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Recognizing the “Thin Places” in Our Lives

Pressing into Thin Places leads hurting readers to a place where hope is found



Dallas/Fort Worth, TX—Is there sustaining comfort to be found for the suffering, perhaps flailing, faithful? Dr. Margaret Wills, Ed.D, asserts that there is, and in her book, *Pressing into Thin Places: Encouraging the Heart toward God* (Brown Christian Press), she invites questioning, thinking, and hurting readers to recognize glimpses of wonder and to draw strength and find rest in the presence of a loving God.

Dr. Wills knows from her own experiences that life is not simple and that we all need encouraging words and reasons to hang on to hope. She offers these in abundance in this deeply personal, beautiful, and thoughtful work that summons authenticity and contemplation while soothing the dark night of the soul with kindness and truth. With transparency and refreshing gentleness, Wills tackles universal fears, disappointments, wounded relationships, and even death and beckons readers to pull aside the veil and to see into that “thin space,” as the Celtics called it, where all that separates heaven and earth becomes almost transparent. She invites readers to wrestle and be comforted by assurances of God’s love and goodness even in the darkness.

Pressing into Thin Places is a collection of stories from the author’s personal experiences, punctuated by her poetry and infused with biblical verses and rich truths. Wills answers questions like, “How do we keep from falling into despair when pain and suffering weigh heavily upon us?” and answers honestly questions about doubt, mystery, and the experience of not knowing. Wills offers insight for bringing biblical truth to life, wisdom to cultivate a listening heart, encouragement for the downhearted, reassuring words for the faltering, and comfort and rest for those in any stage of their faith journey.

“When Jesus delivered His Sermon on the Mount, He spoke specifically to the poor in spirit, the slope-shouldered individuals who had lost the hope that they would change or that anything about them would ever be any different,” says Dr. Wills. “He blessed those who had reached into their spiritual pockets and found them empty. He blessed those who were desperate, needy, and at the end of their rope. He offered hope. Through the book I want to offer hope with the sharing of a few ‘thin place moments.’ I encourage readers to have eyes to see that God gives us reminders that, though we are tethered to this earth, there is another realm of reality and to feel unified and connected with God through that knowing.”

A writer and a poet, Dr. Wills is dedicated to the ministry of encouragement and helping people experience hope, wisdom, and faith in their spiritual journey. She has written for a number of publications including *The Journal* of the Fort Smith Historical Society. She previously served on the board of the Arkansas Community Foundation. Dr. Wills makes her home in the foothills of the Ozark Mountains in Fort Smith, Arkansas.

A portion of the proceeds from the sales of *Pressing into Thin Places* will go to the John Brown University Center for Relationship Enrichment.

Pressing into Thin Places: Encouraging the Heart toward God

by Dr. Margaret Harrell Wills, Ed.D

Brown Christian Press – April 2011

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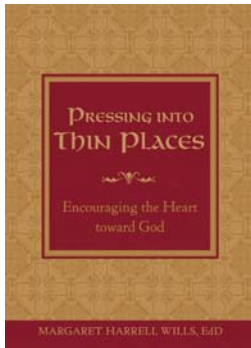
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Bio for Dr. Margaret Harrell Wills, Ed.D
Author of *Pressing into Thin Places*



Dr. Margaret Harrell Wills grew up in Phoenix, Arizona. She received her undergraduate degree from John Brown University, a master's degree from Arizona State University, and a doctoral degree in higher education with a teaching field of history from the University of Arkansas. She was on the faculty at the University of Arkansas in Fort Smith, Arkansas, and taught American History. Dr. Wills is also a graduate of Chuck Colson's Centurion Program for Worldview Leadership, an intensive and demanding education program that prepares Christians to articulate and live out their faith with authenticity and to lead effectively in the marketplace of ideas.

A writer and a poet, Dr. Wills is dedicated to the ministry of encouragement and helping people experience hope, wisdom, and faith in their spiritual journey. She has written for a number of publications, including *The Journal* of the Fort Smith Historical Society and *Issues and Inquiry in College Learning and Teaching*. She previously served on the board of the Arkansas Community Foundation as an appointee of Governor Mike Huckabee. She has been a guest lecturer in the Leadership and Ethics Program at John Brown University and has spoken on the topic of "Leaving a Character Legacy."

Dr. Wills makes her home in the foothills of the Ozark Mountains in Fort Smith, Arkansas, with her husband, Paul.

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Suggested Questions for Dr. Margaret Harrell Wills, Ed.D
Author of *Pressing into Thin Places*

1. Your book is titled *Pressing into Thin Places*. What is a “thin place”?
2. Is there a thin place you experienced that became very defining for your faith?
3. How can glimpses of those thin spaces help us feel more connected to God?
4. *Pressing into Thin Places* is a collection of stories, experiences, and learned truths expressed through poetry and prose. How are you hoping that readers connect with the experiences shared?
5. You invite readers to be authentic and to voice the thorny questions they contemplate. Do you think Christians are afraid to express doubt?
6. Is it dangerous to say those doubts or questions out loud or can faith be strengthened even by voicing the questions?
7. *Pressing into Thin Places* touches on the experience of depression. Do you think it is harder for Christians to acknowledge depression?
8. You write about the importance of prayer in strengthening faith. Has your own faith journey taught you to pray differently?
9. In the throes of pain and suffering, sometimes the well-known truths in the Bible can feel cliché or like just “God talk.” How do we make these truths real in our lives?
10. You write that through your journey you have read many wonderful and helpful books, but what you learned God taught you on your own. How did you learn and how did it become your own?
11. *Pressing into Thin Places* tells personal stories of pain and heartache where great truths have emerged. Do you think faith must endure adversity to be rich and true?
12. You write, “We must believe in the fact that we are safe and that ‘good’ will result as we submit our will to His Way.” You remind us that being a Christian does not mean we won’t face adversity. So what does that “good” look like?
13. A theme that is woven throughout all of *Pressing into Thin Places* in both poetry and prose is one of God’s goodness. Yet one doesn’t have to look far to find suffering all around. What do you say to the reader who struggles to believe that God is good and loving?
14. What do you hope that readers will take away from *Pressing into Thin Places*?

Q&A With Margaret Harrell Wills, Ed.D **Author of *Pressing into Thin Places***

Q: Your book is titled *Pressing into Thin Places*. What is a “thin place”?

In the Celtic tradition, a “thin place” is the place where the veil that separates heaven and earth is nearly transparent. It is a place where we experience a deep sense of God’s presence in our everyday world. A thin place is where, for a moment, the spiritual world and natural world intersect. It can be a sudden momentary awareness or profound unexplainable experience.

Q: *Pressing into Thin Places* is a collection of stories, experiences, and learned truths expressed through poetry and prose. How are you hoping that readers connect with the experiences shared and those “thin places”?

Through the book I wanted to share a few “thin place moments” and encourage readers to have eyes to see the gifts of thin places through their own experiences. There are moments when we do feel the divine breaking through into our world. We feel unified and connected with God. It is not an intellectual knowing; it is felt in the spirit. Every once in a while, God draws the curtain and lets us see. He gives us reminders that, though we are tethered to this earth, there is another realm of reality just as real. Every once in a while, He lifts the veil. He thins the space between heaven and earth. He lets us experience the “thin place.” Ultimately, He helps our faith.

Q: This book is one rich in the faith experience and in the assurance that God is love. Yet you invite readers to be authentic when they don’t understand and to voice the thorny questions they contemplate. Can faith be strengthened even by voicing the questions?

When we ask why or say we don’t understand, we are reminded of the Last Supper when Jesus sat before His disciples with the bread and the wine and told them a mystery. He told them to eat the bread and drink the wine because it was His body poured out for them. He did not tell them to understand or to make sense of His strange request. He said, “Take and eat.” They did not understand. There is much we do not understand. That is to be expected. The scriptures say God’s thoughts are higher than our thoughts and His ways are past understanding. But God says we can know Him. He longs to know us in a personal way. He invites us to contemplate His mysteries and, through that unknown, to experience the power of His resurrection and the full measure of His grace.

Q: *Pressing into Thin Places* gives readers permission to be authentic and to acknowledge doubt, questions, even depression. Often we experience guilt over these sometimes realities, fearing they show a weak faith. But how can facing these circumstances or emotions actually strengthen faith and reveal the presence of God in our lives?

We all have ups and downs. We are emotional beings. This is part of life. But can we dial up different thoughts? Can we change our feelings? Many times, I believe we can. Not too long ago I came across a verse in 1 Samuel 30. The chapter talked about a time when David was defeated by his enemies, rejected by all those around him and discouraged to the core. In verse 6, it says, “And David strengthened himself in the Lord.” How do we strengthen ourselves in the Lord? I believe we do what a verse in Psalms suggests: “And then one day I went into your sanctuary and thought” (Ps. 73:17). We strengthen ourselves in the Lord by going into His presence and letting Him guide our thinking. Many of the Psalms tell us that David worshipped and meditated on the scriptures. This was no exception. He received new purpose, vision, and authority. He waited patiently to become king.

David strengthened himself in the Lord by meditating on the scriptures. Whether in the fields tending his sheep, or in battle fighting his enemy, or while reigning on his throne, David poured out his heart to God in worship,

meditation, and prayer. When we meditate on the scriptures, God encourages us, imparts life to His Word, and gives us perspective. Meditation is a vital tool for strengthening ourselves in the Lord. When our focus changes, our thoughts follow—and then our feelings.

Q: Why do you think we fear admitting doubt or struggles with faith?

Fear wants to rise and speak to the bottom corners of our mind. It will remind us not to be vulnerable. We will remember what happens when we risk psychological safety or abandon feelings of superiority. We will remember our nakedness. We will feel the wash of old fears and the pull of old attitudes and the temptations of old behaviors. But our heart, where our choice and our spirit live, desires our Father and His Kingdom. And our Teacher taught us to pray.

Q: You write about the importance of prayer in strengthening faith. What has your own faith journey taught you about prayer?

The older I get, the less I pretend to know about the workings of God. But I also become more and more sure of two things: God loves me, and God cares more about my faith, my spiritual maturity, and my intimacy with Him than He cares about my comfort. This I know. One time I was praying one of those “inside-out, upside-down” prayers when suddenly I realized what I really wanted was a guarantee of the future—the future the way I envisioned it. There is no guarantee. There is just Faith and Grace.

Sometimes, I still pray “Deliver me” prayers. But my prayers have expanded to “Whether or Not” prayers. Whether He changes my circumstance or whether He doesn’t, my faith is in Him and not just His deliverance from a specific situation. The object of our faith is always God. The fact of our faith is that God can change anything. God can give Grace for anything. This brings tremendous freedom.

Q: How do we make these truths in the Bible tangible realities that can really strengthen us? How do we make them more than just words or pithy sayings?

There was a time in my life when I yearned to experience the reality of the Christian faith, not just the words. I wanted to know God in a more definitive way. I read books on prayer, faith, and the spiritual disciplines. All of the books I read had something to say and were helpful, especially those on the spiritual disciplines. But what I learned, God taught me on my own: His Word generates faith, and God uses our everyday life as a stage to show up in a very real way. It is when we choose to depend on Him for the demands of everyday life that we experience His faithfulness. It is when we choose to let Him model how we relate to people that He gives grace and love and joy, enough to share. It is when we throw ourselves into His arms in a crisis that we know that He is “better than a light and safer than a known road.” Even when God is silent, He is present. God meets us where we live and gives us the best opportunities to experience His reality in faith and answered prayer. When we go to the Lord’s sanctuary and think, He encourages us and teaches us. He deposits His Word in our heart and our mind.

Q: How do we learn on our own, as you did? How do we go beyond even the most helpful books so that we know when God is speaking to us, guiding us, and comforting us?

I believe inherent in the wisdom that God promises is our acknowledgement that we are dependent upon Him. I also believe that when we pray for wisdom, we should also be mindful of a “listening heart.” Perhaps our thoughts are God leading us, God’s way of giving us an opportunity to see Him work. A listening heart is always prompted to obey. What does it mean to have a listening heart? It means to listen to the place within ourselves that is more profound than just an information center. It is the place that is deeper than the mind. It is the place where the ears of the spirit and the will exist. It is the place where we affirm or deny the speaking of God’s spirit. It is the place we listen to when we pray for wisdom.

Q: Wisdom is critical to listening to the right messages. Often our listening heart is listening to the wrong messages, to negative self-talk that ultimately undermines our faith. How can we counter the messages that are sometimes within us that can oppose what God is trying to do in our hearts?

Every thought is a seed that reproduces itself. Negative thoughts, especially negative self-talk, produces more negative self talk. Proverbs 4:23 says, “Above all else guard your heart for it is the wellspring of life.” A wellspring is the source that produces the water for a well. If the source of our thinking is negative, then that which flows from our conversation and behavior will be negative. Ask yourself, do you guard the way you talk to yourself; or do we fill our mind with talk that is untrue, unproductive, and self defeating? Do you keep pushing the “replay” button on negative thoughts in your head, thoughts that trap us in the past or cause us to fret about the future or thoughts that demean our ability to think for ourselves or act in a way that would produce change? We need to edit our negative self-talk, pause, and push the erase button. Then we need to conform our thoughts to God’s Word and to God’s view of our potential in Him.

Q: We often view faith like another life skill, something to be mastered and checked off the list. But what can we expect about the journey of faith?

A faith journey is not a smooth, linear path. There are times we get weary and worn down. There are times we search for God and wonder if He has hidden behind a tree, or crawled under a rock, or wandered into a far-off cave. On occasion, we call to God and it seems as if He has lost His voice or refuses to respond. Our cries echo into our ears. It seems that our prayers hit the ceiling and fall back on our head. These times are okay. These are the times we live totally by faith. And if we, like Robert Browning, “stoop into the dark, it is but for a time.” When our faith seems thin and threadbare, we keep holding onto the sturdy cord of God’s faithfulness and claim God’s goodness within the mystery of His sovereignty.

Q: The Bible is filled with many promises. Often we use those promises as guarantees that we will not have many adversities if we are obedient. *Pressing into Thin Places* tells personal stories of pain and heartache where great truths have emerged. Is adversity necessary to growing and strengthening faith?

I have learned that adversity is often a path to truth. It removes the material props and spiritual pretensions that we hide behind. It mutes our “God-talk.” It leaves us clothed only in the reality of our core beliefs, whatever they may be. Adversity, if we let it, has a work to do. Quite often, it prepares us for a future task. Adversity, when we are swimming in the middle of it, challenges the consistency of our behavior; it examines us. It tests us to see if what we believe to be true will stand in the storm. It also tests whether we will stand in the storm for what we say we believe to be true. It tears off the mask to see what is underneath.

Q: How do we keep from giving up or being overcome by doubt when adversity befalls us?

We all have moments of doubt. But Jesus meets us at our place of puny faith and carries us to the safe place of belief and sometimes to the sacred place of “My Lord and My God” faith. Blessed are those who believe, yet do not see. God is good and God loves us. We can also take comfort and strength from friends and fellow pilgrims, pilgrims who have gone before us whose eyes could not see and whose feet got weary. At a point in my life when my faith felt weak, my friend once told me she would have faith for the both of us until mine was strong again. When the storms come, friends can be a shelter for your faith.

Q: In *Pressing into Thin Places*, you recall for readers the story of the Apostle Thomas, often called “Doubting Thomas.” Yet Jesus revealed himself to Thomas in a very special way after the apostle asked for proof. Do you think God has a special understanding, even a blessing, for the one who feels deep pain in the circumstances of life, and perhaps authentically questions as a result of that adversity?

When Jesus delivered His Sermon on the Mount, He spoke specifically to the poor in spirit, the slope-shouldered individuals who had lost the hope that they would change or that anything about them would ever be any different. Jesus began to bless them first, as if they had some privileged position, as if their neediness had put them in the front of the line. “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven,” He said. Jesus blessed those who were spiritually bankrupt and spent, out of resources, empty of credentials and religious coins. He blessed those who had reached into their spiritual pockets and found them empty. He blessed those who were turned inside out, upside down in the dark. He blessed those who were desperate, needy, and at the end of their rope. He offered hope at the end of their rope. Jesus blessed the poor in spirit and announced the availability of a Kingdom of Hope. Jesus is our starting place.

Q: It seems that more and more we all encounter people who profess to believe that God exists, but the crisis of faith arises in God’s goodness. What do you say to the reader who struggles to believe that God is good and loving?

Jesus says we can trust our Heavenly Father. We are safe, we are protected, and we are guided when we cooperate with God’s purpose and God’s way of doing things. We become participants in the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of God’s grace on earth. Jesus reminds us over and over again that we must have faith. We must believe in the fact that we are safe and that “good” will result as we submit our will to His Way. This submission is powerful. It defragments our life and gives us spiritual significance and wholeness of soul. This submission results in the process of spiritual transformation. Along the way, we are rewarded by “faith surprises” as resources of the Kingdom of Heaven are available to make changes in us, in others, and in the way things are.

Q: What do you hope that readers will take away from *Pressing into Thin Places*?

At the crux of this message of greater connection with God is the gospel message. Jesus encourages us to see our short space of time on this earth in the light of eternity. He instructs us to remember that there are two realities: a physical reality and a spiritual reality. We are first and foremost spiritual beings called to follow Christ’s teachings.

www.pressingintothinplaces.com

Endorsements for *Pressing into Thin Places*

“Margaret Wills’ *Pressing Into Thin Places* brought hope to my soul like the sight of crocuses pushing through the frozen snow-covered ground. Resurrection life is real and it often surprises us in the bleakest of winters, as these well-written stories reveal.”

DEE BRESTIN

Author of The God of All Comfort and The Friendships of Women

“Somehow we know that we were made for so much more than the things of this world. Nestle into a comfortable chair and follow Margaret to a *thin place* where the invisible realm comes into focus. Get ready to experience God and fresh revelations of hope.”

PAM VREDEVELT

Bestselling author of The Power of Letting Go, The Wounded Woman, and Empty Arms

“How beautifully Margaret portrays the thin places -- the tender places -- the most significant places of our souls. Her work is compelling and rich with passion. It is gripping, challenging, deeply moving. The canvas she paints not only reveals a vulnerable woman, but the brilliance of a mighty Savior. Ever revealing, ever present, a loving God who sees the painful, yet breathtaking realities of our lives. A God who reveals Himself in life-giving color. A God who sees you.

Struggling to find the thin places of your life? This book is the first thing I would put in your hands.”

TAMMY MALTBY

*Co-Founder of It’s a Good Life, Media personality, TV co-host author and speaker
Author of Confessions of a Good Christian Girl and The God Who Sees You*

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DEE BRESTIN

Author of The God of All Comfort and The Friendships of Women

“Just as there are seasons of the year, there are seasons of life. There are happy times and there are times of darkness, discouragement, and despair. There are spring and summer seasons, and then there are, at times, very long winter seasons. One thing that’s needed in every season, but especially in the difficult ones, is encouragement. The gift of encouragement brings light into darkness, renews hope, and provides perspective. Sometimes it’s all that’s left to keep someone from giving up . . . it’s a gift Margaret is generously giving to all of us in the form of this book.”

DR. GARY J. OLIVER

Executive Director of the Center for Relationship Enrichment, John Brown University

“Wills’ book touched my heart! The diverse themes with the ever-prevailing golden thread of God’s consistent and unconditional love are the message we are pursuing when in need of encouragement. [Wills’] writing style makes the reader to want to read on! This is a book that you will go back to from time to time for words that resonate with your life challenge of the moment.”

SISTER JUDITH MARIE KEITH, *Religious Sister of Mercy, Fort Smith Arkansas*

“The poetry and prose of *Pressing into Thin Places*’ do not offer facile or simplistic answers. It is a book that *does offer* the power of the archetypal scriptural leap of faith in dealing with the losses and tragedies that everyone must face and even the everyday pettiness to which all succumb. I like what Margaret Wills has to say and how she says it!”

SHIRLEY FORBES THOMAS

Retired Professor of English and Director of Honors, John Brown University

“I’ve been a fan of Margaret Wills’ writings for more than 25 years. This book is a source of encouragement to anyone who needs strength, hope, or courage. It is scripture-based and helps us refocus our thinking. It is exactly what is needed for anyone who is ready to move forward in life.”

RICK RENNER

Senior Pastor, Moscow Good News Church, Moscow, Russia