

NATALIE

RUNION

RAISED TO STAY

Devotional

A 40-DAY JOURNEY FROM HURT TO HOLY

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A 40-DAY JOURNEY FROM HURT TO HOLY

150 YEARS STRONG
DAVID COOK

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Introduction



I SAID yes to Jesus when I was seven years old at the foot of my little white four-poster bed. I can still feel the cold hardwood floors on my knobby knees and smell the fresh laundry detergent from my lace comforter, an inch from my nose as I prayed with my mom by my side. Since that Sunday night in 1986, I have continued to give Jesus my yes. At times I've given it to him with a reluctant sigh and other times like a wrapped birthday gift shyly hidden behind my back. There have been days I've whispered my yes, other days I've roared it into the heavens, but one thing is for sure: picking up our cross and casting our nets and everything else that comes with being a disciple of Jesus Christ is not for the faint of heart.

When I look around me, when I take inventory of my life, there are many who started out beside me on this journey with Jesus who are no longer running their race. The cross became too heavy, the cost too high, the pain unbearable, the betrayal too deep, and while some simply left a church or ministry, others walked away from their faith altogether.

They couldn't stay.

It was this heartbreaking reality coupled with my own season of questioning why I shouldn't quit that the Lord began to challenge me to write to the wondering, wandering, wrestling about my own relationship with the church and God's people. Using black boxes to frame my white text, I showed up on social media even on the days I most wanted to quit. In this forum I shared what God was teaching me through his Word, my experiences as a pastor's kid turned pastor, and other believers.

The black boxes gave language to Christians around the globe consisting of different denominations, languages, ages, lifetime Christ followers, and brand-new believers, opening conversations that had once felt taboo and shedding light on issues many were too embarrassed to address. As these conversations grew, those on the cusp of quitting found freedom and healing—a movement began.





What started out as a small Instagram account of relatives and close friends became a community of hundreds of thousands of “Stayers” honest in their struggles and desperate for a reason to hold on—to Jesus, to each other.

The black boxes have been shared millions of times, quietly between coworkers and friends and publicly on church platforms streaming around the world. And just like our journey with Jesus, they tell of adventure through the hurt, the hard, the hope, and the holy, which we can only truly encounter by staying through it all and allowing God to turn all things out for our good and his glory.

In the years that followed, I wanted to quit more times than I care to confess. As I spent time in the Scriptures and prayer, as well as in worship and intercession, I shared with the Raised to Stay community what I was learning, and many times my black boxes were scrutinized, used as weapons rather than a sweet balm of healing, and my inbox overflowed with the angry, confused, and bitter.

It would have been easy to grow angry with the church and its people in the daily ambushes of nasty comments and stories of abuse at the hands of shepherds who should be protecting the sheep.

Rather, my anger turned to anguish, and my heart began to break for the wounded and the weary. I stayed, I continued writing the black boxes and showing up in the tenderness of the brokenhearted, believing that if I stayed, maybe I could encourage one more to hold on just a day longer.

The truth is, anyone can quit.

But sticking it out, not giving up, holding on, finishing what we start, that's hard work. Jesus modeled it for us on the cross, for the joy set before him, remaining in position. His crucifixion was the start of a resurrection.

What you think is about to kill you is often an invitation to new life.

He didn't quit on us.

We won't quit on him.

This book is for the Stayers, those who have journeyed through the black and white of the hurt and the hard and stayed to see the brilliance of color in the hope and the holy. This walk with Jesus isn't for the faint of heart.

Oh! How brave it is to stay!

Natalie



FOR thirty-three years Jesus called earth his home. He wasn't born a king in a palace with a crib and a royal guard to watch over him. He was delivered humbly and lowly from the womb of his mother, Mary, into the filthy sanctuary of a manger surrounded by the sounds of cattle and the exhausted breaths of the woman who had carried and just delivered the Son of God.



The Hurst

"Be it unto me as you have said" was her humble response to the angel who came to visit with the news that she, a virgin, would carry and give birth to the Savior of the world. Nine months of stares ... her own fiancé, Joseph, planning to quietly divorce her to avoid public shame until an angel appeared to him in a dream to reveal the divine plan. Nine months of being misunderstood ... her belly growing as those around her speculated of this immaculate conception, all of heaven simultaneously groaning in anticipation of the long-awaited Messiah.

Even in the womb, Jesus was introduced to the hurt that is humanity.

Protected and nurtured by his earthly mother and father, his personal ministry wouldn't even begin until he was thirty years old. In just three years, Jesus would find twelve men to be his disciples, traveling town to town speaking to those who would gather with the good new message of the Kingdom of God calling the people to repentance for the forgiveness of their sins. In just three years he would come up against some of his greatest critics, not the sinners, but those who believed they were saints, the Pharisees, who for the most part rejected Jesus and everything he taught to those who would listen. The religious would be among those to hurt our Jesus, leading him to trial and eventually his execution on the cross.

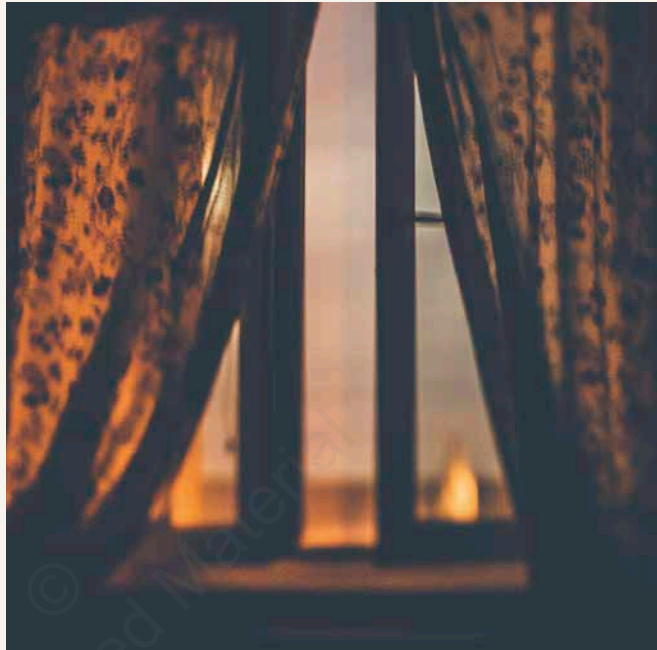
How beautiful is it that even in betrayal, Jesus was teaching his disciples and the crowds to love their enemies. Even now he sings these same words over you and me, reminding us to bless those who curse us, to pray for those who betray us, to forgive those who have

trespassed against us, and to release them back into the hands of their Creator.

In Matthew 5:44, Jesus says, "But I say, love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you!" In other passages he tells us to "love your enemies" and "do good to those who hate you" (Luke 6:27), and Romans 12:19

teaches that as his beloved, revenge will never bring revival in his words, "Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord" (NIV).

From the floor of a dusty stable, where he was cradled in his mother's arms, to the darkened hill on Calvary, where he was held by the sins of the world, Jesus was no stranger to pain. With nails in his hands, his side pierced, a crown of thorns pressed into his brow, he looked out over a jeering crowd of sinners, cynics, skeptics, and saints. We hear what hurt sounds like from the heart of our Savior:



"Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34).

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46 NIV).

"Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43 NIV).

"Woman, behold your son!" and "Behold your mother!" (John 19:26–27 NKJV).

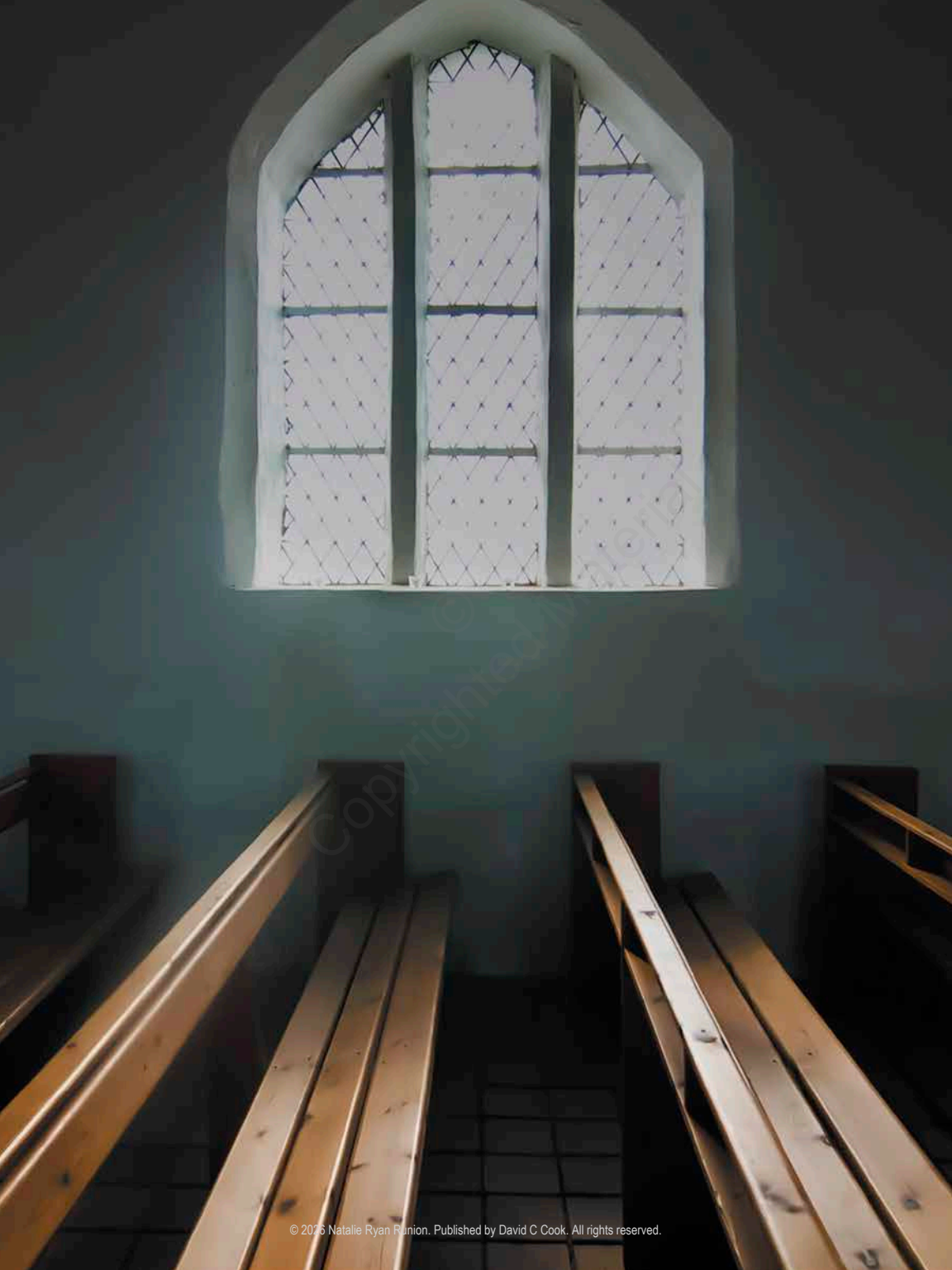
"I thirst!" (John 19:28 NKJV).

"It is finished!" (John 19:30).

"Father, into your hands I commend my spirit" (Luke 23:46 NRSVA).

As Jesus took his final breath, lifting himself up onto those nails to fill his punctured lungs with one last gulp of earthly air, the whole earth grew dark, and for a moment Satan thought he had won.

In what might be the greatest plot twist of all time, this crucifixion was the start of a resurrection.



Raised to Stay



Day 01

IN 2019, I went for a walk with the Lord and forty years of frustrations with the church and God's people came pouring out of me through prayerful tears. I had been a pastor's kid and then gone into full-time ministry. Forty years felt like a good holy number to ask God if I could tap out and quit. My heart was broken over my own hurts and betrayals but also grieved for those we had lost, fellow brothers and sisters who were so deeply wounded by God's people that they had chosen to walk away not only from the church, but from God himself.

During this walk, I heard the phrase "Raised to Stay" as if written in bold black letters across my heart. Not fully understanding what it meant, I ran home and wrote my first black box with white text on Instagram, and a movement of Stayers was born. This word, *stay*, doesn't mean we stay in harmful or abusive environments, but that we abide with Jesus and stay connected to his vine even when the winds of life try to blow us off. I know the church hurt you. I know people betrayed you. I am sorry the church hasn't always been safe for you. But you can rest in the truth that God is with you and for

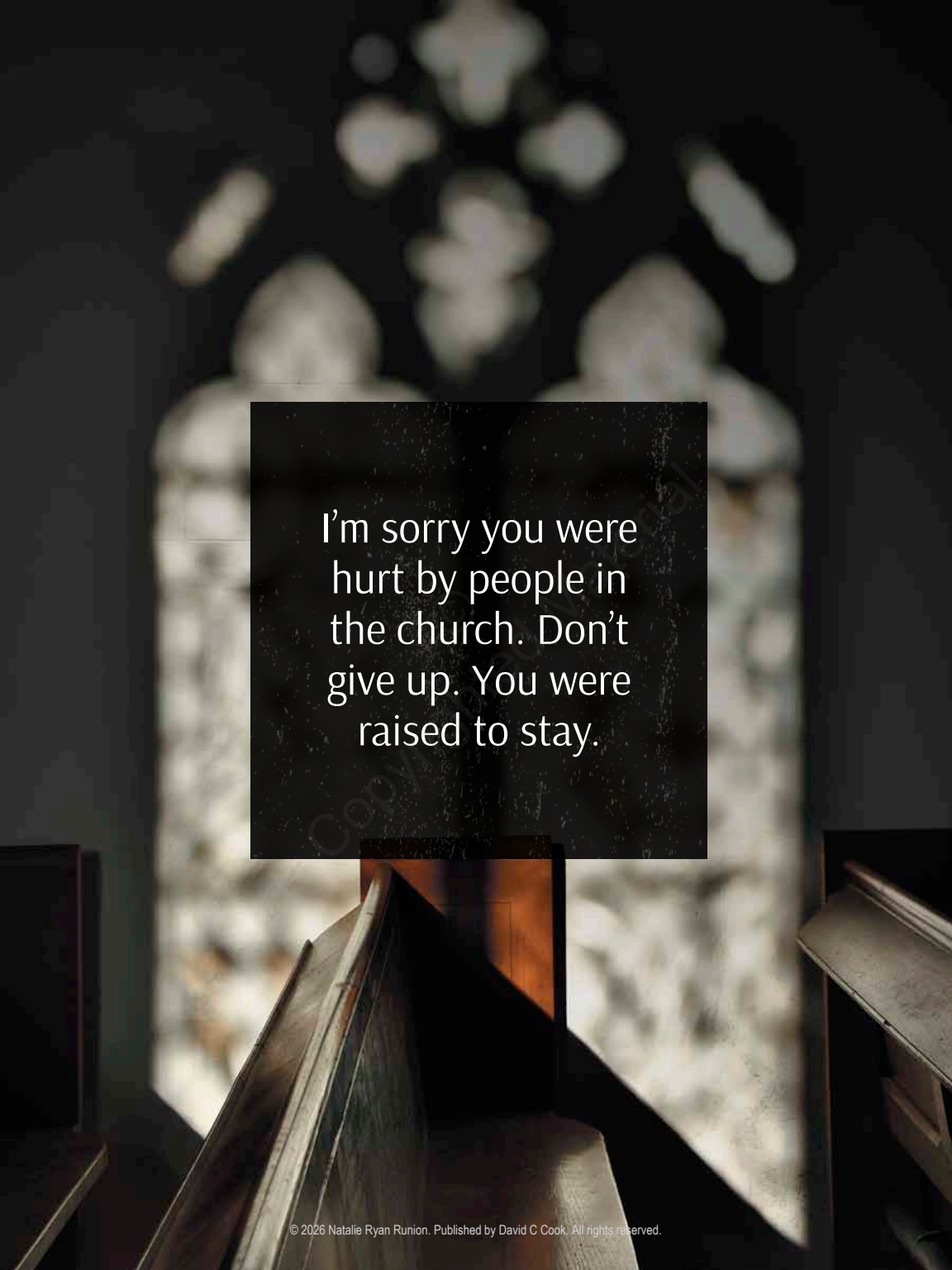
you, and even in hurt and betrayal, we can stay connected to Jesus and allow him to continue to produce good fruit through us even in the strongest of storms.

I'm sorry you were hurt by people in the church. Don't give up. You were raised to stay.

"I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples." John 15:5-8 (NIV)

Abide: What does staying or abiding with Jesus mean to you?

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hurt by people in
the church. Don't
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