

## Life Story: The Ring

by Andi

I dropped to my knees when I got to the side of my bed. It was time to end the day, but I couldn't yet. The ring had to come off. It was time.

That afternoon, a judge had declared my divorce final. Though the demise of our marriage had appeared inevitable for a while, I hadn't stopped wearing my wedding ring, a symbol of my confidence that no matter how hopeless things looked, God could turn them around in an instant. But now here I was, thirty years later, kneeling alone by the side of my bed. I sobbed, but it wasn't the sorrow I dissolved as these images were eclipsed by an overwhelming awareness of God's faithfulness to me through it all. Never had I felt abandoned by him. Confused by his allowing life to be excruciatingly hard for so long when I knew he could restore? Yes. On the verge of complete mental, emotional, and physical collapse at times? Yes. Like I had lost my bearings spiritually? Yes.

In fact, one night it all came to a head and I experienced a true spiritual crisis. Where was this God I had been counting on? Was he real? If he was, did he care? I was in no shape to compose an articulate prayer. There was a lot of sobbing and groaning. When I could form words, I cried out, "I could never watch someone I love suffer like this and not stop it! You say you love me, but I can't square that with what I see happening. This feels cruel. I've got to know you are who you say you are or I cannot go on." I didn't need to know his reasons . . . I needed Him.

The next morning, wise words from a trusted friend came to me: "Andi, you need to force-feed yourself the Scriptures. Through them the Holy Spirit can speak to places in your heart where human words just can't reach."

I needed to be touched that deeply, so the next morning I opened my Bible. My eyes fell on these words in Psalms: "You, O

God, are strong, and you, O Lord, are loving." They came like smelling salts to my fainting heart, silencing torturous fear and doubt. My heart was infused with a deep assurance that He loved me and was very near. I was immediately steadied. It didn't matter anymore that I couldn't square this with what I saw unfolding in my life.

Kneeling by my bed that night, my heart broke, unable to contain my gratitude for God's persistent love through a mess that should have driven him away. . . . Instead he came closer than ever.

As I slipped the ring off, a prayer poured from my heart. "Now I want to give you the devotion I thought I would be giving to an earthly husband. You alone are worthy of my whole heart's trust, and it's yours for the rest of my life."

How could a vow of such loving trust pour from a heart that had just lost so much . . . and be made to the One who had been my only hope? The only explanation is that while so much was dying, something was coming to life.

I had been changed by the experience of this unstoppable love constantly moving toward me when I was coming to him with nothing to offer but weakness, confusion, and need. I cannot adequately explain what happened. I just know that, in the end, this prayer was the only possible response.

As I got up off my knees and climbed into bed, I thought, *I should get myself a new ring to remind me of this vow I've made to the Lord tonight.*

The next morning, I met with a group of women with whom I had been meeting weekly for prayer. We never talked a lot about what we were going to pray for, we just prayed.

During the time of silence with which we always began, I noticed one of them coming over and kneeling in front of my chair. She took a ring off her finger, held it out to me, and said, "I feel like the Lord wants you to have this ring. He wants you to know that you are his beloved, and he is betrothing himself to you for the rest of your life. He will be your protector and provider. He will never leave you or forsake you. He will be with you forever."

The ring she handed me was much more beautiful and valuable than any ring I would have gotten myself. I had mentioned nothing about getting a new ring.

I can't tell you how many times, in the years since, a glance at that ring calmed my fear, filled my loneliness, and comforted me in grief.

I wanted a ring to remind me of my commitment to the Lord. Instead, I ended up with one that will forever remind me of his commitment to me.

## EIGHT

### The Reason for Suffering

*Lord, with what care hast thou begirt us round! . . .*

*Pulpits and Sundays, sorrow-dogging sin,*

*Afflictions sorted, anguish of all sizes,*

*Fine nets and stratagems to catch us in.*

George Herbert, "Sin"

Peter Berger says that all people and cultures long to "bestow meaning on the experience of suffering and evil." I have been arguing that no culture or worldview has ever done this with the thoroughness of Christianity. According to Christian theology, suffering is not meaningless—neither in general nor in particular instances. For God has purposed to defeat evil so exhaustively on the cross that all the ravages of evil will someday be undone and we, despite participating in it so deeply, will be saved. God is accomplishing this not in spite of suffering, agony, and loss but *through* it—it is through the suffering of God that the suffering of humankind will eventually be overcome and undone. While it is impossible not to wonder whether God could have done all this some other way—without allowing all the misery and grief—the cross assures us that, whatever the unfathomable counsels and purposes behind the course of history, they are motivated by love for us and absolute commitment to our joy and glory.

So suffering is at the very heart of the Christian faith. It is not only the way Christ became like and redeemed us, but it is one of the main ways we become like him and experience his redemption. And that