



HOPE-FILLED CHOICES  
WHEN LIFE TURNS UPSIDE DOWN

A NEW KIND  
*of*  
NORMAL

CAROL KENT

A PDF COMPANION TO THE AUDIOBOOK

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one

## SYMPATHY CARDS AND RAZOR WIRE



*When Despair Tries to Take Me Under . . .*  
I CHOOSE LIFE

1. How do you define the word *normal*? Are you someone who appreciates a predictable pattern in life, or do you adjust well to sudden change, good or bad?
2. Looking back on your life, what was a "normal" Christmas like for you? Do you have happy memories of that holiday, or was it often a challenging season?
3. Briefly describe a time when an unexpected crisis meant your life was not going to turn out as planned. What were your feelings at the time? Did you deal with the situation in a constructive or destructive way? Be specific.
4. Think about your view of Scripture. Have you encountered a time when it's been challenging to believe Jesus came to bring us abundant life? Jesus proclaimed, "I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly" (John 10:10 KJV). What does "abundant life" look like when you are living in a new kind of normal? Does this Scripture encourage you, or does it frustrate you?

5. Mary, the mother of Jesus, faced what some might say is the ultimate pain for a mother to endure—watching her son die an excruciating death by crucifixion. Which is harder for you: to suffer yourself or to accept that people you love are suffering? On a scale of 1 to 10 (with 10 being highest), how do you rate your ability to encourage others to hold on to hope when their lives have taken a downward turn? Identify one person whom you will intentionally encourage to hold on to hope this week. Write down what you will do to provide tangible help for someone who is living in a new kind of normal.
6. Think about Ken Gire's statement: "When suffering shatters the carefully kept vase that is our lives, God stoops to pick up the pieces. But he doesn't put them back together as a restoration project patterned after our former selves. Instead, he sifts through the rubble and selects some of the shards as raw material for another project—a mosaic that tells the story of redemption." It usually takes a long time to find meaning and purpose when you are living in the middle of devastating circumstances. If you are up to writing the story of how God is helping you to find "redemption" in the midst of an experience that has altered or outright shattered your dreams, journal about how He used the "shards" in your experience as the raw material for a renewed ability to choose life—perhaps not the life you expected but the "redemptive life" you now have. If it's too early in your journey to chronicle what happened, that's okay. For now, decide to move in the direction of life instead of slipping into self-pity, debilitating doubt, and the stranglehold of fear. Choosing life is the first step in getting a foothold in your own new kind of normal.



two

## THE BATTLE OF THE MIND AND HEART



*When I Wonder What God Could Possibly  
Be Thinking . . . I CHOOSE TRUST*

1. When you were growing up, who was the person you trusted the most? What built that trust relationship? Did it remain intact, or did something happen to destroy the trust? Did your early trust in a person influence your ability or inability to trust God as an adult?
2. How do you define trust today? How does trust impact your daily decisions—for yourself, and for your family and close friends?
3. Proverbs 3:5–6 says, “Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.” In your experience, what does that passage mean? Has there been a situation in your life when you made a decision based on your own understanding instead of allowing God to reveal a clarified plan for the future as you rested in His wisdom? Your response might not have involved a major life-altering decision, but it may have been a time when you wanted to fix a problem that wasn’t turning out the way you anticipated. What was the result?

4. Karan Gleddie's moving story deals with betrayal by a family member. Have you ever been in a situation when the people you thought you could trust the most failed you during a time when you were emotionally, financially, or spiritually needy? If so, how did you respond? If your own situation did not have a favorable resolution, how did you hold on to trust in God? (It's okay to say you are still struggling!)
5. Earlier in this chapter, you read Brennan Manning's unique perspective on trust: "Ruthless trust ultimately comes down to this: faith in the person of Jesus and hope in His promise. In spite of all disconcerting appearances, we stare down death without nervousness and anticipate resurrection solely because Jesus has said, 'You have my word on it.'" How does the power of the Resurrection impact the state of your mind and heart when circumstances tempt you to question what God has allowed to happen in your life?
6. What would you like to express to God as a result of reading this chapter? As honestly as you can, write a prayer that expresses your questions regarding trust issues, along with your affirmation of what you are clinging to in your quest to trust God, whether or not you can see the next chapter in your own new kind of normal.

three

## A PROLONGED JOURNEY



*When I Desperately Want Relief from  
Unrelenting Reality . . .*

I CHOOSE PERSEVERANCE

1. How do you typically deal with situations that involve waiting? Your answer could deal with something as simple as sitting in the waiting room of a doctor's office or as important as waiting to find out whether you're going to be offered a job. What do you do "in the meantime" when there is an unwanted time period between your desire for action and the unknown result?
2. How does your response to waiting during this stage of your life differ from the way you waited as a teenager or as a young adult? What is the difference between waiting and perseverance, or do you think these words are synonyms? Do you value an answer more if you've had to wait for it for a long time? What are the benefits of waiting?

3. The Bible says that “suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us” (Rom. 5:3–5). When have you experienced the above progression in your life—a time when perseverance led to character and character led to hope? If you’re not there yet, it’s okay. This process doesn’t usually happen overnight. Do you feel you are still struggling with the “waiting” part of perseverance, or have you moved into a time of character development, or are you now in a place where you have experienced hope that you can communicate to others? Why do you think suffering leads to perseverance?
4. When you desperately want relief from unrelenting reality, what do you usually do? Some of the ways I’ve tried to cope before I finally get to a biblical resolution are denying I have a problem, drowning myself in work, eating a big bag of potato chips or a large candy bar, casting blame on someone who should have “been there” to help prevent the problem, or going to the movies and escaping into someone else’s life for a couple of numbing hours.
5. Do you agree or disagree with author Jan Frank: “Waiting in hope means that we rest our faith and expectation, not in what God will do for us, but on God who is our hope and expectation?” If you agree, how hard is it for you to rest your hope in God without knowing if your situation will have a positive resolution in your lifetime?

6. Read the following Scripture passages:

- "Yet the LORD longs to be gracious to you; he rises to show you compassion. For the LORD is a God of justice. Blessed are all who wait for him!" (Isa. 30:18).
- "I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I put my hope" (Ps. 130:5).
- "We wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ" (Titus 2:13).
- "I waited patiently for the LORD; and He inclined to me and heard my cry" (Ps. 40:1 NASB).
- "Wait for the LORD; be strong and let your heart take courage; yes, wait for the LORD" (Ps. 27:14 NASB).

Which of these verses best depicts where you are in your relationship with God if you are currently waiting on a specific answer to prayer or to a resolution of a crisis in your life? Write out the verse and then describe what gives you hope as you read the Scripture. If you don't feel hope yet, write out your questions to God, knowing He understands our deep pain in the middle of trying to persevere. Write the verse you selected on an index card and memorize it this week.



four  
HOLDING ON TO HOPE



*When I Feel Oppressed by My Disappointment  
and Sorrow . . . I CHOOSE GRATITUDE*

1. True gratitude consists of two elements: first, showing appreciation for benefits that are received, and second, bringing joy to others by supplying comfort to them during their time of need. Which of those two parts of this definition are you best at expressing? Is the one you didn't select hard for you to convey in a tangible way?
2. Review the story of Paul and Silas (Acts 16:19–28). What were the benefits these men experienced as a result of choosing to praise God and express gratitude for His goodness in the middle of their unjust incarceration? There are many kinds of prisons in our lives, and most are not behind bars. Have you ever been involved in a situation in which someone else's discipline of praying and praising not only broke his or her own chains but also liberated others in some way? Explain.

3. Most of us grew up in a home where our parents either often verbalized praise and gratitude or where they almost never voiced positive comments. On a scale of 1 to 10 (with 10 being the highest), how often did you hear praise or thanks from either or both of your parents? How did that affect you in your growing-up years? How has it influenced your current relationships?
4. This chapter includes two stories of godly grandparents—our son, Jason's, grandparents, and Kathy's grandmother, who left a prayer in her Bible that encouraged Kathy through discouraging times with her son. Did you have a godly heritage, or were you brought up without a strong faith foundation? Whom have you looked to for encouragement, prayer, and advice during your new kind of normal?
5. Author Rebecca Barlow Jordan writes, "The blessing of gratitude is like a boomerang. When it flies out of a truly grateful heart, it hovers momentarily above the receiver, blessing its recipient, and then makes a 180-degree turn back into the life of the one who offered thanks." Write this quote on an index card or on a sticky note and place it in a location where you spend a lot of time. Each time you experience that 180-degree blessing when you choose a grateful heart this week, record it as a reminder of the power of this important choice.
6. Think about your own new kind of normal. Make a list of ten things you have to be thankful for in the middle of an unexpected or an unwanted change in your life. Practice praying through that list, verbalizing your thanks to God for any benefit, however small, of your unforeseen circumstances.

five

MY HEARTACHE IS NONE OF YOUR BUSINESS!



*When I Want to Keep My Feelings to  
Myself . . .* I CHOOSE VULNERABILITY

1. How do you define the word *vulnerable*? Is it easier for you to be open with people you aren't likely to see again or with people who know you personally? Some people are afraid of being vulnerable because someone they trusted held their secret too loosely or betrayed them. Others want to hide the difficult and challenging parts of their lives in a dark closet, hoping the information will never surface. Others practice self-revelation naturally, even indiscriminately. Which of these ways of coping with crisis best describes you?
2. What are the benefits and the liabilities of being vulnerable? When do you think being vulnerable is inappropriate? When is it helpful?
3. The definition of the word *vulnerable* is: (a) capable of being physically or emotionally wounded, (b) open to attack or damage, and (c) liable to increased penalties but entitled to increased bonuses. Pick one of the definitions and think about a personal experience when you were vulnerable.

When you have risked being vulnerable with someone, has it been a positive or a negative experience? What were the benefits? Was your decision to be vulnerable worth the risk you took to be open and authentic? If you are going through these questions with someone else or with a small group, share your responses aloud.

4. Author Brenda Waggoner says, "Revealing our weaknesses helps others feel connected to us." Do you agree or disagree with that statement? Why?

5. Read the following verses:

- "All my longings lie open before you, O Lord; my sighing is not hidden from you" (Ps. 38:9).
- "Nothing in all creation is hidden from God. Everything is naked and exposed before his eyes, and he is the one to whom we are accountable" (Heb. 4:13 NLT).
- "God, investigate my life; get all the facts firsthand. I'm an open book to you; even from a distance, you know what I'm thinking" (Psalm 139:1–2 MSG).

These verses indicate that God knows our thoughts and the longings of our hearts. Yet sometimes it's hard to pray with authenticity. On a scale of 1 to 10 (with 10 being the highest), how vulnerable are you when you talk to God? Do you feel comfortable telling Him you are hurt or angry or frustrated? Why or why not?

6. Think back on Lynn Morrissey's powerful prayer. How did she describe God's grace? How did she portray her need? What was the result of her prayer? Think of a time when you were vulnerable with God about a wrong choice you made or a hurt you faced. How did He respond to you? Did you feel comforted? Confused? Forgiven? Ashamed? Reassured? Being vulnerable is hard. At this stage in your journey, what do you need to be honest about with God? Consider writing out your response in the form of a heartfelt prayer or sharing it in detail with someone you can trust.



six

## LOSS UPON LOSS



### *When Nothing Goes According to My Plan . . .* I CHOOSE RELINQUISHMENT

1. When was the last time you had your heart set on a desired outcome (getting married, a confirmation of a pregnancy, being offered a dream job, receiving a good report on your child's progress, a clean bill of health, etc.), but the situation did not turn out according to your plan? On a scale of 1 to 10, where were you emotionally? How does your emotional response impact your personal faith relationship with God?
2. The word *relinquish* has several synonyms. Decide which one you identify with the most:
  - *Yield*—implies concession or compliance or submission
  - *Resign*—emphasizes voluntary relinquishment or sacrifice without struggle
  - *Surrender*—implies giving up after a struggle to retain or resist
  - *Abandon*—stresses finality and completeness in giving up
  - *Waive*—implies conceding or forgoing with little or no compulsion

As you read through this list and considered which word best describes your current situation, did you believe one or more of these descriptions to be more “spiritual” or God-honoring than the others? Did that influence your decision, or did you feel comfortable selecting the one that fits where you truly are on your journey right now?

3. Reread Kay Arthur’s startling observation: “When we lose hope, in essence it’s because we believe that God’s lovingkindnesses have ceased—that there’s nothing more we can expect from God, that He’s reached His limit.” Have you ever reached a discouraging point when you believed there was nothing more you could expect from God—that your chance for His supernatural involvement in your place of uncertainty had run out? If so, what transpired to bring you to this place of hopelessness? Did this emotional state pass quickly, or are you still at a crossroads with your faith?
4. I voiced an honest prayer of disappointment and relinquishment to God when I learned that my son would not get a clemency hearing. Following that prayer, I also reported that I have had to pray some form of that prayer every day since. Have you ever intentionally laid a person, situation, or hurt on the altar as you voiced relinquishment to God regarding your control of the person or state of affairs? Have you experienced permanent peace, or have you had to pray the prayer of relinquishment multiple times, much as I do?

4. I voiced an honest prayer of disappointment and relinquishment to God when I learned that my son would not get a clemency hearing. Following that prayer, I also reported that I have had to pray some form of that prayer every day since. Have you ever intentionally laid a person, situation, or hurt on the altar as you voiced relinquishment to God regarding your control of the person or state of affairs? Have you experienced permanent peace, or have you had to pray the prayer of relinquishment multiple times, much as I do?
5. Think back on the story of Mary's multiple choices to practice relinquishment during different stages of Jesus' life. Do you think relinquishing Him at the cross was easier because she had already practiced relinquishment earlier in her life? How much of an eternal perspective do you think she had as she watched her son die on the cross? When she saw Him after the Resurrection?
6. Sometimes it's hard to combine relinquishment and hope in our personal circumstances—especially when nothing goes according to our plan. The Bible says, "Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you will abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit" (Rom. 15:13 NASB). Think of a time when practicing relinquishment of your control over a person or a situation to God resulted in increased hope. That hope might have been for a brighter outcome in the not-too-distant future, or it might rest on an eternal hope that will not be fully realized until you leave this earth. If you feel comfortable doing so, call or write a close friend this week and share what you are learning about the combination of relinquishment and hope as you move forward.

*seven*

## WHO'S TO BLAME?



*When I Want to Point the Finger . . .*

I CHOOSE FORGIVENESS

1. Read through this list of ways people respond when they have been wronged. Which one best describes your reaction when someone needs your forgiveness?
  - I tend to hold grudges a long time.
  - I usually quit "finger pointing" after a period of time, but I like the offender to know that he or she has wronged me and I'm not happy about it.
  - I relive the grievance repeatedly and allow bitterness and resentment to develop—especially if the offender has been a real jerk and isn't repentant at all.
  - My response depends upon how bad the action of the
  - I let go of my hard-heartedness toward a person or a situation fairly soon but not immediately.
  - I instantly forgive others because I have been forgiven.

2. Have you been in a situation where you verbally forgave someone who asked for your forgiveness, but you discovered there was still resentment in your heart? Did you go back and discuss your unforgiveness with that individual, or did you just talk to God about it? Have you ever been the one who needed to request forgiveness for a wrong action or attitude? If yes, what was the result?
3. Read through the following Scriptures. Write down one thing each verse teaches about forgiving someone who has wronged us.
  - "Don't repay evil for evil. Don't retaliate with insults when people insult you. Instead, pay them back with a blessing. That is what God has called you to do, and he will bless you for it" (1 Peter 3:9 NLT).
  - "Forgive as quickly and completely as the Master forgave you. And regardless of what else you put on, wear love. It's your basic, all-purpose garment. Never be without it" (Col. 3:13–14 MSG).
  - "Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord" (Rom. 12:17–19).



4. Have you ever had an experience when it appeared that in spite of trying to do all the right things, and even though you prayed for a person or a situation for a long time, you saw no evidence of God's help or intervention? Did you ever struggle with overt or even subtle anger toward God? If so, read through the responses below and identify where are you right now in your relationship with God:

- I'm angry with Him for not intervening in my situation.
- I'm baffled at what seems like silence from God when I have sought answers through His Word and through prayer.
- I think He's busy elsewhere with global concerns and He doesn't involve Himself in "the small stuff" connected to my personal life.
- I believe God's timing is always perfect, and even though I may not understand why my prayers have not been answered the way I wanted, He has a better plan, and I'm trusting Him.
- Even when I'm tempted to question God for what He has allowed to happen in my life, I know He loves me and I do not hold unforgiveness in my heart toward Him. (If you selected this response, how long does it take you to get to this level of trust?)

5. Mark Twain once said, "Forgiveness is the fragrance the violet sheds on the heel that has crushed it." He indicates there is a powerful and positive side to forgiveness that benefits the one who offers genuine forgiveness. What do

you think the benefits are to the person who extends complete forgiveness? Do you think the rewards are only spiritual, or are they physical too? Have you experienced any of these benefits? If so, explain.

6. Think of a time when it was hard for you to forgive another person for what he or she did to you or allowed to happen. Did you surrender your right to hurt someone else for hurting you? Did you hold resentment toward that individual for a long time? If you have come to a place of forgiving that person, write him or her a letter expressing your current response in light of what God is teaching you. If your resentment is toward God, write Him a letter in the form of a prayer. Even if you are not at a place of being able to forgive Him right now, you can express your honest questions and you can communicate your frustrations. You can tell Him anything, and He will not be angry with you!

*eight*

PITY PARTIES, DREAMS GONE AMUCK,  
AND NEW BEGINNINGS



*When I Want to Give Up . . .*

I CHOOSE PURPOSEFUL ACTION

1. Are you ever tempted to give up on hope, or are you adjusting to your own new normal with joy? Read through the following list and decide which way of coping you usually prefer when you are going through challenging times:
  - I withdraw from people and try to hide my disappointment and sadness.
  - I get together with one or two close friends and have a pity party.
  - I escape into my favorite addictive pattern (food, work, perfectionism, etc.).
  - I verbalize my frustration to God through prayer.
  - Fill in your own blank.

2. What dreams from your past have had to be readjusted due to circumstances in your life that can't be changed? Have you discovered purpose and meaning in your life even though it is not unfolding as you expected? Devotional author Rebecca Barlow Jordan writes, "Purpose is what drags a pain-riddled body, one leg at a time, to answer the call for something greater than himself." Your situation may not involve physical pain, but to some degree we can all identify with this quote. How have you found purpose and meaning in your own new normal?
3. Gene and I discovered that being honest with people about our son's crime, conviction, and sentencing was much easier than hoping people didn't know and living with "an elephant in the room." On a scale of 1 to 10 (with 10 being the highest), how difficult is it for you to talk to other people about your own disappointments? If you have been open with others about your circumstances, what has been the result?
4. Read the following verses and write down a core truth in each Scripture that moves you in the direction of purposeful action in the middle of your new normal.
  - "It's in Christ that we find out who we are and what we are living for. Long before we first heard of Christ . . . he had his eye on us, had designs on us for glorious living, part of the overall purpose he is working out in everything and everyone" (Eph. 1:11 MSG).
  - "You, LORD, give perfect peace to those who keep their purpose firm and put their trust in you" (Isa. 26:3 TEV).

- "Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Phil. 1:6).
  - "So if you're serious about living this new resurrection life with Christ, act like it. Pursue the things over which Christ presides. Don't shuffle along, eyes to the ground, absorbed with the things right in front of you. Look up, and be alert to what is going on around Christ—that's where the action is. See things from his perspective. Your old life is dead. Your new life, which is your real life—even though invisible to spectators—is with Christ in God. He is your life. When Christ (your real life, remember) shows up again on this earth, you'll show up, too—the real you, the glorious you" (Col. 3:1–4 MSG).
5. Think about what my friend Janet said: "I think choosing to remain faithful in the face of deeply disappointing and hurtful circumstances is the most important choice we can make." Do you agree or disagree with that statement? How do you think Mary, the mother of Jesus, chose the purposeful action of remaining faithful after watching her own son's crucifixion? In this book, what have you learned from the example of Mary that will help you face the unexpected?

6. Think about the differences between life as you expected it to be and life as it is for you now. How have unexpected changes led you to action steps you wouldn't have taken otherwise? Review the story of Lucia Bone and her decision to move in a positive direction after the murder of her sister. What prompted her to take action instead of throwing a permanent pity party after such a devastating loss? Prayerfully write a list of the new action steps you plan to take as you purposefully live out the power of Christ's resurrection and the promise of redemption.

# SPEAK UP FOR HOPE

*is a nonprofit organization that seeks to  
live out the principle of Proverbs 31:8-9 (MSG):*

“Speak up for the people who have no voice,  
for the rights of all the down-and-outers.

Speak out for justice.

Stand up for the poor and destitute!”

*To accomplish this mission, we will:*

- Assist churches in working with prisons to provide hands-on encouragement to inmates and their families by adopting one prison family, and developing a network of resources to assist that family spiritually, financially, and personally.
- Network educators with prison wardens and chaplains in order to provide GED programs, marriage and family classes, vocational training, and college credit programs that will give purpose to prisoners and help to ensure personal success after an inmate is released.
- Connect families of prisoners with Christian counselors at reduced fees.
- Provide mentoring for spouses and children of inmates.
- Network business professionals with soon-to-be-released inmates to offer job opportunities that provide a chance for a fresh start.
- Assist women’s ministry groups with launching the “Boxes of Encouragement” project that provides gifts to wives and mothers of inmates.

It is the goal of Speak Up for Hope to give hope to the hopeless, encouragement and strength to the weary, reparation to marriages that have been torn apart by incarceration, and mental, spiritual, and physical stability to the children of prisoners.

We pray that people all over the world will begin speaking up for those who cannot speak up for themselves. As people become the hands and feet of Jesus to "the least of these," something miraculous happens. As we choose to get personally involved by giving, volunteering, and praying, we are transformed from the inside out as we model for others how to become hope givers.



*Carol Kent*

Carol Kent, Founder

*Gene Kent*

Gene Kent, Director

For more information on the variety of ways in which you can be involved in Speak Up for Hope, please contact:

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