



Thrashing About with God: Finding Faith on the Other Side of Everything

Mandy Steward

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What if Jesus didn't die so our lives could look perfect? What if He died so we could stop feeling like our lives have to be perfect to mean something? What if we simply live out our own story, even if it doesn't look as others say it should? Mandy Steward set out in pursuit of these what-ifs. She didn't find answers so much as she discovered a messy grace that knows no limits and a God that was and is willing to thrash about with her no matter her questions or struggles or doubts. What she found was abundant life, but it didn't look like she thought it was going to. It was far different, and much deeper. This is a book without "easy" answers that lets those struggling with faith and searching for more know they are not alone.

Thrashing About with God: Finding Faith on the Other Side of Everything Details

Date : Published October 1st 2013 by David C. Cook

ISBN : 9780781408257

Author : Mandy Steward

Format : Paperback 272 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, Christian, Autobiography, Memoir, Spirituality, Religion, Christianity

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Kathryn says

**** This book is an advanced read.****

I got this book from the author through a goodreads contest. I had hoped that I would the book as it seemed to have a different focus re: the Christian spiritual life than what was in the contest lists in general.

I liked Mandy's writing as it was raw, honest "this is where I am at with God and it is messy" food for thought. Mandy tells us that she is a mother of 4, wife of a church staffer and she has periods where she doesn't really like going to church, doesn't really know what she believes about God or Jesus, and she puts it all out there. There is a vulnerability in her writing that is refreshing and is the side often not heard in our Christian churches today. No one, especially not a ministerial family member, wants to admit that they are the "perfect" picture of a believer.

In her journey, she has learned that in learning to know herself, she has begun to know God. It is okay to be the woman that is even if her faith isn't clearly defined or in a neat package. She gives hope to the rest of the thrashers who are also struggling to define themselves.

I will have to expand on some of the thoughts that she left me with in a future blog post.

Elora Ramirez says

An incredible memoir. Mandy Steward takes the chaos and messiness of "thrashing" and weaves it perfectly with the coming into one's own. It's not sequential or even necessarily organized, but really there's no other way for Steward to have spilled her words. I loved this book—can't wait to get my own paper copy when it comes out.

A.E.M. A.E.M. says

I discovered this jewel by accident, yet precisely when I needed it the most. What I love about this book is that it is honest, yet kind, about Christianity. By opening up about her own thought processes, feelings, and experiences; she allows others with the same or similar struggles to have a cup of tea or coffee with somebody who has been there. For those who may not yet have struggled with such depth with their faith, it offers an insight. Her process doesn't belittle those who cling to the rules and feel comforted by them; instead it comforts those who struggle to keep their faith alive in the midst of all those rule keepers. There is beauty when you allow your eyes to see the dark and the light mixed together, and that's exactly what Jesus did. He didn't stand in the light with the rules, pushing the dark away. He took his light to the dark places to shine hope in people's heart. And that's what this book does. It brings the light.

Paula Vince says

Giving a book a ranking at all is something I'm loath to do in most cases but especially in this one, as it has a lot to do with what Mandy Steward addresses, including how she's decided to tackle her reactions to the opinions and labels of others. Given the subject matter, I'd hate to come across as a prime example of the type of person she's talking about within the pages. However, part of the process of writing a book includes inviting feedback from members of the public, so now I'll attempt to explain the great good I got from reading this on the one hand, and the niggling misgivings I had on the other, pulling me in different directions and resulting in a 3 star ranking; a tied vote, so to speak.

First, I've got to applaud her for being brave and honest enough to take a stand, and fight for her right to take time out from her normal life to reflect. A pastor's wife deciding not to attend church until she's worked through the issues in her mind and spirit is surely not a common occurrence. Mandy decided to break from her established pattern of seeking answers from older, wiser, (usually male) figures outside of herself to delve within.

Here are some of the issues she addresses. Jesus has promised us 'life to the full', but what do we really make of this? We keep searching, although we're not sure what it will look like when or if it comes. It's easy to get into a pattern of striving, assuming God must be holding back because we're falling short in some way. Taking time to reflect showed her how often she'd been stuffing genuine feelings of inadequacy deep beneath the web of performance she was trying to weave to make up for it. It took stepping back to help show her how she'd exhausted herself, chasing approval from others through performing and achieving. She has an eloquent way of writing which convinced me that this could be my story too. I'd be willing to guess that almost every reader of this book will come away recognising the benefits they could get from a similar performance detox.

However, as I was reading, I couldn't help wondering if her depression, many times, was tied up to a self-focused digging around where she didn't really need to go. Sometimes it seemed as she had a permanent "How am I feeling today?" thermometer attached to her. We all know that someone who continually takes their own temperature may most likely end up feeling unwell. It would be a shame not to live our lives because we're too busy examining them. I read this memoir on my kindle, but I'd be willing to guess it'd be a pretty thick hard copy book. That's a lot of soul searching.

Her stance to take a fast from Bible reading, as if it's all tied in with people pleasing, seemed a bit shortsighted. She gave the impression that she's fed up with it because she knows it all so well, but she doesn't seem to take into account how multi-layered it is, or to open herself to the possibility of being surprised by a fresh insight.

I think it's the sort of book to delve into one chapter or so at a time, when we're in the mood to feel challenged and have a good discussion. Reading it straight through from start to finish may bog us down a bit. Being inside my own head, grappling with a train of thought, gets tedious over the long term, and so it is with someone else's.

Although it's classified as a memoir, this felt a lot like reading someone's personal journal; a prolific artist/writer's free flowing thoughts. As I said, I felt awkward about reviewing it for this reason, as I wouldn't like somebody to rate mine. Mandy Steward has made herself vulnerable, so in the end, I respect and admire her for that. At one stage she said she came to the point of saying, "So what?" to people's value judgments, accepting that we all have our mixtures lightness and darkness that make us unique. Maybe that's one of the

best things to take away from this.

I received a copy from Net Galley and David C Cook in return for an honest review.

Brenda says

This wasn't bad by any means, but after awhile I just got tired of it. I got tired of it seeming like her main problem with Christianity was that it didn't mesh with her artistry. Unless I was just missing something. I did read it before bed at night and was sometimes tired.

I would have thought it would be more interesting for her to delve into why she seemed to be having a faith crisis. Instead it seemed like a lot of her talking about not knowing what she really believed, or if she believed something, and not wanting to conform or perform for other people.

Was that really all it was? That she wanted to be an artist and a rebel? Or did she struggle with certain tenets or beliefs of Christianity? That was just never really brought up that I can remember. And I feel like it would have been a much more interesting book if she had. But it was her book to write, and this was what she wanted to write. So there it is.

Janette Fuller says

Are you tired of pretending?

Are you tired of spitting out right answers for others when your own well has gone dry.

Are you tired of thinking the dreams you long to step into aren't holy enough to warrant action?

Are you tired of religiously giving and sacrificing and having nothing left to feed yourself?

Mandy Steward is a pastor's wife, mother of four young children and a talented artist. This is the story of her search for spiritual fulfillment and peace.

Ms. Steward struggles with the expectations that are placed on Christians by the church and society. She questions the beliefs that she was taught as a child. She copes with the guilt, doubt and fear she feels as she questions her faith and her own identity.

Mandy Steward shares her "messy life" and quest to balance her roles as a Christian, wife, mother and artist.

Ms. Steward has written a heartfelt, thoughtful account of her spiritual and emotional journey over the past several years. She questions almost everything about her life. She comes to the realization that there is nothing wrong with questioning because it is the way a person grows.

It has been several months since I have read a "Christian book." I must warn you that this is not the average book written for Christian women. This book is brutally honest, unvarnished and "messy". The author writes from her heart and expresses a very realistic view of her personal and family life.

I was very impressed by the patience and understanding that was shown by her husband and church family. This young woman is truly blessed to have a loving support system that will allow her to honestly examine her life and follow her dreams.

The good news is that questions lead to understanding and change. This book will inspire women to take a good look at their own situations and see if they are living the life "to the full" that Jesus promises in John 10:10.

Lindsay Smith says

Vulnerable, funny and profound. I found so much of myself in her words, as I think many evangelicals will. What I loved about this book, though, was the grace woven throughout. It's not a church-bashing memoir- it's full of hope and God and, yes, even church (and community) done right. The author wasn't ashamed to say she didn't have all the answers, wrestling right up until the end, and I loved the transparency about that.

Misti says

I've been reading Mandy's blog for 3.5 years and read through her dark 'messy' days. When I first began the book I told her that her book was what I'd hoped Blue Like Jazz to be. I wanted to highlight and underline all sorts of beautiful words and phrases---she was right on.

There were definitely times that I did not identify with her. At a young age I felt alienated by church/church people/church setting and have long since made my peace with it and God. There were so many times I wanted to tell her to just move on, stop worrying about everyone else. I think even those who aren't religious could probably use this book to equate it to the general pressures and expectations and beliefs from the society around us. It isn't just Christians or the religious putting their spin on how everyone should act and live.

I know she intended the book to be messy, a bit organized and scattered, but by the end I was a bit frustrated with keeping up with the here-and-there of it all.

That said, I'm still a big fan of Mandy and her writings. I can't wait to see what other book she's got up her sleeve and see what kind of space she's in with God.

Valjean says

Extraordinary book. I found no answers, which is what I usually look for in books on God. Instead, I found someone who had virtually all the same questions as I have had about years of Christian experience that somehow did not result in the 'abundant life'.

For example:

Why, when I do everything that spiritual authorities tell me to do, am I so empty?

Why can't I ever seem to find God the way others do?

Can I hear from God besides through reading the Bible?

Is it possible to trust the 'still, small voice' inside of me? Or should I run away from it as being 'me' and not 'God'?

Do I trust God enough to walk into a dark place with only His presence, not concerning myself with the approval of others?

Who are true spiritual friends and mentors (that love unconditionally)?

I left lots and lots of underlining and exclamation points and asterisks in the copy. I came to the end of the book, knowing that I simply need to keep walking on this narrow path of faith, even when it at times feels like 'the valley of the shadow', feels very uncertain, feels unknowable.

I strongly recommend this for you if you fit this description: Someone who has done all the 'right' Christian things and still feels a gaping hole inside. A God-shaped hole waiting to be filled.

Maia says

This book came into my hands not because I'm a Christian (I've never been particularly involved with religion) but because I fell in love with Mandy's philosophies and writings on art and the mysteries, from reading her blog. There is something about self-acceptance, about messiness and madness and magic, and about individuality and sovereignty, that it seems like Mandy gets in a deep and true way, and is able to articulate well. For these reasons, I am drawn to her writing, and I picked up this book.

I liked it. I liked the stories from her life, things she remembered and observed. I liked peeking in in this way, and in these stories I saw myself - the conflict between my inner people-pleaser and my inner free self, and the way that my natural curiosity and fascination with life runs painfully into walls built by external expectations and norms that have been internalised.

There were other parts in the book, though, that were more like musings and meaning-makings than stories, and in the second half of my reading, I found myself tiring of them and skipping over them, looking for the next passage where another story began. I can imagine that if I were part of the target audience, I may have found these passages illuminating, but this wasn't the case here.

There is something satisfying about a story with a clear beginning, middle and an end, but this book is not like that. It feels to me more like a collection of ideas and stories with a common theme.

Towards the end, as I was reading, I made an interesting connection that allowed me to relate more to the book. In the book, Mandy's true self is coming up against the rules of religion. I realised that I feel similarly about studying at an institution where there are rules to follow if I want to be involved. There is no answer here about what to do with the dilemma, but I'm left feeling inspired to know that somebody else is striving in the name of her own soul-self, too.

Faith says

This is a book filled with bright words. Bright words are those clusters of ideas that speak to you, that you need to hear.

We all know what our bright words are, and they change all the time as we change. That's why I'd keep this book handy. At different points on different days, there will be different chapters that hit you just right and help put cracks in the walls around your heart.

With chapter titles like "Illiterate," "Darkness," "Naked," "Voice," "So?," "Mystery," "Love," "Labeled," "Rhythms," and "Friend," this book can evoke a lot of emotion and thought as you read.

Let me say this upfront. When I think about Time Spent With God, I tend to think of peaceful time. I don't tend to think of oceans roaring apart into walls of water and then closing again and crushing armies, I don't think of the sky going black around a bloody hill while everyone trembles, and I don't think of thrashing. Thrashing makes me uncomfortable. I don't want to thrash myself, and I don't want to see anyone I care about having to thrash about with God. I want everything to be easy for them, I want faith to be simple, and I want the results in their life to be nearly picture perfect.

Except you know what? If I had my way, I would be condemning people to deadness. The fact that a person has thrashed about with God means that they are alive, they have lost and found and felt their own strength, and that most of all they have encountered the truth that God is Alive and will thrash back with them. Thrashing isn't pretty. It can't be whitewashed. It has to just be what it is. And that's how Mandy Steward's book unfolds: Raw, Honest, Personal, Genuine.

As much as she warns us that this is her own journey, and that no one else will duplicate it, I think she's speaking to a lot of us here.

There are her thoughts on Divine Romance, on our expectations and the punishing judgements of others, on hearing our own frequently-smothered voices and the difficulty we have in accepting ourselves, on art and the need to create, and many other things. These aren't just lofty musings either. They're deeply personal, learned by her own experience, and she gladly states that she's still discovering more, dancing to the song of God's Love and being shaped by His touch in every moment.

If you read this book, there will probably be many times when one concept or another meets you where you are. For me, in this reading, it was the way Mandy found out that God loves to woo us in ways that will appeal to us personally. These gifts, blessings, and messages are not even likely to come in expected packaging or conventional places. There were times she felt compelled to do something- watch a certain movie, for example, and she experienced God there where you'd never think to find Him.

Reading her story made me feel free to accept these touches of love. I may be receiving comfort from Bob Seger's music and Rich Mullins' music on the same day, and that is perfectly fine. God can speak through the haunting words of "Mainstreet" and "The Color Green." One praises Him directly, one is a ballad about the lostness and longings common to us humans.

Maybe we all need to live our lives with both eyes open and both hands out, comfortable in our own skin. I'm really glad I read this book.

Thank you David C. Cook for my review copy.

Leigh Kramer says

So much of my ARC of Mandy Steward's Thrashing About With God resonated. Steward gives us a book

that allows inside her process of faith, complete with questions, doubt, wrestling, and glimmers of hope. I appreciated her honesty and vulnerability and was honestly amazed a Christian publisher dared to go there. There's no tied up neat conclusions, no black and white theology. Just Steward's openness to where she's at, her willingness to step away from church for a time, and the very real ways God is speaking to her. I highly recommend it, especially for those of us on the road less traveled by.

Rain says

I read this book in one sitting. A brief dozing off between 3 AM and 7 AM? I don't think that counts. When I closed the cover following the final page I let out a gusty exhale. I hadn't known I was holding my breath.

I am one who finds herself skittish, to put it mildly, in the world of faith and traditional Christianity. My fundamentalist roots and the consequent good-Christian-girl experiences (read: exhaustive, shame-based, fear-based, marked with an infinite array of "shoulds" and exclusions of practically everyone else in the world) of my twenties worked themselves into my skin and bones and leave me twitching on occasion when I am exposed to anything remotely "Christianese." However, my heart is very tender towards God and my spirituality. I am fiercely protective of my spiritual path. What I call the working out of my own salvation may not look like other versions but it is precious to me and I get to guard it with my whole being.

Because of this, I wasn't sure what to expect upon reading *Thrashing About With God*. Mandy is a dear friend of mine. She asked me, after I texted her to say I finished reading it, "Any triggering spots for you?" And I am surprised that I can honestly say, "No."

While she talks candidly and respectfully about her observations and experiences within and around the evangelical church world (including a former pastor of hers by the name of Rick Warren; you may have heard of him?) and uses words and phrases familiar to this culture, they are offered with such grace and freedom that it's like breathing fresh air into a dingy, stale room. There is no hidden motive, no conversion sales pitch, no "should-ing." Simply an invitation into the mystery and the life that is our own unique journey with God. On page 145, she says, "As God said in *The Shack*, "I will travel any road to find you." And He will, and He did, and He does. And it is He who then woos us onto unique, personal narrow roads that few have traveled."

Now I'm working through the book a second time and am struck by the way author Mandy Steward invites a deep breath, a relief, and a rest within the weary world of evangelical Christianity. She offers her own questions and discoveries, anger and hope for us to witness and perhaps see some of ourselves reflected there. I certainly do. On page 99 she writes, "It's scary to see how much I relied on the voices of others to direct my paths. And now I see the dark silhouettes of the owners of some of those voices, and I realize they weren't for me at all. Quite the opposite, they were sent to destroy me. I see a huge monster, and his name is Religion, and I am finally brave enough to be angry with him, because he has stolen God away from me ..." And on page 148-149, "We are all of us desperate, at some time or another, to institutionalize God, build structures, construct ideologies, and devise formulas that will make Him certain and secure, attainable and controllable. We are seeking certain paths for our own comfort. But the Divine will not be chained down. And this is the haunted beauty of it all. That He is always revealing Himself in present terms, always in the now. God is not limited to who He was and God is not limited to who He will be. God is "I AM." God is relevant now in ways that can meet our hearts' needs ... if we could but see our longing and our hurting and our haunting and our inadequacies as invitations to His beauty and power and love." These words meet me right here. Like the probing touch of a gentle physician they fall right onto a tender place in my heart,

bringing freedom and peace and permission to work through my own salvation with a God who is willing to go through the mess and the dark and the ungraceful thrashing with me.

On page 212-213 Steward writes, "... my knees would be wobbly and my palms sweaty. I would feel as if I was there on God's behalf, His acting attorney, and if I couldn't plainly represent His case and win the jury over, another soul would be lost for eternity. ... I would soothe my wounded pride from the "unwon battles" by telling myself, "You did the best you could. It's the Holy Spirit's job to convict the heart, not ours." But part of me always felt sick. Sick because I knew my friendship with that person could never really be the same again, and sick because I wasn't sure who I was trying to convince more - the jury or myself. But lately ... lately the conversations have been different. They've been different because I'm not having conversations to win anyone over. I'm having conversations because I'm the one asking questions. I can't tell you how freeing this is. For once I don't have to march "onward Christian soldier" as if I'm off to war. I can march as a spiritual seeker who wants to have an authentic conversation about how we as humans interact with a Higher Being. Or, actually, I don't have to do much marching at all."

I think that those within mainstream or fundamentalist Christianity might be frustrated by lack of emphasis on evangelism, consider the focus on grace to be out of balance with "law", equate the suggestion that it's possible to find God outside of the Bible (and actually hear from God outside of the institutionalized church or an appointed leader) with dangerous ground. However, those willing to embrace an honest anger that stirs passion just might be surprised at how hopeful this conversation can be. Honest thrashing, like Jacob's own dark night of the soul, presses one right up close to the Mystery itself which will not be contained but will allow itself to touch you, transform you. And however reads our story, our own wrestling with the Divine, it has the power to shape us, to scar us, to heal. We do not walk away the same.

This book is raw, breathtaking, brave. Mandy Steward brings a desperately-needed conversation to the table and in a refreshing twist, doesn't offer pat answers or tiresome platitudes or even the deprecation that western evangelicalism seems to adore. She writes with deep respect, wonder and reverence. I feel like I, with all my bumps and questions and bruises and, at times, ungraceful "thrashing" would not only be welcome at the table with her and God, but actually *wanted* there, with no underlying agenda ready to spring upon me once I let down my guard. Her words are wild poetry. She is a passionate artist offering a behind-the-scenes glimpse into one woman's spiritual life. It feels almost too intimate, like we are peeking into private journals scrawled out in the dark while a thunderstorm rages outside. I suspect this is more true than not.

Suzi Baum says

Growing up in a home guided by the tenets of organized religion can shrink your worldview. Some might argue that it expands your view in just the right directions, but, in my experience, my 'thrashing' was not invited to the conversation. My obedience was. Mandy Steward has set out for us a wild map, drawn with thick paint and finger thin lines, tied up with her own brand of magic that draws the reader in to her world, married to a pastor, mother of four and allows us to follow her journey towards spiritual clarity.

The territory that Mandy draws us in to in *Thrashing About* is fraught with darkness; the reader's eyes grow accustomed to it by the time you reach the third chapter. In the last line of chapter three she describes herself as "A compliant Christian with a life lacking fullness". She is determined to explore her capacity as a woman in relationship to God, as an artist in conversation with the dark and unexplored rooms of a woman's soul.

She does not do it alone. Mandy embodies what I learned from a dear writing colleague, Zita Christian, “I write in solitude, I work in community”. Every chapter is filled with her conversations with God, with her children and her husband, and with her friend Teresa, who we grow to love. Readers may long for such compassionate companionship in our own dark journeys. Mandy’s map is one each reader can take up for their own, draw in their own paths and roads of introspection and questioning and then set forth asking some hard questions like “Are you there God? Will you be with me, even now?” This book invites us each toward greater clarity in our relationship with whatever we call God.

What compels me to be near a woman like Mandy, who is so deeply devoted to asking the questions no one in the room is asking, is that through the “dark night of her soul” she shines luminously. She stands as a beacon for what is possible for creative women today, in friendship, in marriage, in faith practices, in families. I ache for her at times, feeling the agony of walking away from all that is familiar, away from people and events so related to church-going life. And I applaud her for her bravery and willingness to set out her journey just so.

Linda Koski says

I'm grateful to Mandy & David Cook Publisher for embracing this message and sharing it in print. So much indoctrination, heaps of twisted perceptions of what walking Christianity should look like, make a conversation/boo about a 'messy' life wrestling with God, a potentially controversial one. Thank you for simply being real, straight forward and including us in the reality that we are enough, and we need others to love us as we slowly love ourselves. As is.

Tanya Marlow says

This has been on my ‘to read’ list for ages, since practically every writer-friend I know has recommended it. Much like me, Mandy Steward was the Christian good girl, and then she grew up and married a minister, (which, as everyone knows, makes you a Super-Good-Christian). But burnout, doubt, and a faith crisis combined to throw her into a whirlpool of unknown, and this book is her thrashing her way through these questions, and finding a place of peace and resolution.

From this general description, I feared that it would be angry and chaotic, but although it poses some difficult questions, it is not an angry book. It felt to me like a free and freeing exploration of faith, throwing everything up into the air, and not catching everything, but just catching a few things, and turning them over in her hands so that the concept of a relationship with God appears fresh and new and good again.

This is, without question, a book for the burnt-out, the weary, the good girl or guy who is weary of being good, the doubter, the poet and artist, the lost one. It is for those who are in the midst of the storm and don’t know how to get out. I loved this book. I wasn’t sure that I agreed with everything in this book, but it is one of the few Christian books where that is not only permissible, but encouraged. I loved her spirit of exploration, her astute analysis into the psyche of the good girl / Older Brother of the prodigal son, and her deft storytelling. It is a beautiful, lyrical read, and a lifeline for those drowning in doubt. Highly recommended.

Kari says

I should start by saying that I am probably not the target audience for *Thrashing About With God*. Mandy Steward makes a point of saying that she knows she is not finished with this journey of grace, and I completely understand that. I hope I am never done learning about the mysteries of God either. But the sense I got from the book is that she is not settled with herself, that she still feels defensive about parts of her story like taking a break from church and not reading the Bible. This is understandable because she is a pastor's wife, but it is also very far from the life that I live, and that made it hard to relate. I felt sorry for her a lot, because I felt like she was "thrashing about" with a confining view of Christianity more than she was "thrashing about with God" and that it's likely that God isn't as worried about some of her hangups with Christianity as she has been taught. In the end, I thought that the book would have benefited from further time for growth and reflection on her part: her story is worth telling but it did not feel ready yet. Some of her thoughts were beautiful, especially the ideas of light and dark that she returned to several times, but the book as a whole did not gel for me. Recommended for: people who liked the message of *Grace for the Good Girl* by Emily Freeman and the style of *One Thousand Gifts* by Ann Voskamp.

I will add that I have read her blog before and enjoyed it which is why I picked up the book.

Abigail Smith says

This book has been so great for my soul, accepting and healing the trauma from all the SHOULDs placed on you in the Christian faith. Truly life changing. I have never underlined or highlighted so much content!

Jenny Wells says

A gift to read. Honest. Tender. A book about a woman in process who knows it, stays open, and thrashes through being her authentic self with God, four children, her husband's church vocation, and in the depth of friendship. It only took me so long to read because I moved while reading and was able to get through about a chapter every other night or so. Great way to end my days. Thanks, Mandy.

Lauren Alexander says

"I see a huge monster, and his name is Religion, and I am finally brave enough to be angry with him, because he has stolen God away from me, making Him into a tame little puny judge with graying hair who raps his wooden mallet and squeaks out, "You're forever guilty."

I found *Thrashing About with God* a wonderful look at the struggles we find in life and our faith. Steward is honest about the trials she has found with the church, other believers and the incredibly difficult life of being a pastor's wife. I found this book rather than being one with a clear end, middle and ending but rather a collection of musings. Steward's writing is used to find herself and her voice. It is a beautiful collection of stories.

