



From Pain to Freedom

God's Healing from a Decade of Pain and Worry

by **Alicia Yoder**

Eighteen months ago, our son took his first breath. He has learned so much since then—smiling, laughing, rolling over, sitting up, eating solids, crawling, talking, walking, and now climbing. When he was born, I couldn't picture him doing all the things he can do now. Neither could I have imagined the journey of healing from physical pain and worry God would take me on as my son was experiencing each baby milestone.

My physical pain started back in high school. Soreness in my back, neck and shoulders. Headaches on and off. I'd wake each day feeling like I had spent the previous day lifting weights much too heavy for me. The stiff aches kept my neck, shoulders and back tense as I struggled to carry my textbooks home from school. I'd try to become invisible in gym class, especially during physical fitness tests. At an adventure camp with our youth group one summer, I tried to hold back my tears and recited Psalm 139 while I tried to catch up with the others on the mountain-biking trail.

I didn't talk about my pain with my friends, since we had recently moved to a new state, and I felt embarrassed by it. Instead, I threw myself into my studies at school. I went to some doctors for testing and tried a number of different therapies. Some helped a little. Most didn't.

Over the next years, I enjoyed new friendships at Columbia International University, a Bible college in South Carolina, where I also met my best friend and married him. The busyness of work, school, and campus life helped to distract me from the pain that continued to flare up in my neck and shoulders. My mom arranged appointments for me when I came home for the summers. Our family doctor prescribed some mild anti-depressant medication, and my quest for answers led me to try occupational therapy,

physical therapy, electrotherapy, deep-tissue massage, acupuncture, chiropractors and weight lifting.

I did learn a series of stretches in the therapies that helped relieve some of the pain's intensity when I faithfully did them each morning and night. Once I could do the stretching routine by memory, I used the time to memorize Scripture and try to focus on the Lord.

Throughout my time at college, I thought about serving overseas, as did my husband Christopher. When I was a girl, I used to tell people I wanted to be a “missionary orphanage worker,” since I'd been impressed by the missionaries I'd met and liked interacting with children who were younger than me.

After graduating with my degrees in Teacher Education and Bible, I got a job at a Christian school, learning to depend on God not only in preparing the material I needed to teach, but also in shepherding my middle schoolers' hearts. It was a year of survival as I woke each day at 5:30 to do my stretches. The adrenaline of my new job helped me to ignore my pain and focus on my lesson plans and students. Since Christopher was also teaching at a new school that year, we'd stay late to do our lesson prep, then come home and collapse before the next demanding day.

When the school year ended, Christopher and I went with a team to teach English for six weeks in Northern Iraq. As on other overseas trips I'd taken, serving in a different culture continued to shape my view of the world as I saw God's heart for people living in darkness. Shortly after arriving in the country I got sick, experiencing both diarrhea and vomiting. I spent most of the first week lying on the three-inch thick foam mattress in our ten-foot-by-ten-foot room, studying the fingerprint-stained, pink sparkly walls. Since I hadn't gotten to know the team yet, I felt isolated. When I did join the team, I burst

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into tears while sharing about the physical pain I was feeling. I struggled through the rest of the trip with constant pain and limitations as I tried to be a helpful part of the team.

Two weeks after coming home, we moved to Delaware to be near Christopher's family as we prepared to serve overseas. After our summer experience, we realized how difficult it would be to work in Iraq long-term unless I experienced some relief from my physical pain. My self-inflicted pressure to find healing consumed much of the next eight months as I tried natural remedies and other suggestions from people. I used essential oils and other supplements and cleansers, abstained from products with gluten or corn, tried new stretches, and exercised regularly. I felt the only thing keeping us from serving overseas was my physical pain, and so it was up to me to overcome that obstacle. The stress of finding the answer to my pain led me into thought patterns filled with worry, impatience, and discouragement.

Since I hadn't known anything about the Mennonite culture before I met Christopher, my first months of being in Delaware also brought the struggle of finding my place in my husband's wonderful family, church and community. I started a women's prayer group in our apartment, which turned into a moms' prayer group when we all got pregnant. But as the pregnancy progressed, my pain continued to worsen. The neck, shoulder, and back pain intensified so that I was reminded of it during almost every household task of cleaning, cooking or washing dishes. Even bending over to do laundry exhausted me.

About halfway through my pregnancy, Christopher and I attended a three-week training course in reaching out to Muslims, held in Dearborn, Michigan. While Christopher and the other classmates went out to interact with Muslims in the community to practice what we had learned in the classroom, I spent the evenings alone in the sketchy hotel room, feeling guilty for not having enough energy to go out. God reminded me of His sovereignty when He gave us an opportunity to share Scripture with our hotel cleaning lady who was a Muslim from Jordan. It was a huge encouragement to me to know that He understood my dilemma and could bring people to my doorstep!

My parents, who provide pastoral care for missionaries, visited us on the way back from one of their conferences. Before they left, they sat with us in our living room and encouraged us to seek the Lord

about the wisdom of moving overseas. They asked if serving overseas was what we truly wanted to do or what we felt we had to do to please God. They also shared that missionaries have a lot to balance, with language, culture, ministry, and time-consuming daily household tasks; dealing with chronic pain would likely add even more challenges.

To be honest, the idea of living in a foreign culture with my limitations had felt overwhelming, but a complete change in our plans sounded scary too. And what would Christopher think? Moving overseas had been our plan since we'd gotten married three years earlier.

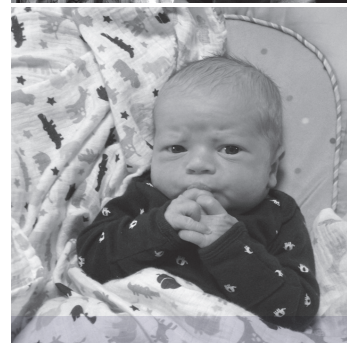
A few weeks later, Christopher and I were driving home from visiting some friends who'd been in Iraq with us and were also planning to be part of the long-term team. As we rode along in the darkness, I asked him to share his own thoughts about where we were in our journey toward missions. Surprisingly, Christopher had also sensed a growing lack of peace about going as he'd prayed and reassessed things. He shared that one of his dreams before he'd decided to serve overseas had always been to live in Delaware near his family. When he asked me where I'd like to live if we could live anywhere in the U.S., I realized that I was enjoying the budding friendships in our church and community. I said, "I think I'd like to live in Delaware."

We were amazed God had brought the two of us to the same conclusion—that He was redirecting us to reach out to people stateside. God also answered our desire to be a part of His work around the world by actively praying for and encouraging missionaries.

As I processed this major change in our future plans, my two closest friends from college encouraged me to see a counselor. God brought both a counselor and a mentor into my life over the next months—amazing women with training and advice grounded in God's truth. The counselor helped me to step outside of the high expectations I had for myself and shared lots of stories about the way others lived lives of balance and rest. She encouraged me to find a creative outlet. As I've studied the craft of fiction writing, that new soul-refreshing passion has brought a vibrancy to all the other responsibilities in my life.

My mentor talked me through many of my false beliefs, which included all the good things I thought I needed to do to be a useful part in God's kingdom. She helped me to see that God doesn't need me to accomplish his plans; His greatest desire for me is to live in close relationship with Him. If I'm focusing on

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ABOVE Little Isaiah Yoder, near the beginning of his first year.

FAR ABOVE Alicia and Christopher in Iraq.

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knowing Him, I can trust His Spirit to lead me into the good works He's prepared for me to do.

Once Isaiah was born, I had plenty of chances to integrate what I'd been learning about depending on God. As I began my new role as a mommy, God showed me that He is just as concerned about my spiritual and emotional health as He is about my physical health. I memorized Romans 8, reminding myself daily that because of Jesus' sacrifice I am not condemned and that nothing can separate me from His love.

These truths began to free many of my thoughts once clogged with worry. I used to fear I'd fail to live up to the image I thought people had of me: an organized, in control, cheerful part of the church and community, always ready to serve wherever there was a need. Now I know that my identity is secure in my Savior and I don't need to prove myself to Him or anyone else. I am able to delight in the way God is using the body of Christ in our community and around the world, yet I feel free to focus my time on the ways I feel gifted and led to serve here at home.

At the beginning of this year, I reflected on all the Father had taught me and felt the Spirit leading me to start a weekly devotional blog about staying close to Jesus in the busyness of life and family (aliciayoder.com). It's been a blessing to

interact with women in this way as I remember that I am not alone in the journey.

Today, I feel better than I have in almost a decade, the physical symptoms being more than manageable. Living a physically healthy lifestyle through good food, exercise and relaxing stretches has blended together with the changes in my heart and mind to bring me into a rhythm of freedom.

Some days I feel more pain and am tempted to fall into old patterns, worrying that I'm not contributing enough to the needs in our community or towards God's desire for the nations to be reached with the gospel. But now I can declare that God is in control and that I can trust Him to guide me as I look to Him in prayer.

As my son grows into adulthood, I want his development to be a visible reminder of God's work in my own spiritual life. With each passing year, as I think about how much taller he's gotten or the way his language has developed, I want to remember the freedom God has brought me into, shaping me to be more like Himself for His glory.

Alicia Yoder lives in Greenwood, Delaware with her husband Christopher and son Isaiah. They attend Greenwood Mennonite Church. When she's not chasing her son, playing violin with her husband, or coming up with ideas for her devotional blog, you'll probably find her scribbling notes and writing scenes for her novel (women's fiction).

Leadership Corner, continued...

he knew the Holy Spirit had set up a divine encounter. What happened in that encounter made a difference for eternity.

The Holy Spirit's guidance will always agree with the Scriptures

Some folks get concerned right away as soon as we start talking about listening to the Holy Spirit as I do in this article. Just take a deep breath and relax. The Holy Spirit will never direct us to go against the scriptures. All guidance needs to agree with the Word and be heard in the spirit of meekness. If we are led by the Spirit it means that we don't go our own way, and it is always the "Superior One" that is doing the leading. Each day becomes an adventure when you wake up to the possibility of being on a team with the Holy Spirit doing the leading!

NEWS & NOTES

MENNONITE WORLD CONFERENCE

The Mennonite World Conference assembly, Pennsylvania 2015, is coming to Harrisburg, PA in July 2015. CMC would like to help our International Affiliates send representatives to the assembly. Four of the seven CMC International Affiliate churches are members of Mennonite World Conference. Costa Rica, Ecuador, India and Nicaragua could send representatives if finances are available and visas can be secured. Per person average cost including travel and lodging is about \$1,700 and CMC would like to help pay expenses for two people from each of these four countries. Representatives will also be able to attend the CMC Annual Conference on Sunday. If you would like to help someone from these churches attend Pennsylvania 2015 please send checks to CMC, 9910 Rosedale MC Rd, Irwin OH 43029. Designating funds to assist a specific church/country is welcomed.

LEADERSHIP POSITIONS

Shiloh Mennonite Church (shilohmc.org) of London, Ohio is searching for a senior pastor. We are looking for someone that has a heart for God, a passion for people, strong preaching and good leadership skills while at the same time is very personable and approachable. This is a full time posi-

tion serving with a team of elders and two associate pastors. For more information, contact Phil Weber at philtwila@gmail.com or 740-506-4756.

Bean Blossom Mennonite Church, located in south, central Indiana, is a small, engaged, rural community congregation, comprised of approximately 75 regularly attending members. We are seeking a lead pastor to guide our body into the next stage of spiritual growth. We are members of the Conservative Mennonite Conference and are presently looking for a ½ to ¾ time Pastor. The candidate should have the ability to operate in a Mennonite church and outreach to our non-Mennonite community. For more information please contact Matt Roberts at robertsma77@gmail.com or call 812-345-2774.

Cherry Glade Mennonite Church, Accident, MD, is currently searching for a Worship Leader. This is a part-time paid position. This person would be a team member with the focus of leading the congregation to connect with God through worship for the purpose of transforming lives. Letters of interest from men who have interest in this position should be sent to Barry Maust, Senior Pastor, at 307 Foxtown Rd., Accident, MD 21520 or by email at bmaust@verizon.net.