

The
Storm-Tossed
Family

How the Cross Reshapes
the Home

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CHAPTER ONE

The Storm-Tossed Family

THIS BOOK IS NAMED FOR a song I hate. And, Lord knows, I love songs. I grew up with the lyrics of songs all around me, the most vivid of which were those sung every Sunday in the little red-brick church I attended, multiple times every week. Many of those hymns I find myself singing at the most surprising of moments. I will find myself turning to them whenever I am at a moment of personal crisis—when I need to be reminded that God loves me “just as I am”—or at a moment of temptation—when I must remind myself that “I have decided to follow Jesus”—or at a moment of joy, when I want to sing out, “How marvelous! How wonderful!” There’s one I never sing to myself; though, like the others, I could sing it by heart, if asked.

The chorus of the hymn goes: “Place your hand in the nailed-scarred hand.” I would say that perhaps the hymn is too sentimental, but lots of them were, ones that I still treasure. I would say it’s because the hymn starts off with a mixed metaphor of a question—“Have you failed in your plan of your storm-tossed life?” But it’s hardly alone on that front either. I suppose it’s because the song doesn’t seem to

make sense in terms of what it's saying with how it's sung. The chorus is exuberant and light, almost like a commercial jingle, and yet the words are about the gruesomely sober reality reaching out to a hand spiked over with bloody scabs. That doesn't seem to fit.

Even so, that hymn kept emerging in my memory as I wrote this book, and for a long time I didn't know why. At first, I thought it was obvious. This is a book about the family, but family in light of the cross. My subconscious was mining up this old hymn because I was talking about the cross. And yet, my mind is filled with cross songs about Jesus and crosses and blood—fountains filled with blood, being washed in the blood, finding power in the blood. It wasn't until much later that I realized: what I was grasping for somewhere in my hidden psyche was not the imagery of nails or scars, but that of the storm.

As with blood, my revivalist church tradition had plenty of songs about storms—about being lifted out of stormy waters, about lighthouses beckoning ships in from the storm, about houses built on solid rocks, able to withstand the gale of the winds and the rain. That makes sense. The Bible, after all, is filled with these images, of thunder and tumult and storms. The world of the Bible was, after all, an agrarian one, in which the survival of nations and tribes and villages and families was dependent upon rain. And the sea was the embodiment of chaos and disorder and peril. Those who sailed upon the water could harbor no illusions that they had control over the ocean, especially if they were battered back and forth by a suddenly emerging storm.

No wonder, then, that the ancient nations surrounding the people of God so often made idols out of storms. Many of their gods were fertility deities, who would bring forth rain if they were appeased enough. The storms that could arrive in that ancient Middle Eastern world could communicate all sorts of things about the idols. They could bring rain enough to save you from starvation, but the fire and thunder could also scare you into remembering they could kill you too. One would cry out to these gods for rain, but one could

also be willing to sacrifice a human life to still a boat-capsizing storm (Jonah 1:11–15). Even in delusion, the nations could recognize something quite true: that bound up in a storm is both a blessing and a curse. And in both the blessing of rain, and the peril of the storm, we lose all of our illusions of control.

Family is like that too: the source of life-giving blessing but also of excruciating terror, often all at the same time. Likewise, this is also true of the cross. In the cross, we see both the horrific curse of sin, the judgment of God, and the blessing of God in saving the world (Gal. 3:13–14). At the cross, Jesus confronted both the “joy that was set before him” and at the same time was found “despising the shame” (Heb. 12:2). These families of ours can be filled with joy, but will always make us vulnerable to pain. And the joy and the pain are pointing us to the same place: the cross. Nothing can show you that you are loved and that you belong like family—and nothing can strip away your crafted pretensions and comforting illusions like family. Regardless of whether, as Jesus put it, one’s house is built on sinking sand or solid rock, the storms that come with being part of families can make us feel as though we are lost to the howling winds around us. And, with family, just as in a tempest at sea, we inevitably realize that we are helpless to do anything about our plight.

For those of us in Christ, though, storms should be no surprise. They need not panic us, nor need they destroy us. The worst thing that can happen to you is not whatever you went through with your mother or father. The worst thing that can happen to you is not your sister who won’t speak to you. The worst thing that can happen to you is not a spouse walking out on you, or cheating on you, or dying on you. The worst thing that can happen to you is not seeing your child rebel against you, or even attending your child’s funeral, as awful as all those things are. The worst thing that can happen to you is dying under the judgment of God, bearing the full weight of the sentence of death and hell. If you are in Christ, that’s already happened to you. You are not only a survivor; you are a beloved child,

an heir of everything. Even so, it's hard to remember all of that when your life seems to be reeling back and forth on stormy seas.

Whatever your storms, though, you are not in uncharted waters. Psalm 107 speaks to this evocatively. "Some went down to the sea in ships, doing business on the great waters; they saw the deeds of the LORD, his wondrous works in the deep," the psalmist writes. "For he commanded and raised the stormy wind, which lifted up the waves of the sea. They mounted up to heaven; they went down to the depths; their courage melted away in their evil plight; they reeled and staggered like drunken men who were at their wits' end" (Ps. 107:23–27). But the psalm does not end there. "Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress. He made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed" (Ps. 107:28–29).

The disciples of Jesus must have thought of this passage as they rocked back and forth in a sudden storm on the waters of Galilee. The panic in their minds and voices is palpable, especially in Mark's rendering of the moment. Jesus, though, was asleep on a cushion. The disciples cannot be blamed for resenting this, for crying out "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" (Mark 4:38). Jesus woke up, but not with the adrenaline-pumping alarm that most of us would expect. He spoke to the storm: "Peace! Be still." And it was gone. Elsewhere, the same pattern would be repeated. The boat was in a storm, "beaten by the waves, for the wind was against them" (Matt. 14:24). Jesus, again, was preternaturally calm, walking out on the storm-tossed waters themselves. When Peter attempted to join him, though, he was knocked down, not so much by the storm as by his own panic. "But when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, 'Lord, save me'" (Matt. 14:30). Jesus, of course, grabbed him by the hand. In this, of course, Jesus was doing what he would do for all of us. He would endure the sign of Jonah, go into the storm of sin and death and hell, and take us by the hand to pull us out, safely toward home. Jesus was not panicked by the storms around him because he was headed into another storm, the really scary one, at the cross. The more that I think of it, maybe the

question, “Have you failed in the plans of your storm-tossed life” isn’t loaded with a mixed metaphor after all. Maybe it makes more sense than I knew. Maybe that’s why I couldn’t write this book without humming that tune.

* * * *

Someone who chose the hymns in our church must have liked “The Nail-Scarred Hand,” because we sang it so much. I never hear it now, and I can’t really say that I miss it. The reason the song persists in my memory isn’t the song, but two things that went with it: the message of the cross and the context of a family. The imagery in the song might be trite in some places, but the central picture is visceral—the hand that reaches out to us is scarred, and scarred not with abstractions but with nails. The other reason it lingers is because of who sang it with me—a church family of people I can see in my mind right now, and I could tell you exactly where most of them sat on any given Sunday morning. I probably muttered along with that song while on my mother’s lap as an infant or playing with my father’s watch as a small boy. That seems to fit because that’s what this book is about. We are shaped and formed by family, in all sorts of routine and unexceptional ways that we may never even notice or remember. There’s the joy, and there’s the danger.

I don’t know your situation. I do know, though, that you are part of a family—a past or present or future family, even if you don’t know any of the names or faces of anyone in that family. Someone has shaped you. Someone is shaping you. Someone will shape you. And I also know this: sometimes whatever home you make for yourself will seem to be tossed about in an uncontrollable storm. To make it through, we must recognize why family is so important to us, and why family can never be ultimate to us. We must see the family clearly, but we must see beyond it. The only safe harbor for a storm-tossed family is a nail-scarred home.

