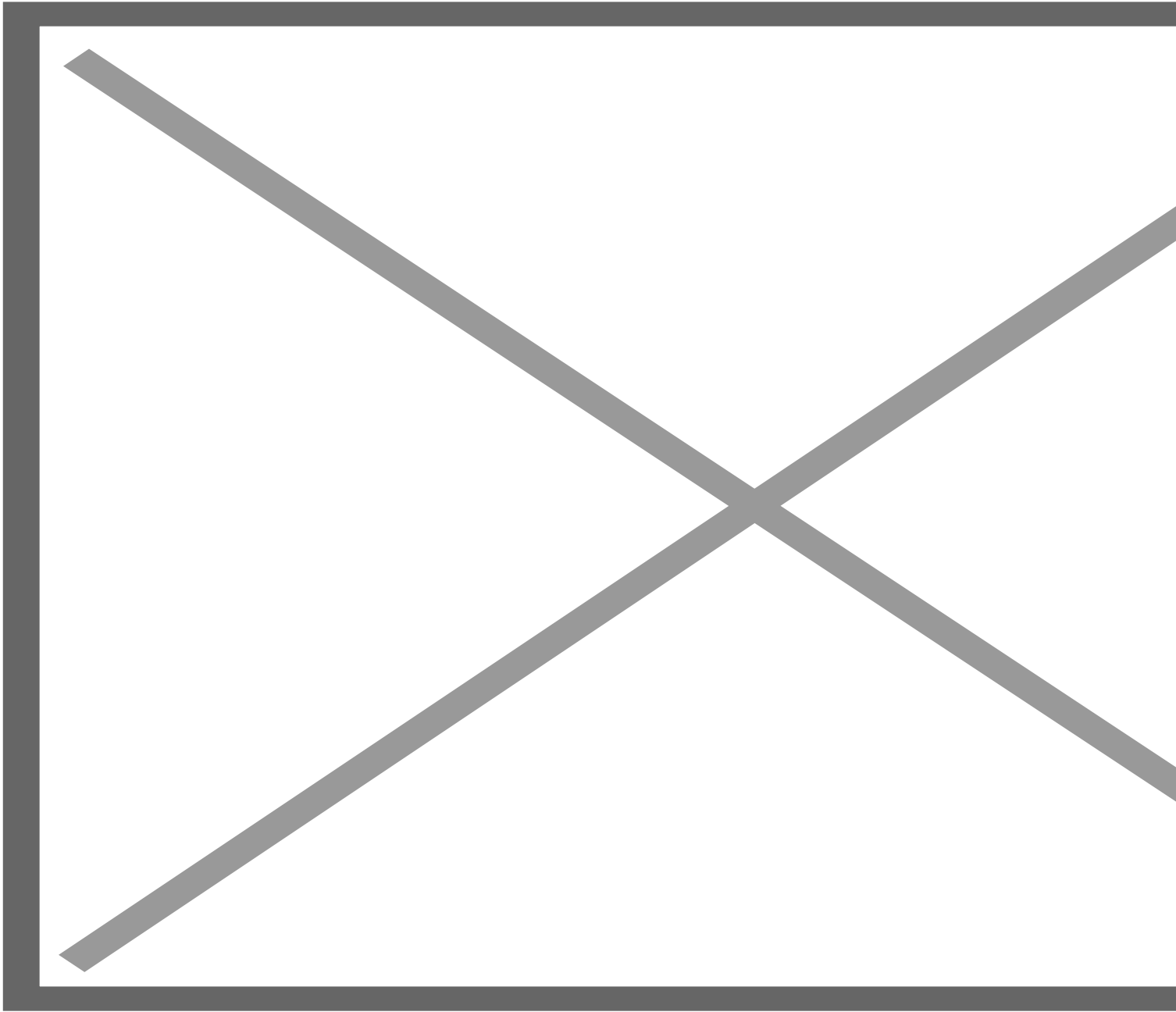


The silent, suffering God

I've spent weeks in the hospital this year. I keep waiting for God to speak.

by [Rachel Mann](#) in the [October 2025](#) issue

Published on October 3, 2025



Source images: Getty

I am lying in a hospital bed. This year I have spent nearly two months in the hospital, recovering from massive abdominal surgery and learning to live, practically and spiritually, with intestinal failure. I am wrestling with a big question: Who am I and who is God in this new world I inhabit?

I have lived with Crohn's disease for 30 years. Over that time, my understanding of myself and, with it, my pictures of God have evolved in lockstep with the disease's progress. I was in my 20s when first diagnosed. The disease rampaged through my intestines and left me unable to work for several years. I felt stripped. A picture I had of myself—as lively, young, capable, a contributor—died and along with it a cherished image of God: that of the dynamic, spiritually charged-up God who always blesses his beloved children with good things. It took me years of grieving to let go of that false image.

Over time, I received a gift: a richer vision of God as the one who suffers with us in Jesus Christ. When my health improved, I found myself raised alongside that Savior who carries his scars into resurrection. Nonetheless, although I have had periods of OK health, over the years my strength has eroded, often in a feast of pain. I have been to the emergency room countless times and spent years unable to eat anything other than medically prescribed gunk. That triggered clinical depression. There have been many occasions where I have effectively felt too tired and stripped out to hope.

I have wrestled with huge questions: How far does one have to fall before one starts to think that the crucified and forsaken God is not enough? Where do we go when the broken God dies? To what does one cling when one lives among the fragments of a story that once made sense?

I have no easy answers. In the tough times, I have simply tried to come to terms with a fall into blankness and exhaustion, to believe that God fell with me and had already fallen ahead of me. To be melodramatic: If I was falling into hell or the pit, Christ was going there too and had already been. For surely there is no place beyond God. In extreme illness I discovered that the suffering God reveals a new dimension in the darkness: the God only found in the fragments of ourselves and our hopes and dreams.

And what did hope look like? It had the character of simply setting one's face against despair. "God" and "self" found their meaning and dignity in a kind of raw existence. That life is close to despair, and I have known it. It is horrible, and one is left feeling like a mess smeared all over the floor. It was in that place, however, that I encountered God at her most startling. For this is God at her most intimate: the one who simply is when all else seems lost. This is God beyond doctrine and without boundaries. This God beyond reason and the uses we would make of her.

What about now, in this new world in which I find myself after my most recent surgery? Short bowel syndrome and intestinal failure are no fun. Nobody readily chooses to live with these conditions. However, not only was my surgery lifesaving, but it also means, thankfully, that I can now eat some actual food again. The challenge is to accept that I cannot absorb sufficient fluids and electrolytes to survive without regular intravenous support. I require it several times a week to stay healthy. If I am honest, it is going to take me some time to figure out what this new reality means, but already I feel there is treasure waiting to be found, about God, self, and others.

It is a fresh encounter with vulnerability and dependence. I feel like I am being taught new lessons in waiting and, thereby, fresh things about God and myself. I spend a lot of time waiting: for nurses and medical support, for me to figure out how to look after my new health needs on top of complex existing ones. Most of all, I wait on God to speak. Truth is, she has been pretty quiet recently. I like to think she spoke in the success of my surgery, even if the consequences are challenging. I am trying to trust that she is showing me more of my true self as I wait in the silence.

However, I am finding that silence tough. Right now, I am not sure I have much to say, and I am struggling to hear and listen to God. Perhaps the sheer difficulty of silence indicates it is one of our deepest vocations. For it is not just stillness, nor is it the mere absence of sound. For me, it is simply being in the presence of God, stripped of illusion and distraction. There are many ways in which this vocation is difficult. I have always struggled to deny myself sufficiently to let God in. And for me—as one who has known the degrading, sinful effects of being silenced by others—I am so resistant to any form of silence, even God’s holy silence.

For though I know her call is not about destroying me or eroding my sense of self—so hard-won—it is still about a kind of annihilation and letting go. And when you have struggled so long and hard to be yourself, even when one knows that God’s way of letting go is life, it is so scary to plunge into her beautiful darkness. Perhaps all one can do is jump—and trust that the waters will at least be warm as one sinks down into those holy depths so full of new life.