moves toward us. He moves toward you.

- Even when we have incurred suffering and hardship from *our own sins and choices*, God is still turned toward us. He is turned toward you.

My prayer for each of us is that these truths will increasingly become more vivid and precious to us as we venture through each day.

This devotional has four sections. Each works together with the rest to take you through a process of healing. First, we will spend several days considering afresh who our *God* is as a way to build up our faith and hope in him for our thirty-one days together. Next, we will move through considerations about your *past* to help you to wrestle through it and lessen some of the negative, harmful impacts it has had on you. After that, we will look at the *present*—and how God intends your faith to transform your experience of today. He gives you a new story and the right ways to understand yourself. Finally, we will ponder your eternal *future* and practice setting our sights on what will be. This practice is how we can experience both comfort and joy while we wait for God to make all things new.

The Lord is near, so let's entrust our pasts, our hearts, and our very lives to him and begin.

WHO IS YOUR GOD?

DAY 1

God Extends an Invitation

*Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your heart
before him; God is a refuge for us. (Ps. 62:8)*

THINK ABOUT THE last time you received an invitation. Maybe it was an invitation to dinner at a friend's house, a birthday party, or a wedding. Whatever the event, it is nice to receive an invitation because it means you are wanted. You have been included. Your presence matters to the one who sent you the invitation.

In the Bible, God repeatedly finds ways to invite his people to himself. When the invitation comes from him, we can draw similar conclusions. He wants us to come to him. He longs to include us in his plans. Our presence with him matters to him.

In today's Scripture reading, you receive a particular kind of invitation. It's an invitation to pour out your heart. This is a different kind of invitation from ones we're used to. What does this invitation tell us?

First, the invitation implies that your heart is full. If you're anything like me, your heart is filled with a mix of emotions, fears, doubts, and longings. It's not all pretty. It doesn't all make sense. It's messy. It's tangled.

Second, God knows that your heart is tangled and messy, and he still extends an invitation. This tells us a lot about *him*. He's not saying to you, "Get your heart together, and then pour it out to me." He doesn't place that kind of condition on his invitation. Instead, you can come to him as you are. You don't have to come from where you wish you were or as you think you should be. Come as you are right now.

Third, the psalmist also says to trust God at *all* times. He is always trustworthy. He can be trusted with what is in your heart.

Let's put this all together as we begin this devotional. You have a God who wants to hear from you. He already knows what is in your heart—the emotions and hurt from your past that you still carry. He cares about what is there and wants to be near you as you face it. You can trust him with your heart. You can trust him with your messiness. In fact, he is so utterly trustworthy that the psalmist calls him a *refuge*, which is a safe place. He is a safe place for you. Think of the process of reading, reflecting on, and praying through this book as a process of pouring out your heart before God. Each day, God will invite you to bring yourself to him. As you respond to this invitation, trust that you are in the safe refuge of the God who loves you.

Reflect: What is it like for you to receive this invitation to pour out your heart?

Reflect: As you begin a devotional in which you will think about your past, what kinds of feelings and thoughts do you have?

Act: Begin to search for words that describe your heart in relation to your past. Will you share them with God?

DAY 2

God Listens to You

*I waited patiently for the LORD; he inclined
to me and heard my cry. (Ps. 40:1)*

YESTERDAY YOU RECEIVED an invitation to pour out your heart before your God. Today's Scripture is a companion to that invitation. If you are going to pour out your heart to someone—to put words to what is going on inside you—then it's important to trust that the person is listening to you. We all know what it feels like to talk to someone and get the sense that they are not really listening. They are distracted, with a faraway look in their eyes. You ask yourself, "Should I keep talking? Does this person care?" You wrap up what you're saying because there's no point in sharing if the person isn't listening.

If we are going to pour out our hearts, it really matters that the person we choose to speak to is listening. And so the psalmist's declaration about God really matters: the Lord is inclined to you.

Here's a mental picture to help you get a sense of "inclined." If someone is inclined to listen, that person is engaged and present. That person physically leans in toward the speaker. Their lean indicates focus. Their eyes are on the one talking. This is God's posture toward you as you pour out your heart before him. He intently leans in to hear what you have to say. He is undistracted; you have his attention. He values your thoughts and concerns. What is on your heart matters to him, so he is not going to let what you say fall on deaf ears. He cares too much.

He hears your cries. He hears every word. There are likely things that you don't yet have words for. That's OK, because he also understands your every groan (see Rom. 8:26–27). And his hearing isn't the end of the interaction. No, God is going to take

what he hears from you and do something with it on your behalf. Often, all we can offer people is our listening ears, but we can't do much else to help, and we certainly can't change their situation. But God is going to take what he hears from you and help you. We may not know yet what form that help will take. But we can take encouragement from the psalmist, who knew what it was to wait patiently on the Lord. May we who need help wait patiently on the Lord, trusting he is inclined to us.

Over the next several days, we will continue to think about who God is by meeting him in the person of Christ. It is important to have a firm grasp of what our God is really like so that when he speaks to you about your past, it is easier to trust what he says. Jesus is the image of the invisible God (see Col. 1:15), so we will be intentional to notice how he interacts with real people.

Reflect: What is it like for you to picture God leaning in toward you as you pour out your heart to him? How does it make you feel to know that his posture is inclined toward you?

Reflect: When you think about your past, do you have a sense of what kind of help you need from the Lord?

Act: Pray that God will help you to trust him with your heart and to reveal your heart to him. Ask him to help you to be open and receptive to his help over the course of this devotional.

DAY 3

God Spends Time with Broken People

And when Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today.” So he hurried and came down and received him joyfully. And when they saw it, they all grumbled, “He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner.” (Luke 19:5–7)

IN MANY WAYS that are dear to us, Jesus is like us. He identified with us by becoming a human. He lived, worked, rested, and worshiped like we do. But because he was sinless, there are also ways he is *not* like us. This is important. It is easy to slip into thinking that we know what he must be like because we know what people are like. Or we may presume that the way we think and feel about ourselves is the way he thinks and feels about us. Though this is natural to us, we cannot import our understanding of people’s ways into our understanding of who God is. When Jesus came to earth, it was our chance to see what God is really like.

Today’s passage is our first snapshot of how Jesus relates to broken people with painful pasts. To fully appreciate what Jesus does in this interaction, know that Zacchaeus was a dishonorable, highly disliked man. A tax collector, Zacchaeus was widely—and accurately—known as a cheat and a crook. So think about this from a human perspective. If you knew someone like Zacchaeus, would you be friends with him? Go into his home and share a meal with him? I’d be concerned about my reputation. If people saw me with Zacchaeus, what would they think of me? The last place I’d want to be is in his home.

Jesus doesn’t share my concerns. In front of a crowd, he initiates a conversation with Zacchaeus. He’s personal and calls

Zacchaeus by name. Jesus needs a place to stay and chooses Zacchaeus's home. Zacchaeus responds immediately to Jesus's call. He welcomes Jesus to his home. He acknowledges his sinfulness, repents, and identifies a way to make up for how he has mistreated others.

Let's go back to our human way of thinking. We can easily understand the grumblers' words in verse 7. *Why is Jesus willing to be the guest of a sinner?* It would be hard to know the answer to that question if Jesus were like us, a mere man. It makes no sense for Jesus to risk his reputation by associating with Zacchaeus. Surely there is something better he could be doing—*someone* better he could spend his time with. But Jesus isn't like us. He's unafraid of being associated with sinners. *Why?* Because he's holy. And Zacchaeus's unholiness—and our unholiness—is no threat to Jesus. *Holy consumes unholy*¹—but it can't go the other way. The direction is essential. We can't make Jesus unholy with our unholiness, but he can make us holy when he comes close to us and unites with us. That day, Jesus came close to Zacchaeus and united him to the holy life through the forgiveness of sins.

This story ends well. Zacchaeus joyfully responds. His friendship with Jesus makes a new man out of him.

Reflect: How do you think Zacchaeus feels about his past?

Reflect: What sticks out to you in this story about how Jesus interacts with Zacchaeus?

Act: Think about how God relates to broken people, and then write down the words that come to mind. If you were to imagine how Jesus might approach you, how would you envision that interaction?