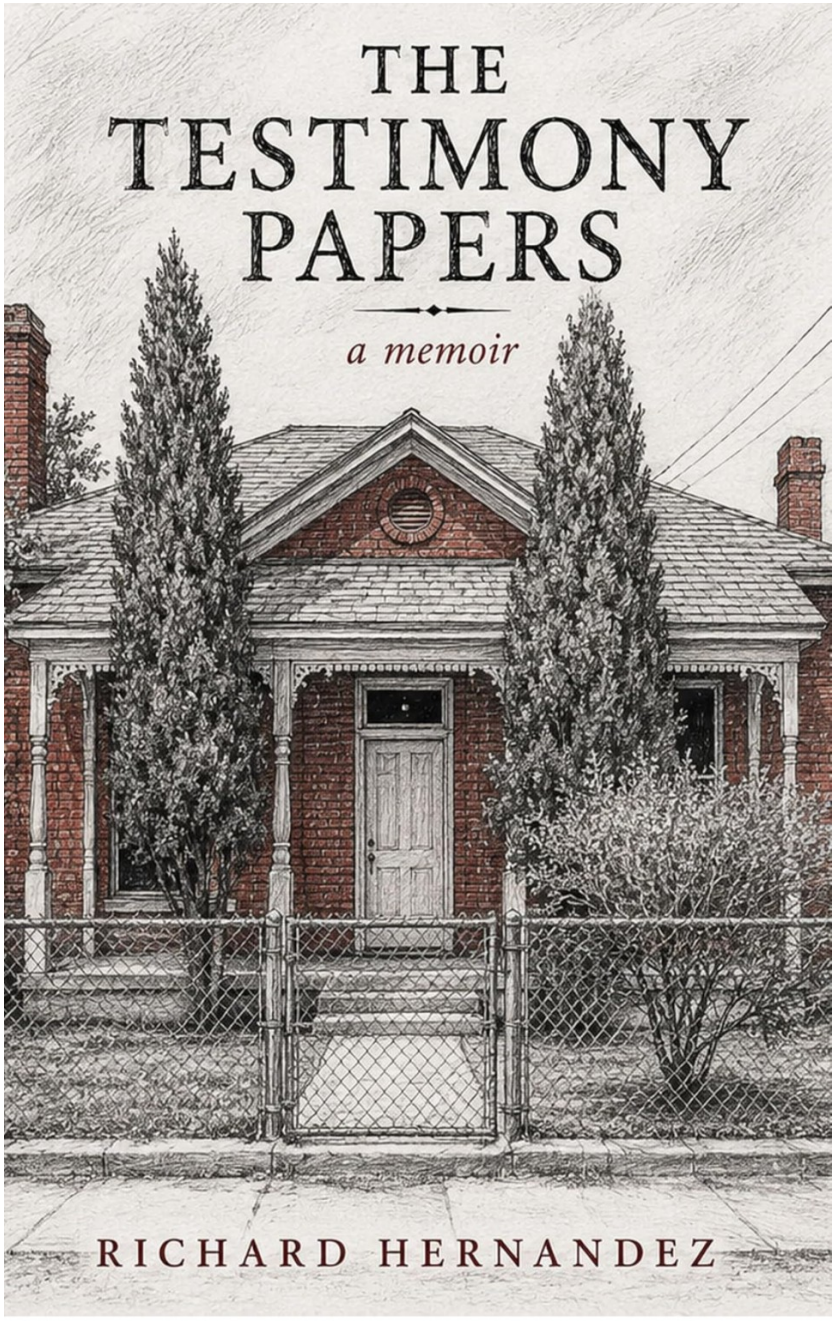

THE
TESTIMONY
PAPERS
a memoir
RICHARD HERNANDEZ

OUTPOST 27

THE TESTIMONY PAPERS

OFFICIAL READING PREVIEW

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Richard Hernandez

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A Note to Readers

These testimony papers include descriptions of childhood abuse, domestic violence, childhood fear, parental absence, substance abuse, serious illness and surgery, death, grief, and marital conflict.

They are not offered as proof that suffering is secretly good or that every wound arrives with an explanation. They are an attempt to tell the truth about what happened, what I misunderstood, what I regret, what I carried forward, and where I now recognize the mercy of Christ.

The past is not softened. Grace is not used to pretend that every wound was secretly good.

Prologue - The God I Did Not Yet Know

I once sat my mother and sisters down at the kitchen table and told them I did not believe in God.

I was raised Catholic in El Paso, Texas. I knew the language of faith before I understood what any of it meant. I knew the prayers, the rituals, the names, and the stories.

But I also had questions.

If you know me, you know that I ask questions about everything. I want to understand how things work, why people believe what they believe, and whether an answer can withstand being examined.

At that time, the people around me could not answer what I was asking.

The priest could not.

My family could not.

Perhaps they loved God. Perhaps they were doing the best they knew how to do. But the answers I received were not large enough to hold the questions.

So I mistook unanswered questions for the absence of God.

And one day, at that kitchen table, I said it plainly.

I do not believe.

I thought that was the moment I left Him.

Looking back, I no longer believe He left the table.

Even during those years, I loved life.

Not merely my own life.

Life itself.

I loved friendship, animals, food, the sky, laughter, beauty, and the strange goodness of being alive. I wanted to learn. I wanted to help. I wanted to make things better for people who had less than I did, even when I did not have much myself.

I volunteered at an animal shelter.

I worked with friends to host Christmas celebrations for families who could not afford them.

I supported people when they were hurting.

I was intelligent, independent, curious, and eager to serve.

I did not yet know how to name the source of those things.

I loved the gifts before I understood the Giver.

That does not mean I was secretly righteous.

It does not mean kindness was enough to save me.

It means the image of God had not disappeared simply because I denied the God whose image I carried.

I could reject His name and still hunger for what came from Him.

Beauty.

Love.

Mercy.

Purpose.

Belonging.

I did not know that my love for those things was already a kind of homesickness.

My life was not easy.

I grew up poor.

My home was not always safe.

I was abused by my stepfather. There are other wounds from earlier years that I may never be able to name with certainty.

Some memories arrive clearly.

Others remain like shapes beneath dark water.

I know enough to know that things happened to me that should not have happened.

For a long time, suffering became part of the case against God.

I did not understand how a loving God could exist inside a world where children were harmed, families broke apart, people disappeared into addiction, and grief arrived without asking permission.

I thought pain was evidence against Him.

I had not yet learned the difference between God and the Fall.

I had not yet understood that He was not the author of the wound.

He was the One who remained near the wounded.

I still rebelled.

I partied.

I experimented with drugs.

I made choices that could have led somewhere darker than they did.

I was not carefully walking toward God. I was often moving in the opposite direction.

And yet, when I look back across those years, I see preservation.

I do not say that carelessly.

I was hurt.

I lost friends.

I lost family.

I carried confusion, anger, and questions that did not disappear simply because I later believed.

God's protection did not mean that nothing terrible happened to me.

Terrible things did happen.

But they did not take everything.

The abuse did not destroy my ability to love.

Poverty did not remove my generosity.

Grief did not empty the world of beauty.

Drugs did not become my master.

Rebellion did not erase the path home.

I do not know why some dangers consumed people I loved while I was spared from them.

I cannot turn mercy into a formula.

I cannot say that I was preserved because I was wiser, stronger, or more worthy.

I was not.

I can only say that, looking backward, I recognize mercy where I once saw coincidence.

I thought I had survived my life by myself.

I now believe I was being carried through parts of it I did not have the strength to survive alone.

I did not hear a voice.

I did not see a figure standing in my room.

There was no single night when heaven opened and every doubt disappeared.

My testimony is not dramatic in that way.

It is quieter.

I began to notice a thread.

It ran through the questions.

Through the beauty.

Through the suffering.

Through the kindness I still wanted to give.

Through the dangers that did not finish me.

Through the love for Jesus I could never fully explain, even when I resisted Christianity.

I did not love the pain.

I did not love the judgment I associated with religion.

I did not love the shallow answers or the people who seemed afraid of honest questions.

But somewhere beneath all of that, I still loved Jesus.

I just did not understand Him.

I blamed Him for the hurt He did not create.

I confused the consequences of human rebellion with the character of God.

I looked at a fallen world and placed the Fall at His feet.

It took me years to understand that the line was not God to evil.

God created what was good.

Humanity rebelled.

Sin entered through us.

The world fractured.

And God came after the people who broke it.

That changed the way I saw my own life.

Christ was not standing above my suffering, demanding that I explain why I had failed to trust Him.

He had entered suffering Himself.

He had been rejected.

Mocked.

Beaten.

Abandoned.

Killed.

The God I accused of not understanding pain had carried pain in His own body.

The Jesus I blamed for the cruelty of the world had been crucified by that cruelty.

And He rose.

Not to pretend the wound had never existed.

To prove that the wound would not have the final word.

I became a Christian slowly.

Not because every question was answered at once.

Not because life suddenly became easy.

Not because I began hearing God speak in ways I had never heard before.

I became a Christian because the truth kept gathering.

The world made more sense when I stopped pretending that human beings were basically good people damaged only by bad systems.

My own heart made more sense when Scripture named both the love within me and the rebellion beside it.

Jesus made more sense when I stopped reducing Him to either a religious symbol or someone responsible for every pain He came to redeem.

The Bible did not confirm everything I already believed.

It contradicted me.

It told me that my questions mattered, but they did not make me sovereign.

It told me that my suffering was real, but it did not make every conclusion born from suffering true.

It told me that I had been sinned against.

It also told me that I was a sinner.

It refused to let me use my wounds as evidence that I did not need forgiveness.

It refused to let me use the failures of Christians as evidence that Christ had failed.

The faith that comforted me also confronted me.

The God who preserved me also called me to repent.

The Christ who loved me refused to leave me exactly as I was.

That is how I came to know Him.

Not through spectacle.

Through recognition.

Believing did not make me a different species. I still brought myself with me.

I brought the kid who learned to work early. The boy who became useful because usefulness made sense. The son who learned how not to need too much. The man who could explain almost everyone else's behavior before he could admit that some of it had hurt him. I brought anger, loyalty, creativity, suspicion, humor, work ethic, pride, fear, tenderness, control, and the habit of carrying things before anyone had asked me whether they were mine.

That matters because not everything I carried was the same kind of thing. Some were genuine strengths. Some were survival strategies that learned how to introduce themselves as personality. Some were sins I could explain beautifully and still needed to repent of. Some were wounds I spent years treating like moral failures.

Learning the difference has taken longer than I expected.

These papers are about that inheritance: what reached me, what formed me, what I mistook for identity, what God did not erase, and what He would not allow me to keep excusing.

Christ did not travel backward through time and give me a different childhood. He did not make absence become presence. He did not turn every adult who failed into a secret

hero. He did not declare every scar good because He was able to redeem the person carrying it.

He has done something both less theatrical and more invasive.

He has kept asking for the things I thought were simply mine: my definitions, my defenses, my right to be understood, my need to be useful, my way of loving, my way of leading, my creativity, my anger, my explanations, my memories.

Not so they can disappear.

So they can be brought under Him.

There is another part of the thread that makes me smile now.

For nearly fifteen years, I have worked in learning and development.

I have trained people, supported facilitators, built learning experiences, translated complicated ideas into language others could understand, and spent more hours than I can count asking how to help something finally make sense.

For most of that time, I thought this was simply my career.

Maybe it was also preparation.

I cannot claim to know the purpose behind every job, every difficult season, or every strange turn my work has taken. But I can look back now and see that God was teaching me how to teach long before I understood what I might eventually be asked to say.

He gave me a mind that asks questions.

Then He placed me in work where questions mattered.

He taught me to listen for the place where understanding breaks down.

To recognize when familiar language has stopped carrying meaning.

To take something complicated and return it to people without removing its weight.

For years, I helped people learn systems, processes, expectations, and skills.

Now I find myself writing about creation, the Fall, truth, identity, mercy, and Christ—trying to help people understand the faith I once walked away from because no one could answer my questions.

Apparently, God had me working in instructional design before I knew the course objective.

That still makes me laugh.

Not because the calling is small.

Because His patience is astonishing.

I thought I was building a career.

Perhaps He was also building a teacher.

I looked back and saw that the life I believed I had carried alone contained a faithfulness that was not mine.

I saw that my hunger for beauty had always been reaching toward something.

My instinct to serve had always been answering something.

My grief had always been protesting that death and loss did not belong.

My questions had not been proof that God was absent.

They were proof that shallow answers were not enough.

Even now, I do not hear an audible voice.

I do not see Him standing beside me.

But I know He is with me.

Not because every day feels spiritual.

Not because every prayer is answered the way I want.

Not because suffering has stopped.

I know because I have seen what His truth has done.

It has given a name to the wound.

It has given a face to mercy.

It has corrected what I blamed Him for.

It has shown me that preservation is not the same as ease, and presence is not the same as spectacle.

I once sat at a kitchen table and announced that I did not believe in God.

I believed my questions had carried me beyond Him.

Years later, I see something else.

I see a child asking questions no one around him could answer.

I see a young man loving the beauty of a world whose Creator he denied.

I see someone wounded but not emptied, rebellious but not abandoned, wandering but never beyond the reach of mercy.

I thought I had left God behind.

But when I look across my life now, I see the thread.

I did not put it there.

And He never let it go.

Continue Reading

A memoir about childhood, suffering, the people and habits we carry into adulthood, and a faith that came slowly.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Richard Hernandez is the author of The Testimony Papers and The Witness Papers and the founder of OUTPOST 27, an independent press.