

Stay.

Also by AmyLu Riley

Jesus as Healer: Miracles and Meditations in Luke

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Stay.

why i'm still here

a *spiritual* memoir

AMYLU RILEY

Published by
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*For my Father God,
who is causing even this to work for my good*

Even when I walk
through the darkest valley,
I will not be afraid,
for you are close beside me.
Your rod and your staff
protect and comfort me.

Psalm 23:4

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Preface

The Bible says “a wise person thinks a lot about death” (Ecclesiastes 7:4), so I don’t try to skip over those thoughts. I have written many journal entries about walking through the darkest valley, and even after those times ended, I still thought about the experience.

It did not frighten me there, but it was a *sad* place. It was a dark place—not in the sense of evil, but in the sense of sadness. And it was very quiet there. *Very* quiet.

God is there. He was always there with me. Where the valley is so narrow that it seems no one else can walk in it, God is *never* absent.

God’s rod and staff^t did comfort me, because he is a *good* shepherd. When I could not see ahead of me through the thick mists in that place, I could always trust him.

I had faith as I entered the valley, and I kept faith as I walked through it, but my faith was changed. That isn’t a place that one emerges from unchanged. Scripture says that “sadness has a refining influence on us” (Ecclesiastes 7:3).

I am not in that valley anymore. Eventually, God will likely lead me through it again, and, at some point, even through death itself. But God has already been there—and already conquered death—and so, even there, I will trust him because he knows the way through it.

In these pages are journal entries of some of my experiences from the darkest valleys I have walked. Some, recorded during the actual experience, are written in present tense. Others, penned afterward as I wrote to understand my experience, are recounted in past tense. I have

left the two side-by-side, because I find that to try to change them now is to rewrite an experience that cannot be rewritten.

I hope these writings bring you encouragement and comfort, by clarifying and fortifying your faith and trust in God. That is my purpose in sharing them.

Introduction

From my vantage point inside the body, it didn't feel or appear that the mortal part of me could remain viable enough to stay. And my body wanted to go.

My spirit, however, was sure that it *wasn't* time for me to leave. Dying before having fulfilled my purpose in this life was not acceptable to me. My human spirit opposed the body's palpable pull toward Heaven, knowing—and adamant—that it was necessary for me to stay and complete my lifework (Ephesians 2:10).

My spirit's resolve remained firm, and I *did* live, but—it appeared to me—without being otherwise healed. Living this way was difficult and paradoxical.

My aim was singular: I wanted God to show me what I needed to accomplish here so that I could do it and go home.

But God didn't want a transaction. He wanted a restoration.

He wanted me to know his affection in a new way while I was yet in the land of the living. He wanted to restore my crushed spirit with his compassion and hold my head close to his chest, so I could hear that his very heart beats with love for me.

He wanted to plant seeds of life in my heart again, in soil that had died.

Stay.

Part 1

In Which

I Stay

Untied

I have never been dead, nor have I seen myself from the outside like those stories you hear about people floating above their own bodies and watching themselves on operating tables. Those are not experiences I have ever had.

But when I say that my spirit was outside my body at a point in time, I am not speaking metaphorically. It was an actual reality that I could perceive, although I didn't know by what sense I perceived it. I became aware of its change of position gradually during the time of a serious physical setback.

Similarly to the way you know whether or not your right foot is touching the ground even when you're not looking at it, through the physical sense of proprioception, I knew through a sort of spiritual proprioception that my spirit, although still tethered to my body (Ecclesiastes 12:6), wasn't touching the ground with the rest of me anymore. There was nothing frightening or painful or mysterious about this untying (that is the term I used for it then), it just *was*. And for some time.

I see from a biblical account by the physician Luke that this is a real thing that *can* happen. In his report, a sick girl's spirit had left her body, returning to it after Jesus healed her: "Then her spirit returned, and she arose immediately" (Luke 8:55 NKJV). Before my own experience, I had not known that such a state could occur while one was alive and conscious. (I also probably wouldn't have believed anyone who talked

about it, and I still might not. I'm still not even sure I want to relay my experience with it, except that it ended up being important to the rest of my life.)

I don't know why it happened. Maybe it is the natural order of things for a human spirit to change its position when the body is in a certain degree of mortal peril. (Possibly there is a parallel to be drawn between a spirit getting in position to depart and the way a physical fetus changes position to prepare for birth *into* this world.)

But it was in *that* context and situation—with my body appearing to be making moves toward the door—that my spirit asserted itself, overruled everything in the visible world, and plainly and firmly refused to be done here.

God, I am not leaving this earth until I have done what you put me here for. I have not finished it, and I am not leaving.

I was a little shocked, frankly, at having spoken this way to God. But if he minded, he didn't let on.

The next thing that happened was that I didn't die. But I also wasn't healed.

Nothing seemed to have changed.

In the Valley of the Shadow

Heal my body that hovers so close to death without being pulled back from the precipice. I am dearly weary of lingering around this dark pit, when I am a child of the King, created to live on a mountaintop and sing with joy and bask in the smile of my Father God.

For a long time I had thought I could fix everything with the right healing course of action, and then I could get on with doing God's will for my life. So far my body had proven me wrong.

My joy is not to be found. Darkness swarms. I sigh deeply. My tears are even tired of coming out; they know they could accomplish nothing. They stay inside, wound into a ball like yarn, not even bothering to use up the energy to unwind and land on my eyes and cheeks.

I think there is a spoof movie in which a damsel is trapped on the railroad tracks, and a train is coming, yet every time the camera angle changes to show the train, it's still no closer to her. She just continues to be in mortal peril, without rescue or conclusion, as time drags on and on. Like this feels.

Or maybe it is more like crashing waves, as the sons of Korah wrote:

I hear the tumult of the raging seas
as your waves and surging tides sweep over me.

Psalm 42:7

When I'm under the water, I can't even see the waves that keep me down. Some situations in this human experience present as so all-encompassing that it's impossible to broaden my perspective enough to even fully recognize them, let alone begin to adequately describe them. I think that spending at least some time walking in the valley of the shadow of death is one of those. That's why I appreciate that Scripture doesn't shy away from talking about it.

I consider Jesus, anguished, in the garden, praying desperately for escape from his cup of suffering—for another way. He “was in such agony of spirit that his sweat fell to the ground like great drops of blood” (Luke 22:44). Christ knew he faced a harrowing death (Matthew 16:21; Matthew 20:17–19), and he dreaded the suffering.

Jesus's example humanity makes something very clear to me, which is also confirmed by the life and death of every believer I've read about in Scripture: *I'm not the owner of my life. God is.*

Jesus aligned with God's will, no matter what that was. Christ took a larger view, and that included willingness to accept either death or life from the Father's hand. Even life in which the Son's problems were not removed.

Buried Alive

God, I have no idea why you have kept my body going. It is not healed, but it is alive.

My fears about the future pile onto today. In my weariness of body and spirit, despair stacks on top of me and presses me into the ground, toward the grave and death.

Overwhelmed, I had forgotten that “today’s trouble is enough for today” (Matthew 6:34).

Distressed, I had forgotten that “God has not given us a spirit of fear and timidity, but of power, love, and self-discipline” (2 Timothy 1:7).

Weak and hurting, I had somehow forgotten to shift these burdens off myself. I just lay underneath them like someone trapped under a rockslide.

Later, I wondered how I could have possibly forgotten—for what seemed like a long time—to “Give all your worries and cares to God, for he cares about you” (1 Peter 5:7). I wondered how I had been subtly tricked into being so afraid, when we “have not received a spirit that makes you fearful slaves” (Romans 8:15).

David’s Psalm 143 prayer revealed that I was not the first believer to find himself buried in that way. David—spirit drained, in despair, nearly at the end of his rope, and within an inch of his life—prayed:

Listen to this prayer of mine, GOD;
pay attention to what I'm asking.
Answer me—you're famous for your answers!
Do what's right for me.

The enemy hunted me down;
he kicked and stomped me within an inch of my life.
He put me in a black hole,
buried me like a corpse in that dungeon.
I sat there in despair, my spirit draining away,
my heart heavy, like lead.
I remembered the old days,
went over all you've done, pondered the ways you've worked,
Stretched out my hands to you,
as thirsty for you as a desert thirsty for rain.

Hurry with your answer, GOD!
I'm nearly at the end of my rope.
Don't turn away; don't ignore me!
That would be certain death.
If you wake me each morning with the sound of your loving voice,
I'll go to sleep each night trusting in you.
Point out the road I must travel;
I'm all ears, all eyes before you.
Save me from my enemies, GOD—
you're my only hope!
Teach me how to live to please you,
because you're my God.
Lead me by your blessed Spirit
into cleared and level pastureland.

Keep up your reputation, God—give me life!
In your justice, get me out of this trouble!
In your great love, vanquish my enemies;
make a clean sweep of those who harass me.
And why? Because I'm your servant.

I prayed my own Psalm 143 prayer:

Spirit faint. Heart dismayed. Hands spread out.

Spirit fails. Show me the way I should go. To you I lift up my soul.

Rescue. Teach. Lead. Preserve. Bring me out of trouble.

God, I am not at peace. My soul is not kept in perfect peace. I commit all things into your hands and ask you to put me at peace.

Vortex

“My days are over.
My hopes have disappeared.
My heart’s desires are broken.”

Job 17:11

Job, brother, I feel like I've been there. When not being restored felt like the end of everything. When all the loss from the past, present, and future met at a single point in time, pouring into the heart until the vessel seemed to expand and then break, overflowing.

Every bereavement I would ever experience—even those not yet realized—crashed toward me and converged at a dark vortex of fear, pain, and grief.

Their blackness and pain rushed in like air into a vacuum, except they *were* the vacuum, sucking the oxygen from my soul. Deaths of my loved ones, I grieved as if they were fresh—although in reality, the persons I mourned were still alive and well on this earth. How my present loss had attracted the future pain of all other losses to come, I don't know; maybe this is what a black hole *really* is. But I grieved it all. Every day when I awoke, it all rushed in again.

Plans? The shattered pieces of my plans could not even be picked up, they were so many and so small and sharp. Even a broom could not carry them all away, and the tiniest shards caught the sunlight, reflecting pain and mocking into my eye.

The desires of my heart? How can a heart have room for desires when it has filled with and been burst by pain? When the spirit is broken and the mind sees only death ahead (Job 17:1)?

Doesn't having desires in one's heart require having *hope for this life*? The only hope I had left was for God to carry me to the next life. I had no hope left for this one, except him.

Desire has to do with life on earth, and when one "despairs even of life," as Paul says (2 Corinthians 1:8, author's paraphrase), then there is little useful function left for desires of the heart—except a few.

I see that one desire of the heart that must remain, as Jesus modeled, is to be willing to commit one's spirit into the Father's hands, as well as to forgive (Luke 23:46, 34). Job, also, had those desires.

Job had something else, too: some kind of paradoxical hope.

"God has blocked my way so I cannot move.
He has plunged my path into darkness.
He has stripped me of my honor
and removed the crown from my head.
He has demolished me on every side, and I am finished.
He has uprooted my hope like a fallen tree."

Job 19:8–10

"If I wait for the grave as my house,...
Where then is my hope?
As for my hope, who can see it?"

Job 17:13, 15 (NKJV)

Job's hope had been torn out by its roots. Yet, he rejected the idea that his hope would be fulfilled *only in death*. He knew, in a way he didn't describe and likely couldn't have explained, that it wasn't yet time for him to die, even though the physical evidence pointed to the

contrary and he would have been relieved to let death carry him away. But even though he longed to be free of his body of pain, and could see death as the only logical outcome of his situation, he refused to place his hope in the coming release of death (Job 17:13, 15). However, Job also reserved no hope for this life—he expressed no anticipation of healing or of a restored life on earth (Job 17:1, 11). Job hoped in neither death nor life.

Yet, even while he was broken in every way, Job did still have two hopes.

One of his hopes was related to accomplishing God's will for Job's own earthly purpose—although Job may not have recognized it as such at the time. Job expressed a desire (Job 19:23) that his words be recorded, written on a scroll. And that prayer was answered; Job's words *were* recorded—and *became part of Scripture*.

Job, you probably didn't even realize you were praying God's will when you made that plea that sounds like a cry for some small measure of justice from God (Job 19:7) and understanding from humans (Job 19:5). Look how your prophetic prayer was answered, Job. Your words—all of them that came at such a high price—were important to God, and he wanted your entire story told to all people, in your age and the age to come. God would use it to crush the lies that your friends believed, and he would use it to uphold the truths that came from your lips about him. He wanted all of us—including the people in my own generation—to read the whole story and to see that if you had died when you wanted to, that the story of your life wouldn't have been complete at all. He wanted generations to hear his words to you and to understand that what he is doing in and through our lives is so much bigger than we are. I think that he even used your story to encourage Jesus in the completion of his earthly mission—his high calling that would eventually save you and is saving all of us who believe.

The second hope that Job never let go—something that never broke amidst all else that was breaking—was his eternal hope in God.

“But as for me, I know that my Redeemer lives,
and he will stand upon the earth at last.
And after my body has decayed,
yet in my body I will see God!
I will see him for myself.
Yes, I will see him with my own eyes.
I am overwhelmed at the thought!”

Job 19:25–27

God, I see now that whether Job had lived or died at that point, his hope in you would not have failed him. He wanted you more than he wanted his own life.

It is not the ending of Job's story that should build my faith. Rather, I should glean from the hardest part of his story that whatever you allow, the important thing—the only thing—is to trust and hope in you alone. Whether Job had died without healing, had lived a long time without earthly restoration, or had lived fully restored (as you happened to choose for him to do), his hope in you would have been fulfilled. His faith had never been and would never be dependent on his circumstances; you proved that conclusively.

Job's response—his trust in you no matter what the outcome for him personally (Job 13:15)—was the right response. That was the only thing that mattered.

At the time when things looked and felt—and were—so bad that all Job wanted was death (Job 6:8–9; 7:15–16)—and to never have been born (Job 10:18–19), God *was* getting ready to turn the tide in his life. Job's life was far from being over, and, contrary to all he had feared, his earthly life was not all going to get worse from here. This nadir of Job's life was

just part of something God was doing in and through that particular life.

I see that God isn't doing exactly the same thing in every life. He might choose to do something completely different in my life—something in which the latter part is not more blessed than the first (Job 42:12).

Would I trust him anyway?

End of Sample

Stay is available on Amazon.com.

About AmyLu Riley



AmyLu Riley is a writer whose love of the Bible has, for many years, spilled over into stacks of notebooks filled with her reflections on Scripture. She lives in Indiana with her husband.

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