

HOW LONG, O LORD?

HOPE AND HELP WHEN YOU
HAVE BEEN DEEPLY HURT

by

K R I S T I N A . V A R G A S



Published by Concordia Publishing House
3558 S. Jefferson Avenue, St. Louis, MO 63118–3968
1-800-325-3040 • www.cph.org

Copyright © 2018 Kristin A. Vargas

All rights reserved. Unless specifically noted, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior written permission of Concordia Publishing House.

Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Quotations marked *LSB* are from *Lutheran Service Book*, copyright © 2006 Concordia Publishing House. All rights reserved.

Manufactured in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Vargas, Kristin A., author.

Title: How long, O Lord? : hope and help when you have been deeply hurt / Kristin Vargas.

Description: St. Louis : Concordia Publishing House, 2018. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017050435 (print) | LCCN 2017057784 (ebook) | ISBN 9780758658654 | ISBN 9780758658647

Subjects: LCSH: Suffering--Religious aspects--Christianity. | Traumatism. | Violence--Religious aspects--Christianity. | Death--Religious aspects--Christianity. | Grace (Theology)

Classification: LCC BV4909 (ebook) | LCC BV4909 .V37 2018 (print) | DDC 241/.697--dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017050435>

My soul also is greatly troubled.
But You, O LORD—how long?

Turn, O LORD, deliver my life; save me
for the sake of Your steadfast love.

—*Psalm 6:3–4*

CONTENTS

Editor's Preface	5
Acknowledgments	6
Introduction	7
Lesson 1: Crisis of Conscience	9
Lesson 2: Body and Soul	15
Lesson 3: The Fathers vs. Freud	25
Lesson 4: Women and War	33
Lesson 5: Family and War	39
Lesson 6: Two Old Testament Examples	45
Lesson 7: A Lesson in Lamentation	51
Lesson 8: Jesus Heals Us—The Presence, Touch, and Word of Jesus	57
Lesson 9: Paul—Treasure in Jars of Clay	63
Lesson 10: Christ in the POW Camp	67
Lesson 11: Christ in the Interrogation Chamber	73
Lesson 12: Where We Go from Here	81
Leader Guide	87
Illustrations	98
Further Resources	99

EDITOR'S PREFACE

Life in a fallen world is often harsh and difficult. The things we experience can cause tremendous suffering and devastate our souls and spirits, making us question God's holiness, love, and power. In the face of severe trauma, spiritual hurt and confusion frequently lasts years, decades, or even a person's entire earthly lifetime. That is why this study is titled *How Long, O Lord?* How long must the pain endure? How long must our questions go unanswered? How long until we are finally whole?

This study looks primarily at traumatic events suffered by military personnel. At times, you will come across intense examples that you may find unsettling. These are not meant to cause you pain but to give you a window into the spiritual trauma suffered by servicemen and women. These examples are also meant to help you understand the similar spiritual trauma suffered by first responders and victims of abuse.

Ultimately, there is only one lasting solution to spiritual damage and pain. Ironically, it, too, was a traumatic event: the crucifixion, suffering, and death of God's own Son, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. But it was through His mortal pain and agony and His victorious resurrection that our sins were removed. It is through Jesus' victory over all that harms us that God offers us hope, courage, peace, and healing for this lifetime. And it is through Christ's ultimate victory, which we will see when He returns to judge the living and the dead, that He will wipe away every tear from our eyes and rid His creation of pain and trauma forever.

"Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!" (Revelation 22:20).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Projects like this are not a one-man show. It took a lot of people to set the stage and enable me to write on a difficult—sometimes distressing—subject.

Much of the information you read here I first encountered as a graduate student, and I am grateful that I can now pass it on to other Christians in churches around the country. In particular, I thank Dr. Rita Nakashima Brock for her work at the Soul Repair Center in Fort Worth, Texas. If not for her week-long intensive seminar that I attended in January 2016, this Bible study would not exist.

Two other professors made a deep impression on this work. Dr. Wil Gafney, Associate Professor of Hebrew Bible at Brite Divinity School, was integral to my learning via her in-depth lectures on the world of the ancient Israelites. The lessons regarding Joshua, Judges, and the prophets all owe a debt to her teaching. I am also indebted to Dr. Charles K. Bellinger, Associate Professor of Theology and Ethics at Brite Divinity School, for introducing me to the world of ethics, religion, and violence. His teaching and mentorship have changed my life and significantly influenced the creation of this study.

Next, I need to thank my church, St. Paul Lutheran of Fort Worth, Texas. If it had not been for the trust and encouragement of Revs. John Messmann, Bud Beverly, Doug Widger, and Martin Danner, I would never have taught the Sunday School series on moral injury that led directly to the making of this book. I thank Jennifer Gross, the coordinator of St. Paul's adult ministry programs, for always seeing that our class had everything it needed, from handouts to chairs. I also will be forever grateful to my gracious audience who participated in that first experimental class.

Thank you to my editor, Rev. Wayne Palmer, and his team at Concordia Publishing House for being my guide and support during this process. Wayne's keen understanding of pastoral care, theology, and the Bible was invaluable in keeping this work doctrinally sound.

Last, I must thank my husband and family for their support and encouragement throughout the process.

INTRODUCTION

I first encountered the subject of moral injury in my graduate studies. Extreme trauma shakes or shatters a person's moral expectations, faith, and beliefs. Psychologists and clinicians differentiate this moral damage from the psychological damage called post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

I quickly came to understand that “moral injury” is spiritual brokenness and conflict. A soul-damaging experience can either shake one's faith to the point that one abandons belief in good and God, or strengthen one's faith as the Holy Spirit works through Word and Sacrament to move the believer closer to his or her Creator and Savior.

Moral injury and soul repair is a challenging topic. But understanding it will help the members of your congregation grow in compassion for one another and be better neighbors to one another—especially to those who have worked in occupations with high risks of trauma (e.g., military personnel, first responders, medical personnel, counselors, ministers, and journalists). Moral injury is also quite common among victims of domestic and sexual abuse. For the purposes of this class, I use the military as my default example.

One lesson in this book represents one week in a twelve-week study. This book is intended for a group Bible study, but it can also be read as an individual at one's own pace. The first six lessons of the study establish a basic concept of moral injury alongside biblical examples of spiritual brokenness, desolation, and trauma. Lesson 7 marks a turning point to explore God's pathway to healing, restoration, and reconciliation.

Unless referencing content or stories previously published in print, personal names in this study have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals.

A word about terminology: Many veterans dislike the label *post-traumatic stress disorder*, especially since the symptoms associated with the disorder can be temporary side effects of combat violence. The use of the acronym PTSD, therefore, is more appropriate for those who have suffered for years without treatment. In this book, I will typically use the term *post-traumatic stress* (PTS).

I commend you for your interest in the topic of moral injury and your courage to care enough about the trauma of others. God bless you on your journey through moral injury, being guided by His Word!



Lesson 1

CRISIS OF CONSCIENCE

Today, as a class or an individual, you will embark upon a journey that will take you through the fires of spiritual brokenness caused by violent trauma. This journey will lead you through some of the most challenging and disquieting chapters of the Bible. But before you open your Bible, let us first look at the history, the *why*, and the definition of our topic.

A BRIEF HISTORY

For quite some time, Western culture has been a therapeutic culture. As science has advanced in the last several centuries, the trend in our culture has become to rely on various scientific disciplines to solve our life problems. As new problems have arisen, new scientific fields have developed to solve those problems. Thus, with the turn of the twentieth century, psychology, anthropology, neuroscience, and modern medical philosophy emerged, coinciding with and rising out of the wars of the twentieth century.

When the first veterans of World War I came home (and then the veterans of World War II, Korea, Vietnam, and so on), many were visibly and invisibly broken. Medical and psychiatric care treated their physical and mental ailments, but science could not treat their spiritual injuries. Therefore, their spiritual needs were largely ignored. The dependence on scientific disciplines also resulted in a widespread denial of the spiritual aspect of human existence.

Let me give a few real-life examples from some veterans' experiences. Joseph fought in the Korean War when he was eighteen. He spent one terrible night in a foxhole, holding the hand of his unit mate who died sometime during the night. In the morning, Joseph couldn't pry his hand out of the corpse's as rigor mortis had set in. When he eventually managed to free his hand and return to base, Joseph was not the same man. When he returned to the United States, he was put in a psychiatric ward for quite some time. But despite the efforts of psychiatrists and clinicians, when Joseph was discharged, his wife and children did not recognize the person who returned to them. The trauma of that night in the foxhole and the guilt he feels over the loss of his friend still linger, even after all these years.

This resembles the story of my own grandfather, Wesley. During World War II, he thought he'd managed to carry his wounded buddy out of danger to safety until a German sniper put a bullet in the center of this friend's head, while Wesley cradled him in his arms. My grandfather waited for the sniper to pull the trigger again. He waited and waited. He could almost hear the sniper whisper, "Your life is in my hands. *I* choose whether you live or die." The sniper did not kill him, although he had the opportunity, and that experience haunted my grandfather until his death. "Why was *I* spared and not my friend?" he would ask.

Last is Janet's story. She was a military nurse stationed in Japan during the Vietnam War. During the Tet Offensive, massive casualties flooded her hospital. She vividly remembers the gory sights and deep disturbance the medical staff experienced when there were so many soldiers they could not save. Even the doctors wept. Her return Stateside with her veteran husband did even more damage as the average American did not understand or sympathize with what they had experienced and instead looked with scorn on their involvement in the unpopular war.

In 2009, an article by Brett Litz and a team of authors rocked the clinical psychology community. It described a study conducted by psychologists in conjunction with the U.S. Marine Corps. It admitted that for various reasons, little attention had been paid to the moral and ethical distress servicemen and women face in addition to or alongside PTS symptoms. Astonishingly,

the study acknowledged that a new approach involving spiritual communities was needed. The article all but admitted that clinicians had no expertise in this area of human life and needed help from those who did.

WHY THIS MATTERS

The atrociously high suicide rate of veterans suggests our society has failed in its responsibility to return our troops to civilian life. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) recently conducted the most comprehensive study of veteran suicides to date. Published in 2016, the study revealed that twenty veterans commit suicide every day. Many experts think that the actual number is higher since, statistically, veterans' favorite method of suicide is by motorcycle, and it is extremely hard for a coroner to determine if a motorcycle accident is suicide.

Beyond devastating statistics like these, the topic of moral injury is important for Christians because we care about people's lives and quality of life. Each person is created by God and loved by Him. Therefore, we want to care for all people who are suffering because God cares about them—no matter who they are.

This is where our secular world falls short. But this is where the Church can shine. As sisters and brothers in faith, as priests under our High Priest, Jesus Christ, we are being asked for help. We can share with others the spiritual healing that Jesus gives. This is the *why* and the purpose of this Bible study: to prepare us for spiritual care for those suffering from the aftereffects of violence on the human soul or spirit.

DEFINITION OF THE TERM

Experts and academics use the term *moral injury* to describe the distress that results from human beings committing, seeing, or experiencing acts that go against their beliefs of what is morally right and wrong. Moral injury is a crisis of conscience. It is damage to the soul. When a person suffers this kind of damage, his entire belief system and his understanding of good and evil are altered or destroyed. The trauma that caused this disruption changes a person, no longer allowing him or her to see the world as he or she once did. Such a person often feels betrayed: by God, by a superior commander, by a nation, or by loved ones.

For the purposes of this Bible study, active duty and veteran military servicemen and women will be the primary sources of illustrations of our topic, but this kind of spirit-rending damage is by no means restricted to military servicepeople.

Violent trauma and the destruction it wreaks on the human spirit can come to any one of us at any time in our lives. Pilots, first responders, EMTs (emergency medical technicians), firefighters, emergency staff in hospitals, and police officers all tend to experience moral injury. Victims of violent crimes, sexual assault, or child abuse may also deal with this kind of injury. The great unspoken secret of many women who have had abortions is the psychological and moral wounds they quietly endure, leaving their families in ignorance of their pain, remaining alone in dealing with these experiences.

THE SHEDDING OF BLOOD IN THE BIBLE

Moral injury harms us because God requires us in the Fifth Commandment to respect human life. Why? At the very beginning of the Bible, we read, “God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them” (Genesis 1:27). Of course, shortly after Adam and Eve were created, they rebelled against God, ate the forbidden fruit, and became sinners. God commands us to respect human life because we are His image-bearers and the prohibition against taking life is written into our hearts by natural law.

But the Bible seems to show a contradiction here. Often we see God condoning killing—even commanding it—especially in war. This is when it is helpful to do a short word study in the Bible’s original languages. The Hebrew Old Testament uses more than one word for our word *kill* in English. The term used in the Fifth Commandment, *ratsakh*, is never used for the killing of animals and plants, for self-defense, or in the context of warfare. Instead, *ratsakh* means the shedding of innocent human blood either intentionally (murder) or negligently (manslaughter).

In light of what God says about the importance of our respect for human life because we are His image-bearers, it is easy to see how killing in the line of duty or in the heat of battle can damage the spirit, even though those actions technically do not violate the Fifth Commandment.

READING FOR THE WEEK

Read and contemplate Lamentations 3 this week. Churches have used this chapter in worship to address the moral injury of veterans returning to civilian life. Jeremiah's words speak to the hearts and minds of victims of moral injury. Read through the chapter several times, both as one who may have suffered moral injury and as one caring for others within a local church.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Can you think of anyone in your personal history who was touched by moral injury?

2. Who else besides those who have witnessed or participated in combat and warfare could be at risk for spiritual trauma caused by violence?

3. Why do you think the rise of scientific knowledge undermined the general belief in humans' spiritual nature?

4. What does it mean to be an image-bearer of God? In other words, what qualities do we as human beings exhibit in our nature that reflect our Creator?
