

From the Author of *Calling Out: Prayers for those in Isolation*

HOLLY DICKSON-RAMOS

# Strong Spirit

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HOPE FOR WOMEN  
LIVING WITH ILLNESS

STRONG SPIRIT  
HOPE FOR WOMEN LIVING WITH ILLNESS

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*Holly Dickson-Ramos*

*I dedicate this book  
to my husband, Alexis.  
When we made our vows  
you didn't know  
your lively, youthful bride  
would get sick  
and stay sick.  
Your love and loyalty  
infuse life with warmth  
and comfort.  
Your patience and gentleness  
when I am grumpy, weak, or struggling  
help me keep going.  
God uses you in my life  
to show me how deeply  
He loves me.*

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## STRONG SPIRIT

*Hope for Women Living With Illness*

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*F*ew of us expect to be seriously ill. Fifteen years ago I thought that perfect health and carefree days were the norm.

In my early thirties, I felt energized and capable... until one day my body failed me.

In the years that followed I realized that real women struggle. Real women are not like shiny ads, radiating beauty, good spirits and perfect health every day.

For many of us, life is complicated. Challenging. We battle illness, longing for many things: to be loved, to live meaningful lives, to enjoy just one day without symptoms, without triggering a condition, to feel capable of nurturing our loved ones the way we want to, to be defined not by a condition or a diagnosis, but by our inner selves — the person God sees when He looks at us.

In the pages that follow I'll share some of the highs and lows of my own journey and I'll introduce you to women who wrestle with chronic pain, cancer, anxiety, depression, and other conditions that have impacted their physical and emotional well-being.

You and I belong to a community of real women who suffer and struggle — although brokenness may be part of this season of our lives, let's inspire one another to find God's deeper purpose for us as we allow Him to use our strengths and our weakness for His glory.



## STRUGGLE

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*After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace,  
who called you to His eternal glory in Christ,  
will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish you.*

1 PETER 5:10 (NASB)

The lowest point in my life with illness came a few months after an unsuccessful cardiac ablation. I went forward, one Sunday, to be anointed and prayed over by church elders. We called on God together, asking Him for healing.

God heard our prayers and intervened in the lives of those who came forward, but not in the way we expected Him to. We hoped for immediate physical healing and this did not happen.

I felt angry with God for ignoring our plea and I wondered if prayer made any difference at all. I asked myself if God even existed.

Then one morning, as I read my Bible, I noticed that John the Baptist went through a similar struggle. Even though John was really close to Jesus, when life didn't turn out how John wanted (when he found himself in prison for no good reason) he began to wonder if Jesus was really who He claimed to be (*Matthew 11:2-3*). Just like me.

It's a common response to suffering, I've realized: doubt about God's existence and character.

Deep inside, in the places where I am disappointed with life, where I suffer from ongoing pain and wrestle with emotional trauma, I have tantrum after mental tantrum because life is not as

fun as I want it to be. I don't *want* to suffer. I don't *deserve* to suffer. I shouldn't *have* to suffer. I am entitled to happiness. Aren't we all?

I *thought* we were until I ran across the verse from 1 Peter that begins this chapter. Read it again, and then tell me if it doesn't suggest that *struggle* is vital to the faith-filled life; *suffering* may be the prerequisite for strong faith.

After reading this verse I realized that God's purpose for my life is not unfettered fun. He is perfecting me for another life in another place and the process might not be entirely painless.

I'm not suggesting that God caused my condition. I know that because of all the wrong choices humanity has made throughout centuries we live in an imperfect world. There can't be free will without the possibility of suffering. I see that.

But couldn't He keep this pain from touching *me*? And everyone I love?

He could if He wanted to.

But that's me forgetting to think of this moment in context; this moment is a sentence in a paragraph in a chapter in a book.

The book of my life has a sad section — the sick section. These pages document the struggle.

But I'm chasing hope, so I've peeked at the ending of my story. *This* season is just a chapter in my book. *This moment* is not all there is. For you or for me.

Life will seem less bleak if we keep the larger narrative in mind and hold fast to Peter's words. Suffering and death are not absolute evils to be avoided at all costs. Jesus himself had to suffer and die to save us, a sad chapter in His story, but essential to that final, victorious end.

In this fallen world most people will have to suffer at some point to some degree, but God promises to use it for good, if we let Him.

Let's do our best to re-frame pain in a context that gives it meaning. **We have not been rejected or abandoned by God.**

I believe that God, with the heart of a loving father, cries with us and gives us an opportunity like the one He gave Job — to trust Him and to embrace His nearness when we're hurting.

No one likes to suffer, and I will not pretend I don't want healing in my life. I do.

But that initial crisis of faith has passed. I choose to trust.

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## PRAYER

Loving God,

increase my faith.

On days when You seem distant and uncaring,  
remind me of these truths:

that You created me for a reason,

that You have been near to me each moment of my life,

that You use suffering to shape me

and to remind me of my need for You,

that You are not indifferent to the pain of this broken world;

that You are not indifferent to my pain.

Draw me close during my hardest moments;

may these times fuse my spirit to Yours;

may my suffering be the glue that bonds me to You —

my Creator,

the One who rescues me.



*Meet*  
**ANDREA**

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**CHALLENGE:** Multiple Sclerosis

**IN THE BEGINNING**

When I first was diagnosed with MS I had pretty much lost the use of my legs. Every morning when I woke up, I asked God to restore my legs to me. If that wasn't in His plan for the day, could He at least make my life purposeful to others? What a plan He had for me! He set me on a path of volunteering for some amazing organizations. I have had relationships and experiences that I would never have had if I wasn't diagnosed. The phrase "When I got busy, I got better" comes to mind.

**DAY TO DAY CHALLENGES**

I experience numbness, pins and needles, sensory overload in busy situations, fatigue, inability to walk long distances and an overactive bladder. My biggest challenge with MS is to focus on the here and now, not what the future has in store for me.

**HOW I COPE**

I am strict with daily routine. I try to wake and go to bed at the same time every day. I follow an ebb and flow for my day to make sure that I don't get too fatigued. I am strict with my medication, food, treadmill and physiotherapy routines. I set achievable long term goals. I attend church and Bible study regularly. I believe in living a well-balanced

life, taking care of my emotional, physical and spiritual needs.

### **ABOUT FINANCES**

I haven't had what one would call a normal work life, and this has impacted my family's financial life. But I've found that God provides. We have a roof over our heads, food on the table and we do enjoy regular vacations. What more could I want from life?

### **SPECIAL PEOPLE**

God has placed a sisterhood in Christ around me. I have had close, supportive relationships with women who have strong faith in God and who come around me to teach me His word. I want to acknowledge Angela Maxwell for being my godmother when I was baptized in my thirties. She has always been a strong teacher, mentor and cheerleader in my life.

### **LAST THOUGHTS**

I do believe this has brought me closer to God. I ask Him on a regular basis to help me help others. I feel blessed to be used this way. I see His hand in the pathways that have been opened for me but I also see His hand in the doors that have been closed. He has taught me to be patient in understanding where I'm meant to be at any given time in my life. I'm not great at remembering Bible verses but I feel God's presence around me on my life's journey.