“Vaneetha writes with creativity, biblical faithfulness, compelling style, and an experiential authenticity that draws other sufferers in. Here you will find both a tested life and a love for the sovereignty of a good and gracious God.”

—JOHN PIPER, author of *Desiring God*; founder and teacher, desiringGod.org

“The Scars That Have Shaped Me will make you weep and rejoice not just because it brims with authenticity and integrity, but because every page points you to the rest that is found in entrusting your life to one who is in complete control and is righteous, powerful, wise, and good in every way.”

—PAUL TRIPP, pastor, author, international conference speaker

“I could not put this book down, except to wipe my tears. Reading Vaneetha’s testimony of God’s kindness to her in pain was exactly what I needed; no doubt, many others will feel the same. *The Scars That Have Shaped Me* has helped me process my own grief and loss, and given me renewed hope to care for those in my life who suffer in various ways. Reveling in the sovereign grace of God in your pain will bolster your faith like nothing this world can offer, and Vaneetha knows how to lead you to this living water.”

—GLORIA FURMAN, author of *Missional Motherhood* and *Alive in Him*

“When we are suffering significantly, it’s hard to receive truth from those who haven’t been there. But Vaneetha Risner’s credibility makes us willing to lean in and listen.
Her writing is built on her experience of deep pain, and in the midst of that her rugged determination to hold on to Christ.”

—NANCY GUTHRIE, author of *Hearing Jesus Speak into Your Sorrow*

“I have often wondered how Vaneetha Risner endures suffering with such amazing joy, grace, and perseverance. I still don’t understand that, but this book has given me a new glimpse into her world and into the character of our loving God. Raw, transparent, terrifying, and yet amazingly hopeful, *The Scars That Have Shaped Me* can provide strength for the journey regardless of your situation.”

—BRIAN FIKKERT, co-author of *When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty Without Hurting the Poor . . . and Yourself*

“When I’m in a hard place and needing to draw deeply into God, I want to hear from someone who knows and understands. Someone who’s been there. I can think of no better voice than Vaneetha Risner’s. In both the sudden crisis and the long, relentless daily struggle, Vaneetha’s insights have been purchased in the fire of adversity. So I listen. She leads through a door that comforts my soul and straightens my spine—I am in her debt. You will be, too, as you drink deeply the wisdom she has to offer.”

—PAULA RINEHART, author of *Strong Women, Soft Hearts* and *Sex and the Soul of a Woman*

“In the unfathomable logic of God’s wisdom, this faithful woman with increasingly weakening physical strength has,
of all the people I know, the most secure grip on God’s steadfast faithfulness and reliability. Her faith has helped me weather the storms in my own life, and the words in these pages will do the same for you. Vaneetha Risner is the real deal.”

—MARGOT STARBUCK, author of The Girl in the Orange Dress: Searching for a Father Who Does Not Fail

“It’s hard to find words to express how vitally important Vaneetha’s testimony has been in the shaping of my life and faith. She has walked uniquely hard roads and ventured into deep spiritual waters, yet always welcomes fellow travelers like me. These pages are full of vulnerability and hope, rooted not in optimism but in the real-life experience of God’s faithfulness in suffering. It is truly oxygen to get a glimpse of God’s face through Vaneetha’s eyes.”

—CHRISTA WELLS, singer, songwriter

“In The Scars That Have Shaped Me, Vaneetha proves to be an able guide who can lead us through the valleys of tragedy and hardship with both grace and truth as she unveils the brilliant and redemptive power of God in the darkness of human misery. As her friend and pastor for many years, I can personally testify that the paths on which Vaneetha will lead the reader she has faithfully walked herself. She invites us all to see God’s sovereign and good glory in times of testing and struggle.”

—TOM MERCER, Senior Pastor, Christ Covenant Church, Raleigh
“The Scars That Have Shaped Me accomplishes the nearly impossible: Vaneetha tells her story of suffering—which has been, and still is, large—without drawing us into her pain. Instead, by grace and wisdom she guides us to find the way through our own sufferings into the heart of God. Somehow she lays out her story of gut-kicking suffering while captivating us with her experience of the goodness of God in the midst of her pain. The result? Our hearts are emboldened to trust and submit to Jesus. Her book is a gift to those who suffer, and to those who walk alongside them.”

—SALLY BREEDLOVE, Spiritual Director, Cofounder of JourneyMates, Author and Speaker
VANEETHA RENDALL RISNER

the Scars that have Shaped Me

HOW GOD MEETS US IN SUFFERING
To Shalini

Without you, not a chapter in this book would exist, for you have pointed me to Christ in the darkest days, encouraged me to record God’s love and faithfulness, and edited every word I’ve written.
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FOREWORD

Joni Eareckson Tada

Before You Begin

Most people think that living with quadriplegia would be utterly overwhelming. And they’re right. It is. Shortly after I broke my neck, I met a young man in rehab who told me he had been in a wheelchair for eight years. I gulped, pushing down the panic in my throat. To me, eight weeks of paralysis seemed impossible. But eight years?! It was unimaginable to me, a spinal-cord injured teenager who still retched at the thought of living life sitting down.

But that was decades ago. I can hardly believe I’ve been living without use of my hands or legs for almost 50 years. I still look back and wonder, how did I make it to this point? And how have I done it, for the most part, with a smile? Even after all this time, total paralysis still seems impossible.

But with God all things are possible. And whenever I try to explain how I have “arrived” at this point, I shake my head in amazement.

It has everything to do with God and his grace that sustains—not just over the long haul, but grace given in tiny moments, like stepping-stones leading you from one tick of the clock to the next. And the beauty of God’s grace is that it squeezes those hard moments together,
THE SCARS THAT HAVE SHAPED ME

eclipsing the years until one day you look over your shoulder and all you see is five decades of God at work.

Try as you may, you cannot recall the horror of it all—grace softens the edges of past pains, choosing only the highlights of eternal importance. What you are left with is peace that’s profound, joy that’s unshakable, and faith that is ironclad. It is the hard but beautiful stuff of which God makes your life. *Like . . . when did that happen?* I cannot say, but I praise God for his amazing grace.

Vaneetha Risner would say the same. Here is a woman who understands deep suffering with its sorrows and joys. Perhaps that’s why I consider her such a close friend. She gets it. She resonates with people in pain.

And she offers a special kind of wisdom to the reader in *The Scars That Have Shaped Me*. The book you hold in your hands is nothing short of remarkable. With each chapter, my friend tenderly turns over the stepping-stones of her own journey through suffering, helping us understand the hard but beautiful stuff in our own lives . . . how God meets us in our suffering . . . and how we are changed forever in it and through it.

One more thing. Vaneetha and I both recognize that vulnerability is so necessary in communicating a powerful story. But we also realize that our testimonies won’t really reach—or even change—the life of the reader. Only the word of God can do that. And *The Scars That Have Shaped Me* is overflowing with snippets of psalms, slices of Scripture, and stories from the Bible that tell the story of God and his purposes in our pain. Vaneetha reminds us that God’s reasons are perfect and that our Savior, intimately acquainted with grief and suffering, is constantly plead-
ing our case before heaven’s throne. What could be more comforting than that?

And so I am honored to write this opening statement for her book. For we both know that suffering is a strange, dark companion; but a companion, nonetheless. It’s an unwelcome visitor; but still, a visitor. Affliction is a bruising of a blessing; but it is a blessing from the hand of God. It is how God meets us in our suffering.

I pray that The Scars That Have Shaped Me will inspire and refresh your heart—especially if you are in the midst of hardships or heartaches. So get started, turn the page, and be blessed by the story of Vaneetha Risner. Before you are through, you’ll be looking over your own shoulder and seeing much more than pain and disappointment—you’ll see the unmistakably hard but truly beautiful stuff God is doing in your own life.

Joni Eareckson Tada
Joni and Friends International Disability Center

Agoura Hills, California
INTRODUCTION

I almost titled this book *He Makes My Griefs to Sing,* because the phrase so beautifully describes what God can do in our suffering. But that could make me sound eloquent and poetic, when I am neither. And furthermore, I can’t sing; Just ask anyone who has had the privilege of sitting near me in church.

So making my griefs to sing isn’t pretty. Not only because I can’t carry a tune and I have no idea what “pitch” is, but also because the song I sing in my grief doesn’t sound winsome. It’s often a desperate cry for help, not a stirring hallelujah chorus. But in the end, God has taken my griefs and turned them into something beautiful. He has indeed made my griefs to sing.

I am well acquainted with suffering. Many of you reading this book are as well, and suffering has carved hollows into your soul. Some of you may even feel abandoned by God, as trials have threatened to overwhelm you. I honestly have felt that way too, both as an unbeliever and as a committed Christian. I have been tempted to turn away from him in my pain, wondering why a good God would let his children suffer. Yet the Lord has proven abundantly faithful, as he has filled those hollow places with an overflowing joy. Leaning into Jesus, I have discovered that he alone is my greatest treasure and walking with him is my greatest joy.
I feel honored to publish this book with Desiring God, especially because the Lord used their ministry to transform my view of suffering. Almost twenty years ago, I heard a John Piper message on the sovereignty of God, and was immediately convicted by how man-centered and earthly-focused my view of life was. For the first time, I became aware of how God uses suffering and trials in the lives of believers for their good and his glory. Since nothing is outside of God’s control, I realized that all of my experiences could deepen my eternal joy. The Lord knew that I would need this newfound perspective to sustain me, for suffering would continue to mark every decade of my life.

This book was borne out of that suffering. My story begins in India, where I was born to Christian parents. As an infant I contracted polio, long after it was virtually eradicated. Because the doctor had never seen polio before, she misdiagnosed me and prescribed the wrong treatment. Within a day, I was totally paralyzed. The physicians in India offered little hope for my recovery and encouraged my parents to seek better medical care in the West. We quickly moved to London, where I had my first surgery when I was two years old. By the age of thirteen, I had undergone twenty-one operations and had moved from England to Canada and finally to the United States.

I lived in and out of the hospital for most of my young life and learned to walk, albeit with a pronounced limp, at age seven. Though hospital life was lonely and isolating, I felt safe and “normal” when I was there. At home, I enjoyed the comfort of a loving family but was openly picked on at school. Feeling like an outcast, I wanted nothing to do with God because he had allowed all of this
to happen. But when I was in high school, God met me in my bitterness and I committed my life to him.

I went out-of-state to college and then moved to Boston for my first job. Several years later, in graduate school, I met and married a classmate, and we soon had our first daughter, Katie. After three miscarriages, I was pregnant again with a son, whom we discovered would be born with a serious heart defect. Paul had a successful surgery at birth, but when he was two months old, he died as a result of a doctor’s mistake. It was soon afterwards that I heard John Piper’s sermon on God’s sovereignty, which radically changed my perspective on suffering. A year later we had another daughter, Kristi, and I busied myself parenting two children, teaching a Bible study, and speaking on the comfort of God in the midst of loss.

Several years later, I developed an inexplicable pain in my arm and was eventually diagnosed with post-polio syndrome. This disease involves increasing pain and weakness, which could potentially result in quadriplegia. The most difficult part for me is that the more I do now, the less strength I will have for the future.

After years of adjusting to this new life filled with limitations, my husband decided to leave our family. Within a few weeks he had moved to another state and our once close-knit family collapsed. Parenting adolescent daughters amidst chaos and pain while striving to model grace proved beyond my ability. Yet it forced me to rely on Christ in ways I never had before. Although it was not my choice to divorce, we eventually did, and I was faced with trusting God for a new chapter of my life. A chapter, like others, that I didn’t want to begin, but I knew would increase my dependence on God.
In time, God blessed me with a wonderful new husband, Joel, whom I married in 2015. Before I met Joel, I began writing a blog in late 2013 at the prompting of several friends. Writing was a way to remind myself of God’s faithfulness. I then started posting articles for other ministries, excited that God would use my words to encourage fellow sufferers. This book is a compilation of some of those writings.

Though the book has a purposeful order, the individual chapters do not need to be read sequentially. The first section largely contains my life story; the middle section is centered on finding God in various trials; and the last section points to the blessings that God gives us in suffering.

I wrote this book for anyone who has experienced loss, particularly those who are struggling now. But I found that in the middle of a storm, I cannot read or process too much at one time. As such, each chapter is brief and can stand alone. I pray that the Lord will use these words to sustain those who are suffering, illuminating the priceless treasures God gives us in the darkest of places.
PART I: FEARFULLY AND WONDERFULLY MADE
You formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.

(Psalm 139:13-14)
I’ve long despised my scars.
I have spent much of my life hiding them, keeping my legs covered as much as possible. My scars told me that I wasn’t like everyone else. They told me I was unattractive, an oddity, a bit of a freak. Some people are proud of their scars; they speak of courage. They show others what they’ve endured. They carry with them stories of bravery and adventure.
But for me, with scars covering both my legs, they were not medals to display, proclaiming my bravery. They were rather deficiencies to hide, reminding me daily of my flaws—reminding me I was damaged.
As a teenager, I desperately wanted a perfect body, hoping that a perfect body would make me feel accepted. Instead, I saw in the mirror a body deformed by polio and further marked by the twenty-one ensuing operations. In a world filled with images of flawlessly photoshopped models, it was a challenge to believe that my physical imperfections were beautiful.
So hiding my scars was natural. That way, no one could see how imperfect I was. That way, I could look more normal. That way, I wouldn’t be humiliated. *My scars were simply jagged reminders of my pain.*
I hated going to the pool, or the beach, or anywhere that my legs could be seen. Even if no one openly stared, I imagined that everyone was repelled by my scars. I assumed that if they saw the real me, I wouldn’t be accepted. I was convinced that my scars made me ugly.

**When Scars Speak**

For a short while, a close high-school friend convinced me to show my legs at the beach. She said my scars might be ugly to me, but to everyone else, they represented strength and courage. To everyone else, they revealed what I had endured just to walk. To everyone else, they were just part of what I’d been through. And for a while, I did show my bare legs, but I slowly reverted back to covering them up. It was easier that way.

I went back to believing the lies I had told myself: I was more valuable if no one could see my scars.

I hid my wound marks and was comfortable doing so for decades. But one day, I noticed this in the Gospel of John: “Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, ‘Peace be with you.’ When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord” (John 20:19b–20).

The disciples recognized Jesus when they saw his scars. And Thomas needed to feel the Lord’s nail wounds to verify that the risen Savior was before him. Jesus didn’t need to have scars on his resurrected body. His body could have been perfect, unblemished, unscarred. But he chose to keep his scars so his disciples could validate his identity. And even more importantly, so they could be assured that he had conquered death.
Michael Card’s song, “Known by the Scars,” expresses this truth so beautifully.

The marks of death that God chose never to erase
The wounds of love’s eternal war
When the kingdom comes with its perfected sons
He will be known by the scars

God chose not to erase these marks of death—the wounds of his love for us—so our Savior will always be known by his scars. Rather than physical imperfections, Jesus’s scars are breathtakingly beautiful. They represent his love and our salvation.

The Places I’ve Been Healed

As I considered these truths, something stirred in me. My scars are significant and precious. I shouldn’t keep hiding them. I am recognizable by them; they make me unique. They are an integral part of who I am. They show that, through Christ, I am a conqueror—that I have suffered and, by the power of the Holy Spirit, have overcome. My scars remind me that God is sufficient and that physical perfection is not our goal. A life lived to God’s glory is infinitely more valuable.

Scars represent more than I ever realized. They can be beautiful. The dictionary says “a scar is a mark left by a healed wound.” A healed wound. My scars signify healing. And even though my initial flesh wounds have healed, there is yet a deeper healing in acceptance.
I started to notice scars more as I looked around. There was something captivating about people who were unafraid to be themselves: authentic, unmasked, and unashamed of the wounds that shaped them. Their vulnerability was magnetic. I was drawn to them. To learn from their self-acceptance. To hear their stories. To see their courage.

I learned it is often a good thing to ask people about their scars. As long as I do it respectfully. And lovingly. Asking demystifies scars and allows people to share what has shaped them. Because all scars have a story.

I saw that when we display our scars, we inspire others to do the same.

Those of us with scars should wear them like jewels, treasured reminders of what we’ve endured. It’s okay to show our imperfections. It is even courageous. And perhaps we’ll discover the beauty in our scars.