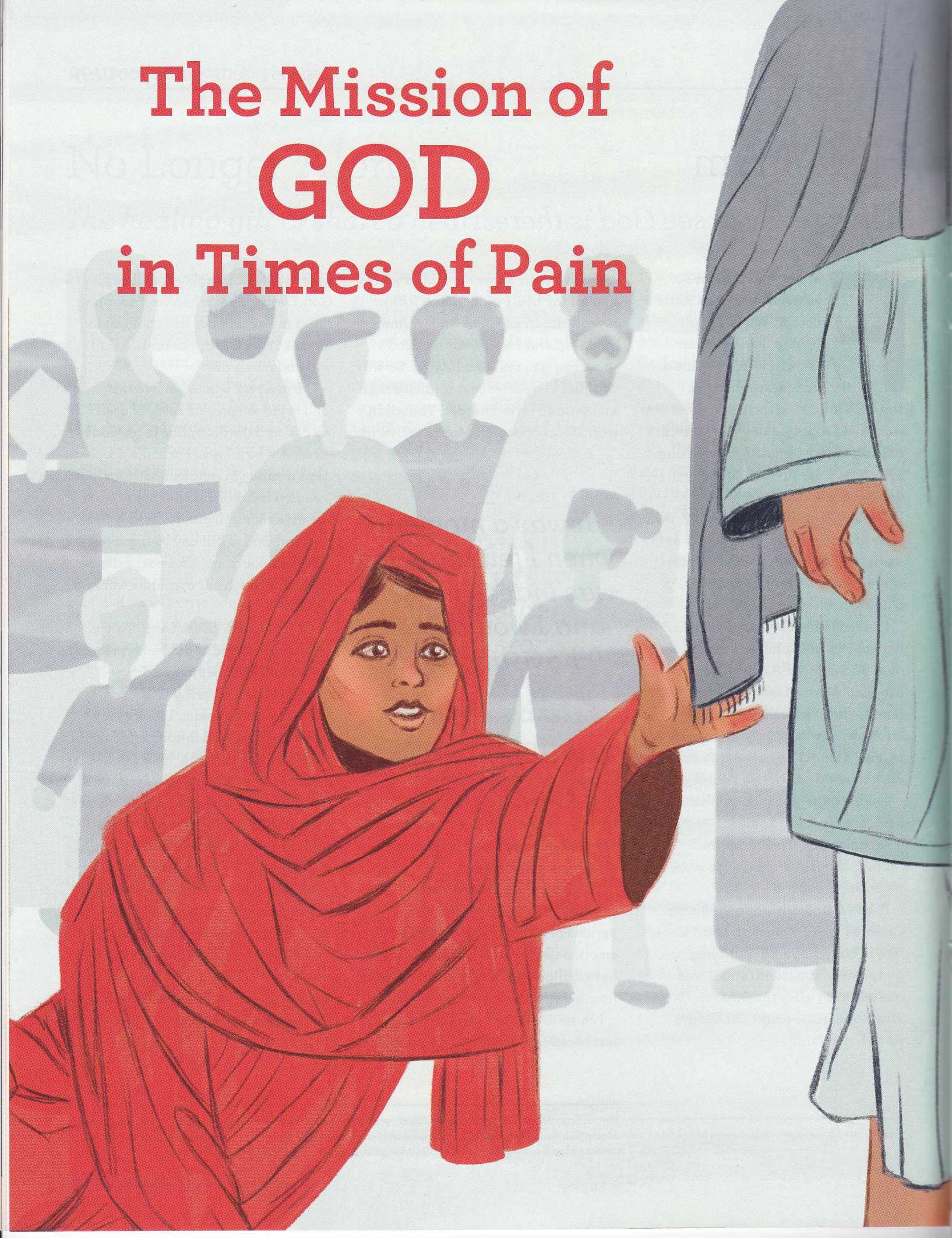
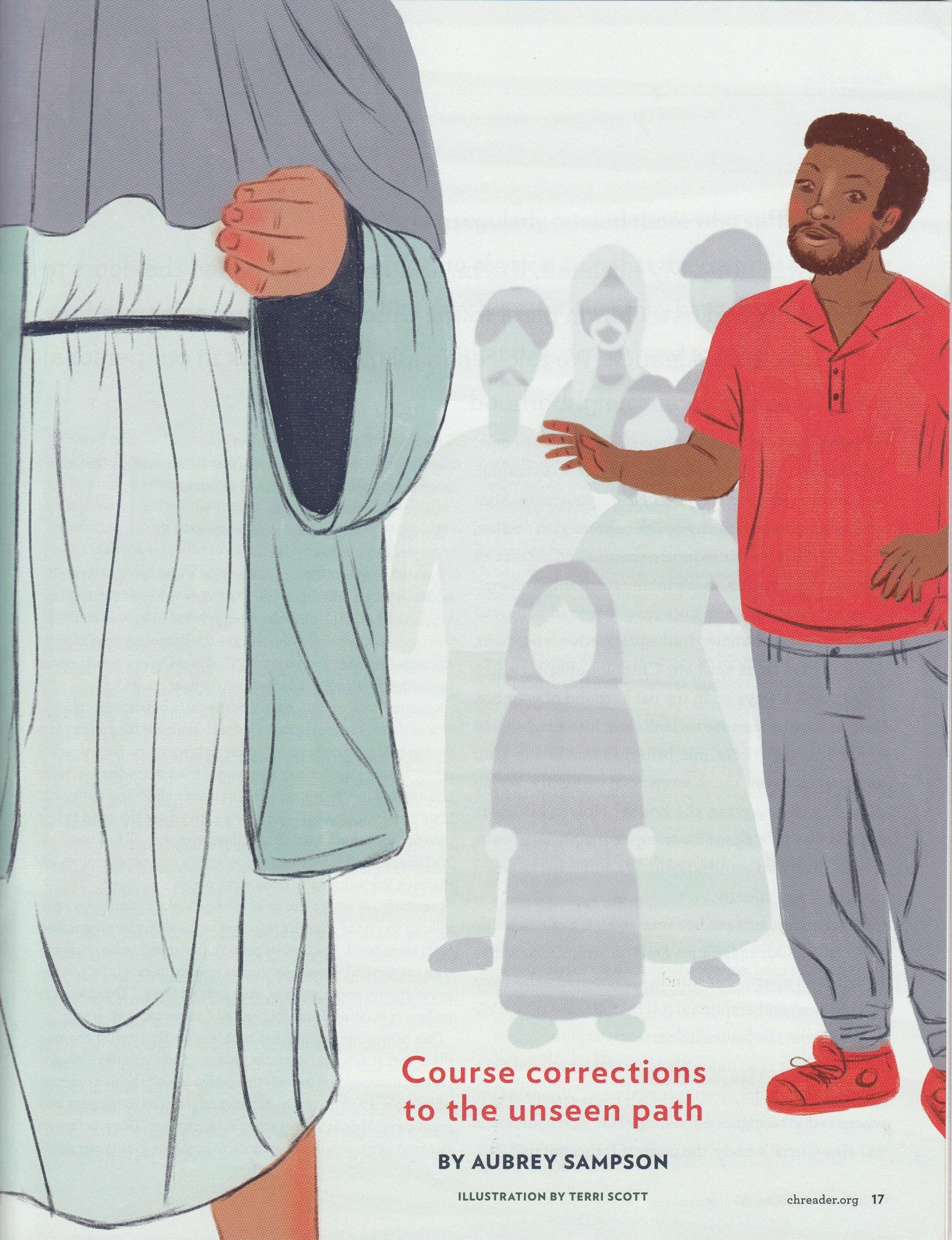


# The Mission of **GOD** in Times of Pain







**Course corrections  
to the unseen path**

**BY AUBREY SAMPSON**

ILLUSTRATION BY TERRI SCOTT



**I**t was 2015. My husband, Kevin, and I had just opened the doors to our brand new church plant in the Chicago area and celebrated my first book's launch. We rejoiced in all of God's work in our personal lives and in our neighborhood.

That same week, I woke up inexplicably unable to walk.

Assuming I had a running injury, I tried the old faithful: rest, ice, compression, elevation. No improvement. After a short hospitalization, my health continued to decline, and I officially had a diagnosis: rheumatoid disease or rheumatoid arthritis, as it's more commonly known.

If you suffer from any lingering season of pain, you know the secret I know. Unlike productive labor pain, ongoing pain leads nowhere. Chronic suffering is like white noise, always on in the background of your life. People move on because we look okay. It's an imposition to ask friends to continue bringing meals day after day after day. How much longer can we justify paying someone else to clean the house? How much more care do we really need? So on top of the physical pain, we feel guilty for wanting help. We suffer in the worst possible way—silently.

We often feel unseen because so much of our battle is invisible. Our marriages feel the strain. Our sense of self falls apart. Our minds and bodies ache from the physical and emotional toll that disease takes. We wonder what the future holds.

In the midst of so much physical and emotional pain, we also experience deep spiritual pain. Where is God when we don't experience healing? Has God abandoned us? Has Christ's body, the church, forgotten us?

### **The Scale-Balancing Problem**

One difficulty with chronic pain is that well-meaning folks almost instinctively want to offer a list of solutions.

"Do you take fish oil?" I do.

"Do you rub magnesium on your joints?" I do.

"Do you avoid gluten?" I do.

But still, I have a chronic illness. That's when people typically respond with something like: "Well, this horrific thing has happened, but just look at the strength God has given you!" Or, "Imagine all the people who will see the gospel because of your example." Some say confidently, "God must have a good reason for not healing you—God wants you to help others."

A pastor friend of mine calls this the scale-balancing problem. "It's as if every encouraging or helpful comment is an attempt to try and balance out the scale," he recently wrote me. Each time we try to "balance the scales," we attempt to answer what is simply unanswerable—the ontological problem of ongoing suffering. If we can somehow help our hurting friend see the good in her pain or a meaning for his illness, then he or she will find comfort. We'll have fixed things momentarily. We can pat ourselves on the back, knowing we've done some good.

I recently sat with a group of evangelical scholars who were talking about the church's response to the sick, also attempting to do some good. The topic of prescription drugs came up, along with the general consensus that we need to be careful about the principalities and powers at work behind them. "The church is no longer trusting Jesus for healing," someone said.

This brings up yet another problem for those with chronic illness; what do we do when the pain goes on every day? What if prescription meds are the only things that actually help us function as husbands and wives, as moms and dads, as employers and employees? Should we feel ashamed about that? Does that mean our faith is too small? Do we need to continue hiding our pain?

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**We can regularly remind those who suffer from ongoing physical pain that they are not alone, that they are seen, that they have dignity, and that they do not have to hide.**

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Instead of offering solutions or “balancing the scales” or holding an academic discussion about the value of prescription medication, perhaps we need to quiet ourselves and join our sick friends on their mourning benches—or at their doctor’s appointments—so they remember God loves them and sees them. Perhaps we need to practice the ministry of presence: the power of being still and silent—bearing witness to and in another’s pain. In so doing, we incarnate the love of Jesus to those who need him most.

### Course Corrections

Recently one of my Zambian friends, Pastor Michell Lee, wrote in a segment for my new book, “You Americans! You never want to long suffer. You just want the pain to end so you can write a good sermon about it.”

He’s right. No matter our church backgrounds, a collective Christian subconscious voice says that we need to handle physical pain, and not just handle it—*handle it well*. We must learn whatever lesson God is trying to teach us so we can hurry up and graduate to the next stage of spiritual maturity. Or we must quickly fix someone else’s pain, so the story can have a happy ending and God can stay in the box we’ve designated for the divine.

What if, instead, we stopped to consider Jesus and his interactions with the chronically ill? The gospels tell us many stories about the healing touch of Jesus. One that stands out is from Luke 8, the story of Jesus and the bleeding woman. She’d spent all of her money on doctors to no avail. All she needed was to touch Jesus in order to experience his healing power. “Someone touched me” he said, “for I noticed that power has gone out from me” (8:45).

Interestingly, this is not a cautionary tale about avoiding the doctor or even a morality story about putting more trust in Jesus than in prescription medicine. This is a profound picture

of the kingdom of God alive in Jesus. In fact, the word “power” here, *dunamis* in Greek, is a word that implies rule. We see, in Jesus’ power over this woman’s chronic illness, a picture of his lordship and his authority over evil.

Jesus healed this woman physically, but we also know that he healed her emotionally. He gave her dignity. He called her “Daughter” (8:48)—a term in Greek that evokes kindness, affection, even encouragement. Jesus sent her on her way with his shalom, his peace and blessing. He healed her economically; no longer would she waste her money on doctors who couldn’t help. He healed her self-worth; no longer would she have to hide in illness from her Jewish brothers and sisters. He gave her salvation—“Your faith has made you well.” Luke recounts the declaration, in front of her entire community, with a Greek word that intertwines the redemptive salvation and the healing wholeness that characterized Jesus’ ministry.

Because of one interaction with Jesus, this chronically ill woman could now walk in society, hold her head high, use her money on that which would sustain her well-being, and experience the saving power of God. Jesus healed her body, her soul, and her entire identity!

Jesus answered her 12 years of suffering—not with reasons, or scale-balancing, or by rushing to wrap her pain up in a pretty little preachable package. He met her suffering with wholeness. This new kind of healing power had never been seen before. As he healed this chronically ill woman, Jesus declared victory over evil. He declared his kingdom-come. He declared his gospel.

We have within us the same Spirit that indwelt Jesus. What if we followed in his footsteps and began healing prayer ministries and support groups specifically designed for the longtime ill? We can organize meal-trains, house-cleanings, errand-running, and baby-sitting. We can send encouraging emails, and even offer financial support.





We can regularly remind those who suffer from ongoing physical pain that they are not alone, that they are seen, that they have dignity, and that they do not have to hide.

What if we actually took our place as the body of Christ, and helped bring healing and wholeness into the lives of those who long suffer? What if we took it upon ourselves to help strengthen their faith in their long, dark days of suffering?

This would minister with *dunamis* to their weary souls. This would powerfully declare the gospel to a hurting world.

This is part of our *missio Dei*, the mission or sending of God—not to provide advice or well-meaning reasons for pain, but to assure the hurting that God has not forgotten them and that we have not forgotten, either.

### The Power of Suffering

While there is a great deal the church can do for the chronically ill, we still have much to learn from them. Those who know daily suffering embody what author Lesley Leland Fields says, “that God came not to save his people from storm and suffering but to save them *through* storm and suffering.”<sup>1</sup>

Just as the bleeding woman’s suffering drew her to Jesus, the chronically ill can teach us that if our pain draws us closer to him, we will be transformed—no matter the outcome of our prayers for healing.

The chronically ill can teach us what it is to endure, what is to experience God’s presence with the crushed and broken. Those who know Jesus in their pain can remind the rest of us that we have an Emmanuel God, so intimately intertwined with suffering that suffering becomes the “*means of which*,” writes N. T. Wright, “the rescuing love of God is poured out into the world.”<sup>2</sup>

Since that fateful week in 2015, I have hobbled to the communion table each Sunday morning alongside my church community, in order to declare this: because of Jesus’ suffering, all of our suffering—chronic or otherwise—will one day cease. My chronic illness has taught me to hope, above all, in him.

### Notes

1. Leslie Leyland Fields, *Crossing the Waters: Following Jesus through the Storms, the Fish, the Doubt, and the Seas* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2016), 189.

2. N. T. Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began: Rediscovering the Meaning of Jesus’s Crucifixion* (New York: HarperOne, 2016), 368.

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# GENUINE WAYS YOU CAN HELP

If you've ever been in a hard season, you know that advice is a tricky thing. It's well meant, of course. But in their attempt to be helpful, a lot of people can say stuff that's, well, not. So if you're walking with someone who's going through some serious pain, here are some genuine ways you can help, without giving advice.

- Know that the hurting person will likely always be a hurting person—from now on. Their physical and emotional pain might become less raw over the years. But chronic disease remains with a person his or her whole life. You cannot fix or take away their suffering. But you can sit beside them as they cry or listen while they talk about their loss. You can allow them to scream and fall down crying and say unedited things without correcting them.
  - Suffering people are afraid that you will either forget their pain or forget their illness. Send cards when you think of it. Remind them that you see them.
  - If you are a church leader, offer to host a support group for those with chronic illness in your community.
  - The person in pain doesn't need you to help steer them to the bright side. In fact, they might need the opposite—validation. Assure them that what they are going through is a big deal—and can be a big deal for as long as they need it to be.
  - Err on the side of coming near. Err on the side of being made a fool. Err on the side of saying I'm sorry more than you should, even if you have nothing to do with their pain. Sometimes the suffering person needs space. But mostly they want to be met where they hurt. Practice the ministry of presence. This is after all what the hurting person wants—friends who are near, who minimize nothing, who lament with.
  - For the person in chronic pain, it can feel like an imposition to ask for help. But they need help. Here are some practical things to offer:
    - “I made dinner/grabbed a latte for you. It's on your front porch.”
    - “Can I come over and pray for you or with you? I won't linger.”
    - “Choose one of the following and I will do it for you today: (a) take your kids away for a couple of hours; (b) do your laundry at my house; (c) take you out for a night out.”
    - “I paid for a housecleaner to come to your house this week.”
- You get the idea. Generally speaking, practical help and lots of compassion are all you need to offer.