

Facing Loss

*Lessons of Hope from
My Unwanted Journey*



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Preface

My name is D. Ray Davis, and I experienced terrible loss on February 18, 2019 when my wife, Kim, died unexpectedly. Mine is a story of both loss and lessons of hope learned on this long and unwanted journey.

Kim and I were married on July 30, 1983, and we enjoyed life together for more than thirty-five years. We were blessed with three children and five grandchildren. Our life was not devoid of sorrow, but our life was good. We were empty-nesters and enjoying a new phase in life with adult children and the wonderful gift of grandchildren.

After loss, I set out to heal which led me to journaling. Before long, I was learning important lessons. Counselors encouraged me to share my lessons with others. I recognize I have a stewardship with what's been entrusted to me. So, I embark on a journey to share lessons of hope learned on my unwanted journey as I have faced loss.

As you join me on this journey, remember these chapters are a retelling of my story chronicled in my journal. I choose to invest these lessons learned between February 2019 and August 2021 to help others on their



journeys. I began releasing these entries over a year after Kim's death on [Facing Loss](#).

Welcome to My Intense Schoolhouse—An Introduction

This is awkward.

For a year now, I've been writing—journaling, processing, and rambling. I've been writing about my journey into facing loss, and now I'm about to share it publicly.

So why is that so awkward? Because in an ironic twist I'm stepping into Kim's arena of expertise. She was the gifted writer; I was her loyal admirer. Absurd.

However, I am stepping into this new realm of writing for several reasons:

- I was compelled to write to process my loss personally. My son-in-law, Michael, and daughter, Emily, gave me a journal the week Kim died. I have journaled to heal. I have rambled to pour out my heart's pain. I've pressed into the truth of the gospel. I read a lot of books about grief. However, now in writing, I put my own flesh on grief.
- Trusted counselors encouraged me to capture my insights and lessons learned. My writing—originally for my own healing—is a collision of journaling, rambling, insights, experiences, and lessons that poured forth into and from me as I walked this difficult journey.
- I met a counselor at a work event who asked to see my ramblings. After he read a few entries, he said I should share them and not worry about polishing the content. Sooner rather than later. Get it out there. My experience, in its painful raw form in the context of hope, could help others.
- I don't want to waste my journey of loss. It's been too high a price to pay to waste the lessons and keep them to myself. I want to encourage others to face loss and not to be tempted to sidestep, diminish, or

minimize their loss. I need to comfort others with the comfort with which I've been comforted (2 Corinthians 1:3–4).

- We overcome by the word of our testimony according to Revelation 12:11. A testimony is a bright spot in a dark world. A testimony is a picture of the gospel in a person's life. A testimony delivers ancient truths in a contemporary life. I share my testimony of facing loss to testify to God's goodness through the eternal gospel of Jesus in my temporal, singular experience.
- I value openness—transparency. We, in the church, don't talk a lot about grief. I want to share my journey to prepare others for what inevitably will come to every person. Loss is universal, multifaceted, and pervasive. We cannot control what happens to us, but we can control how we respond to what happens to us. So, let's talk about it openly. I choose to steward my experience (1 Corinthians 4:2).
- While Peter referred to those times when we suffer for the sake of righteousness, his admonition to be prepared to give an answer is valid for me during grief, as well. As my son, Paul, stated after reading some of my entries, "We wondered what was going on inside your mind. It's good to know how you were really doing." Sometimes, things go without saying, but I decided this is not one of those times. I need to share about the hope in me while facing loss (1 Peter 2:15).
- I also want to shine a light on the answer to the question, "Is Jesus enough, even during loss?" I want to communicate the rich nature of such a journey in the very real and relentless pain.
- Lastly, I realized I could not honor Kim P. Davis, the writer, in any better manner than to take up a pen and write about what her life—and now her absence—has taught me. My children—Paul (and Brennan), Emily (and Michael), and Trevor (and Emily)—have encouraged me to honor her in this manner.

"The Lord God has given me the tongue of those who are taught, that I may know how to sustain with a word him who is weary. Morning by morning he awakens; he awakens my ear to hear as those who are taught." Isaiah 50:4

And with that introduction, I welcome you to walk with me on my unwanted journey, *Facing Loss*. It's a journey filled with lessons of pain

and loss coupled with faith and hope. I aspire to answer the question, “What does it look like to face loss, mourn well, and stand on the hope of the gospel.” At least in one life.

Mark Vroegop, in *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy*, explains that, “Lament is the honest cry of a hurting heart wrestling with the paradox of pain and the promise of God’s goodness.” I want to face loss and press into the promise of God’s goodness. Lament leads us to God and not away from him.

“Sorrow is a school, and we meet it as we should only when we learn the lessons and go out fitted for being a richer blessing in the world.” J. R. Miller, *The Ministry of Comfort*

A South African proverb states, “Some hardships teach.” Indeed. God has taken me into an intense schoolhouse this past year. As I approach and pass the first anniversary of Kim’s death, I desire to steward the journey that has been entrusted to me. I desire to pass these lessons on for others who may be weary from the pain of loss.

“... if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard...”
Colossians 1:23

“We don’t have to like the process of being ‘schooled,’ but if we want to be joyful, it’s essential that we keep ourselves open to what God has to teach us.” Boyd Bailey, *The Spiritual Life of a Leader*

“Thou hast taught me to say, it is well...” Horatio G. Spafford, “It Is Well With My Soul”

[Comments](#)

My Story of Staggering Loss

On February 18, 2019, I received a text message at 12:48 p.m. from Leigh Ann Fort while I was in a lunch meeting with Scott Logsdon, a colleague. Three simple words began to unfold my unwanted journey:

“Come home immediately.”

Scott and I had finished lunch and were about to get a cup of coffee across the parking lot at Willow Lawn Shopping Center to continue our discussion. Concerned, I told him I needed to call Leigh Ann. Leigh Ann answered and was crying, and I was told Kim had collapsed and paramedics were at my house. She told me to come home. Scott prayed for me, and I rushed home.

Honestly, the full weight and severity of what I was facing was prevented from caving in on me. It was as if, now in retrospect, I was partitioned off from reality. There was a sense of alarm, and there was a heavy weight to the moment, of course. I had to get home and now.

I drove in silence for the next twenty-plus minutes. I did not know what to think and, in fact, I was prevented from thinking much. It was as if a loving, caring God—in protective grace—put a bubble of protection around me. I do remember two fleeting thoughts that passed quickly through my mind. Neither lodged. The first was about what sort of long-term care was going to be needed for my wife if something serious was wrong with her. The second thought, “Why haven’t they called me to tell me where they are taking her?,” was pushed aside.

“Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your heart before him; God is a refuge for us.” Psalm 62:8

I arrived at my house to be escorted to my den and immediately to my couch. Leigh Ann sat to my left. Without any delay, a police officer or paramedic announced to me, “We are sorry to have to inform you that your

wife has passed away.” I fell on Leigh Ann’s shoulder and began to cry in disbelief.

After some minutes—I have no idea how long—I sat up. Everyone else had left the room, and Leigh Ann told me later that I exclaimed out loud, “Is this real?”

A journey had begun. It was unwanted, but it was unavoidable. Eventually, calls were made to my children. I cannot believe I had to make such calls to inform them that we lost their mom. I called Kim’s parents, another horrible call to make. No parent should lose a child, definitely not two. Harry and Katrena have lost their two eldest children prematurely. It’s just not natural.

I made the decision—with my children and with Kim’s parents—to ask for an autopsy. This was a difficult decision. But it was the right thing to do. We needed to know as much as possible about the cause of Kim’s death. It was necessary, but it was a decision no man should have to make about the body of his beloved wife. Painful.

The next week was a steady stream of friends and family paying their respects and offering their support. I was overwhelmed with the outpouring of love and support at the visitation that led up to the funeral.

At the funeral, I read portions of Proverbs 31 surrounded by our children. It was painfully difficult but necessary to honor Kim in that way. As my children supported me, I stood to share excerpts of some eleven verses. Here’s one excerpt of what I read:

“An excellent wife who can find? She is far more precious than jewels. The heart of her husband trusts in her, and he will have no lack of gain. She does him good, and not harm, all the days of her life.” Proverbs 31:10–12

After reading the whole passage, I continued my comments:

“These words, and so many more, describe my wife. She, however, would want you to know why. She became a Proverbs 31 woman only because He became flesh and dwelt among us, paid a debt she owed, redeemed her, made her a new creation. A beautiful new creation. His gospel—his story—made a claim on her life, and she believed it. She would say to me today, ‘Make so much more of Him and not so much of me.’”

The most meaningful line to me was how she became the woman she was because Christ became flesh. She would have approved. Selfless and pointing to Christ.

We also had Ecclesiastes 7:1–4 read, among other passages. For context, I include two verses:

“A good name is better than precious ointment, and the day of death than the day of birth. It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting, for this is the end of all mankind, and the living will lay it to heart.”

Ecclesiastes 7:1–2

This passage always riveted Kim and me. It can only be true if the gospel is true. How can the day of death be better than the day of birth? It’s a paradox it would seem. We’ll talk more about this passage later in this journey.

Finally, I asked Gordon Fort to share a eulogy, and he honored Kim so well. I told him later that I had a new goal in life: to die before he dies so he can share my eulogy, also. My pastor, Cliff Jordan, shared a strong gospel message about the resurrection. I had many comments as to how the funeral was uplifting and celebratory. We literally wanted to celebrate Kim’s life and her Lord. I felt we did so.

As people returned to their normal routines, I settled into a severe shock and a confusing numbness. I was having trouble making sense of it all. I began taking initial steps on my long and unwanted journey through loss.

“And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.”

Philippians 1:6

[Comments](#)

How My Pastor Helped Me Make Three Pivotal Decisions

I learned shock and numbness overwhelm a person when suddenly thrust into grief. In retrospect, I realize now, the shock and numbness that surges in upon you are gifts of grace from God. The full weight of all the confusion, pain, loss, grief, and the entire avalanche of emotions are all held at bay, and only small glimpses are allowed through the fortress raised up to protect you from the onslaught.

The ensuing hours are a blur of emotion, confusion, people, planning, and disbelief. In retrospect, I thank God for shock and numbness. It lasted for days, but slowly allowed reality to seep in and crash upon me.

As I sat on my couch that day, Leigh Ann told me she'd found Kim half in and half out of our shower. She insisted on protecting me from seeing Kim at that time. After all, paramedics and the police were seemingly carrying out an investigation. So, I sat and waited. I sat stunned in shock, numbness, and disbelief.

“The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to be silent.”

Exodus 14:14

Later, however, the funeral home representatives came to prepare Kim's body to take her to the funeral home. It was at that point my pastor, Cliff Jordan, put his hand on my shoulder and said, “If you need to see her before she leaves your home, you need to do it.” I shook my head in affirmation. I was in complete shock, but I knew he was right.

The funeral home representatives eventually asked if I wanted to see Kim. I said that I did. In the midst of shock and numbness, I was overcome by fear, but Cliff's counsel equipped me to take a first courageous step, a

difficult decision. I had to see her, I needed to see her. Seeing her would be a stake in the ground.

My dad and my sister, Darla, were at my house by that time. They held me up as I went into my dining room where they had placed Kim's lifeless body. I fell on her and wept. They kept me on my feet as I kissed Kim's forehead and her cheeks. I began to pray, and then somehow, surprisingly, I began to thank God for thirty-five and-a-half years. I thanked God for the children he gave to us. And I said goodbye. It was obvious that my beautiful wife was gone. She was not there. Her spirit was not in her body's shell. It was a stake in the ground in my new unwanted journey. I was facing loss.

In retrospect, Cliff Jordan gave me a gift as my pastor and leader that day. He helped me to face a new and difficult reality. He helped me to begin facing loss, and he set me on a journey of facing this difficult season with courage. In fact, just hours later I blurted out to someone, "I have to sleep in my bed tonight." And then later, "I have to take a shower in my bathroom"—where Kim had been found. Two more pivotal decisions were added to the first one.

That fateful day, medicated by shock and numbness, I made three pivotal decisions that would prove to help me walk this long and painful journey. Call it trajectory. I looked upon my wife's lifeless body, I got into my bed that night, and I took a shower in my bathroom the next morning. With the gentle guidance of my pastor, I made three very difficult decisions in the first eighteen hours. In the cloud of shock and numbness, those three difficult decisions put me on a path to trust God even in the midst of fear.

“When I am afraid, I put my trust in you. In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I shall not be afraid.” Psalm 56:3–4

[Comments](#)

How I Found Bedrock on Morning Number One

I got into my bed on Monday night just ten hours after learning that I'd lost my bride. As I put my head on the pillow, a song came to my mind: "You are good, you are good when there's nothing good in me." I leaned over to my phone, searched for the lyrics, copied and pasted the words from the song, "Forever Reign," for later. These words by Jason Ingram and Reuben Morgan have ministered to me since God pushed the words into my mind. These lyrics are healing and faith-building. The song includes phrases such as:

"You are good, You are good, when there's nothing good in me.
You are love, You are love, on display for all to see.
You are light, You are light, when the darkness closes in ...
You are peace, You are peace, when my fear is crippling.
You are true, You are true, even in my wandering ...
You are life, You are life, in You death has lost its sting.
"I'm running to Your arms, I'm running to Your arms.
The riches of Your love, will always be enough.
Nothing compares to Your embrace,
Light of the World forever reign ...
My heart will sing no other Name, Jesus ..."

Jason Ingram and Reuben Morgan, "Forever Reign"

I have never had a night like that first night. I felt physical anguish, pain all night. I tossed and turned, unable to sleep. I couldn't even cry. I could only moan and groan. I may have dozed between 3:00 a.m. and 5:00 a.m. At least on and off.

I awoke at 5:00 a.m. looking up at the ceiling and simply said out loud, "In the beginning, God ..." I was falling, but I found bedrock.

“You could argue that the most important words in all of the Bible are the first four words, ‘In the beginning, God...’ those words are meant to change the way you think about yourself, life, God, and everything else.” Paul David Tripp, *New Morning Mercies*

It’s amazing the thoughts that come to you. Cliff Jordan, our pastor, began a series the month before Kim’s death in the book of Genesis. And I awoke to the thought, “In the beginning, God...” Bedrock. Foundation.

**“I can do all things through him who strengthens me.”
Philippians 4:13**

I praise God for Cliff and every other pastor, teacher, and friend who has ever poured truth into my life. I praise God for others who walked the road of loss and suffering before me, serving as testimonials. As I was facing the heartbreaking end of my marriage, it was healthy to be reminded that my marriage’s beginning was not *the* beginning of time. Kim was at the altar with me at the beginning of my marriage; God was before *the* beginning of time. Perspective is important.

Back to that first morning. Shortly after I spontaneously blurted out, “In the beginning, God...” I felt the tears begin to flow as I raised my hands and simply cried out, “I trust you, I trust you, I trust you.” I didn’t feel everything I was saying out loud in these first hours, but I knew them to be sound words.

“He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will abide in the shadow of the Almighty.” Psalms 91:1

My sweet wife has left many rich and healing nuggets behind through her prolific writings. Months after her death, I was rereading the book, *Both Feet In*, for which she was the ghostwriter. In this book, Bud Fray states, “It is fatherlike love that awakens childlike trust.” If placed firmly upon the shoulders of a good, powerful, and sovereign Father, childlike trust is appropriate, wise, and curiously beneficial.

So, my declaration to trust God, since he was, indeed, “... in the beginning,” proved to be a foundational, albeit aspirational, pronouncement. It was my declaration of intent.

**“I will say to the Lord, ‘My refuge and my fortress, my God,
in whom I trust.’” Psalms 91:2**

[Comments](#)

I Chose to Trust Him

I remember tears flowing freely one day as I worshipped while singing, “I dare not trust the sweetest frame but wholly lean on Jesus name.” In fact, the title of the hymn alone should be welcomed as instructive—“My Hope is Built on Nothing Less.”

But, is my hope built on him, really? As I worshipped that day, I recall the realization that I could only trust and wholly lean on Jesus’ name. Indeed, Kim was the sweetest frame I had ever seen or known, but she was not my savior. She could not carry such a burden, whether present or absent.

“Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding.” Proverbs 4:5

I made two crucial decisions in my life. Many of us make these two decisions. I chose to follow Christ, and I chose to marry. Both are important choices, but one is so much more important than the other. Again, Kim is not my savior; she was never intended to fill that role.

However, here’s the danger: It is easy for any of us to confuse these two important relationships, not so much in our minds but in our hearts and in practice. A spouse is seen—very present—while our Savior is unseen. Yet, Jesus is the sweeter frame. He has saved us for himself. In the Citizens song, “In Tenderness,” they sing, “I never heard a sweeter voice...”

Perspective shaped by truth is so very important. As a man, my greatest need is a reconciled relationship with my Creator. Jesus’ voice, therefore, becomes so much sweeter than the voice of a temporal life companion, no matter how sweet.

The worship group, Rend Collective, drives this message home even further in these lyrics from their song, “Yahweh:”

“You are the great I Am, seated upon the throne. Nothing can take Your place in my heart...” Rend Collective, “Yahweh”

Oh, but how easy it is to replace Christ in our hearts—a wife, a loved one, a child, a job, a life passion, a hobby, a home. These temporal gifts change; He is ageless and unchanging. Trustworthy.

“If your way of living is no longer based on what your eyes can see and your mind can understand, but on God’s presence, promises, principles, and provisions, it is because God has crafted faith in you.” Paul David Tripp, *New Morning Mercies*

Indeed—I trust you, I trust you, I trust you. What a simple, yet powerful, declaration. While simple, we often make it very complicated. Trusting our unseen God is often more difficult than trusting our seen loved ones—or even our circumstances.

As time continues to plod along through this unwanted journey, I am reminded often of the reasons I can trust him. He is faithful, and he is true. One morning, I was singing the hymn, “Like a River Glorious,” and was reminded of the following:

“Every joy or trial falleth from above, traced upon our dial by the Sun of Love; We may trust Him fully, all for us to do; They who trust Him wholly find Him wholly true. Stayed upon Jehovah, hearts are fully blest. Finding, as He promised, perfect peace and rest.” Frances Ridley Havergal, “Like a River Glorious”

I chose to trust him, and they who trust Him wholly find Him wholly true. This is my testimony of trust, as well.

“Every word of God proves true; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him.” Proverbs 30:5

“Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” Matthew 11:29–30

[Comments](#)

Expect and Endure Spiritual Paralysis

We who are Christians often talk about walking with Jesus daily, moment-by-moment. I remember thinking my experience through grief was better described as “stumbling with Jesus.” I was paralyzed.

I experienced spiritual paralysis. Early on, I could hardly put words together in a coherent private prayer. Focus eluded me. There was more stumbling and stammering than walking with God. I could hardly read my Bible, or anything else for any length of time.

“On the day I called, you answered me; my strength of soul you increased.” Psalms 138:3

In some ways, I was thrust into a crisis in my faith. My faith, while shaken, stood upon a firm foundation. Trustworthy. I simply needed to press through the darkness, the mist, the fog, the confusion, and the paralysis. Later, I thought of this sense of paralysis as I was singing a song, “King of My Heart,” by John Mark McMillan. He refers to Jesus as “... the anchor in the waves...” Rend Collective calls Jesus “... a harbor in every tempest...” in their song, “No Outsiders.” So true.

One lesson I learned was loss—especially when in shock—is one example where Romans 8:26 comes to vibrant life. When in spiritual paralysis and unable to respond or even pray coherently, we find that “... the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.” I drew comfort to know the Spirit was interceding for me with groanings.

Even in spiritual paralysis, I had to make some decisions. I had to refuse to let the paralysis—the circumstances—become a compass for my journey. The fears and sorrows do not dictate or undermine the foundation of my faith. I was reminded by Rend Collective’s song, “True North,” that I had to place my feet on *the* solid foundation:

“I will not let the darkness steal the joy within my soul. I will not let my circumstance become my compass, no I will not let the fears of life and sorrows of this world dictate to me how I should feel, for You are my true north.” Rend Collective, “True North”

Additionally, I am a part of a community which would play a crucial role in my support and guidance through paralysis. My family, local church, and broader Christian community were important—and present. I’m speaking primarily of those people I know. But then there are those I don’t know personally, but they have ministered in ways that help me in my healing. The song of musicians and the books of authors have been a part of the fabric of my healing. Add to these the words of Scripture, and I have found groanings were provided for me to cry out to God to begin to recover from spiritual paralysis.

“Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer.” Romans 12:12

While pain and grief continued unabated, paralysis began to subside. Eventually, focus returned, and a new level of conversational prayer emerged. Spontaneous worship returned. Awe revisited me like never experienced before.

If you’re facing loss, expect spiritual paralysis. And endure it without losing heart.

“So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.” 2 Corinthians 4:16–18

[Comments](#)

Bracing for a Distorted and Warped Perception

On Tuesday afternoon, the day following Kim's death, I had to go to the funeral home. My father went with me. My three children, now all in town, accompanied us.

When it came to making plans for the funeral, my son, Paul, stepped up and helped me with the unwelcome and inescapable logistical decisions. In hindsight, I am so proud of him. Kim would have been proud—but not surprised.

After a laborious meeting, making some initial decisions, and completing paperwork, the funeral director invited us to follow him down a hall. We entered a room, and I found myself in a stark and sterile place—a room full of empty caskets. We had to select a casket. After a few minutes of wandering aimlessly through the room looking at various caskets, I became overwhelmed with the relentlessness of the pitiless cascading reality. I turned to my daughter, Emily, and said to her, “What am I doing here?” Twenty-five hours after I learned of Kim's death, I was standing in this room full of caskets. Pain was beginning to pour in upon me.

“... casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you.” 1 Peter 5:7

There is an aspect to loss that distorts and warps reality. It's simply difficult to grasp it all. Acceptance has to catch up with the new uninvited and unwelcome reality. It's good to be surrounded by family and friends to walk you through it all.

A few weeks after Kim's death I was sitting in my den, and I flashed back to the moment when I was abruptly told of her passing. The event replayed in my mind, although I wasn't even trying. It was an unsolicited replay of the memory.

I observed that the room looked different in my memory from that fateful day than it looked on the current day. In my memory, the room was elongated. The place where the policewoman or paramedic stood to break the news to me seemed skewed when compared to what currently was before me across the room. I wondered out loud, “Has my room been rearranged?”

I remembered Leigh Ann had been sitting next to me to my left. However, in my mind my couch seemed different. Later, my pastor was at the other end of my couch sitting in silence until it was appropriate to speak. In my mind, he seemed to be at the far end of the room. The couch seemed stretched out, longer.

In retrospect, I realize shock was literally distorting the perception of my experience. My memory of that day is concrete and distinct, but it’s a warped and skewed snapshot in time. In essence, the power of shock created an alternate reality in my memory bank of the very same room.

“We live life as if it were a motion picture. Loss turns life into a snapshot.” Jerry Sittser, *A Grace Disguised: How the Soul Grows Through Loss*

Shock, especially a sudden onslaught, distorts and warps perception. This is why I heard repeatedly over the next few weeks from several trusted advisors, “Don’t make any major decisions.” But, I kept thinking to myself, “A casket and a funeral are pretty major decisions, but I didn’t get to delay those decisions.”

“Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content... I can do all things through him who strengthens me.” Philippians 4:11, 13

[Comments](#)

Treading Assaulting Waves

I turned the lights off in the kitchen and den one evening. Another long and difficult day had ended. I forced intentional steps toward my stairs to go to bed. As I walked into the entry hall a sense of dread overwhelmed me. It was a heaviness I'd never felt; it stopped me in my tracks. I didn't like it. It persisted, and I experienced a dark fear. It scared me. A sense of despair surrounded me. The future looked grim, hopeless in that moment. The journey ahead looked long and painful. Overwhelming. Relentless.

“... my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed,’ says the Lord, who has compassion on you.” Isaiah 54:10

On another occasion, I had a sense of losing touch with reality. I don't remember if it began with confusion or fear. I had this feeling that I was drifting and losing touch. I had this thought: “Has this shock led me toward insanity?” I sensed I was losing touch. I was unable to maintain clarity. Jerry Sittser, in *A Grace Disguised: How the Soul Grows Through Loss*, described it as if he were “... dizzy with grief's vertigo...” I totally understand his description. Confusion. Insanity. Assaulting waves.

“Maybe He'll turn the water into land. And maybe He'll take your hand and say, ‘Let's take a walk on the waves...’” Steven Curtis Chapman, “Take Another Step”

Fortunately, I learned the discipline of pressing into the dread, fear, and confusion. I learned to stay with the waves. I recognized and embraced undeniable and horrible loss. As I accepted and stayed with the waves, I learned that assaulting waves would pass if I pressed through.

These lessons are bolstered by hymns such as “How Firm a Foundation.” This excerpt from the third verse is a powerful reminder to me:

“When through the deep waters I call thee to go, the rivers of sorrow shall not overflow; for I will be with thee, thy trials to bless, and sanctify to thee thy deepest distress.” John Rippon, “How Firm a Foundation”

Tom Elliff, a friend and mentor, stated that his prayer for himself during his loss and now for me during my loss was this: “That my conscious sense of Jesus’ presence would be greater than my conscious sense of Kim’s absence.” Deep waters and assaulting waves need to be outpaced.

I remember hearing a song, “O Praise the Name,” and embracing the first lines as an antidote to the assaulting waves:

“I cast my mind to Calvary, where Jesus bled and died for me. I see His wounds, His hands, His feet, my Savior on that cursed tree.” Hillsong Worship, “O Praise the Name”

When assaulting waves persist you have to wait patiently for them to subside. Or better yet, you have to wait for them to be driven out by the presence of Jesus. The crucified Christ is victorious. So, in the battle when I’m surrounded by waves, I intentionally cast my mind to Calvary.

I also think of Jeremy Riddle’s words to his song, “Sweetly Broken:”

“To the cross, I look, and to the cross I cling. Of its suffering, I do drink, of its work, I do sing. On it, my Savior, both bruised and crushed, showed that God is love and God is just. At the cross, you beckon me...” Jeremy Riddle, “Sweetly Broken”

Most assuredly, a sense of faith and certainty of the eternal hope to come will drown out waves driven by temporal loss. Eternity with him is better—more secure—than any man-made anchor. Matt Boswell and Matt Papa call the cross a “ballast of assurance” in their song, “Christ the Sure and Steady Anchor.” His cross is a strong reminder of the foundation upon which we stand in the face of assaulting waves.

“... all I have needed Thy hand hath provided...” Thomas O. Chisholm, “Great Is Thy Faithfulness”

**“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.”
Hebrews 13:8**

[Comments](#)

How God Met Me in the Depths

“... I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need...”
Philippians 4:11–12

“I have learned... to be content,” Paul writes. But, have *I* learned? Have *I* learned to be content in any situation, any circumstance? We will certainly see about that. For sure. Further, will I do all things—even grieve, mourn, and trust—through him who empowers me? Again, there is no question whether we will see or not for such a trial demands a response.

I’m cornered.

Do I really know how to be brought low or abound? Do I really know the secret to face plenty and hunger or abundance and need? I had no choice when this tragedy descended upon me. I began to face a test like never before at any time in my life. I realized I was being carried away on a journey that would take me deeper. I was being swept away. Into deep waters.

My unwanted journey would have an *intended* consequence. God intended to take me deeper than I’d ever been before in my faith. I began to experience truth in deeper and more vibrant ways than ever before. These experiences were occasioned by pain, loss, shock, numbness, and grief but were met by the reverberation of God’s resounding response. Yes, I have been carried away into an intense schoolhouse—my eyes and ears have been opened.

“I shall look at the world through tears. Perhaps I shall see things that dry-eyed I could not see.” Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son*

Pain—and these other sensations and experiences—gave way to new insights. For example, different aspects of the same biblical passages came alive. Sure, I was familiar with a given passage and understood it before. But now, with a layer of life scraped off, I see deeper beneath the surface. Same passage, deeper insight.

Also, songs came alive for me. It wasn't like I hadn't heard a specific hymn or song before. It was simply that I was hearing or seeing it from the perspective of grief and pain—with some new clarity provided. Truths I had sung for decades made sense in ways never quite understood before loss. I don't claim to have any special insight, but I know this one thing. The circumstances in my life have opened an opportunity to go deeper than at any other time. God has accompanied me on an unwanted journey, and he has taken me to new depths.

Further, experiences in prayer took on a new intimacy. Interestingly, prayer centered around my own painful experience of loss broadened spontaneously to selfless prayer for others who were suffering. Even more, I have been riveted to a new and deeper intercession for Christ's church and the nations like never before in my life.

If you're facing loss, you will be taken to depths with God never imagined. Simultaneously and strangely, it can be both painful and glorious. However, you must position yourself as the student to learn contentment from him. And he will meet you in the depths and take you deeper with him.

“Can you find out the deep things of God? Can you find out the limit of the Almighty?” Job 11:7

[Comments](#)

Four Early Lessons That Gave Me Clarity

“Older men are to be sober-minded... sound in faith... and in steadfastness.” Titus 2:2

In the early days, I was trying to make sense of everything—I needed clarity. I had to address details, host the gift of visitors, and all the while try to wrap my mind around everything swirling around me.

Here are four truths I embraced, pressed into, and trusted as I began to make sense of it all:

God is the author of life—Death is a consequence of the Fall of Man. God is able to intervene, but he does not always choose to do so. We can question him and his ways all we want. However, second-guessing does no good whatsoever. Ignore this truth, and it will send you down all sorts of unhelpful roads. I have heard it said that sovereignty does not eliminate calamity.

The Fall of Man in Genesis is real—We live in the middle of time before God makes all things new. We love to talk about and study the New Heavens and New Earth. But these are future promises. We live now and are still under the impact of the Fall of Man. As Ligon Duncan has written, “Not everyone gets a happy ending in a fallen world...” Life is, therefore, full of pain and loss.

Temporal experiences must be kept in eternal perspective—A shocking experience such as the death of a loved one focuses your attention on the here-and-now. I remember repeating often that my micro-story is tragic, but my macro-story is still beautiful. Temporal loss must be connected back to the arc of God’s redemptive story. It takes intentionality. Every experience—joyful or sad—is a sub-story in the arc of history. Perspective matters. Setting temporal loss in eternity’s perspective delivers clarity. Death is a universal experience for humanity. But eternity is coming.

God is not a respecter of persons—Fairness comes up a lot during loss. I was reminded God doesn't choose favorites. He is not a respecter of persons. The Bible is clear that the rain falls on the just and the unjust and that the sun rises on the good and the evil. We do not have some special immunity when it comes to facing loss. There are consequences that come with living in a fallen world. Our role is to walk by faith.

“For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.” Matthew 5:45

“... God shows no partiality.” Romans 2:11

As I was seeking clarity, I reread *Both Feet In*, a book Kim wrote as the ghostwriter. One morning tears flowed as I came across these beautiful, clarifying words by Bud Fray (and Kim):

“It is hard to understand why God chooses to physically heal some and not others. Over the years, untimely death was a common occurrence in the surrounding villages [in Zimbabwe] and when asked why, my answer was usually feeble at best. However, I knew God was my strong tower and my hiding place. What does that mean and how did this apply to this important question? Our refuge must be the sovereignty of our Almighty Father. The sovereign knowledge, sovereign truth, and sovereign love of God are always in place and never fail. He can be and must be trusted. When we don't understand His knowledge, truth, or love in circumstances, illness, or death, we wait in our Refuge and trust His heart. There is peace and contentment there. His love never fails—neither do His purposes or promises. We wait as He works all things for good according to His love, purposes, and promises. Our prayers and His promises will be accomplished for good. Wait, be strong, and take courage are our instructions.”

Clarity during grief is of paramount importance. Therefore, press into these four lessons: 1. God is the author of life; 2. The Fall of Man in Genesis is real; 3. Temporal experiences must be kept in eternal perspective; and 4. God is not a respecter of persons.

Wait. Be strong. Take courage.

“Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage...” Psalm 27:14

[Comments](#)

Kim Chose Me

A few months after Kim's death, I was talking to Leigh Ann Fort. Gordon said it best at the funeral. "Our families have been inextricably connected through these events." Kim helped Leigh Ann the year before as Leigh Ann faced a life-threatening health problem. After five surgeries, Leigh Ann has done well. Then Gordon, Leigh Ann, and I were thrust into this experience of loss together. We've had to talk, process, rehearse, and remember.

One day, Leigh Ann looked at me and reflected, "I don't know why, D. Ray, but Kim chose me to be her friend." Kim chose Leigh Ann as her closest friend and confidant. Leigh Ann went on to say that Kim was more like a sister than a friend. But any would-be friend of Leigh Ann's knows why Kim would choose her. Gordon knows why. He chose Leigh Ann, too. Leigh Ann is a selfless, loving friend. She's also quite funny with an engaging laugh.

I want to go on record here and say some things I've already said to Leigh Ann. She was a dear friend to Kim. Kim was a dear friend to Leigh Ann. Kim served Leigh Ann through her illness out of love and not out of duty. After all, they were like sisters. Knit together.

"... the soul of Jonathan was knit to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul." 1 Samuel 18:1

And Leigh Ann served Kim, me, and my family in Kim's death. Leigh Ann was expecting Kim for a lunch date. When Kim didn't show up, Leigh Ann went to our house and, after entering, she found Kim where she had collapsed. Leigh Ann spared me the shock of that life-altering moment. Kim wouldn't have had it any other way. Honestly, Kim was a planner. If she could have planned the circumstances surrounding her death, she would have planned for Leigh Ann to find her before I did.

So, it's true. Kim chose Leigh Ann.

However, Kim chose me, too. And I told Leigh Ann as much.

I was privileged to be Kim's husband. I stand in awe of that previous sentence. We chose each other in a wedding ceremony on July 30, 1983. Really, we chose each other before that date, but we made our commitment before God, family, and friends on our wedding day. I chose Kim, and she chose me.

Leigh Ann said with a sparkle of gratitude that Kim chose her. She was blessed and grateful to be Kim's friend. But I'm overwhelmed to have spent thirty-five-and-a-half years as Kim's choice as her life companion. Pure grace.

If you're married, take this opportunity to consider the blessing, privilege, honor, and responsibility bestowed upon you by the choice made by you and your spouse. A covenant.

As I jogged one morning mulling over this blessing, I realized something profound: God chose us. He chose to redeem us. God actually chose us.

“... even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world...” Ephesians 1:4

Kim chose me, yes, and lavished her love upon me. But she could not redeem me. She could not provide forgiveness. God has blessed us with those profound gifts. He chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world. Let that sentence sink in.

Kim chose me on July 30, 1983. God chose you and me before the foundation of the world.

I'm taking this passage at face value. He chose us before the foundation of the world and predestined us for adoption. We are sons and daughters through Jesus Christ. His own possession.

He chose us.

“But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession...” 1 Peter 2:9

[Comments](#)

An Awkward Experience That Undermined My Naivety

“Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.” James 1:2–4

I returned to church on March 17, 2019 almost one month after Kim’s death. I was optimistic as I prepared for church that morning. I needed to be back at church, and I was leaving after the service to go to the airport to head to Atlanta to spend some time with Kim’s parents and then to Trevor’s for his birthday. We were going to a cabin in the Ozarks to hike.

This distraction provided a momentary promise that things are better. But things are not better.

That Sunday morning, I began to cry when I merged onto the interstate. Kim and I drove to church together. I wasn’t supposed to go alone. Driving all alone in my car forced me from my temporary distraction back to my tough reality.

It got worse.

I stood alone during worship where I’d stood with Kim a month before. Matt, a friend, came across the aisle and put his arm around me as tears filled my eyes. We worshipped together. Supported.

But it got worse. And a little funny. Nothing had been funny to me in quite a while. But this was quite funny. Or at least ironic.

Our pastor, Cliff Jordan, stood to continue teaching out of Genesis. I’m not quite sure who to blame. Is it my fault for waiting a month to come back to church or not waiting longer? Is it Cliff’s fault for not calling an audible? Is it God’s fault? Kim’s fault? As Cliff stood it became apparent very

quickly that the central text of his message on my first Sunday back after the untimely death of my beautiful wife of thirty-five-and-a-half years was Genesis 2:18. I'm sure he read more, but this is all I heard:

“Then the Lord God said, ‘It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.’” Genesis 2:18

Honestly, it was quite uncomfortable. It was as if I was transported to sit next to the podium as evidence, and everyone—I mean everyone—was staring at me. I thought, “Had Cliff somehow arranged for me to come to church like a child brings an object to school for show-and-tell?” I sat trying not to move awkwardly. I wondered if there was a spotlight on my head, because that's how it felt. Inwardly, I realized the humor of it all. I wanted to scream out, “Amen, don't I know it.” Or I could have yelled out, “Are you trying to rub it in already?”

He wasn't trying to rub it in. Nor could I say, “Amen, I fully get it.” Not yet. I was still so early in my grief that I had no idea what was ahead of me. I would understand Genesis 2:18's loneliness more in the days, weeks, and months ahead.

Looking back on that awkward moment, I realize that God gave me a gift. He wanted me to know, “It is not good that [this] man should be alone.” I don't have to pretend—it's not good. I'm alone. I've lost my best friend. Face it. Acknowledge loss. Undermine any tendency toward naivety!

But he also wanted me to know he could work a bit of humor back into my life. It really is funny that on my first Sunday back at church the pastor preaches an entire message to tell me that it's not good for me to be alone. Harsh.

After the service, I got a group hug from the youth group. We spent a few minutes together. It was rich and healing to me.

Then I turned and there he was. I put my arm around Cliff and said, “Really?” He was shaking his head in disbelief and admitted that he'd never preached an entire sermon thinking of one name throughout the entire message. I told him that it was alright. He was faithfully teaching through Genesis, and he came to this passage. What he taught us that day was spot on. It was true. I was living it.

I was missing my best friend and companion. However, it was only the beginning of a very long and unwanted journey. Cliff simply reinforced it and further helped to undermine my naivety.

“Therefore, preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ.” 1 Peter 1:13

[Comments](#)

Marshaling Endurance for an Unwanted Journey

“I loathe my life; I will give free utterance to my complaint; I will speak in the bitterness of my soul.” Job 10:1

**“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.... And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”
Philippians 4:4, 7**

I told innumerable people early on that I was on a new and long unwanted journey. I spoke of it in a cerebral manner. I knew it to be true, but I didn't understand it yet. Loss is like a slow starvation, long and painful. It's a sadness that simply goes deeper and deeper and you have no way of stopping it. Job and Paul are both correct. There's loathing and rejoicing. A confusing dance of experiences and feelings.

I cannot overstate the pervasive, life-altering, uninvited nature of such a loss. The long part of my description turned out to be more true than I could have fathomed. The insidious nature of the inescapable change is, indeed, new and long. It just won't go away.

But, I learned to face the loss. It's a choice. I've learned to embrace the undeniable. I've been intentional. Believe it or not, there does seem to be an option whether you face loss or not. However, I learned to do it with the faith-filled knowledge that I wasn't going to face my loss alone.

**“I can do all things through him who strengthens me.”
Philippians 4:13**

I will never forget visiting Paul and Brennan and their boys for the Easter weekend. All went well until after church. We innocently did what we knew to do on Easter Sunday. Take pictures after church. I squatted to get a

picture with Beckett and Camden, two handsome grandsons. I was smiling on the outside, but I was experiencing excruciating pain on the inside. It was my first posed pictures without Kim—alone. It’s just not good for man to be alone. This echo kept insulting me at every turn. Pain became a constant reminder shouting that I was on a new, long, and unwanted journey.

I’ll never forget the day when the word endurance came to rest heavily in my heart. It was a profound realization. Mine was a long journey that would require stamina. It wasn’t going to be an easy journey. It wasn’t going to be short-lived. I have to stay in it, face it, and endure it.

“... we could choose to step out of the redemptive story, not allowing enough time to see it unfold to the end. It is, after all, hard to stay in the story, considering the cost involved.” Jerry Sittser, *A Grace Revealed: How God Redeems the Story of Your Life*

Micro-stories are set in the macro-story, the redemptive story. Jerry Sittser goes on to call this journey we are all traveling “a strange story.” While it is “still unfolding, it is already finished.” In other words, we know by faith how our redemptive story ends, regardless of our individual parts of the story. That fuels my endurance!

I have learned loss requires that I marshal endurance for my long and unwanted journey.

“A man’s spirit will endure sickness, but a crushed spirit who can bear?” Proverbs 18:14

**“Be watchful, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong.”
I Corinthians 16:13**

[Comments](#)

A Vivid, Comforting, and Faith-Bolstering Dream

I am not a mystic. I do not ever remember having a dream with some special meaning. Ever. However, I know it happens.

In the mission context, people across the world have dreams that open their minds and hearts to Jesus. It's commonplace. But it just doesn't happen a lot in our context. Kim wrote about dreams in *Voices of the Faithful*. These dreams were instrumental in opening people's hearts and minds to the gospel.

However, I have never had meaningful dreams. So, it was with some amazement that it happened.

I was not sleeping well the first few months. It's a common aspect of grief. One morning I was on an early flight, and I was tired. As the plane ascended, I dozed off.

I was jolted awake by a vivid dream. In my dream, Kim was about twenty feet in front of me, and she was running full speed toward me. Her face had an expression of sheer exuberance. She was elated more than I'd ever seen her. She dove into my arms and my dream ended. That's it. Mere seconds.

“Jesus said... ‘... everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?’” John 11:25–26

Over time I unpacked my dream slowly. I'm not going to insist on this interpretation or that the dream was from God. Maybe. I hope so. Maybe God was giving me a gift. I don't pretend to know with absolute certainty. I am reminded, however, that Joel prophesied that old men will dream dreams. And for the record, I'm beginning to fit Joel's criteria to be able to dream those dreams (Joel 2:28).

Kim normally didn't run but when she did it was never fast (although a little known fact about Kim is that she played soccer for the University of

Georgia). I concluded her exuberance was a result of being with Christ. Heaven was beyond anything she'd ever known, and it showed on her face. Pure ecstasy. Elation. Given the choice, she would not come back to me. She loved me, her children, and especially her grandchildren. Not to mention her extended family and friends. But in the light of her new life in eternity, she would want me to know that she's perfectly fine. Heaven *is* for real. She would graciously decline any invitation to return to us and her life here even if offered the opportunity. Heaven is that good. Jesus' presence is that joyful.

“But, as it is written, ‘What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him.’” 1 Corinthians 2:9

“In mansions of glory and endless delight, I'll ever adore Thee in heaven so bright...” William R. Featherstone, “My Jesus, I Love Thee”

As a result of my stunning experience of loss, I see heaven differently than I ever have before. I feel like Stephen (in Acts 7:55). He got to gaze into heaven before he went there. Maybe this dream was a gift to allow me to gaze into heaven, see the ecstatic joy on Kim's face, and long for the beautiful presence of Christ even more.

But for now, I live on. I need to carry on faithfully. I need to honor Kim and God in the manner I live.

“For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me...” Philippians 1:21–22

Living on in the flesh will mean fruitful life, relationships, and work. For me, apparently, it is more necessary. I need to grieve and mourn appropriately so that health and effectiveness return. Then, I'll be able to embrace the “more necessary,” the investment into the accounts of others. But for now, I am encouraged by a glimpse into eternity.

“He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces...” Isaiah 25:8

“O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?” 1 Corinthians 15:55

It is reassuring to project yourself into the future when death is, indeed, swallowed up and defeated. Tears are wiped away from every face. Struggles are behind us, and the persecutions are put away. The reproach of God’s people is removed. While we live here on earth in the day-by-day stuff of life, it’s encouraging, faith-bolstering, and even comforting to know it will one day be put behind us. Death, mourning, crying, and pain will pass away.

“But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.” 1 Thessalonians 4:13

“Giver of immortal gladness...” Henry Van Dyke, “Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee”

**“He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.”
Revelation 21:4**

“Then I shall bow, in humble adoration, and then proclaim: ‘my God, how great Thou art!’” Stuart K. Hine, “How Great Thou Art”

[Comments](#)

Layers of Grief and Loss

“Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints.”

Psalm 116:15

The death of a saint is beautiful in the sight of the Lord. I get it. However, it wasn't beautiful for those of us left behind.

Over time, I have learned death yields many layers of grief and loss.

First, Kim lost her life. She always embraced life and lived well. She invested her life. But now, she lost the enjoyment of life. She lost the joy of grandchildren. But, as I learned in [my previous post](#) about my vivid dream, she is just fine. Yes, she lost some things, but what she has gained is incomparable.

And then there's my loss. I lost my life companion and friend. I lost the potential of the rest of my life with Kim. My retirement years will be different. I am a grandfather without a grandmother by my side. My loss is multifaceted and multidimensional. There are so many layers to my loss. Almost every single day I discover new levels, dimensions, or layers of loss.

My children lost their mother. They needed her influence in their lives—not only in the past but also in the future. Mothers make life sweeter. Kim was so much more thoughtful than I am. She was the glue that drew us all together. Don't get me wrong, I love being with my family. But she was the planner that made it happen almost effortlessly. A mother is a lifelong friend to children. A mother is a lifelong fan of her children.

My grandsons and my granddaughter lost one of the best Grandminny's ever. I know I shouldn't compare. But she was loving and embracing grandmother-hood, and she was good at it. Regardless, my grandchildren lost a grandmother who would have poured into their lives for good.

Kim's parents and her brother, Greg, lost a wonderful daughter and sister. Kim adored her family and they lose out on a loyal family member who selflessly loved them. Not to mention her extended family.

“... pictures fall far short of what they were in real life and what real life was like with them.” Jerry Sittser, *A Grace Disguised: How the Soul Grows Through Loss*

Kim had friends who have lost a genuine friend. There are several of her closest friends, but I would be remiss if I didn't mention Leigh Ann Fort. Leigh Ann had a good friend in Kim. And Kim had a good friend in Leigh Ann. Leigh Ann spoke of Kim more like a sister. Anyone who considered Kim a friend lost out. Another layer of loss.

I thought about another side of loss. Kim impacted many people through her writing. She edited, wrote, compiled, or ghostwrote fifteen books or booklets. If you don't know Kim, just Google Kim P. Davis. Death robbed us of her future work.

There are so many layers, sides, dimensions, and ramifications to loss. Only time will reveal them all. For now, I take solace in Kim's good name and that her loss has been turned to gain for her and important lessons for us.

“A good name is better than precious ointment, and the day of death than the day of birth.” Ecclesiastes 7:1

[Comments](#)

Anger, Vulnerability, and Self-Care

“But watch yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life, and that day come upon you suddenly like a trap.” Luke 21:34

A few months after Kim died, I had a doctor’s appointment for a regular checkup. Dr. Harrington knew Kim and me from our mutual missionary service in Africa. Dr. Harrington served in Eastern Africa, and we served in Southern Africa. He’s been my doctor for a long time. During the physical checkup, he spent some time asking how I was doing in my grief.

When I left his office and stopped by the receptionist’s desk, she said we needed a follow up in three months. Normally, I go every six months or year. Then, I noticed something. Dr. Harrington had listed a reason for the follow up. Grief. He knows something most of us don’t know unless we’ve been thrust into this journey. If you’re in grief, you’ve entered a vulnerable state. Self-care is paramount.

I was jogging one day and listening to Ecclesiastes again. I came across Ecclesiastes 4:9–12:

“Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up! Again, if two lie together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone? And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him—a threefold cord is not quickly broken.” Ecclesiastes 4:9–12

I’ve always loved this passage. However, that was when I was a married man. Two are better than one. But now, I’m alone. Dr. Harrington is right.

I'm in a new and vulnerable state. I need to be cautious about so many things.

But let me back up.

The week Kim died I saw Dr. David Fort when he and Laurel brought a meal to my home. He is a friend and a colleague who is in a member care role for our organization. I told him that I needed time with him when the dust settled. After all, I had no idea what was ahead of me. To be honest, I felt a foreboding, a fear, concerning my future. I knew enough, even in the shock and numbness, to know that my life was drastically altered. I had a long journey before me. Besides that, I had often encouraged new missionaries not to think too highly of themselves and, instead, to reach out to member care or their sending church to help them through the inevitable struggles that come with missionary life—and life in general.

Three weeks after Kim died, David Fort and I sat in a coffee shop to talk. I learned a lot. But I had one major concern. I feared anger. I had always heard that anger was a part of the grief process. For some reason, I feared the prospect of experiencing unrestrained anger. I pressed him for guidance and insight. It was very helpful, but David avoided discussing anger the first couple times I brought it up. Finally, after I pressed a third time, he spoke a sentence that I found comforting and liberating.

“D. Ray, anger is not inevitable.”

Clearly, anger is not a wrong response. It's a normal, oft-experienced part of grief. But in response to my concerns, David explained that if I faced my grief, mourned appropriately, and took care of myself, I did not have to experience out-of-control anger. If I kept my loss in a biblical perspective by not sugarcoating the loss but by keeping it in the context of truth, I did not have to be overcome by anger.

About two and a half hours later, I realized how blessed I am to have the support system I have to help me face my loss. In community. I'm learning self-care must be sought out; but care must also be received. Vulnerabilities must be met with care.

“Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God.” Hebrews 3:12

Comments

Seeking and Embracing Wise Counsel

“Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls...” Hebrews 13:17

After first submitting myself to the help of Dr. David Fort, I sought to spend time with other counselors.

My pastor, Cliff Jordan, met with me multiple times. His care as the leader of my faith community has been such a support as I have faced my loss. I [look back](#) to his influence and counsel during the grieving process, for sure. However, I [look back](#) at his leadership and teaching before my loss as vitally important to my spiritual health and preparation to endure such loss. Leading.

Ron, a colleague, was in town from his gateway city in Eurasia. His role is focused on member care. I jumped at the opportunity to debrief and seek his counsel. He and I met at a restaurant for breakfast, and we talked for four hours. Refreshing.

As our organization prepared to celebrate a group of retiring missionaries, former member care leaders, Mark and Linda Whitworth, came to town. We met for breakfast. The privilege to debrief and process with friends who are counselors continued to aid me as I faced my loss and sought to walk in a healthy manner. Comforting.

A serendipitous meeting happened when I journeyed to see my son's family in Durham for Kim's birthday. I traveled down the day before to be with Paul, Brennan, Beckett, and Camden, arriving the day before Kim's June 5th birthday. Upon arrival, I received a *Facebook Messenger* note from Sandy Hammack, telling me how sorry she was and that she knew the next day was Kim's birthday. Duane and Sandy live in Colorado now, and so it was a surprise for her to add that they were visiting a new grandchild in Raleigh, NC. I quickly told them I had just driven into the area also, and

another counseling session was organized over coffee. We talked for two and a half hours. Healing.

On a trip to Europe in August, I reconnected with Ron from Eurasia who I had met up with earlier in the Spring. He asked to spend more time with me. It was time for a checkup. We shared a meal together, and it was good to debrief my journey and to update him on how I was doing through my grief. Encouraging.

Besides these brothers and sisters who have counseling or pastoral roles, I have been surrounded by others who are simply caring believers—brothers and sisters who have been there to listen. I have also been blessed by my own family, especially my siblings and parents, who have helped me as I process my grief in as healthy a way as I am able to do so. Selfless love.

Then there are my own children. I have joked with others that my children are treating me like I was now their child. I've loved it. They encouraged me to get up each morning and get outside. They asked me to take care of myself and walk or jog. Their advice has turned out to be most helpful and healthy. In retrospect, the exercise helped me to feel physically stronger. Beyond the exercise, the outdoors has a healing, centering effect. The walls in a bedroom or den can close in upon you. The sky, and creation in general, help to give perspective. Loved.

“The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork...” Psalm 19:1

I praise God for the many counselors who have stepped up to give me guidance. They are a part of a tapestry of care to aid me in my unwanted, yet unavoidable, journey. Abundant help is available if you seek and embrace wise counsel.

“Where there is no guidance, a people falls, but in an abundance of counselors there is safety.” Proverbs 11:14

[Comments](#)

Appropriate Reasons for Anger

“Are not my days few? Then cease, and leave me alone, that I may find a little cheer before I go—and I shall not return—to the land of darkness and deep shadow, the land of gloom like thick darkness, like deep shadow without any order, where light is as thick darkness.” Job 10:20–22

Over the months, I did think more about anger. In some ways, I delved deep into thinking about it. Anger is a normal emotion. Anger is not a negative sign. Grief leads many into anger. Bottom line, God can handle it if you're angry at him, and he can help you if you're angry at something or someone else. He's not knocked off center by our anger.

But a fair question remains: Who deserves the anger? Is it God? Or are you mad at the person who died? In the case of foul play, are you angry at the perpetrator who caused the death? If an accident, who should be the object of your anger?

I say I haven't gotten angry. That's not totally true. The more I probed into anger I realized there is an appropriate reason for anger and appropriate objects of anger.

Let me explain.

One of the healthy ways I coached myself was to remind myself that my micro-story is tragic, but my macro-story is beautiful. Even better said, the macro-story that God is orchestrating throughout history is still beautiful. Inherent in that story is an eternal struggle between good and evil, between God and Satan. Satan along with Adam and Eve had an encounter known as the Fall of Man, and death was introduced.

“... Jesus approached the grave of Lazarus in a state not of uncontrollable grief but of irrepressible anger... the emotion that

tore at his breast and clamored for utterance was just rage. B. B. Warfield, *The Emotional Life of Our Lord*

I can get angry at the very existence of death. That is a godly response! I can get angry at sin that resulted in death in the world. That, too, is an appropriate response. Anger at death will aid you in respecting the value of life. Anger at death has caused a deeper love of those in my family. My love for my family has grown as a direct result of my loss. My love for my family has grown as a result of considering the wife, daughter, mother, and sister we as a family have lost. I hate death! It is a result and sign of Satan's and mankind's rebellion. Anger at sin has caused a new level of recognition of my own sinfulness. Anger at sin will aid you in sanctification—your own discipleship—if you allow God to use it in your life. Anger at sin has caused me to pray differently—more passionately and desperately!

**“And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.”
Matthew 6:13**

In short, anger at death has caused a renewed love of life itself and for those in my life. Anger at sin has brought an opportunity for growth in holiness and Christlikeness.

Second, I can appropriately get angry at our enemy, Satan. He rebelled and misled Adam and Eve. We call him our enemy because he is against God's ways and seeks to keep us from being transferred from the kingdom of darkness into the Son's Kingdom.

**“He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son...”
Colossians 1:13**

I can embrace God even more intimately as I express anger at our enemy. If there is blame to be assigned, our enemy is the object of appropriate anger. I resist the temptation to turn my back on God. I embrace the idea of turning my back more emphatically on Satan. Death should never cause us to get or stay angry at God. Death, suffering, or loss of any kind should cause us to run to God. It should cause us to have anger at sin, death, and Satan.

In short, loss should be a clarion call to run from Satan and to run to God.

As I explored anger, I recognized there is a good role or place for anger. Loss puts life in perspective. Loss puts sin in a different light. Loss can reinvigorate vision and purpose for the life I have remaining. Anger can animate these lessons solidifying them in a mourner's heart and mind.

There is, as it turns out, an appropriate place for anger.

“If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell.” Philippians 1:22

“Jesus’ anger is not merely the seamy side of his pity; it is the righteous reaction of his moral sense in the presence of evil. Jesus burned with anger against the wrongs he met with in his journey through human life is truly as he melted with pity at the side of the world’s misery...” B. B. Warfield, *The Emotional Life of Our Lord*

[Comments](#)

Powerlessness and Purposefulness

The sense of helplessness or powerlessness during loss can be debilitating. This loss of control is not only an overpowering sense or feeling. It's a reality. You don't have control or power over death.

“No man has power ... over the day of death...” Ecclesiastes 8:8

It has been said you don't have control over what has happened to you, but you do have control over how you will respond to what has happened to you. I get to decide whether to be powerless or purposeful.

You can fight the loss. But it doesn't change the loss. Paul learned in Acts 26:14, “It is hard for you to kick against the goads.” A goad is a stick with spikes or a spiked end. It was used to herd cattle. You would incur injury if you kicked at it. Herders would guide cattle with goads. They would gently goad the cattle. It became painful if the cattle kicked the goads. Paul, on the Damascus road, found that he was fighting God. He was kicking against the goads. God was lovingly goading or prodding Paul. Ironically, rebellion against God is equivalent to bringing injury to yourself. Kicking against the spikes only injures yourself. Further, fighting God reveals my absolute powerlessness.

“The words of the wise are like goads, and like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings; they are given by one Shepherd.” Ecclesiastes 12:11

Loss, therefore, provides an opportunity for growth. Loss ushers in a time for sanctification. It's better to not kick against what God is doing through the loss. He is God, and you are not. Loss must be accepted and embraced. I have not enjoyed loss. I'm not happy about loss. But I am accepting loss

and choosing to allow God to use it to bring growth in my life. He's introducing a doorway to a new depth to my life.

It's better to humbly accept loss and purposefully engage in the work of sanctification with fear and trembling. It's better to acknowledge it is God who is working his will and working for his good pleasure. My role is to humbly face my loss without grumbling or disputing—easier said than done. My responsibility is to respond to my loss by seeking to be blameless and innocent in how I walk this unwanted journey. My role is to glorify him purposefully by seeking to shine as a light in this crooked and twisted generation.

“Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure. Do all things without grumbling or disputing, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world...” Philippians 2:12–15

[Comments](#)

How to Steward and Not Waste Your Pain

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For as we share abundantly in Christ’s sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too.” 2 Corinthians 1:3–5

It’s interesting the thoughts that probe at you, slipping in between grief, pain, and confusion. Once in a while, a thought of a different sort glides in sideways and slips into your thoughts.

Don’t waste your pain.

Your children are watching. Others are watching. Trust God now so that they will trust God with you and then later when it’s their turn. In a strange sort of way, you have been given an unwanted journey, and it’s your responsibility to steward it. You’ve been entrusted an important, life-shaping assignment. It’s life-shaping for you, but it’s also life-shaping for everyone else in your circle. You’re an example one way or the other. For ill or for good.

“Everyone helps his neighbor and says to his brother, ‘Be strong!’” Isaiah 41:6

I turned to someone the first week and told them I did not want to dishonor Kim, and I did not want to dishonor God. In a way, I was saying I didn’t want to fail this test, and I didn’t want to let people down. I didn’t want to mislead anyone. I didn’t want to paint a picture of God and his trustworthiness that wasn’t true.

“Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial...”

James 1:12

Others were indeed watching, but so is God. He is El Roi, the God who sees me; he is the God who is watching. He knows he is enough. He watches me to make sure I know he is enough. Will I remain steadfast under the weight of this tragic trial? Will I stand the test? He has promises he will keep. He will comfort others through my testimony of his faithfulness.

Children and other family members are watching. Responding well will build faith in them. In no way is this responsibility on my shoulders alone. Each one of us has a responsibility to respond. However, the question was—Would I do my part and respond in humility? Would I trust God? Would I embrace this unwanted journey and respond to him in faith?

“... it is required of stewards that they be found faithful.” 1

Corinthians 4:2

Friends and work associates—whether men or women—are also watching. A loss is not for a grieving husband alone. A loss is not only my loss, it’s our loss. A loss can shake up a community, and how I respond can have positive or negative ramifications.

In my world, missionaries across the world knew of my loss. I felt a sense of stewardship with my loss in the lives of numerous marriages. Anytime I had an opportunity, I challenged colleagues to live with their wives in an understanding way. I challenged them to show honor to each other as equal heirs. I challenged them to love each other. I challenged them to not take each other for granted.

“Likewise, husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel, since they are heirs with you of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered.” 1 Peter 3:7

Who doesn’t want their prayers answered?

It’s true, I was overwhelmed, but he is trustworthy. He could and would empower me to live this journey as I stewarded my experience. I couldn’t change what had happened. However, I could determine how I would respond by his grace.

I was being assaulted on every side, but I was overcome by grace and provision for me. I have everything I need to walk by faith.

Now here's a worthy aspiration for us: Let's steward our experience in a way that others can imitate.

“Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us.”

Philippians 3:17

[Comments](#)

The Strange Mix of Grief and Grace

“And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.” Acts 4:33

As I wrote earlier, [assaulting waves](#) were unending like waves on an ocean. One after the other. Sometimes the waves were strong and sometimes not as much. But they kept coming. Persistently. I learned I had to be just as persistent in facing the waves. As I pressed into the repeated waves, I learned a beautiful lesson.

I experienced a very strange mixture of grief and grace. Simultaneous. Integrated. Overlapping. As a wave of grief hit the shore of my heart, I learned to turn and face it and wait it out.

“I lost the world I loved, but I gained a deeper awareness of grace.” Jerry Sittser, *A Grace Disguised: How the Soul Grows through Loss*

Waves of grace counterattack waves of grief.

But, let’s be honest and acknowledge something—this elixir of grief and grace is a strange mixture. It’s different than seeing waves of bad being met with waves of good. It’s deeper, more authentic. It’s real life. It’s an unfiltered reality. It’s not shallow, and it’s not trivial. It’s real and raw. You don’t have to diminish the pain and grief to deal with it. You have to acknowledge grief, but in complete faith you have to anticipate the resounding answer of grace. By faith.

“Grace seems to work that way. It’s beautiful but strangely so, like a messy masterpiece.” Justin Waincott, *Lost in Wonder, Love, and Praise: Hymns and Poems*

The mixture of grief and grace is profound. A messy masterpiece, but a masterpiece all the same.

The meeting of grief and grace is unexpected, especially in the early days of grief. The grief seems so piercing. So pervasive. But then the echo of grace is right there replying with its resounding answer. An echo. I'm reminded of the promise in Psalm 30:5:

“Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning.” Psalm 30:5

Waves of weeping are met by waves of grace-inspired joy. Again, it is a strange mixture that does not seem to go together. Like oil and water.

I was encouraged by a particular line out of the hymn, “Praise to the Lord, the Almighty:” “Surely His goodness and mercy here daily attend thee.” Daily. Sufficient. So very true.

This provision of grace, mercy, and goodness in the face of grief is so unexpected, except that it's wholly biblical. We should expect it. We should trust him. Take him at his word. His grace attends me every day as it reverberates against the grief. Psalm 145:14 assures us, “The Lord upholds all who are falling and raises up all who are bowed down.” If you are falling and are bowed down by grief, he raises you up and upholds you.

Grief and grace—while a strange mixture—actually go together quite well. What else would you expect from a God of miraculous redemption?

**“Give ear, O Lord, to my prayer; listen to my plea for grace.”
Psalm 86:6**

[Comments](#)

Palpable Grace and Mercy

“But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.” 2 Corinthians 12:9

I know what you’re thinking. Grace again? I thought he [covered that](#) last week!

However, a passage such as 2 Corinthians 12:9 leads me to one of my most important lessons to learn and now share: Refuse to face grief and loss in your own power. I know, it’s obvious. But not to everyone. Jesus says his grace is sufficient. I have always believed it, but never have I had to experience it in the way I’ve had to in my grief. His grace shows up. It’s clear and unmistakable. It’s profound. It’s palpable.

“When we wait in faith and trust, we are met with grace and peace.” Katherine and Jay Wolf, *Suffer Strong*

His grace is sufficient as he said. Moment by moment, as it’s needed. It’s there in real, substantial ways. The weaker you are, the more his grace and power show up. I find it interesting that God refers to his available grace as simply sufficient. I’m beginning to resonate with the writer of “Grace Greater Than Our Sin” when she penned these words: “Marvelous, infinite, matchless grace, freely bestowed on all who believe...”

Sufficient doesn’t quite sound profound enough.
Unless you’re God.

“... my grace, all-sufficient, shall be your supply...” John F. Wade, “How Firm a Foundation”

Sufficient, I'm learning, is in comparison to God's supply. He's just skimming some grace off the top for me. There's so much more. Never-ending. Always available. Palpable.

Similarly, I have praised God for his mercy. If his sufficient grace was needed moment-by-moment, his mercy was needed every morning. And mercy is, indeed, available every morning according to Lamentations 3:22–23:

“The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.” Lamentations 3:22–23

His mercies never come to an end. They are new and replenished every morning. His steadfast love never ceases. This provision is rich. Every single pain-filled day, I awake, and I need mercy. I go to a quiet place. I drink coffee, cry, pray, read, cry, and process my loss. His mercy makes it possible to face the loss and process it all. His steadfast love undergirds me. But, I have to press into his gift.

**“But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope...”
Lamentations 3:21**

Mercy is available. But we have to call it to mind intentionally. We need to stand in his steadfast love. We need to welcome his mercies. He gives mercy. We embrace hope.

The hymn, “Great Is Thy Faithfulness,” reminds us that we have “Strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow...” Strength—his mercy, grace, and hope—are indeed available for today. And again on every subsequent morning. Sufficient grace. New mercies. Hope.

However, while I am undergirded by his grace and mercy, I need to acknowledge that bright hope for tomorrow could be revealed tomorrow or maybe only in eternity. But it's still bright hope. Because, today, his grace and mercy are palpable.

“... so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.” Titus 3:7

[Comments](#)

Love Underneath Me

John Newton's words from "Amazing Grace" have echoed through time and have reverberated in my heart throughout my journey:

"Through many dangers, toils and snares, I have already come:
'tis grace has brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me
home." John Newton, "Amazing Grace"

Trevor, my son, and I sang "Amazing Grace" at Paige Plumblee's wedding. Paige, my niece, lost her father, Scott, eight years before. Then we lost Kim. This verse was emotional as Trevor and I sang it. Scott and Kim were on our minds. However, we also had grace on our minds. Amazing grace. Mercy. Love.

So, here's an understatement: It turns out his grace, mercy, and love are tangible. You can stand firm upon those gifts. They are available in overflowing measure. Supporting. Underneath me. These gifts come with his very presence.

The Lamentations 3 passage continues with this promise:

"The Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul who seeks him." Lamentations 3:25

When you seek him and find him, you find all that you need for every situation in life—even the hard ones. Dennis L. Jernigan writes these words in his song, "You are My All in All:" "Seeking You as a precious jewel, Lord, to give up, I'd be a fool; You are my all in all." You and I need to seek him in every good and difficult situation.

"I love the Lord, because he has heard my voice and my pleas for mercy. Because he inclined his ear to me, therefore I will

call on him as long as I live.” Psalm 116:1–2

It’s a humbling and powerful experience to need grace and mercy and to find that it is there every moment you need. It’s as if you can reach out and take hold of it. And then add his steadfast love to the mix.

“We love because he first loved us.” 1 John 4:19

One morning, I was worshipping and sang an old hymn again. It was an important hymn to me when I was a worship leader for a short time in my ministry. “O the Deep, Deep Love of Jesus” is a powerful hymn. Speaking of steadfast love, this song breathes the love of Jesus.

“O the deep, deep love of Jesus, vast, unmeasured, boundless,
free! Rolling as a mighty ocean in its fullness over me!
Underneath me, all around me, is the current of Thy love.
Leading onward, leading homeward to Thy glorious rest above!”
Samuel Trevor Francis, “O the Deep, Deep Love of Jesus”

If he loves, I should love. If he promises grace, and mercy, I should trust and walk faithfully in his gifts to me. If he is faithful by nature, I should embrace that nature by trusting him. He is love, and his love is underneath me, upholding me.

“So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.” 1 John 4:16

I press into and trust his love. I should befriend faithfulness. He is worthy of my trust because he gives grace, mercy, and love as I face my loss.

“Trust in the Lord, and do good; dwell in the land and befriend faithfulness.” Psalms 37:3

[Comments](#)

What Tea and Popovers Taught Me About Unwanted Journeys

While traveling on a pilgrimage to mourn and celebrate what would have been my thirty-sixth wedding anniversary, I learned an important lesson:

Tea and popovers can lead to important insights.

With rising emotion, I approached Jordan Pond House in Maine. Kim and I spent a lovely day in Acadia National Park on our honeymoon. We returned for our twentieth anniversary, and I needed to go back. It was part of remembering and processing, but it was much more: English tea, popovers, and strawberry jam.

Kim's favorite. Not bad to me either.

If Kim had known there was a trail around the entire lake, we would have hiked on one or both of our previous visits. This time, I had heard about the trail and decided to find it. The hike is over three miles and simply traces Jordan Pond. The reward is English tea, popovers, and strawberry jam upon completion.

As I completed the trail and was thinking about the tea and popovers, I had an insight. The trail around Jordan Pond reminded me of my entire marriage and now just after it.

First, the trail was so nice and easy at the beginning. It was wide enough to easily walk and had been beautifully maintained. In fact, most of the trail was simply enjoyable. The scenery was beautiful, and the trail was such that you could look up the mountain or out across the lake without worry of stumbling. The trail was that nice.

However, up around the bend I faced a different story altogether. I had been warned by a guide earlier that the trail deteriorated on the back side of the lake. He stated that most of the journey is easy until you get where there are lots of rocks and boulders on the trail. His cautionary advice was an

understatement. The trail became rockier, and then it became nearly impassable. At least that's how it looked.

A thought invaded my mind: This is almost as stark a change as I've experienced over the past few months! The drastic change was incredible. From easily passable and enjoyable to nearly impassable and difficult in a moment. There was a key I quickly learned: Don't look too far down the path. Take note of the rocks right in front of you and deal with them. I could keep my eyes focused on the rocks that were right at my feet. The rocks on down the path could wait until I needed to face them.

And then, there was a transition. But it wasn't back to the same open and beautiful path as it was at the beginning. It was beautiful, but it was different. A different sort of path had been put in place to rise above a new soggy and boggy landscape. Planks had been erected to keep hikers above it all.

At one point, I took note of an extended part of the path where a consistent set of supports were measured out ahead of me and bolstering the raised plank pathway. And I thought of my immediate and extended family. They rallied around me to help me walk my unwanted journey. I thought of the Body of Christ, my local church. The guidance and care I received was a support to me. I thought of my missionary family around the world. They peppered my inbox and phone with consistent messages of support.

And then I looked up ahead and saw a near return of the beginning pathway. I don't want to go so far as to say it was a return to the exact path. However, it was a return to a broad and flat path.

And as I walked this new path, I flashed back to a meeting with Dr. David Fort, a trusted counselor. He told me just three weeks after Kim died that I would eventually enter a period of wistful peace. He cautioned that it was a long way off, but there would be peace in my future. I'm not there yet; but I know it will come. Wistful peace.

**“And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding,
will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”**

Philippians 4:7

But what did come at the end of my hike was English tea, popovers, and strawberry jam! And it was as good as I had remembered from my previous visits with my bride.

[Comments](#)

Miracle in Acadia

“So she called the name of the Lord who spoke to her, ‘You are a God of seeing,’ for she said, ‘truly here I have seen him who looks after me.’” Genesis 16:13

The most significant intentional step I took was to travel alone to Acadia National Park, Bar Harbor, and Mount Desert Island in Maine. It would have been our thirty-sixth wedding anniversary, and Bar Harbor, Maine was the destination for our honeymoon. We had returned to Bar Harbor for our twentieth anniversary in 2003.

I went to remember, and I went to honor and celebrate my marriage. I went to celebrate marriage itself. I went to take a significant step in my healing. As the time approached, I sensed God saying to me it was time to pull aside and get alone with him, as well. He would meet me there. My anticipation grew as the date came for me to fly to Bangor, Maine to begin my pilgrimage.

My time in Bar Harbor was my most significant of the “firsts.” In a nutshell, I worshipped, hiked, and journaled. I was amazed and thrilled with the beauty of Acadia National Park.

But the best of my pilgrimage was near the end of my trip. Even better than the [tea and popovers](#).

On my anniversary, I took two mountain hikes. The afternoon hike, my second of the day, took me up Gorham Mountain. As I approached the summit, I passed and greeted three young ladies who were cooling off under a tree. I asked if I was close to the summit, and they pointed out that I was a mere fifty feet from my goal. As I enjoyed the summit view and took pictures, I heard the three young ladies begin to sing an old chorus, “He’s Got the Whole World in His Hands.”

Moments later, I turned to head back down the mountain. Since they were still under the tree, I sang out, “He’s got you and me sisters in his hands...” A conversation began. After establishing that we were Christians, one young lady named Brit told me she worked at a Christian school. I replied that I worked at a Christian mission agency. She asked which one. When I answered, her eyes widened. She knew my mission agency. She then quickly added, that she was the administrative assistant to the head of the mission department at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. Then one of them asked if I was hiking alone, and I briefly shared about my anniversary pilgrimage. They asked if they could pray for me. And there on Gorham Mountain in Maine on Mount Desert Island, three believing young women ministered to me in prayer.

El Roi. God sees me. He cares for me. I’m not alone. He is Immanuel, God with us.

“I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you.” Psalm 32:8

God wasn’t finished.

The next morning, I awoke and had some time before I had to go to the airport that afternoon. After coffee and prayer, I hiked up to Bubble Rock. I enjoyed the beauty that morning looking out at Jordan Pond below. This was a pivotal moment. I had come to the end of my time in Bar Harbor and Acadia National Park. I would head down to my cottage, shower, have breakfast in Bar Harbor, and then head to the airport. I exhaled out a sense of accomplishment and completion. Then I turned with determination to end my mountaintop anniversary experience. I was finished. It was time to head home to continue facing loss.

But God wasn’t quite finished.

As I turned, a family was just ascending the peak of Bubble Rock. I saw the youngest son wearing a shirt that had Union University across the front. I commented on it, and a conversation ensued. They asked how I knew Union and I mentioned, once again, that I work for a mission agency. Our workers send children there for college, and we take graduates from the school and send them overseas. They asked which mission agency. When I told them, one son, Josh, asked if I knew the Laffertys. This couple, Todd and Susan, had just returned to Richmond as leaders. The oldest son

continued, “Jonathan Lafferty is going to be my resident assistant and is going to live in the dorm room next to me next week.”

I asked where this family was from and learned that they were from Grace Community Church in Nashville, Tennessee where Scott Patty, a respected leader, is the pastor. The father, Bill Kersey, shared that he was an elder at the church.

Then, his wife, Lisa, asked if I was hiking alone. Once again, I shared that I was on an anniversary pilgrimage.

Bill asked if he and his family could gather around me and pray for me. And right there at the top of Bubble Rock in Maine on Mount Desert Island in Acadia National Park a family ministered to me in prayer.

“For all my ways are known to You. Hallelujah, they are known to You!” CityAlight, “All My Ways are Known to You”

Two days. Two mountain tops. Two prayers.
El Roi. I see you. Miraculous.

“Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.” Ps 73:25–26

[Comments](#)

Jars of Clay

“Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame...” Romans 5:3–5

“Amen, Christopher!”

I said it out loud as I sat weeping one day just over four months after Kim’s death. I had tuned in online to join with a brother and colleague, Mick Stockwell, as he and his family mourned their grandson’s tragic death. I was suffering with them, and I was enabled to suffer with them because of my own loss.

Mick’s son and the father, Christopher, said he wanted to thank God for Bridger’s life, even though only two-and-a-half-years-old. And he thanked God that he was a suffering God. He read from Isaiah where God spoke of his Son to be crushed on our behalf.

Amen, Christopher. Let that penetrate your heart, anew.

“But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.” Isaiah 53:5

Later, Mick read out of 2 Corinthians 4 and explained that we are not crushed. Even though we are hard-pressed, we are not crushed. I opened my Bible and read it again:

“We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed...” 2 Corinthians 4:8

Think about what it means to have a suffering God. He crushed His Son so that we are not crushed. I would have done anything and everything I could have done to avoid losing my wife, but God willingly sacrificed his own Son. We have a good and suffering God. And I was reminded that we are simply jars of clay in his hands.

**“But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.” 2
Corinthians 4:7**

It’s a good reminder especially when facing loss: We are simple jars of clay, and we are empty without the treasure of God’s indwelling. We can press into the difficulties of life in his surpassing power. After all, he is in us, and he is being lived out. We faithfully walk through difficulties, and he shows up—he shines. Us, not so much. We’re just jars of clay. Fragile.

We may and will be afflicted at times. Be it persecution or simply the losses that come in a fallen world. By faith we can declare that we are not crushed. Jars. Prone to affliction. Prone to being crushed. Yet uncrushed. For now, we walk victoriously in an afflicted world, but step back and think on eternity for a moment. Ponder this fact of faith anew. We will not be crushed. We will be restored. Jars of clay. Filled, enthused, and blessed with a treasure.

Matthew reinforces, “... the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it” (Matthew 13:45–46). Everyday jars of clay are filled with an incomparable gift.

“For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God.” Romans 8:18–19

[Comments](#)

Our God of Sorrows

**“Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort.” 2
Corinthians 1:7**

I was reminded of our overarching redemptive story and an earlier event about Moses in Exodus 14:13. Moses is leading the people, and he is up against the proverbial wall. The Israelites are being afflicted. Moses was confident in the face of suffering. In this affliction, he knew he would not experience a crushing blow. Moses proclaims to them:

**“Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the Lord,
which he will work for you today.” Exodus 14:13**

They were hemmed in by the Red Sea with the Egyptians bearing down on them. And Moses is optimistic. Is Moses naive? The Israelites are not buying his optimism. In fact, right before Moses tells them to stand firm and predicts that they will see God’s salvation, the people brazenly ask him a searing question.

**“Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have
taken us away to die in the wilderness? Exodus 14:11**

It’s actually humorous and helps you have a little sympathy for any pastor or leader you’ve ever met. Followers tend to whine and complain. Godly leaders lead. Decisions are made that affect followers. But followers tend to embrace sight, and their scope of visibility is only what is right in front of them. Leaders seek to stand by faith and perceive an eternal perspective.

I'm learning to stand by faith. I have used the word "recipient" to describe my experience through loss. I am receiving support. I think of the word "observer," too. I'm standing firm and watching God orchestrate circumstances and chance meetings. If you are facing loss, then be faithful to observe with a watchful eye, receive the ministry of God and his people, and stand firm as he weaves this journey together before you.

By faith, we need to remember that we are not alone. Our God suffered for us. He proved that he can be trusted for our eternal safekeeping.

“Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered.” Hebrews 5:8

Our God is a suffering God. Matthew 26:38 states, “Then he said to them, ‘My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch with me.’” He suffered, and apparently—from the rest of this story—he suffered without his disciples’ support since they did not watch or remain with him.

“Did e'er such love and sorrow meet...” Isaac Watts, “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross”

Jesus learned obedience through suffering. If I stand faithful in suffering, what will I learn? Maybe I'll learn more obedience. Maybe my suffering produced by loss will give way to maturity. As Mark Vroegop writes, “The sorrow of a loss can lead us to the man of sorrows because Jesus is the answer to the cause of every pain.” Maybe I'll grow in Christlikeness. Most assuredly, I am not immune from suffering. But I do have a choice about what I believe about suffering.

“No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.”
1 Corinthians 10:13

Jesus suffered on our account. If I am determined to walk with him and be like him, I must seek to learn from my suffering, decide not to waste my pain, and comfort others. Our God is a suffering God and a God of sorrows, and he sent us a Comforter. Charles H. Spurgeon has said, “God's people

have always in their worst condition found out the best of their God.” I agree.

Ours is a God of sorrows who shares abundant comfort.

“For as we share abundantly in Christ’s sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too...” 2 Corinthians 1:5

“He took my sins and my sorrows, he made them his very own.”
Charles H. Gabriel, “I Stand Amazed in the Presence”

[Comments](#)

The Plague of Recurring Disbelief

Disbelief during loss is sinister. How many times should someone have to face their loss? It turns out you face it repeatedly every day. Multiple times a day. It's almost like waking up having to live an event over and over. And worse, you have deceptive surges of disbelief sneak in when you're not expecting.

“I am utterly bowed down and prostrate; all the day I go about mourning. For my sides are filled with burning, and there is no soundness in my flesh.” Psalm 38:6–7

Even if you're facing loss head on, your mind is still trying to integrate a new massive change into years of memories. Your mind often reverts to the past memory and ignores the present reality. It's like reformatting a disk, except more difficult.

The disbelief is like a plague that just won't go away. I found myself sitting alone at times and would occasionally look at the other end of the couch and just shake my head. Other times, I'd be with someone and just blurt out, “I just cannot believe it.”

I found myself at times giving theological or mental assent to the facts. I knew the truth. But in those early moments, days, and even months it did not change the feelings. It still doesn't change the feelings. Further, I couldn't stop the disbelief or the shaking of my head. I'd lock eyes with someone, and we would both shake our heads.

*“Image-bearers of God are not impervious.” David Powlison,
Suffering and the Sovereignty of God*

Loss never strikes this close to home, right? It's just unimaginable. I remember walking into the funeral home on the Sunday of the visitation. I

entered the room alone and had time to weep. Finally, I stood and went to bring my three children into the room with me. We stood crying before the casket holding Kim's body. We wailed. We held each other and just let our tears flow. We held each other.

I remember a sense of focus coming over me. A sense of resolution. I kept saying out loud, "This is a stake in the ground." I added, "Everything has changed." I repeated it over and over: "This is a stake in the ground." However, I'm not sure it was helping me get beyond disbelief. But I knew I had to help my family and myself. So, I kept saying it. "This is a stake in the ground."

Stake or no stake, it's difficult to believe I've lost her.

Disbelief. Recurring. Like a plague. Yet, through it all, I was forcing my gaze upon Christ. While experiencing loss, Christ's presence is a balm even for the plague of recurring disbelief.

"I am feeble and crushed; I groan because of the tumult of my heart. O Lord, all my longing is before you; my sighing is not hidden from you." Psalm 38:8–9

[Comments](#)

Don't Sugarcoat Loss

People mean well. However, they often say things that should be kept to themselves. Now to be fair, I did not have anyone say anything of the sort to me. Nothing out of line. My experience was so shocking, unexpected, and unimaginable that most people said either nothing or my favorite, "I can't imagine." My quick reply was always, "Neither could I."

However, when you're thrust into loss you hear stories about the various statements people make.

The point here is that people try to make something bad seem better. People just want to help. They also try to protect God's reputation, as if death takes him by surprise. As if death makes him seem out of control. As if God needs an emissary to come to his aid and reframe the current loss you face. Help God and help you at the same time. To make it worse, even I wanted to make it better. I wanted to make sense of it all.

However, I found myself settling in on a very important realization: I should face this tragedy head on, and I should not sugarcoat my loss.

"Then Job answered and said: 'Today also my complaint is bitter; my hand is heavy on account of my groaning.'" Job 23:1-2

I learned that loss was going to come at me from every direction. Loss is multifaceted, multidimensional, and multi-layered. Relentless. It's not a respecter of the clock or calendar. It's not a respecter of persons. Contrary to subtle feelings beneath the surface, unspoken, I am not immune to loss. No one is immune.

So, don't sugarcoat loss.

I appreciate the raw authenticity of Steven Curtis Chapman in a song he wrote about loss.

“But right now, if we’re all honest, we don’t like God’s higher ways; but we are trusting Him ’cause what else can we do?”
Steven Curtis Chapman, “Michael and Maria”

It’s healthier to clearly identify your loss for the loss that it is. Face it. Sugarcoating it, or trying to downplay or diminish it, will only give rise to emotional infection and a delay in your hoped-for healing. It’s just not healthy to sidestep loss. There’s nothing admirable about being a person who can endure pain or hardship without acknowledging the impact of the loss. How do we come to such unfeeling conclusions?

“Somehow stoic conclusions are fashioned from a most unstoic truth about a most unstoic God!” David Powlison, *Suffering and the Sovereignty of God*

As Mark Vroegop contends in *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy*, “... restoration doesn’t come to those who live in denial.” Denial, often a normal part of grief, must be addressed by facing loss and walking the long journey beyond denial.

Don’t sugarcoat loss.

“Evening and morning and at noon I utter my complaint and moan, and he hears my voice.” Psalm 55:17

“But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ.” Philippians 3:7–8

[Comments](#)

The Good Place of Pain

“Even in the darkness He’s beautiful. Even in the shadows He loves you still. What’s true in light, still true in the dark.” Rend Collective, “Weep with Me (Reprise)”

Pain is persistent, pulsating. Pain is enduring, relentless. I learned that my thought that I had a long unwanted journey before me was truer than I had understood. Pain toyed with me. Pain had this deceptive side to it.

When I was in the midst of pain, I had this feeling or sense that if I could just endure a little longer everything would be better. What I really felt deep down is that everything would go back to the way it was before. Endure, pass the test, and Kim would come back. I knew that was not true and was impossible. But that was how it felt. Pain on an unwanted journey is confusing.

Pain was toying with my heart.

I remember one vital lesson I learned: Don’t try to erase reminders or memories. Reminders of Kim are everywhere in my house and among my circle of friends. Every room and closet in my house; in fact, every shelf, drawer, and cupboard shouts her sweet name. And that’s just in my house.

Pain in loss is different than physical pain. God created us so that if we feel physical pain it acts as a warning. We touch something hot, feel pain, and we wince or shrink back. We pull away to avoid the damage that might be done to us.

It’s different with emotional pain. You must stay in it—press into the pain—in order to heal.

Inside my own mind are the memories we made across our thirty-five-and-a-half years of marriage. Add to that a couple years of dating and engagement. Memories fill my mind. I expect to see her around the corner or upon arrival home after a trip. My hand reaches for my cell phone only

to remember she's not going to answer even if I follow the impulse to call her.

Even so, you simply should not try to erase any reminder to avoid the pain. You should not erase any memory. Reminders and memories help you by bringing the pain to the forefront to help you embrace and process the grief.

Physically, we were created to pull away from pain; emotionally, we were created to press into the pain.

Once after I drove away from Durham after visiting my son, Paul, and his family, I was overcome by excruciating pain. We had simply taken pictures on Easter Sunday. But the pain it initiated was intense. I wasn't supposed to be kneeling alone with two adorable grandsons for a photo. I wept as I drove north on the interstate as I headed back to Richmond. At one point I cried out, "I just want this pain to end!"

But that's when I realized something: No, I don't want the pain to end. I need the pain to process the grief. Pain has a good place. A good part to play. The pain reminds me of what I had when I had Kim as my wife, my companion. If the pain were to end so quickly and so easily, it would be as if I had not lost much at all. Another way to say it: If I easily skirt the full weight of pain and skip the process of mourning, I devalue the very institution of marriage, generally, and my own marriage, specifically. Pain must be valued for the part it would play in helping me remember and value my marriage.

In that light, pain became somehow beautiful and meaningful to me. Could I be steadfast and find joy in the good place of pain?

“Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.” James 1:2–4

[Comments](#)

Echoes of Pain and Beauty

I learned that [pain had a good part to play](#). Pain actually became beautiful.

I know of story after story, testimony after testimony where someone was thrust into a crisis, and they eventually came to Christ. Or someone's crisis opened the door to the gospel for someone else who observed the crisis. In essence, the pain of the crisis prepared them to find the beauty of a Savior.

“For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” 2 Corinthians 5:21

Months after Kim's death, I received a message from a former youth group member who was now living in Africa. Josh K. shared that he had decided to follow Christ. In part, he referenced a letter that Kim wrote to him in her own handwriting before he moved with his family. I knew nothing of the letter. Kim's influence continues. Beauty out of pain.

I also learned, on this unwanted journey, that weakness was strength. Of course, I already knew it. I had heard 2 Corinthians 12:10 all my life:

“For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.” 2 Corinthians 12:10

So, the pain of weakness paves the way to find real strength, his strength. If I don't recognize my need for his strength, I live my life pretending that I can provide all the strength I need. I pretend I can muster it up from my own resources. I avoid acknowledging my weak state. Or worse, in rebellion, I refuse to face my weakness.

Pain is beautiful when it helps us learn hard lessons. As the psalmist declares in Psalm 61,

“Hear my cry, O God, listen to my prayer; from the end of the earth I call to you when my heart is faint. Lead me to the rock that is higher than I, for you have been my refuge, a strong tower against the enemy.” Psalm 61:1–3

The pain of loss will give birth to gain if the pain is embraced. I want to be careful here. Loss is loss. It's irreversible. Loss itself will never be gain. No one can convince you that the loss of a beloved person can ever be re-identified as gain or good. But loss can pave the way for gain. I have gained deep insights and deeper relationships with my children, for example. I have experienced caring love from my children. Their mother would be so proud of the way they have cared for and loved me. It's beautiful. It's a gain in my life, a blessing. And yet, the loss that gave rise to this love is still painful.

In pain, the beauty of Jesus gives birth to a worshiping heart. He can make a woeful heart sing joyful praise. One morning on a hike, I was listening to the song, “Life is Beautiful.” Rend Collective captures something in this verse and chorus:

“Up from the ash, up from the dust, You're recreating us. I will not waste this day you've made, I will be glad. Rejoice, rejoice, in the sunshine, in the sorrow. Oh, my soul rejoice.” Rend Collective, “Life is Beautiful”

He is recreating us. He created us, but the Fall called for recreation. It's our role to surrender and to grow and to work out our salvation. Do so and watch God turn pain into beauty.

**“Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling...”
Philippians 2:12**

[Comments](#)

Draining the Wound of Grief

Normally, I am not a person who emotes very easily. I generally don't cry. I can name the times I've cried before Kim died. I'm just not overly emotional.

However, real loss has changed me. I cried every day for almost seven months after Kim's death. And the tears turned out to be a gift. Mine wasn't messy or out-of-control fits of crying. I've described it to some as simply a weepiness.

“You have kept count of my tossings; put my tears in your bottle. Are they not in your book?” Psalm 56:8

I have learned the gradual and daily release has been healthy for me. As I embraced tears, I began to see a couple of scenarios playing out. First, there was protected or planned time to mourn. I arranged time to process my grief, and the emotion that came with it simply flowed. The protected time was usually in the mornings. And then, second, there were times when I had unplanned waves of tears. I had to learn to be responsive. It was like an assault. Ready or not.

There's a key lesson here: To drain the serious injury brought to your soul by loss, you must embrace and plan for tears. You're draining a wound.

When it came to the first lesson, intentional mourning, I began my day quietly. I protected the mornings as much as possible. I read books to help me face grief. Erich Bridges, who had lost his wife to cancer, gave me a devotional book on grief. I read multiple devotional entries each day. I read other books. One particular book, *A Grace Disguised: How the Soul Grows Through Loss*, was exceptionally helpful. I'd read my Bible. I'd pray. I'd speak conversationally to God. Sometimes I could only groan.

The second lesson I learned was to embrace the unplanned waves of tears. Planning intentional mourning does not prevent unplanned

interruptions by grief. It's the little things. A smell. A sight. A memory. A connection with a friend or one of my children. It may flood your mind at the most unexpected times, and the tears just flow uncontrollably. Ready-or-not-out-of-the-blue tears. And it's okay. In fact, it's healthy. A very real wound is being drained.

I learned to receive intentional and unplanned mourning as a gift of preventative medicine. On a long, unwanted journey the slow draining of the wound of grief is a sign of healing.

I also noticed that writing helped me process my grief and facilitate my healing. I wrote to remember. I wrote to celebrate life with Kim. I wrote to mourn. I wrote to heal. I wrote to grow through my loss. I wrote to live. I wrote to grieve but not without hope. I wrote about my grief to process any necessary repentance. Grief removes the veneer of self-sufficiency. I wrote to worship.

I learned not to be afraid of tears because a wound such as the loss of love has to be drained.

“You have fed them with the bread of tears and given them tears to drink in full measure.” Psalm 80:5

[Comments](#)

Even Jesus Wept

“Jesus wept.” John 11:35

I was comforted by the story of the death of Lazarus. The story teaches us that an individual life is not important enough to stop Jesus from doing the work he’s doing. But it also teaches us that an individual life is important to the one who created that life. It’s a paradox.

As for humility and keeping perspective, Jesus carried on with his work and did not immediately drop everything to go to prevent the death of Lazarus. Lazarus was important—but not that important. A lesson here for me is to keep perspective. The world does not revolve around me. Jesus does not exist to serve me—as if he’s my servant. He loves me, but I should never expect that he exists to attend to my every whim, especially as I define my needs. He is not to center on me; I am to center on him. I’m not even to place myself as central among other people. I’m reminded of the instruction concerning humility found in Philippians. Paul instructs us:

“Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.” Philippians 2:3–4

So, the world does not revolve around us like it did not revolve around Lazarus.

However, our Creator loves us. While he has a much bigger picture with a fuller perspective he is still touched by pain and loss. Have you ever stopped to consider that Jesus’ delay gave time for Lazarus to die? But, he knew he could raise Lazarus from his tomb of death. It’s almost as if we think Jesus doesn’t feel the pain. He knows too much. Sure, Lazarus will die. But, I will raise him again. It’s all in a day’s work in being God.

But don't miss that while Jesus knew he could and would raise Lazarus *he still wept over his personal loss*. One of the most well-known verses in the Bible is John 11:35: "Jesus wept." The ironic thing about this scene is that weeping is often associated with the loss of control over any given situation. I cried at the loss of my wife, in part, because I knew this new reality was out of my control. I had to adjust to my loss. I grieved a loss I could not change. But, Jesus wept even though he knew he could and would reverse the loss. He wept because he saw the pain of Mary and Martha. He wept because his friend, Lazarus, had experienced death. He wept because he was fully human. That's a captivating realization! He wept because sin was having its way in the world. Man is fallen, and the plight of humanity touched Jesus.

The story of the loss of Lazarus reminds us of the full humanity of Jesus. While he is fully God, he can sympathize with us in our humanity.

“Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.” Hebrews 4:14–15

[Comments](#)

Employing the Counterattack of Gratitude

“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” 1 Thessalonians 5:16–18

The funeral home sent employees to prepare my wife’s body to transport her to the funeral home. And all the while, I’m in shock. Eventually, they had prepared her and gave me the opportunity to spend a few minutes with my wife’s lifeless body. Excruciating.

I fell on the gurney that held and cradled her, and I kissed her on the forehead and on the cheek repeatedly through my tears. Spontaneously, I began to cry out to God. And something happened, and I can’t fully explain it.

Eventually, I began to thank God. I couldn’t help it. I started thanking God for thirty-five-and-a-half years with Kim. I thanked God for the children with whom he blessed us through her body. Gifts of our love. Again, I don’t fully understand how it happened. First of all, I wasn’t even able to put words or sentences together easily. I couldn’t even form coherent thoughts.

I realize now, it was a good and fitting response. Kim was a gift of grace in my life. I didn’t deserve her, but God blessed my life by bringing her to me. I was privileged to share life with her. I received the gift of children through her. I should be grateful.

And then I realized it’s a biblical choice. It’s God’s will for me. Paul tells us in 1 Thessalonians 5:18 to “... give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” To acknowledge God’s goodness helps to orient yourself to truth, regardless of your feelings.

Over the months, I remember listening to music and singing along through tears. One example, “Counting Every Blessing” by Rend

Collective, has been a favorite. Here's an excerpt from this song that was helpful in times when I needed to be recalibrated and centered to gratitude:

“I am counting every blessing, counting every blessing, letting go and trusting when I cannot see... Surely every season you are good to me... Letting go and trusting when I cannot see, I am counting every blessing, I'm counting every blessing. Surely every season you are good to me...” Rend Collective, “Counting Every Blessing”

This early lesson would be employed repeatedly. Gratitude is an appropriate antidote to grief. It's a great discipline to employ as a counterattack every time a wave of grief rises and falls on the shores of my emotions.

One morning, I checked in with my children who had insisted on updates every day in the weeks following Kim's death. My loss was still very fresh after only a few weeks. I wrote to them that I had an incredible insight that morning. Alone in my house, I was faced with Kim's memory in every room, closet, and shelf. I told them my house shouts, “Look what you've lost.”

My house also shouts, “Look what you had!” Gratitude puts grief in context.

“When one hurts deeply, when there's scar tissue on the heart, when things appear to be hopeless... the most powerful antidote for such conditions is thanksgiving.” Richard A. Burr, *Developing Your Secret Closet of Prayer*

Grief comes because the loss is so great. The loss is so great because the one I lost was such a blessing—a gift of grace—in my life. Therefore, in time, loss gives birth to gratitude. Again, call it a counterattack on grief. This discipline of gratitude helped me keep perspective. It kept me grounded. Yes, I had experienced a great and tragic loss. But she was a gift from a loving Father who cared for me. And he cares for me now.

“Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.” James 1:17

“Gratitude changes the pangs of memory into a tranquil joy.”
Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*

[Comments](#)

Facing Daunting Doorways

“Let me hear in the morning of your steadfast love, for in you I trust. Make me know the way I should go, for to you I lift up my soul.” Psalm 143:8

One of the first lessons I learned concerned the vital importance of facing loss head on. There is a temptation to sidestep the pain. Some mourners decide to remove reminders of the person they lost. It seems to them that there might be an easier way. Take a detour and avoid immediate pain.

However, from my experiences on the day of Kim’s death—[seeing her before the funeral home took her, then sleeping in my own bed, and taking a shower the next morning where she died](#)—I had learned the importance of facing painful realities squarely. Head on. Facing loss.

“Everyone has grief, but mourning is a choice.” H. Norman Wright, *Experiencing Grief*

Within the first couple of weeks, I had some imagery to go with my conviction. I felt as though there were doorways erected all around me. Some were big doors, and some were small doors. Some stood there, and some appeared in front of me at inopportune times. The doors were representative of something difficult and painful.

A few examples might help. One door was choosing a casket. Another was planning the funeral. Then there were Kim’s pictures all around my house that reminded me of my loss. Daily reminders. Moment-by-moment reminders. One day, I saw one of her baby pictures next to a picture of her holding one of our grandchildren. It crushed me. Each experience a doorway that must be confronted. I could turn away or I could press in and open the door.

I had been warned of another step and it was, indeed, a difficult doorway. It was a massive doorway.

I'll never forget the day I knew I needed to change the sheets on my bed. It seems innocent enough, but I had been warned that this step is not so simple. The issue at the core is that Kim was on those very sheets. That was our bed where we spent so much of our lives.

On the appointed day I climbed my stairs to do the deed. I began to cry. I pulled the comforter and blankets back. I began to wail as I physically engaged in the act of pulling the sheets off the mattress and pillowcases from the pillows. It became a physically laborious chore. Finally, they were all in a pile on my bedroom floor, and I picked them up. Still wailing, I methodically stumbled down the stairs and into the laundry room. I placed the sheets in the washing machine, added soap, closed the lid, and started the cycle. Each step was exhausting.

Then there was instant release. And this is where the imagery of doorways first came into focus. It was as if a huge door had been raised in front of me. I literally had a choice. I could avoid, delay, or face washing my sheets. Again, it was as if a heavy daunting door stood before me.

I chose to push it open and face the task. As I thought through the experience and compared it to other decisions I had made in the early weeks, I began to picture decisions as doorways. I thought about my choices to face these difficult moments or to sidestep them. Doorways rise up before every person who grieves. Those doors of mourning must be faced, opened, and entered.

“He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength.” Isaiah 40:29

[Comments](#)

Avoiding Worrisome Walls

“And the high fortifications of his walls he will bring down, lay low, and cast to the ground, to the dust.” Isaiah 25:12

The [imagery of doors I introduced last week](#) developed further, and I realized that if I failed or even delayed to face these difficult decisions—these doorways—they would become something more imposing.

They would become walls.

Walls become more enduring barriers and must be removed; they cannot simply be opened like doors. If doorways were left unaddressed, they could become solid walls. Strongholds. Dangerous barriers. Infections in my soul.

As I walked through door after door, I have found myself on several occasions facing the door from the inside of my marriage looking out. There were doors to force open to walk into pain, but there were other doors from which to walk out, as well. The daunting realization rising within me is I had to walk out of the door of my marriage. A painful door, indeed. Avoid these doors and walls appear.

One such occasion was after [revisiting Bar Harbor, Maine](#). I stayed in the very cottage where Kim and I stayed thirty-six years before. As I completed my visit to Maine and prepared to head to the airport, I realized I was walking out the door of my cottage. It was so much more than just a simple door of a cottage. I was taking another step—walking out a door—in the journey to say goodbye. I was walking out another door representing a wonderful marriage. I had packed and was standing at the cottage door. I hesitated. I turned back to the room, and I quietly said, “Goodbye, Kim.” Familiar tears came for another visit to my eyes. These doors are painful but necessary. They must be met with courage. Or walls will rise up.

Call it a fear of fear, but I dug deep for the courage to face difficult doorways ahead of me. Mostly, I realized I needed to prevent the formation

of walls. Worrisome walls.

As I've thought through this imagery of doors, I have been reminded that Jesus used the same imagery. Different message, but it was a door all the same.

“Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.” Revelation 3:20

Admittedly, my scenario is very different than opening a door to Jesus' offer of salvation; however, Jesus uses the imagery of a door that we must open to him. It's similar when facing grief and loss. Opening the doors is our responsibility. There are painful doors that must be opened. For every courageous step I took to open a door, it was as if Jesus joined me and comforted me. The door that I opened to him years ago, helped me face these daunting doorways.

“Jesus! the name that charms our fears, that bids our sorrows cease...” Charles Wesley, “O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing”

Grace met grief. Beauty met pain. He is the way, the truth, and the life. Doors must be opened, and worrisome walls must be avoided. He will walk with us through every door of pain.

I am so grateful he invited me to open that first door, the door of salvation. He now gives me courage to walk through every painful door so that I avoid worrisome walls.

“Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.’” John 14:6

[Comments](#)

Overwhelming Fear and Intentional Courage

“My heart is in anguish within me; the terrors of death have fallen upon me. Fear and trembling come upon me, and horror overwhelms me.” Psalms 55:4–5

To put the imagery of [daunting doorways](#) and [worrisome walls](#) into other language, I realized I was truly facing overwhelming fear—even dread. However, I could seek to ask God for the courage I would need. And I could walk in faith. I needed to be intentional. Haphazard or aimless would not work. Always responding would not work. Always on-the-defense would not work. I had to be proactive.

I would have to plan to have intentional courage. But my courage must be nested in the reality that I am walking with Christ, leaning on him. God is with me. Immanuel. Psalm 139:7–12 is a wonderful reminder that can be embraced to produce courage:

**“Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there! If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me. If I say, ‘Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light about me be night,’ even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is bright as the day, for darkness is as light with you.”
Psalm 139:7–12**

There is something reassuring about setting temporal circumstances in an eternal perspective. Seriously, where can we go where we are not in his watchful care? I cannot go down, up, or sideways and depart from his

presence. In him, dark is light. He is the author of all life, and he makes everything beautiful and reassuring. And he gives me courage.

Matt Boswell. Matt Papa, Stuart Townend, and Keith Getty wrote a song, *Sing We the Song of Emmanuel*. God sent us his Son to be with us, Immanuel. His appearing upon earth delivered our rescue from sin and separation and thus delivered our joy, peace, and light. They sing:

“Joy and peace for the weary heart. Lift up your heads, for your King has come. Sing for the light overwhelms the dark.”

I have a choice in the face of overwhelming fear. I can succumb to my distress, or I can intentionally rest in courage made available by faith and trust in God. I can stand upon a sure foundation and press into the fear. I’m learning that when fear accosts me, courage and endurance are available like sufficient grace and new mercies. He is faithful, but you must step out. Faith without a response—or without works—is dead.

Overwhelming fear must be met with intentional courage.

“... fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.” Isaiah 41:10

“Be strong, and let your heart take courage, all you who wait for the Lord!” Psalm 31:24

[Comments](#)

Receiving God's Tapestry of Ministry

“You have granted me life and steadfast love, and your care has preserved my spirit.” Job 10:12

One day, the word *recipient* burst clearly into my mind. It was an instantaneous reflection and realization that I had been blessed by an overwhelming outpouring. Of course, God, the Spirit, is my Comforter. But, Christ's Body, the Church, was also rallying around me.

I am a recipient of a tapestry of ministry that is a gift of grace. By faith, I simply resist fear. I do have to fight fear. I also need to stand firm. I keep reminding myself to stay firmly planted on the foundation of my faith in Christ. And then, I humbly open my eyes and my hands to receive the love and support from him and his Bride, the Church.

“They are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, thus storing up treasure for themselves as a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is truly life. O Timothy, guard the deposit entrusted to you...” 1 Timothy 6:18–20

It is said to be better to give than to receive. But there are periods in life where you must receive. I have been blessed to receive an outpouring of support. I trust that those who have given freely to support me have received blessings, as well.

“In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’” Acts 20:35

I know this: I have been a recipient, and it is also blessed to receive. I thank God for the Body of Christ. One morning I awoke and went to my back porch. I have a routine where I process, decompress, read, pray, cry, and drink coffee. On this morning, I came to a time of prayer. I had been teaching through *The Lord's Prayer* at my church. I began to pray ...
“Our...”

And I stopped.

I couldn't even get past “Our.” I began to cry again as I recounted God's goodness to me through his Body, the Church. *The Lord's Prayer* doesn't begin with “My Father.” It begins with “Our Father.”

And “Our” is a powerful word.

“Trauma is a personal experience, but recovery is a communal one.” Katherine and Jay Wolf, *Suffer Strong*

I camped out on that one word for a long time that morning. I reveled in gratitude as I contemplated the gift of community. Don't miss this single and powerful word in Matthew 6:9: “Our...”

My brother's family gave me a bookmark quoting a Ghanaian proverb: “A tree alone cannot withstand a storm.” That proverb delivers lessons both true and unnecessary. It's true we are not islands to ourselves. We are not alone. And it's unnecessary even to try to stand alone. Walking through a broken world requires standing together.

I have been surrounded by the love of Christ through his Church, and I am a recipient. A tapestry of ministry has overflowed into my life during a difficult journey. I have, indeed, faced loss. However, I have not faced loss alone.

I am a recipient of a tapestry of ministry.

“For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.” Philemon 1:7

[Comments](#)

The Confusion of Sight

“... we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal. 2 Corinthians 4:18

At Kim’s funeral, I read excerpts from Proverbs 31 and made a few comments about her. Then, I ended my comments by saying “... By faith and not by sight, I trust you.” Early on, I understood sight was not my friend, and it would take intentionality to hang on by faith.

“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” Hebrews 11:1

Faith versus sight really is the pivotal point of our battle—in tough times but even in good times. Faith versus sight is ground zero for our battle every day and in every other circumstance. But during unspeakable loss, sight tends to push hard upon faith. It’s a moment-by-moment fracas with casualties.

Our job is to stay doggedly on point. Ours is not to control or even ask why really. However, he’s big enough for any question, even why. Our duty, though, is to stay at the task of embracing everything in faith.

“But what does it say? ‘The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart’ (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim)...” Romans 10:8

In their song, “He Will Hold Me Fast,” Keith and Kristyn Getty sing, “When I fear my faith will fail, Christ will hold me fast.” So, even our ability to have faith depends upon him. I’ve cried out Mark 9:24 with the father of the demon-possessed boy. The disciples had been unable to

liberate the boy. The father presses and brings his case to Jesus. Jesus tells the man to have faith. I love the father's reply to Jesus: "Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, 'I believe; help my unbelief!'" I understand that father's heart. I've cried the same thing and sometimes it only comes out in moans.

In the confusion of sight, we need clarity of faith. And faith is not of our own doing.

"For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned." Romans 12:3

Faith is a gift assigned to me by God himself. That's a mystery. My faith is not a matter for pride. I'm not to think highly of myself. I'm to employ sober assessment knowing that my measure of faith is a gift from God.

"So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ." Romans 10:17

Whether we believe in faith or not has no bearing on the truth whatsoever. Our decision bears only on our relationship to the truth and to the One who is Truth. God is on his throne whether we believe it or not.

It's true, he takes bad and makes good out of it. There is a resurrection. It's true also that Jesus is Lord. He reveals these things to those he can trust. But the truth remains for all of us whether we embrace the truth or not.

"We have to pray with our eyes on God, not on the difficulties."
Oswald Chambers, *Prayer: A Holy Occupation*

The question for any of us in good times or bad times is: Am I hearing the Word of Christ so that I have faith that comes from hearing?

In the confusion of sight, it's imperative to hold fast to the clarity—the firm foundation—of faith.

"The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law." Deuteronomy 29:29

[Comments](#)

O Hole in My Heart

The “firsts” are tough. They’re a mixed bag. The old memories spill in upon you with the reminder that there are no new memories to come with the one lost. It’s final. Horrible.

**“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light...
For to us a child is born, to us a son is given... and his name
shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” Isaiah 9:2, 6**

I had heard that Thanksgiving and Christmas were among the hardest firsts. It is early November as I write this entry, and I assumed I had time to prepare. I was wrong. So wrong.

Earlier I wrote about two different kinds of mourning. First, there’s planned and intentional mourning; and, second, there’s spontaneous out-of-the-blue-ready-or-not mourning. One takes discipline to embrace; the other takes responsiveness, agility, and recovery.

I thought I had time to prepare for Thanksgiving and Christmas. I thought I had time to brace myself. I didn’t.

I have a question: Whose idea was it to start playing Christmas music so early? Can’t we regulate when we can begin decorating and playing music for holidays?

Candidly, I’ve never cared when all the celebration started. I’ve always loved Christmas. After I married Kim, I loved Christmas even more. She knew how to make it special for our family. She carefully made memories. She was intentional in helping us celebrate.

My job was to be ready with a devotional and to read the Christmas story. It was almost an assignment. She had it planned. Intentional. Kim never lost sight of why we celebrate Christmas. Her favorite Christmas carol was *O Holy Night*. She loved the power and grandeur of that declaration of the

import of that holy night. Incarnation. God became man. Miraculous. Worthy of celebrating. Gifts were important—and biblical. Wise men brought gifts. Giving to each other helps us shine a light on our generous, giving God.

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son...”

John 3:16

Kim celebrated the God who gave, the Son who was given, and the wise men who gave us an example of how we could celebrate the incarnate Savior. Christmas. Celebration. Salvation. Family. Unity. Beautiful—always beautiful. Kim’s childlike wonder at Christmas lights was always a source of pleasure. I enjoyed Christmas through Kim’s eyes. Her touch. Her influence. Her imagination.

But she’s gone, and I am facing loss. I have been told—and I believe—Christmas will not be the same. It’s now another one of the horrible firsts. Don’t get me wrong. The reason behind this magnificent season has not gone away. But there’s an overlay of grief that goes with how it’s always been celebrated. It’s inevitable.

In November, I got in my car on the last morning of a work trip to head to the airport. I hadn’t had the radio on at all on that trip. I turned it on and began to search for a channel. I punched the seek button scrolling through stations.

And then it happened.

I landed on a station that was already broadcasting Christmas music. Too early. Blasting from my radio was the first Christmas song I would hear this season. You guessed it. “O Holy Night:”

“A thrill of hope the weary world rejoices for yonder breaks a new and glorious morn. Fall on your knees, O hear the angels’ voices. O night divine, O night when Christ was born.” Adolphe Adam, “O Holy Night”

I began to weep. No warning. I realize now that even the “firsts” have “firsts.” The first Christmas had the first Christmas carol. And wouldn’t you know it. It had to be Kim’s favorite Christmas carol. How ironic.

How perfect.

It was one of those out-of-the-blue-ready-or-not moments. I wasn't prepared. You've heard of people seeing their life flash before their eyes. I had my Christmas and my Christmases flash before my eyes.

I love Christmas. O what a holy night, indeed. But, this day it's once again another reminder of my horrible loss, a hole in my heart. However, I will face my loss with hope because of the incarnate Messiah. I will celebrate. But I will also remember and mourn my loss through yet another of the firsts.

I wrote one song for Kim. One song. I love this line from my love song:

“A smile appears within my heart as I give you this ring. I pledge my life, my love, my all, to show you what it means.”

People sing to those they love. Love songs are part of our culture. I wrote one song for Kim. I wish someone would count how many songs of adoration have been written for the baby given to us at Christmas. Kim's favorite stands out.

“Long lay the world in sin and error pining, Till He appeared, and the soul felt its worth ... Fall on your knees ...” Adolphe Adam, “O Holy Night”

What hope Christmas gives! What joy is ours because of the birth of our Savior! God came down at Christmas. Hope. Joy. Salvation. Immanuel. My horrible loss, my hole in my heart, must be faced in the context of the gift given to us on that holy night.

**“And the angel said to them, ‘Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.’”
Luke 2:10**

[Comments](#)

The Fullness of Joy in the Emptiness of Loss

“Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.” James 1:2–4

Counting trials as joyful is no walk in the park. It’s no piece of cake to embrace trials even if you know you’ll be lacking in nothing when you do. Being thankful in all things is a command—because it doesn’t come naturally or easily.

However, it’s possible—and it’s right. Even as I experience my first Thanksgiving without Kim.

There’s a deep inescapable emptiness that comes from loss. It’s real. Again, my most significant lesson was that you must face loss. You should never sugarcoat it. Emptiness is real. There’s pain. There’s dread. There’s loneliness.

I’ll never forget a retreat Kim and I organized for a Sunday School class back in Mableton, Georgia early in our marriage. Every year, our class of young couples would plan a retreat. Kim and I were the class teachers, and one year we invited a Wycliffe Bible Translators missionary to speak. He took us deep into *The Beatitudes*.

His teaching stayed with us our whole marriage.

He translated “blessed” as “profoundly happy” for the purposes of his weekend sessions. His teaching carried the idea of the profundity of blessedness. Blessed is not simple, shallow happiness. It’s much deeper. It’s profound! As when peace passes understanding. Or comparable to grace that is sufficient or when mercies are new every morning. It’s downright

miraculous. Even in the emptiness of loss you can be profoundly happy, joyful. Jesus said it best:

“And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying: Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn... Blessed are the meek... Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness... Blessed are the merciful... the pure in heart... the peacemakers... Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake... Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven...” Matthew 5:2–12

To excerpt a portion, we might say, “Profoundly happy are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.” Or we might go on to read, “Profoundly happy are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.” His use of profoundly happy was simply meant to help self-centered people realize simple “feel-good” happiness was not the point. The kind of blessedness spoken of in *The Beatitudes* was much deeper. Again, it’s profound. We can experience emptiness brought on by loss and hold on to fullness of joy at the same time. “Rejoice and be glad,” Jesus says, “for your reward is great in heaven...” Matthew 5:12.

This Thanksgiving is empty, yet full. Joy fills loss when you mourn with hope. In the face of loss, it’s necessary to remember our reward is great when we get to heaven. Therefore, there is a fullness of joy in the emptiness of loss. I can be thankful.

“My soul longs, yes, faints for the courts of the Lord; my heart and flesh sing for joy to the living God.” Psalm 84:2

[Comments](#)

Aspirational Response to Loss

“For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.” 1 Corinthians 13:12

I remember talking to someone within the first day or two following Kim’s death. It was as if I was processing my shock, numbness, and grief verbally and on-the-fly. I was making this up as I went, it seemed. After saying something about knowing what was ahead of me, I stopped and said, “I know I am talking pretty big right now.” I might have been in shock, but I recognized it at times and wondered what else I might have said out loud.

I identified a behavior I’ll call aspirational response. I was saying things I wanted to be true of my current and future responses to my grief, but I had not yet truly been tested. However, I knew what I should say. I was talking big. Call it instinct. Call it intuition. But call it aspirational at best. Call it years of truth poured into my life.

I remember learning safety instructions for encountering certain wild and dangerous animals. Stand tall and appear big. That’s what this aspirational response to loss felt like.

Over time, I realized you have moments when your aspirational responses match how you feel. Other times, your responses do not even come close to matching how you feel. It’s a rote response. Going through the motions. However, you keep on speaking out loud to help coach yourself toward the aspirational response.

“It takes time to get to this place after loss. It takes failing and trying again to reroute the trajectory of loss onto a path that restores hope.” Katherine and Jay Wolf, *Suffer Strong*

Some may call this “fake it ’til you make it.” That’s not a bad idea. It’s almost like saying believe it until you see it. Having faith is better than having sight. By faith, we really can set a trajectory—an aspiration—for our response. Stand taller than this wild animal until you survive it. Dogged faith even in the face of horrible sight.

So, I figured it’s good to aspire to respond in faith. Sometimes what you see simply isn’t good, and the feelings reflect the sadness, even desperation, of the reality. However, you know that we see dimly now, and you can coach yourself toward what you believe to be true in the age to come. An eternal point of view is vastly different from a temporal perspective. Job understood this well, and I aspire to respond appropriately in my loss:

“Then Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head and fell on the ground and worshiped. And he said, ‘Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.’ In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong.” Job 1:20–22

I aspire to do as Job did in his trials—which were, admittedly, extreme. In all that I face, I pray I do not sin or charge my God with wrong. I can stand in faith and do good because he is good. At least I can aspire.

**“Beloved, do not imitate evil but imitate good. Whoever does good is from God; whoever does evil has not seen God.” 3
John 1:11**

[Comments](#)

Aspirational Faith Through Loss

“Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.” Proverbs 3:5–6

We get to experience the mercy and love of God in this life. We reap the fruit of grace now. That’s great. However, let’s not insult our Creator and Savior with shortsightedness. His mercy, love, and grace go so far beyond the here-and-now. His gracious gifts extend into the coming age. In fact, the more powerful result of his gift of salvation extends far beyond the temporal and into the eternal. Loss brings heaven closer and makes it more real than it was just the day before.

I love these lines from the hymn, “Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus:”

“Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full, in his wonderful face. And the things of earth will grow strangely dim, in the light of your glory and grace.” Helen Howarth Lemmel, “Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus”

[Aspirational response](#) is healthy if it is built upon the truth of our faith. Yes, enjoy the fruit of his mercy, love, and grace in your life today. But keep an eye on eternity. Lift your eyes from the painful temporal realm and glory in the eternal age to come. It’s real. Our Father will show his immeasurable riches of grace in kindness in Jesus.

“But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages

he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.” Ephesians 2:4–7

[Aspirational response](#) should be built upon the solid foundation of the gospel itself. We preach it to others. Why not preach it to yourself?

Teenagers often distrust everything their parents say. They lack the experience, commitment, or perspective to trust them. Their parents simply don't know best, they think. In my grief, I felt I was facing a similar dilemma. God allowed my bride to be taken. That could be interpreted as reason to distrust or even to rebel against God, my Father. However, I have the gift of perspective and faith-filled trust. It is truly a gift of God's grace to believe. So, in the battle I lean on a trustworthy God. I lean on my God who has delivered truth to me. I lean, by faith, on a God who loves me and who loves Kim. It might feel like chaos or overwhelming darkness, but he can be trusted. My sad micro-story is made beautiful by the rich macro-story. At least, I can aspire to fully entrust myself and my circumstances to him.

I love the aspirational words from Rend Collective's song, "Marching On:"

“In the chaos, the crisis, the troubles, the trials, the shadows, the sorrows, the long nights, the hard fight. We are the prophets, the voice in the darkness, declaring the battle is Yours.” Rend Collective, “Marching On”

I must press on. I must march onward. Even in chaos or crisis, in troubles or trials, in shadows, sorrows, long nights or hard fights. Especially then, I turn my eyes upon Jesus and look into his face. I recognize that I must not be a friend of this world, but instead, I must be a friend to God.

At the very least, I can aspire to respond in faith in Christ.

“You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore, whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, ‘He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us?’” James 4:4–5

**“... Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation
and my God.” Psalms 43:5**

[Comments](#)

Discovering Christmas Presence

“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me...” Psalm 23:4

I don't have a single light up for this first Christmas season without Kim. I don't have any decorations set out to enjoy. There are only a couple decorations visible, but they were received as gifts this year from friends and consolors. Christmas is very different this first year, it's obvious. But not for the reason you might think.

“Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.” Isaiah 7:14

I have wept in joy-filled understanding of “Immanuel, God with us.” I'll take his presence over any presents this year. Nothing this side of eternity matters as much this year as it did last year. However, things the other side of eternity matter so much more.

Presents? Not so much. Presence? Absolutely!

**“Joy to the world, the Lord is come! Let earth receive her King!
Let ev'ry heart prepare Him room...” Isaac Watts, “Joy to the World”**

Joyful and jovial are vastly different. Jovial is not bad, but joyful is so much deeper. No sentimental excitement here. It's not joy to the world because you receive a lot of presents. It's joy to the world because the Lord is present. He has come. He is the gift. His presence is what we long for. His presence is what I need. Francis H. Rowley gets it right:

“Days of darkness still come o’er me, sorrow’s path I often tread;
But the Savior still is with me—by His hands I’m safely led.”
Francis H. Rowley, “I Will Sing the Wondrous Story”

This first Christmas is a heavy season for me. It’s unavoidable. There’s a weight of sadness. I miss Kim’s presence; but I have Christ’s presence. And to quote Dane Ortlund in *Gentle and Lowly*, “Jesus is not the idea of friendship, abstractly; he is an actual friend.”

“We can rejoice that we are children of light and life!” Kim
Plumblee, Christmas 1981

Jesus is with me. He can lead me by his hands. Pain and beauty meet again. I mourn but not without hope. I am a child of light and life. I also resonate with the hymn, “Great Is Thy Faithfulness,” this year. Thomas O. Chisholm proclaims: “... Thine own dear presence to cheer and to guide...” And as John Flavel has written in his book, *Facing Grief*, “... no comforts in the world are so delectable and ravishingly sweet as those that flow immediately from the fountain.”

Christmas is a miracle of his presence.

**“Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel (which means, God with us).”
Matthew 1:23**

Isaiah 7:14 has now become Matthew 1:23. The promise has become a reality. This Christmas’ “presents” mean very little to me, except that they are a way to celebrate Christ’s birth. This Christmas’ “presence” means the world to me. Even though I walk in the shadow of Kim’s death, he is with me. Presence. Even if I go to the ends of the earth, he is with me always even to the end of the age.

“... grant that my part in the world’s life today may not be to obscure the splendour of Thy presence but rather to make it more plainly visible to the eyes of my fellow man.” John Baillie, *A Diary of Private Prayer*

As you celebrate Christmas and the presents you give and receive, I pray you'll discover and celebrate anew Jesus' Christmas presence.

**“And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”
Matthew 28:20**

“When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.... Fear not, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you.” Isaiah 43:2, 5

[Comments](#)

Fall on Your Knees

“... Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.” Matthew 6:9

The irony of [my experience with the Christmas song, “O Holy Night,”](#) was not lost on me. The occurrence was painful and yet beautiful at the same time. Later that morning at the airport, I flashed back to my prayer time at the start of my day. I had been in my hotel room in Oklahoma City rising to prepare for my return trip to Richmond.

I had been quietly reading for a while and then came to a time to pray. I had been praying through *The Lord's Prayer*. I began with “Our Father in heaven,” and then I began to do just as Jesus instructed his disciples. I began to acknowledge his name as hallowed. I get to join the chorus of the multitudes already hallowing his name.

As normal, God's praiseworthy attributes flow from my lips. I report whatever praise is on my tongue. Holy. Majestic. Mighty. Set apart. Worthy. Creator. King of Kings. Lord of lords. Kind. Just. Faithful. Gracious. Loving. Powerful.

On this morning, I proclaimed in prayer his is the name at which every knee was to bow. Every knee. I proclaimed his is the name every tongue was to confess that he is Lord. Every tongue.

**“... God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord...”
Philippians 2:9–11**

I slid out of my chair and onto my knees.

Then I carried on. I continued hallowing his name. I began praying for specific needs and did so in keeping with his kingdom and his will. I thanked him for his provision, daily bread. I sought forgiveness and acknowledged that his forgiveness is in keeping with my own forgiveness freely given to others. I begged that he would keep me from temptation and deliver me from any evil.

Then within a couple hours, I am driving to the airport when I experienced my first Christmas carol in my first Christmas season without Kim. And I abruptly heard her favorite carol, “O Holy Night.”

“Fall on your knees . . .” Adolphe Adam, “O Holy Night”

Call it a coincidence if you want. But I was struck by the confluence of the experience in prayer that morning and the powerful line from a well-known song, “O Holy Night.” I fell on my knees in worship that morning. I heard “Fall on your knees” later that morning.

“To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear allegiance.” Isaiah 45:23

A reminder was given to me that while there’s a [hole in my heart](#), I can fall on my knees. I can fall on his mercy. I can fall on his goodness. I can fall on a firm foundation. He is hallowed and my tongue shall swear allegiance.

Fall on your knees and worship him who is worshipped. His name is hallowed. I choose to join the chorus. I choose to stay in the chorus. It’s a worldwide chorus—or it will be. Every language, every people, every tribe, every nation. It began with the shepherds. It continues with us.

Hallowed be his above-every-other name.

“Come adore the humble king lowly in the manger. Fall before his majesty, hail the little Savior. . . . Fall, oh fall, before the one who in mercy left his throne . . . Bow before, come adore the Name above all names . . .” Matt Papa and Matt Boswell, “Come Adore the Humble King”

“And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the

highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!” Luke 2:13–14

[Comments](#)

Preach the Gospel to Yourself

“My soul melts away for sorrow; strengthen me according to your word!” Psalms 119:28

As it turns out, sorrow—or a melting soul—responds quite well to the truth of God’s Word. At times, I found myself being buried by overwhelming sadness. My soul was melting, and I was experiencing a sorrow that could not be compared to any sorrow I’d ever experienced.

I need to express gratitude for decades of sermons, Bible studies, mentors, friends, and colleagues who have invested in me over the years. I love the hymn “How Firm a Foundation.” Foundations are paramount. There is, as the song reminds us, a firm foundation built for our souls on His excellent Word. I am grateful for the firm foundation provided by God in His Word and through his Body. I’m not a stranger to the gospel. I know it, and I believe it.

But, when a soul melts from deep, unimaginable sorrow, what then? Is the gospel story enough?

I love the following lyrics in a Rend Collective song. They have been instructive and helpful for me as I mourn with hope:

“When I stand accused by my regrets, and the devil roars his empty threats, I will preach the gospel to myself...” Rend Collective, “Nailed to the Cross”

If I need to preach the gospel to myself when I have regrets or when I’m attacked by our enemy, I most assuredly need to preach the gospel to myself when my soul is melting in sorrow.

“No one is more influential in your life than you are because no one talks to you more than you do.” Paul David Tripp, *New*

Morning Mercies

“Instead of listening to the stories we tell ourselves, we need to start purposely talking to ourselves. Preaching to our hearts.” Erik Reed, *Uncommon Trust*

While my immediate story—or my “micro-story,” as I have been calling it—is horrible, sorrowful, and seemingly hopeless, I need to remember the truths of the Word. I need to coach myself to stand firmly on the firm foundation of the gospel. I need to preach the gospel to myself. The meta-narrative—or grand narrative of Scripture—provides a firm foundation for tough micro-stories. Call it an anchor. A foundation.

For example, Romans 8:28 provides the gift of context during unimaginable loss:

“And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.” Romans 8:28

This is one of those passages that doesn’t seem logical to the natural ear. It takes a faith perspective—a gospel context—to grasp it in hope. The loss is not good. However, our good God takes even the worst loss and will work it together for good. I almost—but not really—feel a little sorry for our enemy. No matter what he throws at God’s people, God brings good out of it. That must be very frustrating for an evil enemy; however, it’s faith-bolstering for us. He takes the bad and strengthens us and conforms us to the image of his Son.

“I have found that, sometimes, this requires getting bossy with my soul.” Katherine and Jay Wolf, *Suffer Strong*

Preach the gospel to yourself no matter how many times you’ve heard it before.

“For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.” Romans 8:29

[Comments](#)

Be Ready for the Apathy or Laziness of Grief

“... a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance... a time to keep silence, and a time to speak...” Ecclesiastes 3:4, 7

C. S. Lewis called it the laziness of grief in *A Grief Observed*—a journal of sorts about his grief after the loss of his wife in 1960. As an aside, his book is aptly titled. He does not resolve grief; he only observes it. And his was the first book I read a few weeks after Kim’s death. C. S. Lewis said of this weary state, “I loathe the slightest effort.” I understand. Psychologists refer to this symptom or stage as the apathy of grief. Apathetic laziness descends upon the mourner. You just don’t care, or at least you don’t care much.

For me it presented as lack of interest and lack of motivation. It was as if I just didn’t care, at times. Some normal conversations seemed petty and unimportant. Some responsibilities or duties took a back seat—for months! Procrastination became a coping tool. I put off some tasks that I should have accomplished easily under normal circumstances. However, I just could not produce the energy or even the concern to address the simplest of tasks.

Fortunately, I’d done enough reading to know it was coming, and it was okay. It is part of the journey. My pastor asked me over a cup of coffee one day how it was being back at work. I said that it was mostly okay, but I added that I have low motivation at times. He reached across the table and tapped my arm and said, “You know that’s okay, right?” I said I knew it was okay. However, it didn’t feel okay. It is a bothersome stage.

“... And though my heart grows weary, I never will despair. I know that He is leading through all the stormy blast...” Alfred H. Ackley, “He Lives”

Low motivation, laziness, apathy, or lack of interest. Whatever you call this stage, it is very real. And it is very helpful to know it's normal. It's even better to know it's temporary. Long and unwanted journeys are marked by weariness. It's like other aspects of grief. It's real, it's personal, it's a process, and it is temporary. It's important to lower expectations, and it's important to give yourself grace. It's important to not grow frustrated.

It's a stage that must be endured as you face loss. It's a part of grief that is temporary but must not be ignored or hurried. It's another one of those realities that must be pressed into in order to allow for complete healing. You have to outlast this apathy. You have to press through the laziness. You have to endure.

“Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning.” Psalm 30:5

By faith, I know—or at least I hope—it's temporary. This apathy or laziness is on its own schedule. Be gentle and patient. With me. With yourself.

**“Be watchful, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong.”
I Corinthians 16:13**

[Comments](#)

Our Father Is in Heaven—The Lord’s Prayer

“Now Jesus was praying in a certain place, and when he finished, one of his disciples said to him, ‘Lord, teach us to pray...’” Luke 11:1

Approximately five months after Kim’s death, my pastor asked if I would teach a summer equipping class at our church on *The Lord’s Prayer*. After considering the opportunity, I agreed to teach the class.

I began my preparation by reviewing a section of Scripture I already knew well. Who isn’t familiar with Matthew 6 and *The Lord’s Prayer*? Most of us have it memorized.

But sometimes familiarity can be an enemy to understanding.

I began by looking at the context. It was such a good reminder to hear Jesus’ words leading up to his teaching on prayer. Your Father is in secret. Don’t pile up empty phrases. Instead, Jesus says, pray in the way he is about to model.

“Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.” Matthew 6:9–13

Now remember, I reviewed this well-known prayer during a time of grief and mourning. And the benefit to my soul has been incalculable. Jesus’ model prayer has been a guide to help me. Therefore, in the next few entries I will share a few observations and experiences from my time studying and, more importantly, praying *The Lord’s Prayer*. These are not groundbreaking insights, but they are simply my experiences of healing by praying the prayer Jesus taught his disciples.

Our Father is in Heaven

One day I was praying *The Lord's Prayer*, and I got stuck on the very first word: "Our..."

I couldn't get any further. I was overcome with gratitude that I was praying to a Father who was not my Father alone. I am part of a body and a part of a godly heritage. The church has a history replete with faithfulness. There's a whole cloud of witnesses standing ready to commend God to me, to all of us. Throughout the generations, they have found him wholly trustworthy. We are a temporal blip on an eternal screen. And he is our Father. He's the Father of all.

He's also in heaven. And I am on earth. I was reminded of Ecclesiastes 5:2:

"Be not rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be hasty to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven and you are on earth. Therefore let your words be few." Ecclesiastes 5:2

Earthbound, I am approaching my God who is in heaven. He is worthy of respect, honor, and trust. We come into his presence in awe. Such a foundation of a holy and trustworthy God is a balm in a time of need. Such a foundation evokes trust during a time of need. He is our Father, and he is in heaven. Kneel in awe as you begin to pray *The Lord's Prayer*.

"Our Father in heaven." Matthew 6:9

[Comments](#)

Praised and Accomplished as in Heaven—The Lord’s Prayer

“Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name...” Matthew 6:9

Following the [opening line of the prayer](#), Jesus calls for respect, awe, and worship.

His Name is Hallowed

Naturally, it follows that worship is drawn out of us in the presence of a heavenly Father. We stand in awe of him. Literally, Jesus is teaching his disciples to recognize, acknowledge, and proclaim in prayer our Father’s holiness. He is established in the heavens, and he is holy, set apart, and worthy of worship. As John Baillie says in *A Diary of Private Prayer*, “... even my highest thoughts of Thee are but dim and distant shadowings of Thy transcendent glory. ... Let my soul rejoice in Thy mysterious greatness.”

“Who is like you, O Lord, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders?” Exodus 15:11

“And one called to another and said: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!’” Isaiah 6:3

In my experience, this simple phrase—“Hallowed be your name”—gives birth to the attributes of God and the names of God. While I seek to let my words be few, I cannot help but praise him. He is worthy. Even in the context of loss I am enthused to worship his name.

“Hallowed be your name.” Matthew 6:9

On Earth as it is in Heaven—His Kingdom and His Will

Submission is an uncomfortable word in our society—unless you’re submitting to a good king. I love 2 Timothy 2 where there’s a turn of a phrase or two. If we deny Jesus, it goes, he will deny us. But if we are faithless, he remains faithful because he cannot deny himself. He cannot go against his own faithful nature. Submission, as a posture, to such a trustworthy king is actually attractive.

“... if we are faithless, he remains faithful—for he cannot deny himself.” 2 Timothy 2:13

Therefore, I have no problem praying in keeping with his kingdom and in line with his will. Our God is a faithful God. His kingdom and his will are good. He is wholly faithful and worthy of our trust. Submission to him is for our good.

Even in times of pain.

I love the phrase, “as in heaven, so on earth.” One translation interprets *The Lord’s Prayer* in this manner. I like it. When it comes to what I want or need in my life—especially in such an unsettled moment in my journey—I can boldly submit my desire to his will, as in heaven so on earth. As his will is accomplished in heaven, I agree that I want only that in my life or in anyone else’s life for that matter. I press into his kingdom and into his will.

“‘Thy kingdom come,’ of necessity includes this: ‘the other kingdom go.’ ... ‘Thy will be done’ includes by the same inference this: ‘the other will be undone.’” S. D. Gordon, *Quiet Talks on Prayer*

Proactive, intentional humility prepares you to pray rightly. At this point in my prayer, I bring causes, people, and needs to the feet of a faithful and good God, and I simply agree with God in each case. Not my will but his be done. I choose to trust him and ask that he causes his kingdom to come and his will to be done for me and for those I love. The best intercession is brought to him in the context of his kingdom and his will.

As in heaven, so on earth.

“Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” Matthew 6:10

[Comments](#)

Seeking Provision and Forgiveness—The Lord’s Prayer

“... on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread...” Matthew 6:10–11

After praying that the [kingdom of God would come](#) and that God’s will would be done, Jesus moves on to address provision.

Give Us Our Daily Bread

While technically a request, I believe this part of the prayer actually provides us with a reminder that we are dependent. Paul David Tripp contends, “Prayer abandons independence.” This part of Jesus’ prayer also delivers the message that he is a giving God, a providing God. He is Jehovah-Jireh, the God who provides. Jesus reminds us that we turn to God for any need for provision.

“Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows.” Matthew 10:29–31

Provision is necessary for our physical, emotional, and spiritual needs—to name a few. I have found that he provides bountifully. In grief, he has given sufficient grace and new mercies every morning. He’s given surpassing peace and lavish love. And he’s comforted me. On time. As needed. Bountifully.

He is Jehovah-Jireh.

This request for daily provision is also intended to keep us daily connected to him. Dependent. Like manna of old. Beware of any tendency toward self-sufficiency.

“Give us this day our daily bread.” Matthew 6:11

Forgive Us as we Forgive Others

This next part of *The Lord's Prayer* is pure brilliance. Jesus teaches his disciples to ask for forgiveness, but he ties the very forgiveness they seek to the way they forgive others. In Matthew 18, Jesus told the parable of the unforgiving servant in response to a question posed by Peter. He wanted to know how many times he should forgive his brother when he sinned against him multiple times.

Jesus doesn't mince words.

After saying he should forgive not seven times but seven times seventy, he shares the parable of the unforgiving servant. If you struggle with forgiveness, read Matthew 18:23–35. It will revolutionize your giving and receiving of forgiveness.

“Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.” Ephesians 4:32

We should be forgivers because we've been forgiven. Forgiven people forgive others freely. At least this is what you'd expect of those who've been forgiven. We are to forgive one another in the same way God in Christ forgave us. Some of us need to read this paragraph again. Life is too short to ignore the lesson from this part of *The Lord's Prayer*. The phrase “as we also” is too easily overlooked. If you justify any level of withholding forgiveness or any level of holding grudges, you need to think about this simple lesson. Jesus teaches us to seek forgiveness in the same way we forgive others.

Pure brilliance.

The instruction delivered in this prayer really does provide a healthy prayer guide, and it is a balm in a time of need. Grief brings anger and impacts relationships. Forgive in humility. As Dane Ortlund says in *Gentle and Lowly*, “... release your debtor and breathe again.”

Forgive quickly. Forgive often. Forgive freely. As Christ has forgiven you. Or to quote Jesus, “... forgive us... as we also have forgiven...”

“... forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors.” Matthew 6:12

[Comments](#)

Avoiding Temptation and Evil—The Lord’s Prayer

“... forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation...” Matthew 6:12–13

Jesus moves from the topic of [seeking provision and forgiveness](#)—and our offering forgiveness to others—to the need for guidance and protection from temptation.

Lead Us Away From Temptation

I remember a thought that invaded my mind one day: *I’m going to have to practice what I’ve preached!* I have shared with young men to “... flee youthful lusts.” I’ve preached and touted this admonition from the comfort of my own marriage. How convenient. The proverbial shoe is on the other foot now. The admonition to avoid temptation and to flee lust remains valid. Even more so.

“Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.” Mark 14:38

We are to be on high alert—always. Watch and pray. Resist temptation. Recognize that your flesh is weak and vulnerable. No matter how willing the spirit may be, the flesh is weak.

**“No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.”
I Corinthians 10:13**

We can stand against temptation. Again, we may not be faithful, but he is faithful. No matter the temptation, we can find the way of escape. I need a guide to walk me through the unknowns in my time of need. I need his hand to guide me. I need his eye to guide me. I need him, and his prayer, as a balm and a guide to keep me from temptation.

“And lead us not into temptation...” Matthew 6:13

Deliver Us From Evil

Worse than simple temptation, we have an enemy who seeks to devour us. Like a lion. We must pray to be delivered from evil and the deceiver of our souls. Our adversary is after us. We must be sober-minded and watchful.

“Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.” 1 Peter 5:8

“He is like a lion eager to tear, as a young lion lurking in ambush.” Psalms 17:12

Put all of this back in the context of *The Lord's Prayer*. We have worshipped our Father in heaven. We've agreed with him that we desire his kingdom and his will. We ask him to give to us according to our daily needs. We ask for forgiveness as forgivers. We ask him not to lead us toward temptation. And finally, we need him to fight on our behalf.

“... but deliver us from evil.” Matthew 6:13

The Lord's Prayer has been a blessing to prop me up in prayer. Early on, I was paralyzed in so many ways. I couldn't put a sentence together in prayer. I moaned or groaned out some of my prayers. Of course, after the initial shock and numbness abated, I was able to pray. But this prayer, *The Lord's Prayer*, became a counselor, a friend, a companion on an unwanted journey as I faced my loss. *The Lord's Prayer* acted as a balm and a guide in my time of need.

This prayer is proof that God is not seeking wordiness. He is seeking rhythms of relationship. He is to be worshipped. He deserves our

submission and trust in his kingdom and will. He is to be trusted for provision. He forgives if we ask and if we are forgiving. And he protects us.

He hears. He accepts. O how I have loved *The Lord's Prayer* as I have faced loss on my unwanted journey. This prayer discipline has provided hope as I have mourned.

“The Lord has heard my plea; the Lord accepts my prayer.”

Psalm 6:9

[Comments](#)

How a Smoldering Fire Reignited

“When I’m with you my spirit soars...” Rend Collective, “I Will Be Undignified”

One of my first work-related events after Kim’s death was in Ohio. I was to speak three times on Saturday and once on Sunday. Just before going, the pastor asked if I could add another time slot on Sunday. He wanted me to share with groups from high school to young couples who might one day consider a mission calling.

Honestly, I was tired and weak, and the prospect of adding another speaking slot before the morning worship time was not enticing to me. However, I agreed to do it.

And I am so glad I did.

Normally, I preach a message or provide some sort of mobilization or mission training. It’s been a long time since I told *our* stories from *our* pilgrimage with *our* mission calling and career. Hurriedly, I put a few stories together—*our* call to mission, stories from *our* work in South Africa, stories from Zimbabwe, and stories from *our* various leadership roles. It turned out to be therapeutic. And more. God-ordained.

After telling *our* story from the past twenty-seven years, I was reminded of something keenly important: Kim and I had been co-laborers. This mission calling was *our* calling. It was not simply my calling or her calling. I was tired, grieving, and weak, but I had a glimpse of a renewed spirit that just might be out there on the horizon. I was sensing a rebirth of purposeful service. Kim would have me continue and press on. A fire smoldered.

“... we should emerge from [trouble] ready for better service and for greater usefulness than ever before.” J. R. Miller, *The Ministry of Comfort*

Later at a retreat in North Carolina, I experienced worship in ways I'd never experienced. First of all, I hear aspects of songs and hymns that previously I did not notice. Sure, I heard the words, but they didn't have the deep meaning I hear now. On this occasion, I realized that when I'm worshipping, I'm doing the exact same thing Kim is doing. And I'm doing it at the same time. Worship is different now. A fire was reigniting.

“Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them... He sent out his word and healed them and delivered them... Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love, for his wondrous works to the children of man!” Psalms 107:19–21

Worship was returning to my heart. Not a worship for what had happened but for the God who remained in control of my life and provided a foundation in my storm. One Sunday during worship, I was reminded of this while singing “Jesus is Better.” This song is wonderful and healing for a soul in mourning.

“In all my sorrows, Jesus is better—make my heart believe. In all my victories... Than any comfort... More than all riches... Our souls declaring... Our song eternal, Jesus is better—make my heart believe...” Aaron Ivey and Brett Land, “Jesus is Better”

Service and worship have been renewed. Also, love for others has returned with a force. Love is and must be different from here on out.

I've sensed a renewed love for my children, their spouses, and my grandchildren. I feel I've been given a reminder that I have a little more time, and I am to invest by loving.

“Everything broken will be whole again. And this will be the celebration all of creation longs for. And while we're waiting for that day to come, we've got a little more time to love...” Steven Curtis Chapman, “A Little More Time to Love”

During this unwanted journey, I have experienced a renewed urgency to engage in service, worship, and love. I must not waste the high price I have

paid. A fire is smoldering and reigniting, and it promises to flame up once again.

“Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart, since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God...” 1 Peter 1:22–23

[Comments](#)

Warning: “Timehop” Is Going to Gut Punch You When You Least Expect It

The Unintended Anguishing Aspect of Automated Algorithms

As I approach the second anniversary of Kim’s death I decided a special blog entry was in order. Anniversaries and special days are hard. The firsts are obviously difficult. Today, I write about a new dynamic to grief in our technological era.

Algorithms can cause anguish. Let me explain.

First, a definition is in order. An algorithm is a process that is followed by a computer as designed by a programmer. It’s a set of rules that determines calculations or other operations designed to solve problems. Algorithms help with repeat communications and, in fact, learn your habits, learn about your life, recognize other activities, and make suggestions for you. How nice, right?

Second, these algorithms have been automated. Reportedly, they replace tedious and irreproducible manual work. Further, they replace manual parameters that are prone to errors. The hope is that they lead to performance that is state-of-the-art. But there’s a problem. The automated algorithms fall prey to subtle pitfalls. These pitfalls can render the process and calculation totally ineffective. Based on old or existing data, algorithms are prone to actions that are obsolete. New activity based on old data.

How about an example from my journey?

I received an email from *RightNow Media* around the first anniversary of my loss. The timing was purely coincidental, but the subject line was, “D. Ray, are you investing in your marriage?” It definitely got my attention. It was a shock, for sure. Worse, the email went on to tell me “... it’s never too late to invest time in your marriage.”

Well, I beg to differ.

“Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her...” Ephesians 5:25

Oh, how I wish I could continue to invest in my marriage. If you’re married, here’s a good place to start. Love your wife, men, like Jesus loved the church. Don’t waste time.

My encounters born of algorithms have been numerous. In fact, something I took for granted before my loss shocks me on a weekly basis. A few examples should help you understand.

Facebook has a feature to remind you of things you did on specific dates in the past. A memory is highlighted, and when you open *Facebook* it can be a shock. At first these algorithmic deliveries are painful, alarming.

My *Photo Stream* on my Apple iPhone constantly identifies and highlights photos from previous dates. It brings them to the top for my viewing pleasure. It also collects photos of a person and puts those photos together for you.

Kim and I played *Words with Friends* together. Sometime after her death I received an automated alert: “They timed out,” referring to my opponent, my wife. Really? Timed out? So painful!

I received an email from *Shutterfly*, the company that produces beautiful memory books. When the email opened, it delivered a picture of Kim and my sweet granddaughter among other pictures from past projects. It was a couple days before Mother’s Day. It’s a jolt, a surge of pain.

My kids have used *Timehop* which self-describes their purpose as helping people find new ways to connect with each other around past experiences. That’s fine until you don’t have each other anymore and you simply get reminders of how it used to be. *Timehop* also states that they are reinventing reminiscing for the digital era.

I contend that automated algorithms have reinvented grief for the digital era.

It’s not all bad. In fact, these algorithms helped me in my endeavor to face my loss. Really, they forced me. And the day came when algorithmic remembrances became positive again. After the shock and initial grief passed, I began to like the reminders. As my friend, Joe Hall, says, “You learn to love the taste of bittersweet.” After all, grief’s purpose is not to get you to forget the loved one you’ve lost.

For now, however, it's good to recognize there is an unintended anguish that comes from automated algorithms. It's a new dynamic to grief in the digital age.

“Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning.” Psalm 30:5

[Comments](#)

Fiercely Focus on Facing the Firsts

“So she called the name of the Lord who spoke to her, ‘You are a God of seeing,’ for she said, ‘Truly here I have seen him who looks after me.’” Genesis 16:13

God sees me, and I am not alone on my unwanted journey. He is with me. Better said, I must stay close to him every step of the journey. Who else do I have? Sure, I have faithful friends and family, but I have learned they alone cannot carry my burdens. Long unwanted journeys have many twists, turns, and stops along the pathway.

I often feel like Peter did in John 6:

“... Jesus said to the twelve, ‘Do you want to go away as well?’ Simon Peter answered him, ‘Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life...’” John 6:67–68

To whom shall we go? On unwanted journeys you have no choice whether to go or not. The journey is given to you. However, you do have a choice to whom you will go and with whom you will go. As I have traveled my journey, God has walked with me as I have made many stops along the way.

I have learned it to be very important how you embrace the firsts. You have to fiercely focus your attention upon your journey. To whom shall I go? Of course, we go *to* God. But we also go *with* others. I needed to be intentional about the firsts I would face. *To* God. *With* others. Fiercely intentional.

I visited Trevor for his birthday in March. I celebrated Easter with Paul’s family. I was with my children and grandchildren over Mother’s Day—a trip Kim had planned late the year before she died. Providential. I drove

down again to North Carolina to spend Kim's birthday in June with Paul's family. I was with Kim's parents on Father's Day.

My July [anniversary trip to Maine](#) was the most significant of the firsts, and I chose to do that one alone—or better said, alone with God. And God was there, too, on each and every stop. I thought I was going to Maine to remember and celebrate the past. I thought I was on a pilgrimage to honor my marriage. God was wooing me to get away to consider the present and future, as well. [God was seeking a meeting for me](#)—a retreat—to see if I would realize that in loss, he is enough for me in my present and future.

I visited Emily for her birthday in October. Then, Trevor and I drove to North Carolina to celebrate my birthday and Paul's. Paul and his boys, Trevor, and I went to Kennesaw, Georgia to be with Kim's parents for Thanksgiving. Trevor and I flew for Christmas—always a big holiday in Kim's house—to spend it in Conroe, Texas with Emily's family. Trevor insisted on spending New Year's Day with me.

And then came February 18, 2020—the one-year anniversary of Kim's death. Michael and Emily flew in, Trevor drove down, and Paul and Brennan drove up to be together and to help me go through some of Kim's personal belongings. A brutal but unavoidable first.

Facing the firsts turned out to be more about finding that he is enough than grieving the loss. Both, of course. I'm not diminishing the pain, believe me. But in dealing with the firsts, God changed the narrative to remind me that he has plans and new memories for my life.

El Roi—God sees me. Immanuel—God is with me. If you're facing loss, fiercely mark the firsts by running to God and with others who love you.

“For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart.” Jeremiah 29:11–13

[Comments](#)

Expect to Deal with Brutal Details

“God you know how much I wish I could just hear you say the words and answer all the questions everybody’s asking.” Steven Curtis Chapman, “Sound of Your Voice”

Confusion accompanies loss. Matt Boswell and Matt Papa have a song inspired by *Psalm 42*, “Lord From Sorrows Deep I Call.” They sing, “Storms within my troubled soul, questions without answers, on my faith these billows roll...” They understand this confusion. New realities pour in upon you. It will take time to unravel them.

A friend and mentor, Tom Elliff, called me one day and helped me to put my brutal reality into words. He said, “When Jeannie died, I came to realize I’m no longer anyone’s main person, and I do not have a main person.” There are brutal and jolting realities and details that are one-hundred-and-eighty degrees from the day before Kim died.

However, facing loss and engaging in grief work—especially in the confusion—helps begin to make some sense of these new realities. Answers will come for questions you and everyone else are asking.

“Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God.” Romans 5:2

Unfortunately, however, there are some brutal details that cannot wait. They must be understood, faced, and addressed quickly. Immediately. I had to force myself to face some brutal details before the confusion even began to clear.

Thinking about a funeral is brutal. I’ve said before how confusing it is to stand in a room full of caskets. You can’t really think at all. And then there are some of the legal and logistical details. There’s a sense that a financial

avalanche is pouring in upon you, as well. A death certificate is required. Changing a checking account is so final. Canceling credit and debit cards is so decisive. However, these brutal details must be addressed; they cannot wait. Financial changes must be handled immediately. Have you ever doubted that evil exists? How brutal is it that scoundrels lie in wait to steal identities in and around death? Brutal, indeed.

And then there was our decision to ask for an autopsy. At least in our experience, we needed an autopsy to help us in several ways. We wanted to know what happened for the sake of my children and their future health histories. We just had no idea what could have taken the life of my wife. Of course, we also wanted to understand. In our case, Kim's death was sudden, unexpected, and downright confusing. But, what a brutal decision. There's no denying how very difficult it is to make such a decision. And it's a decision that cannot wait. I'll never forget that afternoon when I knew that the autopsy service had begun the autopsy. Brutal. And crushing.

Nine weeks later, I was alone at home when the autopsy report came in the mail. No man should ever have to read the autopsy of his wife. With great difficulty, I had to follow up with several doctors to try to understand what had happened. I needed help interpreting the report. My children needed to know. Kim's parents needed to know. I needed to know. After numerous conversations with doctors, and even the doctor who performed the autopsy, I've come to a place of peace. Acceptance. I cannot change what happened. However, I had faced another brutal detail.

No matter the circumstances following the death of a loved one, there are brutal details to address. These brutal decisions are not respecters of persons. Expect them. Death has a leveling effect, and it delivers brutal realities and details to face, and some must be faced immediately.

“I could strengthen you with my mouth, and the solace of my lips would assuage your pain.” Job 16:5

“My soul melts away for sorrow; strengthen me according to your word!” Psalm 119:28

[Comments](#)

Mourning an Altered Future

“Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.” Matthew 6:34

Kim died on a Monday morning. The very next morning, Tuesday morning, we had plans that never came about. I had purchased two tickets to a Michael Bubl  concert in Washington DC. I had a hotel booked, and I had planned for our dinner, as well. *Nandos Peri Peri*. Our favorite South African Portuguese chicken. Try it. It’s a family favorite.

But I digress.

We were both looking forward to our date. I have text messages from that fateful Monday morning between us to prove it. We had been planning the date together, and now we were considering some last minute changes due to impending snow.

If the plans for the day after Kim’s death had been so drastically changed, I had no idea what awaited me. My future has been fatefully altered.

“Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring.” Proverbs 27:1

I was now mourning an altered future. So much for counting eggs before they’re hatched.

Mourning and grief have many dimensions. As time moved forward, I learned one significant aspect to my grief was my unavoidable, altered future. Everything had changed, it seemed. Granted, this is a selfish dimension to grief, but it’s a significant reality that must be faced. Everything in my future is altered.

A date night for a concert in Washington D.C. was only the tip of the iceberg.

Every plan in my future included Kim. Therefore, every plan in my new future had been abruptly altered. Disrupted. Distorted.

“Loss takes what we might do and turns it into what we can never do.” Jerry Sittser, *A Grace Disguised: How the Soul Grows Through Loss*

This would take some getting used to. Lesson learned: Don’t boast about tomorrow.

We’re warned about boasting about our tomorrows. We tell each other to be careful about counting eggs before they’ve hatched. We do not know what tomorrow brings. It’s time to repent from boasting about our tomorrows. Eternity is important. Our lives are but a mist—a blip on the screen. Or as Gerhardt Ter Steegen has said, “How great is God! how small am I! A mote in the illimitable sky...”

But right now, that blip seems to have a foreboding future. Altered and undefined.

It’s understandable to mourn an altered future. Loss forces you to do so. However, boasting about your tomorrows is arrogant. Boasting about tomorrows is even evil, according to James. My life took a detour on February 18, 2019, and I’ve learned my lesson. While mourning my altered future, I refuse to boast about tomorrow. Life is good, but it’s only a mist. A blip on a screen. A mote—or a speck—in the illimitable sky.

While I have an altered future that I mourn, I trust the one who holds my new normal, my new future in his hands.

“Come now, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit’—yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, ‘If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.’ As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil.” James 4:13–16

[Comments](#)

Lowness, Heaviness, and Acceptance—The Illegal Squatter

“It is he who remembered us in our low estate, for his steadfast love endures forever ...” Psalm 136:23

Over six months into my grief, a sense of pervasive lowness came over me. Early on, these feelings came in waves, and like waves they eventually retreated. They subsided. Later, however, the lowness came in like a tide of heaviness. Lowness came for a longer stay. Heaviness persisted. It did not so easily subside. It’s as if my new reality was settling in and becoming just that—my new reality.

I didn’t like it.

Something happened during my time of lowness, and I think there’s a connection. My crying ended its every-single-day assault. I cried every day for almost seven months. Some people cry for a longer period, and some people cry for a shorter period. I didn’t know that, but I’ve learned that grief is as individual as each person is unique. The length of time the crying endures is not the point.

But now the tears seemed to subside. At least the everyday onslaught. It’s as if the lowness carried with it an acceptance of my new reality. It was settling in, making itself at home. Uninvited. Acceptance became an illegal squatter.

“The disappearance of the grief is not followed by happiness. It is followed by emptiness.” Sheldon Vanauken, *A Severe Mercy*

The crying didn’t end because I was happy. It seemed as if it ended because I was coming to grips with what had happened. Even if I didn’t want to accept it, I was accepting it. I had no choice.

“I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need.” Philippians 4:12

I had to coach myself through the ceasing of my tears. Tears had become my friends. A daily companion in my journey. A physician to aid me in my healing. A drain for the pressure brought on by grief. And now, without warning, the tears were pulling away. I had to tell myself that this was alright. The reduction in the frequency of tears did not mean that I didn't care anymore. This was a step toward healing. The wound had begun to close and heal over.

“Our griefs set lessons for us to learn, and we should diligently seek to get into our life whatever it is that our Master would teach us.” J. R. Miller, *The Ministry of Comfort*

It was if I had my first taste of wistful peace, but it first showed up as lowness and heaviness. I had been told peace would come again. Acceptance of loss is a part of the grief process. There is progress even on a long and unwanted journey. The path is through tears, and then, lowness and heaviness. Weighty. Drudgery.

This thick pathway, this unwanted journey, leads to acceptance and eventually to wistful peace. If you're facing loss, press on by faith through the heaviness and lowness.

“Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning.” Psalm 30:5

“Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation...” James 1:9

[Comments](#)

The Day the Tears Didn't Show Up

“My eye has grown dim from vexation, and all my members are like a shadow.” Job 17:7

They say grief is personal. No one can tell you how you should grieve. Sure, there are phases that you face to one degree or another. And they are not linear. In fact, the phases are cyclical. It's just not clean or tidy. Messy. Further, the intensity and duration of grief are intensely personal. You have to learn to assess how you are and respond.

So, again, it was with surprise—and disappointment—one day when I had my first reprieve from tears. [As I have written](#), I had shed tears every day for almost seven months. A new, unprecedented experience in my life. Again, tears had become my friends. They rallied around me to help me process and face my loss. In other ways, they assaulted me every day whether I wanted them or not. Sometimes I planned for the attack. Other times I was blindsided. Tears just showed up.

“You have fed them with the bread of tears and given them tears to drink in full measure.” Psalm 80:5

But on this day, my tears did not knock on my door. I was surprised by their delay. Disappointed by their absence, their disappearance. Was something wrong? Was something right? I didn't panic, but I was confused and wanted answers.

However, I learned my tears weren't gone for good. It was just that the repetitive nature of my tearfulness was diminishing. At first, I simply skipped a day. I realized, as I stated earlier, I was emotionally taking a step toward acceptance, [my illegal squatter](#). Previously, I had accepted this new unwanted journey in my mind. How could I deny it? I now realize emotional acceptance is deeper. It takes longer, and it has its own schedule.

It took almost seven months of [draining the grief](#) to get to a step toward emotional acceptance. But when it came, I wasn't really ready for it.

“We cannot but feel the pangs of grief—God will never blame us for our tears, but in our deepest afflictions our faith should not fail, and the songs of joy should not be choked.” J. R. Miller, *The Ministry of Comfort*

Honestly, the day the tears didn't show up bothered me. I just wasn't ready for it. Tears were new companions, now absent. Healing was on the horizon.

Grief brings strange companions. Pain. Loss. Tears. Healing. Recovery. Joy.

“That was always the way of grief: laughter and tears, joy and sorrow.” Sheldon Vanauken, *A Severe Mercy*

Strange. Surprising.

The day the tears didn't show up was a mixed bag. It was sad. It was glad. It was confusing. But it came. I didn't like that day. But I also liked that day. Hope. Recovery. Healing.

Pain and joy came together the day the tears didn't show up, a simultaneous collision.

“... some of God's truths are knocked into us by hard blows, and some lessons are spelled out through eyes cleansed with tears.”
Theodore Cuyler, *God's Light on Dark Clouds*

“Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am languishing; heal me, O Lord, for my bones are troubled.” Psalm 6:2

[Comments](#)

Kim's Faith During Loss

When it comes to loss, losing Kim was not my first experience. It is by far the most difficult loss I have faced, but I have been through a few experiences of loss. Kim and I lost her brother, Scott. Later, we lost our first granddaughter a mere two weeks before her expected delivery. Losing little Scarlett Ray was heartrending. We needed to stand like “oaks of righteousness.”

And Kim did stand firm. She expressed faith during our loss.

“The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; to grant to those who mourn in Zion—to give them a beautiful headdress instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit; that they may be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that he may be glorified.” Isaiah 61:1–3

During loss, everyone plays their part in comforting one another. It’s organic and relational. When our family lost Scarlett Ray, Kim was broken. We were all broken. I’m reminded of the verse in Ecclesiastes 3 when I think of how we served and comforted one another.

“Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up! Again, if two lie together, they keep warm, but

how can one keep warm alone? And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him—a threefold cord is not quickly broken.” Ecclesiastes 3:9–12

Kim definitely played her part. God’s Word encouraged her, and she shared from Isaiah 61:1–3—the passage above—with all of us. Truth such as this passage shared in the middle of a painful experience undergirds sufferers. Remember, every experience of loss is a reverberation of the ultimate brokenness of the world. Likewise, ultimate rescue, redemption, and reconciliation echoes into every loss with hope. Phrases such as “bind up the brokenhearted” and “comfort all who mourn” met our family with the ministry we needed in a difficult time. One phrase came alive for us and delivered a sliver of hope. We longed for “a beautiful headdress” and “oil of gladness.”

“... to give them a beautiful headdress instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning...” Isaiah 61:3

We were overcome with grief, but he promised gladness would return. The gospel takes the long view, and that’s especially important when the short-term view is difficult. We embraced his Word, and we held on tight. It’s amazing how the truth of God’s promises can act as a bastion against the onslaught.

“... God’s comfort comes to his people—not in the lifting off of their weight of sorrow or pain, but in strengthening them for victorious endurance.” J. R. Miller, *The Ministry of Comfort*

And God used Kim to encourage us then. Today, I’m reminded of her ministry to us then. And her trust in God’s Word encourages me now. Kim walked by faith through the heartbreaking loss of little Scarlett. And Kim was right. God helped us all recover, and he has blessed Emily and Michael with sweet memories of Scarlett and three beautiful children later.

God has given us a beautiful headdress instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning. Peace and steadfast love have been our companions. And we’ve also been blessed with new blessings in our family. Violet. Beckett. Oliver. Owen. Camden. Grayson. These are just a few obvious gifts of gladness. Need I say more?

Kim's faith strengthened me then, and her example of faith strengthens me now. And I'm watching, once again, for a beautiful headdress and oil of gladness.

“The Lord redeems the life of his servants; none of those who take refuge in him will be condemned.” Psalm 34:22

[Comments](#)

Can You Prepare for Loss?

“For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it?” Luke 14:28

A few months into grief, I planned to go to Durham to visit Paul’s family. My visit would coincide with a monthly accountability group of younger Christian businessmen from a cross-section of churches in the area. Paul, my son, is a part of this group, and he asked me if I’d like to go with him later in the month when I visited. I heartily said I would love to go with him. Later, after he had coffee with the leader, he asked if I’d be willing to talk with the guys about facing loss. I agreed.

In advance, they posed a question they wanted to discuss: “Can you prepare for loss?” They asked, “Is there any way you can prepare for a tragic loss such as you’ve experienced?” I began to think about the question before I attended the meeting. I had an answer for them.

Yes and no.

There’s no way to plan for what may happen one day. Sudden loss. Loss after a long illness. A car accident. Murder. Or natural death at the end of a good, long life. No one knows, and so, you cannot prepare for your specific loss.

But as I thought about it, you can prepare for loss. Suffice it to say that my parents, leaders in my life, and the way I choose to live my life have prepared me to face loss. My belief in Christ serves as a foundation and thus has prepared me. When loss invaded, I landed on a previously built foundation.

“... how we prepare before we come into a crisis has significant impact on how we go through it.” Laurie Wilcox, *My Worst Year, My Best Year*

“Those who take time to increasingly come to know and trust God as he truly is, are laying the foundation of a life without lack.” Dallas Willard, *Life Without Lack*

Further, I prepared by suffering with Kim through the loss of her brother, David Scott Plumblee. I learned how to walk with someone who was mourning, and I learned how to mourn myself. His illness was a long and difficult journey. Heaven grew a little sweeter and a lot more real during our loss of Scott.

I also prepared by grieving the loss of Scarlett Ray Joiner, our first grandchild. When we lost Scarlett, it was a sudden and heartbreaking loss. Surprise and shock overtake you and your thoughts seek to make sense of the varied dimensions or dynamics. I knew my daughter was under assault emotionally, physically, and spiritually. Kim and I were cast into our own despair. Add to that the need to make travel arrangements. Or better said, we had to change our already-scheduled flights for two weeks away to go hold our first granddaughter. I had to mourn this loss also with Michael, my son-in-law. Then, I had to communicate with my sons, Paul and Trevor, throughout the experience. We cried on the phone together.

Experience is a great teacher. These real experiences of loss help to prepare you for the next loss.

So it turns out, you can prepare for loss. Ultimately, as you prepare for life, you are also preparing for death and loss. How you live your life matters. Walking by faith is important. Stand firm on a solid foundation in life, and it will carry over into the pain when, inevitably, you are forced to face loss.

“According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it.” 1 Corinthians 3:10

[Comments](#)

Life Is a Series of Preparatory Goodbyes

During my loss, I realized that life is a series of many temporary goodbyes. Those experiences prepare us for a more permanent, lasting goodbye. Think with me about all the temporary goodbyes we endure. Sometimes, those goodbyes are traumatic.

“And there was much weeping on the part of all; they embraced Paul and kissed him, being sorrowful most of all because of the word he had spoken, that they would not see his face again.” Acts 20:37–38

For example, a newborn cries uncontrollably when separated from the mother’s arms. Then while still very young, and a babysitter would come in the door, a baby knows the parents were saying goodbye. Even though it’s only a couple of hours, a toddler doesn’t know that and panics. There are also those weekly experiences of being dropped off at the nursery at church. These are just short separations, hours at the most.

“The only relief I can find is in the certainty that this life is not the end, but simply the preparatory school for the real and the endless life that is beyond.” Theodore Cuyler, *God’s Light on Dark Clouds*

Then there are the times when parents go off for a weekend to get away. Or Mom or Dad goes on a business trip. Mom goes for a women’s retreat. Dad goes away for a men’s retreat. Then when older, a child says goodbye when going off to school every day between first and twelfth grades. And then a young adult goes off to college. The goodbyes get more difficult, and the periods of separation are more enduring. Then there’s that question: “Who gives this woman?” And then that Scriptural instruction in Genesis

2:24 where a man is said to leave his father and mother. Goodbyes are exchanged for even longer periods of time.

Then, children are born, and the cycle of goodbyes begins, once again. The series of goodbyes comes full circle in this training, this preparation in learning to say goodbye.

Life is a series of preparatory goodbyes.

“The sorest misfortune that could come to anyone would be never to die.” J. R. Miller, *The Ministry of Comfort*

How do you prepare for these goodbyes? Beyond these preparatory experiences, the greatest grounding is to be in relationship with God himself. His Spirit is our constant Comforter. Companion. His Word is our firm foundation. His Son’s birth, life, death, burial, and resurrection provide hope in life’s good and bad situations, in each of the goodbyes. Dependable. Consistent.

Especially for the hardest ones.

The gospel is the power of God. He and his work on the Cross are the reason we can mourn, or say goodbye, with hope. We can mourn with hope through the goodbyes. Why? Because resurrection looms large in the face of all our goodbyes. There is a greeting in eternity awaiting us with no more goodbyes.

No more goodbyes.

Remind yourself, through every separation, there is a better story beyond the seen and temporal goodbyes in your current story.

Life is a series of goodbyes that leads to an eternal welcome.

“Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock.”

Matthew 7:24

[Comments](#)

Welcoming Renewed Empathy and Sympathy for Others

You never know what journey other people are traveling; therefore, be kind. It's biblical to be caring and attentive to others.

“Be ye kind...” Ephesians 5:32

As a result of loss, I've learned to be more observant. I have a new radar, thanks to grief. I have elevated levels of empathy and sympathy in my system. It was forced on me.

But I like it.

There's a response to grief in the Christian community that if stated abruptly might come out as, “Have faith. Be strong. You know the end of the story. All is well.” Another way to say it might be, “Keep a stiff upper lip.” But knowing truth—the end of the story—and having empathy and sympathy are not mutually exclusive.

Case in point: Jesus himself. He wept over Lazarus.

“Jesus wept.” John 11:3

Take note of Jesus emoting over his friend, Lazarus. He hates death. Jesus hates death so much he came to overcome it with resurrection. A complete victory. But here's the amazing thing to me. Jesus cried, broken over Lazarus, and he knew everything was about to be changed, resolved. He knew he was about to bring Lazarus back to life. And yet, he still wept over the loss. He was overcome with his own loss and the loss experienced by Mary and Martha. He was feeling the loss brought into the world by sin. Loss touches Jesus' heart even though he has overcome it. Forever.

It's okay—even good—that I cry over my own loss, and it's also good that I cry with others. Let grief do its work to renew empathy and sympathy in your life.

“People who suffer want people who have suffered to tell them there is hope.” Steve Saint, *Suffering and the Sovereignty of God*

Steven Curtis Chapman released a whole album about grief, mourning, and hope after the tragic loss of their daughter. One morning on a walk I was struck by his song, *A Little More Time to Love*. In my own loss and grief, I realized I had a little more time to love. I had a little more time to invest. I was left to serve and influence. I have a little more time to employ empathy and sympathy. I was left because, like Paul, it's better that I remain. For now. There is a question I need to face: Will I fan the flame of renewed empathy and sympathy?

Chapman says it so well:

“There's a day that is coming, a day that never will end. There in the light of His glory, everything broken will be whole again. And this will be the celebration, all of creation longs for. And while we're waiting for that day to come, we've got a little more time to love. Just a little more time to love, we've got just a little more time to love.” Steven Curtis Chapman, “A Little More Time to Love”

While we grieve over loss, we do not grieve without hope. We do not grieve without purpose. We've got a little more time to love. Facing loss can produce great fruit. If my waiting before God in humility produces empathy and sympathy for others, I must put them to work.

Loss gives birth to empathy and sympathy for others.

“I waited patiently for the Lord; he inclined to me and heard my cry. He drew me up from the pit of destruction, out of the miry bog, and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure. He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God. Many will see and fear and put their trust in the Lord.” Psalms 40:1–3

[Comments](#)

Understanding During Loss Is Not a Prerequisite for Worship

“... How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!” Romans 11:33

During loss, a spotlight is shined upon God and his ways. That is, if you're looking. Yet, there is so much I simply do not understand about our loss or God's ways. As Gordon Fort said at Kim's funeral, "This is a mystery."

I'm okay with the mystery now.

“God moves in a mysterious way his wonders to perform... Judge not the Lord by feeble sense, but trust him for his grace; behind a frowning providence he hides a smiling face... God is his own interpreter, and he will make it plain.” William Cowper, “God Moves in a Mysterious Way”

We can ask the “Why” question all day. But understanding everything is not a prerequisite to worship. In fact, understanding everything brings God down to a level that is not worthy of worship. Does that make sense? Any God we can fully understand, quantify, explain, and put in our boxes is not much of a God.

His judgments are, indeed, unsearchable. It doesn't mean we don't seek him. We do. But searching his judgments is a lifelong journey.

“You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart.” Jeremiah 29:13

Note we will seek and find him when we seek with our whole heart. Seeking after him is different than seeking out his judgments. Worship is not contingent on understanding his decisions. Worship doesn't include an "if-and-then" clause—if I understand, then I will worship. No! Worship is not conditioned upon his wisdom lining up with my desires, wishes, preferences, or hopes. His judgments are unsearchable, but he is searchable. And he can be found.

“But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.” Matthew 6:33–34

It's interesting that we don't have more days filled with trouble than we do. We live in a broken and fallen world. I know of a few days in my life with trouble sufficient for the day. Through it all, we are given grace sufficient to lift our eyes to seek God's kingdom and righteousness. No need to be anxious.

No need to anxiously worry about his ways. His ways are, after all, inscrutable. They are mysterious and unfathomable. He is knowable yet his ways are unknowable fully. He's beyond description. And yet, we seek.

“You have multiplied... your wondrous deeds and your thoughts toward us... I will proclaim and tell of them, yet they are more than can be told.” Psalm 40:5

Mark Altrogge wrote the song, “I Stand in Awe.” Every time I hear it or sing it, I hear it with a South African accent. I believe that is the first place I heard and sang that song. Altrogge captures this thought well that we worship Someone we do not fully understand:

“You are beautiful beyond description, too marvelous for words. Too wonderful for comprehension, like nothing ever seen or heard. Who can grasp Your infinite wisdom? Who can fathom the depth of Your love? You are beautiful beyond description, majesty, enthroned above. And I stand, I stand in awe of You; I

stand, I stand in awe of You. Holy God, to whom all praise is due, I stand in awe of You.” Mark Altrogge, “I Stand in Awe”

Understanding is not a prerequisite to lifting our hearts and voices in worship. In fact, not fully understanding should inspire us to bow and tremble in silence before him. As Ligon Duncan has penned, “Our worship is ultimately rooted in his character, not our circumstances... We must never interpret God’s character by our circumstances. We must instead interpret our circumstances by God’s character.”

“Worship the Lord in the splendor of holiness; tremble before him, all the earth!” Psalm 96:9

**“... ponder in your own hearts on your beds, and be silent.”
Psalm 4:4**

[Comments](#)

Recognizing True and Deep Value

“But for Adam there was not found a helper fit for him.... Then the man said, ‘This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.’ Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.” Genesis 2:20, 23–24

Kim was a genuine servant. She did so much for others. And for me. The duties she or any person can do for another—cook, clean, wash, or serve in any way—can slowly but surely be replaced. You can learn to do new chores for yourself. You really can learn. It’s not fun or convenient, but it can be done. In fact, I wrote this journal entry on a personal retreat in a cabin where I had just made toast and eggs for my own breakfast.

Even I can learn to embrace new duties.

However, what I’ve learned is that the things that Kim did for me are not what I miss the most. I miss her. I miss her companionship. I miss walking through life with her by my side. I miss debriefing the day together.

I miss her presence and not her duties done for me.

“... ‘and the two shall become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two but one flesh.” Mark 10:8

Facing loss can reveal true and deep value. Oneness. Companionship. Friendship. Walking together. Not things. Not duties done. Again, I miss her presence.

There’s an important lesson here. I realized it’s very tempting to look at what God has done for us in Jesus in the same way as when we look at what another person does for us. And it’s true God has done marvelous things for us. Just look around and see the created wonder. It’s all a beautiful gift.

Look into his Word and find marvelous truths of redemption and salvation. He has done so much for us. Ultimate gifts of grace. Look for his day-by-day provision. “Give us this day our daily bread” in *The Lord’s Prayer* is more a grateful declaration than a request for me. It’s an acknowledgment. He does give us what we need for each day. I’ve learned on my unwanted journey that he faithfully supplies. He has done so much for us. His giving is praiseworthy, and gratefulness should flow from our lips. He truly has done great things.

But greater than all the things he has done for us is this central truth: He has given us himself. Not just his marvelous deeds. Jesus became flesh and dwelt among us. Dwelt. Then he sent us his Spirit to indwell us. He is our constant companion. The hymn writer proclaims, “What a Friend we have in Jesus.” And it’s true. He’s a moment-by-moment friend.

Companionship. Not duties done.

His friendship promises true and deep value. His companionship is beyond any other gifts that come from his hand.

“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.” John 1:14

[Comments](#)

Deeds Over Relationship Is Lawlessness

**“But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.”
Philippians 3:7–8**

Be careful that you don't view your life as transactional. What can my wife or my husband do for me? What can God do for me today? What can my church do for me? What do I do for them?

Life is not deeds devoid of relationship.

I visited a colleague's son's church while on a retreat in North Carolina. Chris Dillon, lead pastor, warned each of us against a “genie-in-a-bottle” Jesus. He cautioned us against a “tooth-fairy” Jesus. He stated frankly and correctly, “We come to Jesus to get Jesus. He is our highest treasure.” He gives himself not solely his gifts.

Chris, who was just beginning a series on the parables of Jesus, was preaching about the “sower and the dirt” as he called it. When he got to the third soil, we read the following passage:

“As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful.” Matthew 13:22

Beware of cares and riches. They are deceptive. Are we tempted to come to Jesus for what he does and not who he is? Are we tempted to focus on the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches? Do I choose Jesus for what he does for me? Do I come to him for things? For stuff?

Deeper still, do I expect him to embrace me for what I do for him? We do not come to him for what he does for us nor should we expect to be

accepted by him for what we do.

This is especially important when facing loss.

“On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’” Matthew 7:22

Indeed, it’s not what we do for him. Even mighty deeds. There are no works we could ever do that would qualify us to be redeemed in his sight. Even casting out demons. This line of thinking is an affront to the gospel. It’s an affront to the Son of God who gave his life to redeem us. He gave his life to us and not just his deeds done for us.

“And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’” Matthew 7:23

His is a serious declaration: Deeds over relationship is lawlessness. If I come to Jesus based on works and not relationship, I come empty-handed in his economy. He died to bring us into a relationship with himself. True companionship. God came to walk with us not for us.

“... and they shall call his name Immanuel (which means, God with us).” Matthew 1:23

God with us. Relationship. Companionship. With us.

Not a genie or a tooth fairy. Not simply for us. He is not our employee nor our servant. Even in the face of loss.

And this makes sense. Relationship, as a higher value, is true in the blessed marriage I enjoyed, and it’s [more true and still deeper](#) in my relationship with Jesus. Jesus told us that the greater, deeper, and truer value is in knowing him.

Deeds over relationship is lawlessness.

“This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.” Matthew 5:32

Comments

Why Grace Is Preferable Over Fairness

“Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?”

Romans 11:35

It makes perfect sense to wrestle with the randomness of loss—no rhyme or reason. “Everything happens for a reason,” it is said. But, I’m not so sure. Romans 8:28 teaches that God causes all things to work together for good—with an important caveat. However, Paul doesn’t present God as some causal architect, orchestrating every good and bad thing to happen. Instead, God is presented as someone who causes all things—whether good or bad—to work together for good. Difficult circumstances can tests us, yes, but God doesn’t tempt us (James 1:13).

I understand God’s omnipotence, omnipresence, and omniscience, but not one of those truths means he is *omni-causal*. I thought I made that word up until I searched online. Omni-causality is a teaching that God is the impetus or cause behind everything. *Everything*. But his power, presence, and knowledge do not mean that he is causing everything as if we are robots in some game God is playing.

James teaches us that we are without excuse due to evil within us. Sometimes bad things happen because we or the world are evil. James says, “... each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire” (James 1:14). We cannot blame evil on God. Evil, and the subsequent pain it brought, is a result of the Fall. Evil is in the world, and evil is in us. God does not cause all things in every way. But I’m in over my head now with this sort of theological wrestling.

When you face loss, important and weighty theological issues come to the forefront. Questions swirl in your mind. And simple or assertively delivered explanations frankly do not suffice. Pain is not assuaged by information.

Therefore, stand in reverent humility before God. Bring no accusation before him.

People often argue that God is either unloving or powerless when bad things happen. The argument goes that if he is powerful enough to stop something but doesn't, it just proves he isn't loving as he claims. He didn't intervene because he didn't care. Or if he can't stop suffering, he isn't powerful as he claims. He cared and wanted to stop the tragedy, but he just couldn't win the day. At least not this time.

But, it's just not that simple.

God created the world good. Sin messed everything up. Some things are just bad. God is sovereign, yes, but brokenness is a result of the Fall. Sin entered and messed everything up. Random loss, however, can be embraced with the knowledge that God will redeem it for good. Mysterious but true.

So, maybe God is *omni-redemptive*. I definitely made that word up.

In my grief, I recognized God is *omni-redemptive* over *omni-causal*. I chose grace over fairness. By *omni-redemptive* I mean he can bring redemption out of any circumstance. He's that good. He's sovereign over all. So, all things work together for good.

Admittedly, maybe I'm a simpleton. But in a fair world, I did not deserve Kim Plumblee's love. In a fair world, no one deserves salvation. We deserve eternal separation and punishment. Before I make an argument on the basis of fairness, I need to follow my line of reasoning to its undesirable conclusion. I have no legs to stand on if I claim that my loss was unfair. I do not want fairness, and I will not accuse God of being unfair. What I do know is he is able to redeem every good and bad thing for his glory and my good.

I trust his grace over fairness.

“For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?” Romans 11:34

I bring nothing to God; I am a debtor. I am in need. I am defenseless apart from the gift of redemption. To choose fairness over grace would be ludicrous.

For now, I resonate with the disciples who were confused when Jesus was speaking in figures of speech. Finally, he had to explain and “His disciples said, ‘Ah, now you are speaking plainly and not using figurative

speech! Now we know that you know all things and do not need anyone to question you...” (John 16:29–30).

I agree, also, with Job that these are things too wonderful for me. My reasoning hides counsel. My utterances are without understanding. His ways are too wonderful. If I make a stand on fairness, I need to join Job and repent in dust and ashes (Job 42:1–6).

I write this rambling perspective with humility and reverence. And from the depths of grief on a foundation of faith. I simply do not fully understand his sovereignty. Like Moses, I take my shoes off on holy ground. It is too wonderful for me. Yet, I embrace it by faith.

But for now, I choose grace over fairness.

“... now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes.” Job 42:6

[Comments](#)

One Example of Selfless, Spirit-Filled Love

“... God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.” Romans 5:5

I loved Kim Davis, but I couldn’t help myself. She drew love out of me. She lived lovingly because she was naturally a loving and nurturing woman. She was a servant. However, her love was deeper and much more profound than simply natural love.

And so is your love and my love if born of the Spirit.

Kim came to faith in Christ, and I was one beneficiary of the work Christ did in her. I am a man who lived with a woman who had fruit born of the love of God. She loved as Christ loved. She selflessly served me, my children, and so many others. God’s love was poured into her heart through the Spirit who had been given to her. And she spilled that love out onto so many people.

“And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.” Colossians 3:14

A week or so following her funeral, one of my children said, “We knew she took care of us; we didn’t know she took care of so many other people.” We were all blessed by the testimonies we heard.

“Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.” Romans 13:10

I can attest that Kim never took herself very seriously. I mean, in her estimation, she was unimportant and not a big deal. She seemed to think little of herself, and she thought a lot about other people. She found purpose in serving. And love poured out of her.

And I lived with her. What a privilege.

“Give thanks to the God of heaven, for his steadfast love endures forever.” Psalm 136:26

“Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” Ephesians 5:1–2

Now for my lesson learned: Kim wasn't a big deal. She was simply a recipient of God's love. She did take one thing very seriously. She desired to be a channel of blessing, a vessel. She wanted God's love to flow unimpeded into and through her life. She chose selflessness to bless others. She chose to love. Several friends and family members have said that Kim loved fiercely.

But you and I have the same opportunity if we have the same faith given to Kim as a gift. We simply have to exert effort to build on the gift we've been given.

“... make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and... knowledge, and... self-control, and... steadfastness, and... godliness, and... brotherly affection, and... love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For whoever lacks these qualities is so nearsighted that he is blind, having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins.” 2 Peter 1:5–9

I don't want to be so nearsighted that I am blind. I don't want to be ineffective or unfruitful. I don't want to forget the gift of cleansing from my former sins. I want to supplement my faith with all these qualities, especially “... brotherly affection with love.”

In fact, the fruit of the Spirit is love, among other things. Love is a fruit that is born of the Spirit's indwelling. I want to be a channel of that same love just like Kim was a channel. Her selfless, Spirit-filled love stands as one example to be mimicked by any Christ-follower.

Lord, let your love flow unimpeded into and through us, also.

“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. Galatians 5:23–24

[Comments](#)

Stripping Away the Idol of Identity

“For God alone, O my soul, wait in silence, for my hope is from him.” Psalm 62:5

I am now single. That was excruciating to say after over thirty-five years. Worse, I’m a widower. I was Kim’s husband. I was a married man. No more. A huge part of my identity has been changed in an instant. One moment, I’m a blissfully married man. The next moment, I’m a single man, and thirty-five years of identity is altered.

I came face-to-face with the idolatry of identity.

“Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry.” 1 Corinthians 10:14

I wrote this entry some eighteen months ago. I had no idea my dad would join me on this unwanted journey the very week I released this entry from my journal. Fallout from the fall continues its march. This week, after nearly sixty-four years of blissful—and I do mean blissful—marriage, he lost his wife, my mother.

How easy it is for me—or any of us—to put hope in any other identity. Our jobs, our children, our family, our degrees, or our talents can be given more importance than is appropriate. A girlfriend, a boyfriend, or a spouse can take the place of God. Yes, anything or anyone can become an idol.

“For all the gods of the peoples are worthless idols, but the Lord made the heavens.” Psalm 96:5

“When you cry out, let your collection of idols deliver you! The wind will carry them all off, a breath will take them away.” Isaiah 57:13

Like idols of old, anything that we embrace as a substitute for God in our lives will disappoint us. Our hope should be in God and in God alone. He alone is worthy of such honor and trust from us. Further, this tension is about worship. Do I worship the creature? R. C. Sproul has rightly warned us: “To worship the creature instead of the Creator is the essence of idolatry.”

**“And now, O Lord, for what do I wait? My hope is in you.”
Psalm 39:7**

Our hope is in God; it is not in any other would-be idol. Nothing in our lives is worthy of being elevated to such a level of worship. I must refuse to be deceived, tricked, or tempted. Anything or anyone taking the place on the throne of God is an idol. We are to have no image ahead of God in our hearts.

“You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the Lord your God am a jealous God...” Exodus 20:5

God is a jealous God, and he will not allow any god before him in our hearts. No other idol can be substituted for the worth of our God.

There are no other messiahs offering redemption but our God. No good things—job, spouse, children, gifts, skills, or possessions—can take that honored place in our lives. We place our faith in Christ, not in any other gift in our lives.

**“... for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith.”
Galatians 3:26**

I am a child of God. I am a creation of God. My identity is in him. My identity is not in any other aspect of my temporal life.

I must strip away the idol of identity.

“Little children, keep yourselves from idols.” 1 John 5:21

“But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.” Ephesians 2:13

[Comments](#)

Lamenting Unfinished Sentences

“... being sorrowful most of all because of the word he had spoken, that they would not see his face again.” Acts 20:38

“... death is no respecter of love.” Sheldon Vanauken, *A Severe Mercy*

There were conversations yet to have. We simply weren't finished talking. Getting to know someone so deeply, becoming one, produces great joy and meaning. Especially as love matures. The other side of getting to know someone is to become known deeply—and still to be loved deeply. No conditions. Grace. Acceptance. Oneness.

Oneness is real, and separation is heartbreaking.

“Loss creates a barren present, as if one were sailing on a vast sea of nothingness. Those who suffer loss live suspended between the past for which they long and a future for which they hope.” Jerry Sittser, *A Grace Disguised: How the Soul Grows Through Loss*

Yes, there were conversations yet to enjoy. Sometimes, in a conversation, I could finish Kim's sentences. And she could finish mine. There were times after a long period of silence that Kim would say something like, “You know what?” And I would answer “Yes...” and I would say something to her that she was about to say to me. She would look at me, her mouth would drop open, and she would emphatically ask, “How did you know I was going to say that?”

Kim was gobsmacked.

I've been waiting to use the word gobsmacked for a long time. Kim loved the word gobsmacked. I have been looking for a good opportunity to use gobsmacked somewhere in a sentence in one of my entries. While the

literal meaning is to be utterly astounded or astonished, the word gobsmacked just makes the point with gusto. It's a word with no exclamation point needed.

For me to know what Kim was thinking or about to say shouldn't have surprised her. It shouldn't surprise any of us either. We spent the majority of our lives walking together. We loved each other. We invested in each other. We spent time with each other. We knew each other deeply. We were one.

“Then the man said, ‘This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.’ Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.” Genesis 2:23–24

God's design for oneness in marriage is so multifaceted and multidimensional. It is so much more than simple physical oneness. Most certainly, there is the God-given gift of physical oneness. However, there's also emotional oneness. There is oneness spiritually. There's oneness in life purpose. Over the years you begin to enjoy the same things. It's not uniformity; it's growing together in oneness.

You even finish each other's sentences until they are gone and you can't anymore. I lament unfinished sentences.

“Your mind fluctuates from being blank to thinking again and again about the one you lost.” H. Norman Wright, *Experiencing Grief*

I miss Kim finishing my sentences. I miss surprising her by finishing her sentences or even knowing what she's thinking before she even hints at it. Oneness is like that. What a gift of grace from God!

I liked it when Kim was gobsmacked.

No one's counting, but I just used the word gobsmacked seven times in one entry. Kim would be gobsmacked. Eight times.

“He who loves his wife loves himself.” Ephesians 5:28

Comments

Proving the Discipline of Faith

“But I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that day what has been entrusted to me.” 2 Timothy 1:12

I have learned that faith is a gift; and yet, it is also a discipline.

First, faith is a gift. We are illumined by Scripture that faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God. We are instructed to have sober judgment and not to think too highly of ourselves because grace and faith are gifts, and—as Romans 12:3 reminds us—we receive “... each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.”

God has assigned even my faith to me. It is a gift given to me. I’ve received it apart from works.

“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God...” Ephesians 2:8

But, again, I have also learned that faith is a discipline. I have had to exercise my faith. I have to practice my faith. In a sense, I have to prove my faith. Faith’s opposite is sight. Sometimes sight is okay, but sometimes it is really not okay.

Immediately, on February 18, 2019, sight became an adversary in my life. Everything in my life’s line-of-sight was horribly unimaginable. Undesirable. Sight was not my friend. I recoiled at what I saw. Sight, in an instant, became my enemy.

“We may allow our mind to dwell only on material things, and keep our eyes on the narrow patch of earth on which we walk in our daily rounds. Or we may persist in lifting our thoughts to

things that are unseen and eternal.” J. R. Miller, *The Ministry of Comfort*

Like a parent forces a child to lock eyes by cupping their little face, I had to submit to God to allow him to hold my face, turn it away from the “sight” invading or flooding my “eyes,” and point me to faith’s proactive, disciplined engagement in the middle of my unwanted circumstances. In a sense, I was at war. It was an unseen war, but it was waged in my thoughts, emotions, and choices.

So many aspects to our beliefs are theoretical. No less true. But oftentimes theoretical. It’s why we practice our faith. By practicing the discipline of faith, we are in spiritual shape. We are ready and equipped to prove our faith in a moment’s notice. We are subject to the effects of the fall, and faith is a necessity. We may be clever and advanced, but we are powerless to change the impact of the brokenness delivered by the fall.

“Man will never by his scientific skill erase from earth the fruits of his transgression.” Vance Havner, *Though I Walk Through the Valley*

With every tragedy or loss I hear about, I am reminded that fallout from the fall continues its march onward. From my experience, the need for the readiness of our faith is crucially important when the gift of faith transitions to the discipline of faith. We must remember that the repetitive march of loss born of brokenness is a march with numbered days. Temporal. So, we walk by disciplined faith.

We each have to receive the gift of faith, but we have to exercise and prove the discipline of faith.

“What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?” James 2:14

[Comments](#)

Watch for God's Sufficient Grace

“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.” Ephesians 2:8–9

I believed in and rested in the grace of God before Kim's death. I am no different from anyone else; I needed grace. Grace, by definition, is receiving what you don't deserve. It's one thing to receive mercy—not getting what you deserve; it's altogether different, to receive grace. Mercy would be enough for me. Avoiding eternal punishment is good. But God, in his graciousness, delivers us into the kingdom of his Son. We are reconciled and given salvation by God.

Grace, while amazing, is offensive to many because grace assumes our depravity. We are sinful, offensive to a holy God. Further, we are wholly unable to rescue ourselves. We bring nothing to bear that might make us deserving of salvation. We are spiritually impotent. Also, grace is the result of a high price paid by Jesus. Our sin is so offensive and our condition is so helpless, our redemption had to be provided by the death of Jesus. Grace is, indeed, amazing.

Undeserved but lavishly provided.

**“He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son...”
Colossians 1:13**

The gift of grace is important in order to understand the nature and goodness of God. His grace delivers gifts to us which we do not deserve. Salvation. Freedom from the power of sin. Eternity with Christ. Redemption. Transference into the kingdom of his Son.

“We have been changed by his grace, are being changed by his grace, and will be changed by his grace.” Tim Lane and Paul David Tripp, *How People Change*

Beyond grace that changes us—past and future—there’s another important aspect to this gift of grace in our present moments. In his devotional book, *New Morning Mercies*, Paul David Tripp states, “Future grace always carries with it the promise of present grace.” Grace is needed in the face of difficulty. Some days are simply worse than others. Paul had a thorn in the flesh. On one hand the thorn was a messenger to instruct and train Paul. It was sent or allowed to keep Paul from temptation from becoming conceited, arrogant. Self-sufficient. He even pleaded that the thorn might be removed from him.

“But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.” 2 Corinthians 12:9–10

Notice again, the thorn wasn’t removed. Relief from pain was not given. Instead, contentment was added to Paul’s chaos. It came through grace, sufficient grace. Power in weakness. Moment-by-moment provision. Marvelous grace. As Julia H. Johnston so masterfully captured in her hymn, “Grace Greater Than Our Sin,” “Grace that is greater—yes, grace untold—points to the Refuge, the mighty Cross. Marvelous, infinite, matchless grace, freely bestowed on all who believe!” Grace is a refuge in moments of our lives. Grace is a constant gift—regardless of how good or how difficult your life is at the moment. Sufficient for all times.

“What gift of grace is Jesus my redeemer, There is no more for heaven now to give...” Jeremy Camp, “Christ in Me”

Here’s my testimony: His grace is sufficient. His grace provides power in weakness. Yes, it’s a mystery. It’s paradoxical. I’d go so far as to say it’s

even weird, difficult to understand. Paul can be content with weakness, attacks, and even tragedy.

And we can too.

His grace really is sufficient in the moment-by-moment experiences of life.

“... and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.” 1 Timothy 1:14

“Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” Hebrews 4:16

[Comments](#)

Open Your Eyes to Every Morning Mercies

I believed and rested in the mercy of God before Kim's death. Make no mistake—before a holy God, I stand in need of mercy like every other person. Mercy, by definition, is not receiving what you deserve. Mercy is punishment withheld, a gift from a just God.

“What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means! For he says to Moses, ‘I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.’” Romans 9:14–15

Let's be candid. You and I deserve to absorb the consequences of our sin. According to the Bible, we deserve eternal separation from God. Sin entered our world and infected every human. It takes a minimal amount of self-awareness to acknowledge this obvious reality.

I laugh as I write this because I am watching two of my children raise their children. Five beautiful grandchildren. As I write, they are all five years of age and under. Let's just say, I don't have to convince two of my children of original sin or the fall of man. I don't have to even make the case. My adorable grandsons and granddaughter were born into sin.

Adorable. Precious. But infected by sin. In need of mercy. Praise God because we know mercy triumphs over judgment (James 2:13). That truth is liberating.

“Holy, holy, holy! Merciful and mighty!” Reginald Heber, “Holy, Holy, Holy”

The need for mercy to shield a sinner from the eternal judgment and separation he deserves is an important truth to understand and embrace. God's mercy rescues us from receiving what we deserve.

“There is no sin or misery but God has a mercy for it. He has a multitude of mercies of every kind.” Thomas Goodwin, *The Heart of Christ*

However, there’s another aspect to mercy. In a fallen world, we face many difficulties. Some days are worse than others. There’s persecution. There’s mistreatment. There’s loss. There are various kinds of difficulty. This is a hard world to face at times. Brokenness can cause a mess. And so, God promises to show up every morning with new mercies. Reprieve. Release. Renewal. Reset. New every morning. Never come to an end.

“Remember my affliction and my wanderings, the wormwood and the gall! My soul continually remembers it and is bowed down within me. But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.” Leviticus 3:19–23

Waves of mercy show up on the shore of real need every single morning. No exception. Mercy is like manna. You don’t need yesterday’s mercy tomorrow. Because of his enduring love, he supplies new mercy for a new day. Like clockwork. Put it at the top of your every-single-day-of-every-single-month-of-every-single-year calendar.

“... in a world where everything is in some state of decay, God’s mercies never grow old. ... Formfitted for the challenges, disappointments, sufferings, temptations, and struggles with sin within and without are the mercies of our Lord.” Paul David Tripp, *New Morning Mercies*

Here’s my testimony: His steadfast love does not cease. Ever. His mercies do not end and really are new every morning. Great is his faithfulness to me. Great is his faithfulness to you, too.

New mercies really are new every morning. So, open your eyes.

“But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ...” Ephesians 2:4–5

“The clouds ye so much dread are big with mercy, and shall break in blessings on your head.” William Cowper, “God Moves in a Mysterious Way”

[Comments](#)

Rest in Christ's Surpassing Peace

“Steadfast love and faithfulness meet; righteousness and peace kiss each other.” Psalm 85:10

I believed in the peace of God before Kim's death. I am a beneficiary of peace that is birthed by mercy and grace. Peace results when I avoid what I deserve—experiencing mercy instead—and I receive what I don't deserve—experiencing grace instead. Come to grips with and understand mercy and grace and you experience peace. Simple and profound.

“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.” John 14:27

Peace is a gift given to guilty sinners who experience mercy and grace. Guilt is overcome by peace. But again, eternal or pervasive peace is foundational and is delivered upon salvation. It's a once-and-for-all-time gift.

However, there is another dynamic to peace, a daily peace. We live in a fallen world. There are tough days. There are illnesses. There are persecutions. And there's a peace-in-the-storm kind of peace for every day. It rises as a fortress around your broken heart. That kind of peace passes perceptivity. It surpasses your understanding. Miraculous.

**“And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”
Philippians 4:7**

“But the meek shall inherit the land and delight themselves in abundant peace.” Psalms 37:11

That kind of peace stands as a guard over your heart and mind. Waves may crash in upon you. Death of a loved one. Loss of a job. Injury. Diagnosis. Accident. Despair rises before you and somehow—a miracle of God’s mercy and grace—peace encamps around your heart. You simply have to press into the proffered peace. In his book, *Though I Walk Through the Valley*, Vance Havner writes, “God has provided a garrison for his people to protect heart and mind.” It is beautiful and beyond comprehension.

“All your children shall be taught by the Lord, and great shall be the peace of your children.” Isaiah 54:13

R. C. Sproul has said, “He is both the Prince of Peace and he is our peace... Our peace with God is not fragile; it is stable.” Amazingly, God does not provide from afar. He is up close and intimate. He is gentle and lowly in heart. Take his yoke and you experience rest, peace. Peace he gives is both gentle and powerful. Elizabeth Elliot calls it a “strange, inexplicable peace...”

“Hail! All hail! The peaceful country of eternal calm... There the Lord my Shepherd leads me, wheresoe’er He will; In the fresh green pastures feeds me, by the waters still.” Gerhardt Ter Steegen, *Hymns of Ter Steegen and Others*

Sproul has further written, “It is a holy peace, a peace that is ‘other’ than routine earthly peace... peace has been established.” Peace for eternity and peace for today.

Here’s my testimony: Jesus really does give the kind of peace that surpasses understanding.

“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” Matthew 11:28–30

Comments

Enjoy God's Lavish Steadfast Love

“But I have trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.” Psalms 13:5

I believed in and rested in the love of God before Kim's death. We all need love. Love is not only something God gives; but "... God is love..." himself (1 John 4:8). Love is a gift freely given. Love is the reason given for Jesus being sent to us by God, his Father.

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” John 3:16

“... but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” Romans 5:8

Not just loved—so loved. Salvation was offered out of God's extravagant love for the world he created. While we were sinners. If you believe in God, you avoid perishing, and you have eternal life. Salvation born of the love of God is ours as a gift, and it is proven by his grace, mercy, and peace. Redemptive love changes everything. It is lavished upon us, and it is steadfast. Agape love. It's based on the Giver's love and not the loveliness of the recipient.

**“... Redeeming love has been my theme and shall be till I die ...”
William Cowper, “There is a Fountain”**

The love of God is recognized and understood at salvation, but God's love is also experienced day-by-day. It most assuredly should be our theme until we die. Like grace, mercy, and peace, we need his love. And we have

his unending love. Steadfast. I repeat: steadfast. Over and over. Steadfast. Steadfast love is an oft-repeated description throughout the Bible. There's a reason for that repeated declaration. We need to hear it.

“You have granted me life and steadfast love, and your care has preserved my spirit.” Job 10:12

“I have loved you with an everlasting love...” Jeremiah 31:3

“Your steadfast love, O Lord, extends to the heavens, your faithfulness to the clouds.” Psalm 36:5

“... for his steadfast love endures forever.” Psalm 136 (26 times!)

You get the idea—lavished. Steadfast. I love *Psalms 136* because in creative genius our communicating God delivers the same message twenty-six times in twenty-six verses. Not to mention all the other places it's repeated throughout *The Psalms*. His lavished steadfast love endures forever.

“... [his] love for these thousands of years enfolded the sinful race of men.” A. W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God*

Endures. Forever. In fact, steadfast love means that his love is firmly fixed in place and is, in fact, immovable. And lavished adds luxurious, opulently rich, and elaborate to the definition. Opulent and immovable love.

“The felt love of Christ really is what brings rest, wholeness, flourishing, shalom...” Dane Ortland, *Gentle and Lowly*

If you allow it, loss shines a light on God's love. Because you need it more. You recognize it more. The pain of loss strips any self-sufficiency away and you fall with your full weight of need on God's love. If you choose to trust. He does not disappoint. Loss shows just how lavish and steadfast his love is to us.

“We thank Thee, Lord, for weary days when desert springs were dry, and first we knew what depth of need Thy love could satisfy.” Frances Bevan, *Hymns of Ter Steegan and Others*

Here’s my testimony: God’s love has been lavished upon me. Elaborate. Luxurious. His love is steadfast. Firmly in place. Immovable. I am loved and so are you.

“See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God...” 1 John 3:1

“May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ.” 2 Thessalonians 3:5

[Comments](#)

Mourn with Unhindered Hope

“Though he slay me, I will hope in him...” Job 13:15

“But I will hope continually and will praise you yet more and more.” Psalm 71:14

I had hope before Kim’s death. I know about hope. In the context of loss and lament, however, your hope is tested. There is an element of trust and hope inherent in the very fact that you turn to God.

A recurring theme in loss and lament is the realization that you have no one else worthy to whom you can turn. You need unhindered hope. Continuous. More and more. We are challenged to “... show the same earnestness to have the full assurance of hope until the end...” in Hebrews 6:11. Unhindered. Until the end. Similarly, in Hebrews 10:23, we are instructed, “Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful.” Unwavering.

“Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God.” Psalm 42:11

I love the psalms of lament. So helpful. It’s good to cry out from a cast down place of turmoil but not without hope. In 1 Thessalonians 4:13 we read that we don’t have to “... grieve as others do who have no hope.” We have hope. This in no way diminishes the overwhelming nature of grief and loss. But we have a place to hide out in hope.

“You are my hiding place and my shield; I hope in your word.” Psalm 119:114

His new mercy, sufficient grace, surpassing peace, and steadfast love lay the foundation for unhindered hope. Jeremiah 29:11 reminds us, “For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.” The unhindered and unwavering hope he gives is both deep and powerful. This hope will be realized when all things are made new. The pinnacle of history will prove our hope. Or at our death.

Case in point: Kim’s hope is now realized. Mine is looking forward.

“We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven...” Colossians 1:3–5

So, hope is for us now, too. Not just a one-day hope. We are to live in hope even though it is yet to be realized. Embracing hope changes the way you live today. Ours is not some shallow here-and-now hope. Our temporal hope can be just as deep and powerful as our eternal hope.

“Loss will always leave us with lingering reminders of what was and what will never be, but it doesn’t have to leave us without hope. Hope is the mingling of joy and sorrow because hope is Jesus. God and man. Perfection and pain.” Katherine and Jay Wolf, *Suffer Strong*

Paul wrote the Colossians and identified the hope that was laid up in heaven as the reason for their manner of life now. He thanked God and prayed for them because they had a sincere faith in Christ and love for his people. Hope helps us live godly lives now. He goes on to admonish them in Colossians 1:23 not to shift “... from the hope of the gospel that you heard...” Instead, they are to continue in faith. They are to be stable and steadfast. The gospel inspires hope, and we live changed lives.

“When I cannot stand I’ll fall on You. Jesus, You’re my hope and stay...” Matt Maher, “Lord, I Need You”

I need stability and steadfastness in the midst of my storm. We all do. Because of hope in the gospel, we have that foundation, and we are

equipped to stand firm.

Here's my testimony: The gospel inspires unhindered hope in me, even as I face loss.

“But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.” Romans 8:25

“If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.” 1 Corinthians 15:19

[Comments](#)

Receive and Give Contagious Comfort

“Are the comforts of God too small for you, or the word that deals gently with you?” Job 15:11

I believed in and rested in the comfort of God before Kim’s death. Everyone, including me, needs comfort. Comfort is a gift at salvation. However, Comfort is a Person. God’s presence is with us through the gift of the Spirit. And Comfort is built upon his grace, mercy, peace, love, and hope. Comfort came to us when we were far off from God. It was God’s doing; it was not our doing.

I love David Powlison’s description of comfort: “... God’s transformative compassion, the perfect union of kindness and candor.” Candor is important because you must not diminish loss. Further, you need to recognize you do not deserve such a gift. Brokenness, loss, and guilt create a context to recognize the beauty of the gift of comfort. And as Tim Challies has said in his book, *Seasons of Sorrow*, “... comfort is closely related to submission.”

God’s kindness is more profoundly recognized in the context of facing profound loss.

**“Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.”
Matthew 5:4**

Ultimate comfort comes after we are broken and mourn over our sin. Comfort is an unlikely gift for the person who comes under conviction, repents of their sin, and trusts in Christ’s blood to redeem them. Comfort. In humility, we don’t expect it. However, in his extravagance, he lavishes comfort upon his creation.

“And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom

the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you.” John 14:16–17

So, the Spirit—our Helper or Comforter—is a gift given at salvation. It’s a gift that is reserved for those who believe. He is our constant companion—forever, says John. Comfort is delivered once and for all.

However, on that foundation, grace, mercy, peace, love, and hope provide moment-by-moment comfort in every situation. We are not immune to pain, difficulty, sickness, or loss. Comfort, in affliction, is available because of the trustworthiness of our promise-giving and promise-keeping God. Yes, he is with us through his Spirit, the Comforter. Comfort received and experienced is a result of overwhelming grace, mercy, peace, love, and hope. Tim Keller calls it “incomparable comfort.”

“This is my comfort in my affliction, that your promise gives me life.” Psalm 119:50

Because of the mercies of God, we are comforted in our affliction. And in God’s sovereign design, our comfort is not only for us. We are to comfort others with our comfort. Comfort is to be contagious. We are to reinvest the comfort we’ve received. In their book, *Suffer Strong*, Katherine and Jay Wolf write, “For a God who wastes nothing and withholds no good thing, it’s fitting that he creates a perpetual circuit of hope and comfort through us as living conduits.” Once you receive comfort, you start infecting others with comfort.

“... the intention of our heavenly Father, when he finds us in sorrow and ministers comfort to us, is not merely to get us through the trial, to strengthen us to endure for ourselves the pain or loss, but also to prepare us for being comforters of others.” J. R. Miller, *The Ministry of Comfort*

Our affliction and the comfort we receive open our eyes to others who are afflicted. We comfort them with the overflow of our own comfort. In other words, our comfort is intended to be contagious. We share in only a taste of the sufferings of Christ; but we share in abundant comfort.

Here's my testimony: The Comforter really does deliver abundant and contagious comfort.

“There is compensation for our suffering if we are enabled to comfort others with our own comfort.” Vance Havner, *Though I Walk Through the Valley*

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too.” 2 Corinthians 1:4–6

[Comments](#)

We Kept Our Vows

I praise God for his kindness and goodness to us, his creation. His ways are not cumbersome. His ways are good.

“For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome.” 1 John 5:3

So many people see God’s laws, statutes, commands, and instructions as constricting and burdensome. However, his ways are for our good. His guidance is intended as a blessing. He created me and then gives his guidance and presence to know his way to “... press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own” (Philippians 3:12). He seeks to guide us to be what he created us to be. His commands are not burdensome to us, but a loving expression of God’s best for us.

“God’s call to obey is itself a grace. In this call, he is actively rescuing you from you.” Paul David Tripp, *New Morning Mercies*

I know it’s much more complicated, but some see God’s command to keep faith in marriage as a burden. Some hate the discipline required. Some despise the reproof. Some do not listen to the voice of their teachers or instructors. I’m grateful to my parents, Jim and Jan Davis, for being teachers in my life. They taught me that the command is a grace, and it is not cumbersome.

“... and you say, ‘How I hated discipline, and my heart despised reproof! I did not listen to the voice of my teachers or incline my ear to my instructors.’” Proverbs 5:12–13

Within the first week of my loss, I turned to someone and said, “Kim and I kept our vows. It can be done.” A thousand random thoughts crossed my mind during early days of grief. Yet, I remember the clarity of this moment. I was overwhelmed with gratitude to my wife for her faithfulness and to my God for his kind intentions. He commands us to be faithful in marriage. Kim and I trusted him, committed to each other, and remained faithful through our thirty-five-and-a-half-years of marriage. We did it. We kept our vows.

And it was not burdensome.

His command blessed our life together. We believed him; we benefited from his statutes. Some may say we got lucky. They may say it was easy because we were a good match. I’m convinced we made it and had a good marriage because we believed his command, submitted to it, and enjoyed the benefits of walking in obedience. We made it because of his command. It was for our good to be faithful.

“Trust in the Lord, and do good; dwell in the land and befriend faithfulness.” Psalms 37:3

We promised on July 30, 1983 before family, friends, and God to join our lives until death parted us. I need to pause to thank my in-laws, Harry and Katrena Plumlee, for sharing the blessing of their daughter with me. As painful as losing her has been, Kim and I stand as one example among so many others that it can be done. Her death has put an exclamation point on our vows and thus on our marriage commitment.

“So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.” Matthew 19:6

Let me say it again. Death placed the punctuation mark on the end of our marriage. Keeping faith in marriage can be done. This exclamation point further reminds us that it is good when we embrace God’s ways or when we agree with him and his design. Call it submission or surrender if you want, but it is not burdensome or cumbersome. His ways are for our good. As David says in Psalm 19:11, “... in keeping [God’s law, testimony, precepts, commandments] there is great reward.”

We believed God and kept our vows.

“’therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.’ This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.” Matthew 5:31–32

[Comments](#)

How I Discovered the Therapy of Gratitude

I was overwhelmed with an outpouring of kindness, concern, and care following my loss. People were so good to me.

**“And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful.”
Colossians 3:15**

The household of faith, believers, rallied around me. As one friend told me, “This was a gut punch for all of us.” My loss affected so many. They cared. And so many responded in a multitude of kindnesses and generosity.

Thinking back over those months, I received so much in the way of tangible support. I was provided meals galore. Flowers were given for the visitation and funeral. I was even given money. I was given gift cards. I was notified that Bibles had been donated in Kim’s memory. And a lot of money was given in Kim’s memory to the [International Mission Board’s Lottie Moon Christmas Offering](#) that supports our missionaries around the world. I was blessed, and I am grateful to God and to believers who responded to him. As of this posting, almost \$20,000 has been given in Kim’s memory to support missionaries involved in the missionary task.

“The one who offers thanksgiving as his sacrifice glorifies me...” Psalms 50:23

I was told numerous times when I tried to take down a name and address that I shouldn’t worry about writing a thank you card. In our household, it was Kim who religiously wrote thank you notes. She was grateful and seemed to operate out of a conviction to show her gratitude. The more I think about it, she was simply a grateful person because she was humble.

“Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor.” Romans 12:10

I remember deciding I needed to write a thank you note to everyone who gave something or did something. If you did something and I didn't write, it was an oversight. It was nearly impossible keeping track of givers who gave gifts while I was in shock. Additionally, as I learned later, even more monetary gifts to IMB continued to come in long after Kim's death. I decided not to respond to the hundreds of sympathy cards. Maybe a thousand. However, I wrote over two hundred thank you notes. It took me several months. But I did it for several reasons:

- First, I was truly grateful. I was overwhelmed at the generosity poured out by supporters and comforters.
- Second, I wanted to honor Kim by expressing my gratitude the way she had always done. She would have wanted me to write notes to every single person.
- Third, I recognized a healing element to sharing my gratitude. My cards became therapeutic thank you notes. The discipline of capturing the tapestry of kindness and expressing my gratefulness became a cathartic endeavor.

I learned that expressing gratitude was an appropriate response to the outpouring I received. It was also one way to honor my wife, and expressing gratitude aided me in my healing. Gratitude was medicinal.

If you're reading this and joining me on my journey, I'd like to say, "Thank you." It's therapeutic to say so.

“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” 1 Thessalonians 5:16–18

[Comments](#)

The Marks Kim Left

Kim left marks in her last moments that are difficult for me. As I write in my personal journal, it's been nine months since we lost her (as of publish date of this entry, it's been thirty months). You'd think I would remove these visible marks, these reminders, from my line-of-sight. But I haven't done so.

When Kim was overcome that tragic morning, she gripped the shower curtain before she fell. One shower ring broke. Leigh Ann explained to me how she found Kim. As she did, Leigh Ann placed the broken ring she found in my hand. I kept it.

It was several weeks later that I noticed something else. I looked up at the shower curtain, and there were stretch marks and even a few slight rips. Kim's small stature slightly tore the curtain as she collapsed.

Over the months, I glanced at the shower curtain to remind myself this journey is real. You need reminders—believe it or not—to keep focusing yourself on your circumstances. Your new normal. It reminds me that her demise is real. I am facing loss on a long and unwanted journey. Those marks Kim left that morning are still visible. [Note: Don't worry, I replaced the shower curtain a long time ago. And I've even vacuumed, swept, and cooked.]

One morning, a thought crossed my mind: "Those are the last marks Kim left."

The shower curtain almost stood as a memorial. A reminder. An initiator of pain. Sometimes I cringe. Sometimes my eyes tear up. From the shower curtain I glance at the floor where she was found. I rehearse in my mind what seemed to have happened. I don't even try, but I can't stop it from replaying in my mind.

“I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.” Romans 12:1

On this particular morning, the reminder of pain is also a challenge for the future. Remembering the past can inspire future faithfulness. The marks she left that morning gave rise to thoughts of the many, many marks Kim left everywhere she went—from Georgia to Southern Africa to Virginia. She served. She impacted people. She mentored. She challenged others. She inspired her readers. She baked and cooked to serve people in need.

She left marks.

What marks will I leave behind? What marks will you leave behind? We still have today. Will we point people to his good name?

I’ve heard many people, including my own children, say they feel like they’ve not impacted or left marks like Kim has left. I understand that sentiment. But we all impact others. We all play our part. This is a reminder to be more intentional and responsive to needs and opportunities. We have today.

So, let’s all humble ourselves and recognize that those who go before us leave marks for us. Kim left an example for us. She would not point to herself, but she would point to the Christ she served. She would point to the worthwhile investment in the lives of people. Her husband. Her children. Her grandchildren. Her parents and family. Her friends. And the many people who have read her written works who never even had the privilege to meet her.

Today, I’m challenged to leave marks on this world.

“I know your works, your love and faith and service and patient endurance, and that your latter works exceed the first.” Revelation 2:19

[Comments](#)

Five Topics to Address in the Turbulence of Loss

In a fallen world, tragedy strikes all of us. How we face loss is vitally important. While loss is universal, responding well to loss is haphazard, at best. It takes intentionality.

“The wise person has his eyes in his head, but the fool walks in darkness. And yet I perceived that the same event happens to all of them.” Ecclesiastes 2:14

I’ve learned it matters how you embrace your journey of grief. While I do not claim to have done everything right, I learned some lessons from my experience that proved helpful. Some lessons were learned the hard way, and some lessons were learned by listening to trusted counselors.

Here are five intentional topics I had to address. These are issues I had to think about that you don’t realize until you’re in the fray.

1. **Early Days and Weeks:** I took five weeks away from work. I would have never thought, in advance, I could stay away that long. However, I needed all of it and could have taken more time. Don’t be surprised by how much time you need.
2. **Daily Schedule:** I had to think about my daily schedule. I was intentional. I blocked the morning for mourning. I started my day slowly and gently. I took time to read about grief, read devotionally, read my Bible, pray, and exercise. Then, the remainder of my day was as normal as it could be after loss.
3. **Important Dates:** Birthdays, anniversaries, and holidays are important. It takes planning to prepare for these dates. I chose to be with all three children on or around their birthdays the first year. My whole family came together on Mother’s Day. Of course, it was already planned by Kim, a providential gift. I was with Kim’s parents

for Father's Day. I chose to be with my sons on my birthday. I spent Thanksgiving with my sons, Paul and Trevor, and Kim's parents. I was with my daughter, Emily, and my son, Trevor, for Christmas. My anniversary was the most significant decision I made. I went away alone to celebrate and [honor my marriage](#) and mourn my loss. It was a spiritual high complete with what I believe are [miracles](#) of God's presence to remind me he is El Roi, the God who sees me.

4. **Clothing and Belongings:** Pictures of Kim are everywhere. A countertop held her hair products, complete with a curling iron and a straightener. Her closet was filled with her clothing and shoes. I chose not to hurry to move or dispose of any of these personal belongings. I left them where they were left by Kim. I was told I would know when to remove her clothing. Left in place, it reminded me of what I had lost. If removed, I'd have a half-empty closet which would also remind me of my loss. It's better not to hurry and simply invest in facing the loss. I was ready emotionally to deal with Kim's personal belongings by the ninth or tenth month. However, we were closing in on Christmas, and I decided to wait until February when all my kids were coming back to mark the one-year anniversary of her death. Additionally, there are decisions to make about our home. In my case, I didn't rush that one either. I'm taking my time.
5. **Disciplined Thinking:** This may or may not make as much sense, but you must be intentional about disciplining your thought-life. It's easy to follow a path toward despair. You are in a battle. The onslaught must be embraced and battled. It must be faced. It must not be ignored or diminished. It must be recognized for the loss that it is, but it must be met with disciplined, biblical, and godly thinking. While a different context, the admonition in 2 Corinthians 10:5 to "... take every thought captive ..." applies here, as well.

Intentionality in the topics you address during a period of grieving and mourning help you navigate the difficult journey. Walking in a healthy manner will pay dividends, enabling you to honor your loved one, your God, your family, and yourself. Be intentional. Build a foundation for a healthy period of grief and recovery. I'm so glad I have been intentional, and I'm so glad my family has welcomed the time together as we have weathered the turbulence of loss by taking steps together.

“For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it?” Luke 14:28

[Comments](#)

Refreshing and Life-Giving Daily Good News

“... we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.” Romans 8:28

Romans 8:28 is life-shaping for us if we're intentional about it. If we believe and act on it. I was finishing a retreat over my first anniversary following my loss. My son, Paul, sent me a link to a message by his pastor, J.D. Greear, on this passage. I listened. J.D. Greear stated, “The good that he is working all things toward is not so much about giving you better circumstances as it is making you a better you—a you who is more like Jesus.”

Romans 8:28 is especially poignant in the context of Romans 8:29. Everything works together whether good or difficult to conform me to his image. It's not about getting good out of bad. It's about becoming like Christ.

Read those last two sentences again.

“When you're in the midst of some kind of pain or boredom, instead of asking God to get you out of the trouble, you should also be asking God what you should get out of the trouble.” J.D. Greear

When my micro-story is marked by sad loss, I can lift my eyes in gospel confidence and remember the macro-story, the grand narrative. The eternal story of redemption is on track. He is on his throne, and as a child of God, my eternity is secure. Kim's eternity is secure—faith turned to sight. My micro-story is temporally tragic, but my macro-story is still eternally beautiful. I am able to choose to grow and mature in my micro-story. In

faith, I know that eternal redemption trumps temporal loss regardless of how tragic, sad, horrible, or painful.

In significant periods of mourning, I have been encouraged by the music of Steven Curtis Chapman. This excerpt speaks to the life-shaping truths found in Romans 8:28:

“We know the world got broke when it took the fall; And here we are living in the middle of it all longing, waiting for the day when everything’s restored. But the best of the beauty that we get to see while we’re living down here in this yet-to-be is to watch God take the most broken things and to hear Him say, ‘When I get through, you’re gonna be amazed!’ ‘Cause I’m gonna turn it into something different. I’m gonna turn it into something good.”
Steven Curtis Chapman, “Something Beautiful”

Be extremely careful at this point. We need to put this whole “good-out-of-bad” discussion into context. I want God to work everything out for good, as he promises. But I have to be careful that I don’t define what “good” means from a self-centered perspective. That’s easier said than done in the throes of grief.

What is the central question I have to wrestle with in light of the loss of the love of my life? Here it is: Is Jesus enough? Is his gospel enough? Or am I looking for something in addition to him? Am I looking for a reversal, an earthly restoration of things before my loss? Or am I looking for him?

“Give us this day our daily bread...” Matthew 6:11

Am I looking to him as my provider of my daily bread? Daily bread takes on many forms. Of course, we look to his hands for provision. But what if *he* is our provision? What if he gives us himself? What if the Bread of Life is my daily bread? Again, this question looms large for me—Is he enough? Is he my daily good news?

“... I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain.” 1 Corinthians 15:1–2

I have learned you must preach the gospel, especially to yourself. Remind yourself of his deeds he has done. Rehearse his life. Hold fast to him in his death. Come to grips with his burial. Celebrate his resurrection. Ponder his wondrous works. Meditate on his mighty deeds. Stand firm on the truth of the gospel. Fully take in—and digest—the Bread of Life; his very presence in and with you.

Preach this gospel—the refreshing daily good news—to yourself. Life-giving.

“I will remember the deeds of the Lord; yes, I will remember your wonders of old. I will ponder all your work and meditate on your mighty deeds. Your way, O God, is holy. What god is great like our God? You are the God who works wonders; you have made known your might among the peoples.” Psalms 77:11–14

“Thy Cross is lifted o’er us—We journey in its light...” Ernest W. Shurtleff, “Lead On, O King Eternal”

[Comments](#)

How Shiny Objects Seek Your Heart

You and I know, in a cerebral manner, the admonition to be wary of earthly treasures. However, we don't always live it with clarity in the day-by-day stuff of life. Already-but-not-yet discernment, temporal-against-eternal distinctions, and sight-versus-faith eyes are for the wise of heart. Living in the world but not of the world is a deliberate choice (John 17:11, 14).

“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal...”

Matthew 6:19

Our eyes are diverted by shiny objects—call them *golden fancies*. Our passions are drawn to our preferred interests—call them *golden dreams*. Our energy is given to the temporal.

It all rots and rusts. Thieves can break in and steal your things. We should not let our things have our hearts.

This is not to say we don't give appropriate value to and care for our possessions. A house is a gift, and it must be cared for to some degree. This is not an admonition to run from possessions. Going to extremes is not the answer. However, this admonition is a warning for balance and perspective.

“Many men and women look at the shine and glittering of prosperity, but they little think of the burden...” Jeremiah Burroughs, *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment*

Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth. Earthly treasures are temporal but tempting. They are desirable but disappointing. Moths, rust, and thieves are targeting your things to get to your heart. Hold your things loosely in your hands. Enjoy them, but don't let them own you.

“... but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal.” Matthew 6:20

A better investment is to put your energy and desires toward eternal treasures. We pray “... Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10). But do we truly invest in his kingdom so that his will is done? Or could it be we are laying up treasures on earth? Do we live as if it is my kingdom come? Again, let perspective and balance be applied.

“Jesus calls us from the worship of the vain world’s golden store, from each idol that would keep us, saying, ‘Christian, love me more.’” Cecil Frances Alexander, “Jesus Calls Us, O’er the Tumult”

We need to intentionally lay up treasures from God’s Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control (Galatians 5:22–23)—in heaven. We need to invest in people. We need to pour our energies into the peoples from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). We need to look upon the distressed and downcast with compassion (Matthew 9:36).

Lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven. Heavenly treasures are eternal and honorable. They require vision, discipline, and hope born of spiritual promises.

**“For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”
Matthew 6:21**

If your eye is drawn to an earthly treasure, your heart is quick to follow. Your heart sets its passions on the temporal. It’s unavoidable. If you treasure earthly stuff, your heart treasures earthly stuff. If you treasure heavenly gain, your heart will treasure heavenly gain.

“We are always living the quest for something. We are always in pursuit of some vision, some desire, or some dream.” Paul David Tripp, *New Morning Mercies*

When you see *golden fancies* or have *golden dreams*, turn away quickly. Seek diligently to maintain perspective. Keep earthly treasures in their place. Elevate heavenly treasures to their rightful place. Eternal stories trump temporal stories—both the exuberant and the tragic. Tell a more wonderful story to yourself and to others.

“I love to tell the story—more wonderful it seems, than all the golden fancies of all our golden dreams; I love to tell the story—it did so much for me, and that is just the reason I tell it now to thee.” A. Katherine Hankey, “I Love to Tell the Story”

If you’re distracted by *golden fancies* or *golden dreams*, you need to understand your heart is a battleground. I see so much more clearly in the light that comes from the shadow of death.

“And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.... For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell...” Colossians 1:11, 19

[Comments](#)

Resting on the Clarity of Faith

“Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.” 1 Peter 1:8–9

The wise at heart makes the decision to rest, trust, and embrace the truth. It's that simple. Precious and wise truths are entrusted to us—they are unmerited gifts. Some may refer to belief or faith as a crutch. An untrue crutch is of no value eternally. But if the truth is, indeed, true then a crutch is not a crutch at all. Instead, it's a wise decision to lean into, press into, and bank your life upon what is true. Truth not only establishes a good foundation; it establishes *the* foundation. Why demean, belittle, or devalue our foundation and call it a crutch? If truth is a false crutch, then the cross is cruelty to those of us who would believe and bank our lives upon it.

“For it stands in Scripture: ‘Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.’” 1 Peter 2:6

It's wholly right to lean into and stand upon our firm foundation. Otherwise, we are like pre-redeemed Paul. Kicking against that truth. He had lived in rebellion and is now, as a new believer, telling King Agrippa what took place on the road to Damascus. He explained that Christ encountered him, and he was surrounded by a bright light. Paul said he fell to the ground and “... heard a voice saying... ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads’” (Acts 26:14).

What intrigues me is the lesson Paul is faithfully passing on to King Agrippa. When you're encountered by God, don't kick against him or his message. Honestly, it's just not very smart. Again, call it a crutch if you

want, but a true crutch is wise to embrace. In fact, it is ignorance to kick against truth.

Paul's message to King Agrippa is applicable to me today.

I recently revisited an old hymn I had not thought about in a while. And it perfectly describes this truth regarding the crutch of faith.

“My faith has found a resting place, Not in device nor creed; I trust the Ever-living One, His wounds for me shall plead. I need no other argument, I need no other plea; It is enough that Jesus died, And that He died for me.” Eliza E. Hewitt, “My Faith Has Found a Resting Place”

My ability to have faith is not the issue. My faith has found a place it can fully lean into and fully rest in without any shadow of doubt. I need no other argument. I need no other plea. It is enough that Jesus died for me.

Is he enough? Is he enough anytime in my life but especially when loss has been thrust into my world? In their song, “Weep with Me,” Rend Collective reminds us that, “What was true in the light, is still true in the dark...” What is only known by sight and experience must be placed beneath what is known by faith.

Faith is clear; sight is confusing. What's true in the light of Scripture is true in the dark of loss. Relax and rest in the clarity of the faith entrusted to us once for all.

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.” 1 Peter 1:3–5

[Comments](#)

Weighed and Found Wanting

I sometimes feel like the handwriting is on the wall for me. In every reading of this story in the book of Daniel across my sixty years, I had never once identified with the king. Always with Daniel. But loss takes you to depths of self-analysis never before experienced.

“... the fingers of a human hand appeared and wrote on the plaster of the wall of the king’s palace, opposite the lampstand.” Daniel 5:5

King Belshazzar, in Daniel 5, was throwing a party. At some point, a human hand appeared and wrote on a plaster wall. This got the king’s attention, alarmingly so, and he became flustered—thrown off balance. The hand itself is what bothered him, not even the message. He couldn’t read the message. Yet.

“Then the king’s color changed, and his thoughts alarmed him; his limbs gave way, and his knees knocked together.” Daniel 5:6

I think I know how King Belshazzar must have felt.

My color changed, my thoughts alarmed me, my limbs literally gave way, and my knees knocked together in the days, weeks, and months following Kim’s death. Her death was obviously shocking and alarming, maybe even like a hand floating in the air was for King Belshazzar.

We should always humble ourselves in times of difficulty. We should always seek to learn the lessons God may be teaching us. I identify with the king.

For Belshazzar, the hand wrote a message that had yet to be interpreted. He was fearful of the hand. His fear was warranted. Standing in God’s

presence is a fear-inducing and awe-inspiring experience.

After failed interpretative attempts by enchanters, Chaldeans, and astrologers, finally the queen approached the king, respectfully, with some advice. She remembered the king's father, King Nebuchadnezzar, and his chief over his magicians, enchanters, Chaldeans, and astrologers. His name was Daniel. Daniel, according to the queen, had an excellent spirit. He had knowledge, an understanding to interpret dreams, explain riddles, and solve problems. He could be trusted to read what the alarming hand had written on the plaster wall. No wonder I identified with Daniel to this point.

So, Daniel was summoned.

When he was brought before the king, he was offered a purple robe and gold if he could interpret the writing. He told the king to keep the gifts, but then he proceeded to deliver a confrontational, convicting message written by the hand on the wall. The king, Daniel said in Daniel 5:23, had "... lifted up [himself] against the Lord of heaven." The interpretation ended in Daniel 5:27 with "... you have been weighed in the balances and found wanting..." Tested. Inadequate. Wanting. Turns out the message was more alarming than the floating hand itself.

"Sorrow makes deep scars; it writes its record ineffaceably on the heart which suffers." J. R. Miller, *The Ministry of Comfort*

I often felt like I was being tested, weighed in the balances. I felt as if I had been found to be wanting. Not enough. Feeble. Weak. Inadequate. Unworthy to stand before God.

And I am.

I am inadequate and sinful. Needy. Wanting. But that's the point. I need a Savior. I need grace. You and I need to be made into new creations. We are weighed and found wanting. However, in Christ, we are no more to be weighed and found wanting. Cleansed by Christ's blood. By his sacrifice. Redeemed. Reconciled. Made acceptable by Christ himself. The old is gone. We are made new.

"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come." 2 Corinthians 5:17

[Comments](#)

Trusted and Found Faithful

“When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.” Isaiah 43:2

While King Belshazzar (in Daniel 5) and I have been [weighed and found wanting](#), my God has been trusted and found faithful. My journey has revealed his faithfulness to me. And yet, his character precedes my discovery of his faithful and trusted attributes.

I have had to press into God, and I’ve fallen hard upon God. I’ve had to stand firm on a foundation not of my own building. I’ve been dependent, as if we haven’t always been dependent. I’ve had to press into and under his wings. I’ve not been able to trust myself, and so I’ve cried out to him to lead me and guide me. I’ve crumbled in his presence out of gratitude for his majesty and power.

I’ve worshipped him for his trustworthiness and faithfulness.

“Blessed is the man who makes the Lord his trust...” Psalm 40:4

I am blessed.

As I harken back to that [fateful morning](#) following Kim’s death, I recall when I raised my hands and cried, “I trust you, I trust you, I trust you.” It was an aspirational proclamation. It was a desperate, albeit hopeful, response to loss. While my faith was shaken, I sought to trust him.

“... if we are faithless, he remains faithful...” 2 Timothy 2:13

He has been found faithful. This is my testimony.

“When a believer comes face to face with death, God is either enough or he is not.” Ronnie Fox, *Beyond My Strength*

Here’s my question: Why are we so reticent to trust him after all we’ve seen and all we’ve experienced from his hand? Why are we not more trusting? Why are we slow to trust? Why are we not absolutely convinced, especially during loss, of his faithfulness?

Here’s my answer: It’s okay. We’re broken people in a broken world. I’m not saying it’s good, I’m saying it is best to be honest and acknowledge our starting place. But he did not leave us there. He recreated us. We are broken, wounded, and shaken in our belief—especially in difficulties. We are vessels. Dishonorable and dirty vessels in need of cleansing.

“... if anyone cleanses himself from what is dishonorable, he will be a vessel for honorable use, set apart as holy, useful to the master of the house, ready for every good work.” 2 Timothy 2:21

We waver because we are broken. We are weak. We mistakenly focus on our own strength to trust. We look at that which is seen and not the unseen. We are consumed by sight and not by faith.

Again, we are weighed and found wanting. But he is trusted and found faithful.

We need to humble ourselves and present ourselves to be cleansed in order to be useful vessels. Trusting is difficult; it really is difficult. However, this says more about our brokenness than it says about God’s worthiness. If we struggle with our belief in his trustworthiness and faithfulness, we need to be cleansed and repaired. We need to lift our eyes off of our difficulties and off of ourselves. We need to relentlessly focus on him and his goodness. He is worthy of our trust. But, trusting is a journey and not a moment.

“Now don’t make the mistake of thinking that trust is something you decide once and for all as you are walking through pain... Life isn’t that simple. Grief is not that tame.” Mark Vroegop, *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy*

Regardless of whether we muster up the trust and persist, he is faithful. As I have faced loss, I have found him faithful as I trust him.

“Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful.” Hebrews 10:23

[Comments](#)

Unconscious Advance Through Lament

“But I have trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation. I will sing to the Lord...” Psalm 13:5–6

I’ve been reading a book that was highly recommended to me by Jeff Long, a pastor and friend in North Carolina. And I highly recommend the book to you, too. Mark Vroegop writes about lament in *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy*. He helps the reader press into biblical lament. I like what he says when he writes, “To cry is human, but to lament is Christian.” So helpful.

In brief, he identifies a biblical process that is repeated throughout *The Psalms*. First, a grieving or suffering person **turns** to God. Second, **complaint** is registered before God. Third, the mourner boldly **asks** and makes a request to God. Finally, **trust** is pronounced, proclaimed, and pressed into in order to round out biblical lament. All four parts—turn, complain, ask, and trust—are necessary to be true lament.

Here’s one observation. In the thick of grief, progress is seemingly nonexistent or slow at best. Daily, weekly, and monthly, this repeated process of acknowledging the undeniable pain and turning to God followed by complaining to the Father, asking boldly for his provision, and turning in faith to trust him gives birth to progress. It’s slow and impossible to discern, but it’s there all the same.

“Waiting, even in darkness, is unconscious advance, because it is God you have to do with, and he is working in you.” Andrew Murray, *Waiting on God*

The advance is unconscious, unnoticeable. It’s not easily tracked or traced. You begin to realize the journey is more important than the destination. You learn there is not a fix for your grief. However, you begin

to recognize there are multiple fixes along the journey. Those fixes are sent by God. So, as Andrew Murray would say we should be "... waiting, even in darkness ..."

We wait on God. Turning. Complaining. Asking. Trusting. Doggedly so. He is the only one who can carry us through deep waters. In the realm of faith, his footprints are invisible. We make unconscious advance.

"Your way was through the sea, your path through the great waters; yet your footprints were unseen." Psalm 77:19

We also wait with fellow journeyers. We are not alone. A fellow-journeyer is a visible Jesus to walk with me.

Again, there is not a fix for your grief. But, as you press through the turning, complaining, and asking, you open your eyes in trust and watch God bring people to you as you wait on him. People in response to the nudge of the Spirit step up one-by-one to play their part. Waiting with you. A pastor shares guidance. A family member recommends a book. Text messages reveal that people are praying. A lunch with a friend encourages. A listening ear. A chance meeting on a flight with a trusted mentor. Slow. Unconscious advance.

"We cannot change the situation, but we can allow the situation to change us." Jerry Sittser, *A Grace Disguised: How the Soul Grows Through Loss*

To be very clear, again, in the thicket of grief the progress is almost imperceptible. But, by faith know that grief work is paying its dividends through lament. God is delivering [grace](#), [mercy](#), [peace](#), [love](#), [hope](#), and [comfort](#). Believe it and bank on it. Others are playing their part and providing encouragement the moment it's needed. Receive and enjoy it.

"Both our journey's Source and End, our broken lives are Yours to mend. 'Cause if we pilgrims must be honest, we rarely seem to make much progress." Justin Wainscott, *Lost in Wonder, Love, and Praise*

The advance is almost accomplished by stealth. Undercover. It's unseen, unnoticeable, and unconscious. Unconscious advance. To quote Andrew

Murray again, “Waiting, even in darkness, is unconscious advance...”

“... he has dealt bountifully with me.” Psalm 13:6

[Comments](#)

Five Rock-Solid Lessons from Psalm 62

“For God alone, O my soul, wait in silence, for my hope is from him. He only is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be shaken.” Psalms 62:5–6

So many saviors with so many messages clang aloud, crying for our attention. These pretend or would-be saviors make empty promises. If they weren't so tempting, they would be harmless. However, they strike at the heart of our need for comfort, assurance, and significance. Therefore, it is imperative to proactively press into or run to our true Savior. It is imperative to wait on God alone.

All of Scripture is important. Paul told Timothy that all of God's words were profitable.

“All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable...” 2 Timothy 3:16

So, let's excerpt a few phrases from this simple passage in Psalm 62:5–6. Here are a few vital thoughts pouring forth from these life-giving words:

1. For God alone: All other would-be saviors should be ignored. It is God alone who is to be trusted fully. Discernment and steadfastness are required on our part. We are to resolutely embrace our God and our God alone.

“Stayed upon Jehovah, hearts are fully blest. Finding, as He promised, perfect peace and rest.” Frances R. Havergal, “Like a River Glorious”

2. Wait in silence: We must avoid trying to save ourselves. We must resist activity seeking to pave our own way forward. We need to reject any

temptation to fall for or chase after empty saviors. Instead, we wait in silence. We wait in patient tenacity.

“Hidden in the hollow of His blessed hand... not a surge of worry, not a shade of care, not a blast of hurry touch the spirit there.” Frances R. Havergal, “Like a River Glorious”

3. Hope is from him: Hope is sought from many sources, but true hope is from God. There are messengers in many quarters shouting different messages with the flavor of the day. However, hope is from God alone. Be careful to whom you listen. Hope is available in him if we are silent and patiently waiting.

“Like a river glorious is God’s perfect peace over all victorious, in its bright increase...” Frances R. Havergal, “Like a River Glorious”

4. He only is my rock: There are numerous promises made to us in this world. None has as strong a foundation as the promise made by our Rock. I love the word “only” in this passage. “He is my rock” should be enough for us. But, he adds the word “only” because you and I need to be reminded.

“We may trust Him fully, all for us to do...” Frances R. Havergal, “Like a River Glorious”

5. I shall not be shaken: In shaky times, it’s a powerful reminder that if we build our house on the rock—the only rock—of his foundation, we will not be shaken. We are on sturdy ground even in pain, suffering, and loss.

“Every joy or trial falleth from above... they who trust Him wholly find Him wholly true.” Frances R. Havergal, “Like a River Glorious”

During loss, everyone presses into something or someone. Would-be saviors make empty promises. However, our God is worthy of our silent waiting because hope is in him. He is our only rock, salvation, and fortress. We will not be shaken.

“On God rests my salvation and my glory; my mighty rock, my refuge is God. Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your heart before him; God is a refuge for us.” Psalm 62:7–8

“You keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you, because he trusts in you.” Isaiah 26:3

[Comments](#)

How a Funeral Can Deliver a Great Commission Reminder

Death delivers many lessons. Clarity is injected—even force fed—into your heart and mind. I learned a vital life-lesson from death that lifted my eyes to the nations.

“It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting, for this is the end of all mankind, and the living will lay it to heart.” Ecclesiastes 7:2

As Solomon stated concerning death and funerals, “... the living will lay it to heart.” The death of those we love changes our living. If we take it to heart. As I have been thrust into dealing with the multitude of ramifications of Kim’s death, I have faced death, and it has changed the way I face life. It’s difficult to fully explain all that you experience and learn. But it’s true, I am laying it to heart.

“So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom.” Psalm 90:12

As difficult and painful as Kim’s death has been for me, I’ve learned my experience is only one among so many. And I mourn with hope. How self-centered do we have to be to not notice all those who have lost loved ones around us? Loss is rampant; it’s everywhere.

I had an overwhelming realization of rampant unbearable pain as I jogged through Arlington Cemetery one day as I was visiting Trevor. Grave after grave of men and women buried due to tragic and sudden loss. Reminder after reminder of the prevalence of death and loss. I stopped jogging, and I doubled over in exponential pain. I began to cry when I

realized some of the families of those represented by the numerous graves around me mourned with hope, but some mourned without hope.

“O that Thy name may be sounded afar over earth and sea . . .”

Frances Bevan, *Hymns of Ter Steegan and Others*

Then later, I learned of a statistic that on average about 155,473 people die every day *without Christ* across the globe. Don't read that sentence too quickly. Let it sink into your soul.

Kim's death, while tragic, is in the context of the redemptive story of God's grace. It's a hope-filled story even in loss. But, what about the nameless unreached and unloved? Death and loss teach those of us left on earth to lay it to heart as Ecclesiastes 7 reminds us. If I am broken over the loss of my bride, am I broken over the 155,473 who are dying daily without eternal hope? Jesus showed compassion, but do we express concern with our lives and resources?

“When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” Matthew 9:36

Jesus takes the thief head on and delivers life and abundant life to overwhelm and overcome the Enemy's killing, stealing, and destroying ways.

So, Kim's death and funeral come with a reminder. Death is a ramification of the Fall of Man. It is always a reminder of loss and a thief. However, Jesus gives life as the answer to the thief's deceptive temptations and promises.

Lay it to heart.

“The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.” John 10:10

He's given life to Kim, to those of us she's left behind her, and to anyone who calls on the name of the Lord (Romans 10:13). So, death is a reminder that we have work to do. If we still draw breath, we can join ranks, cooperate together, and address the 155,473 people dying every day without Christ, without hope.

Let's embrace death's reminder and work while it is still day. Every singular day that passes spills 155,473 people without Christ into eternity. To that end, let's pray, give, go, and send together ([here's one place to invest](#)).

“We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work.” John 9:4

“Behold, upon the mountains, the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace!” Nahum 1:15

“All his saints from all the ages, every clime and tongue, all together now we worship in a faultless song.” Frances Bevan, *Hymns of Ter Steegan and Others*

[Comments](#)

Zealously Keep His Way

Being in the right place at the right time is important. While waiting for the Lord in absolute trust and patience is a great discipline, keeping his way while waiting is paramount. The right place is waiting patiently for the Lord. The right time is keeping his way constantly.

“Wait for the Lord and keep his way...” Psalms 37:34

I read a book, *Waiting on God*, by Andrew Murray during my journey of mourning. I would read about grief, read or listen to my Bible, and read a devotional book. Murray was one of my go-to authors for devotional reading. I learned that waiting is more difficult than most of us readily recognize. But I know it experientially, also. I mean it's obvious in the warp and woof of life that waiting is complicated. Waiting in a busy, driven world is not effortless. It goes against the grain.

Further, the psalmist says we are to keep God's way. Waiting must be accompanied by keeping God's way. We are cautioned and warned against trusting our own ideas of the way. We are, after all, egocentric. We see our perspective. We see our way. And it seems right.

“There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death.” Proverbs 14:12

Pretty serious. That should cause every person, believer or not, to second-guess their own intuitions about the ways that seem right. These ways make sense to us. They feel right. Solomon cautions us to test our way against God's way. Our seemingly right way ends in death.

This is a mystery. Paul admonishes, “Lest you be wise in your own sight, I do not want you to be unaware...” (Romans 11:25). It is wisdom to recognize the danger in trusting yourself. There's mystery to this world, and

it is wise to embrace truth in Scripture and not knowledge of the day. Humility would prepare us to see that God's ways are different, and we must adhere to his way and reject our way.

How does one walk in God's ways? Quite simply, believe what God says.

“How can a young man keep his way pure? By guarding it according to your word.” Psalms 119:9

“So faith comes from hearing,” we are told, “and hearing through the word of Christ” (Romans 10:17). God's Word is the priceless treasure source to enable us to determine our way. Before we can keep his way, we must know his way. Before we know his way, we must discern the source and plumb its depths. He speaks through his Word. That's where waiting comes in. We wait for him and keep his Word. The context for us is a busy, confusing world. It takes patience and trust. Waiting. Then it takes faith to keep his Word because there are so many voices vying for our attention. I have discovered it takes discipline to fix my eyes on the truth and to reject simple and attractive answers. It takes zeal for him and his ways.

Wait on him. Keep his way.

**“Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him, and he will act.... Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him; fret not yourself over the one who prospers in his way, over the man who carries out evil devices! ... The steps of a man are established by the Lord, when he delights in his way...”
Psalms 37:5, 7, 23**

[Comments](#)

Foreign Longings

When all you know is heartache because of death, you're surrounded and encompassed by tears and pain. Experiences of terrible loss flood your mind with despair and sadness. Grief, in the early days, takes over your mind.

“I am a sojourner on the earth; hide not your commandments from me!” Psalm 119:19

Tears make daily visits. Mourning, even with hope, is a long and arduous journey. The very title of my blog, *Facing Loss*, is a reminder that death is always top-of-mind. It's healthy to face loss head-on. But, it's painful and enduring. It's real, and it won't go away. Or so it seems. It must be acknowledged and not ignored. By nature, loss is enveloping. It's like your daily clothing.

**“He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.”
Revelation 21:4**

However, every now and then, foreign longings sneak into your heart—at least they seem foreign to you. To your current circumstances. Thoughts of hope and a victorious future peer out of your heart looking for a hint of light in the darkness. Darkness and dread prevail. However, small flashes of light begin to emerge. Truth speaks into your experience if you're exposing yourself to truth. It takes unnatural, against-the-flow discipline.

Future tense, he *will* wipe away every tear. Death *will* be no more. There *will* be no mourning. There *will* be no crying. Pain *will* be finished. Foreign

longings reveal the hope for a day when all the former things *will* pass away.

In the dungeon of early grief, it's difficult to remember, recall, and rehearse messages of future hope. Hope is an obscure, distant, and foreign longing. But, the longing can be brought near and revived.

**“For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.”
Jeremiah 29:11**

It takes rehearsal to remember hope. It takes faith to embrace hope. As foreign longings arise, faith is reinvigorated. The hope of the gospel gives context to tears, death, mourning, crying, and pain. The gospel gives renewed birth to foreign longings during horrible loss.

**“Surely there is a future, and your hope will not be cut off.”
Proverbs 23:18**

It's important and helpful to recognize when traveling through a land of loss, there is a future hope that may seem like a foreign land. Jerry Sittser, in *A Grace Revealed*, provides much-needed clarity when he says, “... we must resist confusing sign and reality, resuscitation and resurrection, shadow and substance. In short, we must hold out for the real Heaven—Heaven not just for our benefit but for the world's benefit; Heaven not simply for now but for all eternity.” By faith, take hold of the new land even while in a land of pain. Remember and take heart.

“I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.” John 6:33

Living in lament creates foreign longings. In the world, you will have tribulation. Therefore, look with a longing expectation for heaven's hope. Yes, we can have joy in this world, even in grief. But, full and final victorious hope only comes when faith has become sight, and heaven is realized as our hoped-for home.

We have foreign longings because we are not citizens of this world. So, we thrive in his promise for today and wait in patience for the joy that is to

come.

“But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.” 2 Peter 3:13

[Comments](#)

One Simple Step to Obtain Wisdom

I didn't ask to go to a funeral on February 25, 2019. It was forced on me. Kim's sudden and unexpected death on February 18, and then the funeral the next week, turned my life on a dime. I guess that's an understatement.

**“The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning...”
Ecclesiastes 7:4**

Funerals have a way of turning your life on the proverbial dime. The way Ecclesiastes speaks about funerals is paradoxical. How can going to a funeral be good? Death and loss are negatives, right? Death and funerals are undesirable [assaulting waves](#) that crash on the shore of your life. Uninvited. Yet, Solomon makes sure we understand that the heart of the wise leads him to attend funerals or put his heart in the funeral home. Simple. One easy step.

“... this is the end of all mankind, and the living will lay it to heart.” Ecclesiastes 7:2

A funeral will turn your life on a dime if you'll let it. It's interesting that the attendance of a funeral or even contemplating a funeral is all it takes to attain the description “wise.” I think it's such an overwhelming wake-up call that it's assumed that you will take it to heart. Funerals rivet your heart. A funeral is a reminder of your own future. It's a reminder that your day is coming. After all, death comes to all of us—except Enoch, of course; but that's another story. No man or woman can deny that death is on the horizon, and this funeral-initiated reminder gives the opportunity to pivot, redirect, or renew a life path. Turn on a dime. Get instant wisdom.

“So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom.” Psalm 90:12

Solomon contrasts the funeral with a party—a house of mourning and a house of feasting side-by-side (Ecclesiastes 7:2). It’s better, he says, to spend time at funerals or at least to contemplate them. Attending parties lulls you into a tendency to ignore impending death. You’re tempted to live as if you’ll never die. Unwise.

**“... but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth.”
Ecclesiastes 7:4**

Solomon is telling you and me that we have a choice—folly or wisdom. We may spend our time reminding our heart that life is a party like a foolish man, or we can spend our time reminding our heart that life is heading toward a funeral like a wise man. Don’t misunderstand this passage. Solomon is not encouraging an unhealthy relationship with death and funerals. He’s heralding the importance of healthy perspective. Remind yourself that [life matters](#) because death is coming. And to be sure, life is short.

“... you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.” James 4:14

Let’s also be clear that these warnings are not admonitions against celebrations and parties. The issue here is a mindset of arrogance. Are you living foolishly as if you’ll never die? James reproves such a person saying, “... you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil” (James 4:16). Or are you living in humility recognizing you are given breath every day. It’s a gift of grace. It’s humility that reminds us that, “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights...” (James 1:17).

Keep seeking wisdom and avoiding folly. Avoid entertaining a careless heart. Instead, take one easy step—attend a funeral—and you will nurture a heart of wisdom.

“Doing wrong is like a joke to a fool, but wisdom is pleasure to a man of understanding.” Proverbs 10:23

[Comments](#)

How Grief Resembles Amputation

Living with someone for so long gives birth to habits, reactions, and responses that are second nature. So when loss occurs, you must learn to endure phantom impulses. These impulses are painful reminders of the habits born of oneness.

**“For God is not a God of confusion but of peace.” 1
Corinthians 14:33**

I’ll never forget the first time I travelled following Kim’s death. In a hotel room after an evening meeting, I reached for my phone to call her. Phantom impulse and response.

There are many such impulses.

You hear a voice that reminds you of your loved one. Mothers who have lost babies have reported feeling the baby move in their abdomen after the stillbirth delivery. A chance encounter in a crowded place with someone who looks like your spouse from a distance. You take a step in their direction only to stop yourself. These phantom impulses evoke a response. As you start to respond you catch yourself and correct course. You put the phone back in your pocket. You convince yourself you’re not feeling the baby kick. You realize, on closer inspection, the person doesn’t look at all like your loved one.

Grief is often compared to amputation. It’s an effective comparison. Amputations can heal, but you never get your limb back. Mourners can heal, but they never get their loved one back. Minor injuries that do not involve amputation heal and everything returns to normal. Full use returns. Not with amputations.

**“He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds.”
Psalm 147:3**

Amputations, I'm told, give rise to strange sensations. The amputee feels the missing limb at times as if it were still attached. These sensations arise from impulses in the brain. It's as if a roadway has been built based on repeated use of a limb. And it's also as if a road has been built because of a relationship and repeated experiences. These phantom sensations are confusing. Imagine feeling a twinge, a need to scratch an itch, or a tickle. However, it's coming from the amputated limb. Confusing. Frustrating. Even maddening.

“Two years have passed... grief has remained the salient fact of my existence.” Sheldon Vanauken, *A Severe Mercy*

I've found, as time marches on, when I'm distracted by normalcy I am more prone to experience phantom impulses. The normalcy lures me away from the immediate context of my grief. And I reach for my phone. An old habit seeps through the barricade of my new reality. The busyness and distraction lowers your guard. And an old memory has time to travel the path of the nerve all the way to a limb that no longer exists. Painful. Confusing. Jolting.

These phantom impulses are unavoidable. They are inevitable. They must be faced courageously and endured diligently. It's a part of healing, but it's also a reminder that healing still involves loss that will never be reversed. Denial surrenders slowly.

Grief resembles amputation.

“The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.” Psalm 51:17

[Comments](#)

A Biblical Story of Lament

The story in Lamentations begins by declaring the stark loneliness that accompanies pain. Once full of people and relationships, the city is now desolate and lonely.

“How lonely sits the city that was full of people!”

Lamentations 1:1

Stark and immediately changed. Vibrant city now barren. Sudden desolation. Instantaneous. A moment in time. I’m reminded of a song by Steven Curtis Chapman. He describes the onslaught of sudden loss by contrasting juxtaposed realities. He writes of his own sudden loss. Chapman laments:

“Well the band was playing, the flags were waving, and there you were in the middle of a sunny day parade. The crowds were cheering, the sky was clear. Not a worry in the world. . . . Then the lightning flashed, the thunder crashed, and suddenly it began to rain, and everybody ran. Then the sky went black as midnight, and you couldn’t see, paralyzed by what you just can’t understand. . . .” Steven Curtis Chapman, “Take Another Step”

Chapman describes precisely what happened to the city in Lamentations. The city—once full of people—is now lonely, people-less. It gets worse. The city, described as a princess, has become enslaved. That’s a stark and definitive collapse of a city’s life. Paralyzed.

“... She who was a princess among the provinces has become a slave.” Lamentations 1:1

Shocking and sudden.

The sunny day parade has met thunder and abandonment. The city is transformed in a shocking manner from princess to slave. The city laments. She groans. Her heart seriously stumbles, and she is faint. Injured. Taken out.

“... my groans are many, and my heart is faint.”

Lamentations 1:22

This is what suffering looks like. Pain is thrust to the forefront. Your lot is cast, and it's not good. Your identity—all you've ever known—is changed in a moment. Once a princess, now a slave. Initial shock will quickly give way and grief and lament will begin uninvited. It happens to you. Groans and fainting give way to more concrete physical responses. The impact is undeniable.

“My eyes are spent with weeping; my stomach churns; my bile is poured out to the ground because of the destruction...”

Lamentations 2:11

Grief begins to take shape. Weeping. Stressors. Physical illness. It's decision time. Where will you turn? Away from God or to God?

The city in lament turns to God.

“Remember, O Lord, what has befallen us; look, and see our disgrace!” Lamentations 5:1

The psalmist would say, “How long, O Lord?” or “Why have you forsaken me?” Turning and complaining are important aspects of lament. It's important for any of us facing loss to embrace the whole of lament. Individual parts of lament are incomplete. Mourners must press through and not abort the journey.

“The joy of our hearts has ceased; our dancing has been turned to mourning.” Lamentations 5:15

God knows your joy has taken a hit. He knows you're not light on your feet anymore. He knows you're in full-fledged grief. He knows you're

mourning. He is waiting for you to turn to him and even to complain to him. He will redeem the pain through relationship with himself. He wants you to come as a child to a father and make your requests. He desires for you to lovingly climb up into his lap.

According to Mark Vroegop, our Father wants you to **turn** to him, **complain** to him, **ask** of him, but fully **trust** him.

Lament—launched in loneliness—must follow the path all the way to absolute trust. Don't sidestep grief. Embrace loss. Press into lament. But trust. A whole book in the Bible was given to tell a story of lament. Therefore, be restored and renewed by biblical lament.

**“Restore us to yourself, O Lord, that we may be restored!
Renew our days as of old—unless you have utterly rejected
us, and you remain exceedingly angry with us.” Lamentations
5:21–22**

[Comments](#)

How Psalm 34 Drives a Stake in the Ground

Pounding a stake in the ground can be a powerful declaration. There can be no more appropriate faith-filled boasting than to revel in God. It's powerful because you're declaring and establishing that your hope, glory, and delight are in the Lord.

If you're facing loss or in pain, drive a stake in the ground by declaring your dependence. Drive a stake in the ground by boasting in God. Drive a stake in the ground by exalting God. Alone.

“My soul makes its boast in the Lord; let the humble hear and be glad. Oh, magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt his name together!” Psalms 34:2–3

Recognizing that your boasting is in God and not in your own strength results in gladness of heart. Worship rises from a sincere heart, and you seek to magnify and exalt the name of the Lord your God.

Declaring your dependence is a healthy exercise. A stake in the ground. In good times and in tough times, we are fully dependent. The times of difficulty act as a magnet to rivet a heart to closer communion with the Lord.

**“This poor man cried, and the Lord heard him and saved him out of all his troubles.... When the righteous cry for help, the Lord hears and delivers them out of all their troubles.”
Psalms 34:6, 17**

We cry out to God in surrender and dependence. Turning in faith to him, he hears and saves us. He delivers us from troubles. A bit of context may help here. We resolutely train our eyes on him, but we do not define the timeframe or characteristics of deliverance. Salvation and deliverance from

troubles may only be received in eternity. But that's the point. Temporal salvation alone would be short-lived. Eternal deliverance is a foundation worth pressing into and trusting. The temporal is given meaning.

“Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good! Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him!” Psalms 34:8

Give me a choice between temporal salvation and eternal deliverance, and I'm going with eternal deliverance every time. Perspective matters. When I come to fully understand the free gift of redemption that welcomes me into eternal relationship, I join the psalmist in proclaiming, “Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good!” I also turn to others and testify that any man, woman, boy, or girl who takes refuge in him also will be blessed. I give a testimony! Drive a stake in the ground. However, time is of the essence. Refuge must be taken while it is still day. Taste and see now.

But again, salvation and deliverance may not meet our temporal definition. Life continues to unveil many difficulties. We are not immune. We live in a fallen world.

“Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord delivers him out of them all.” Psalm 34:19

Afflictions in the here-and-now may be many. But the Lord will make everything turn right. We call it New Heavens and New Earth for a reason. New. Restored. All wrongs made right. All pain assuaged. We run to the strong tower, and he will not disappoint. He wholly redeems. He absolves those who take refuge in him of their wages owed.

Drive the stake of *Psalm 34* in the ground, and take refuge in, boast in, and magnify the Lord with me.

“The Lord redeems the life of his servants; none of those who take refuge in him will be condemned.” Psalms 34:22

[Comments](#)

How Not to Be Like Job's Friends

When loss descended upon Job, his friends were quick to come to offer support.

They started out well.

The biblical account reveals, “Now when Job’s three friends heard of all this evil that had come upon him, they came each from his own place . . .” (Job 2:11). Friends are intended to be the comforters, fellow sojourners.

However, they quickly changed their tune.

“If one ventures a word with you, will you be impatient? Yet who can keep from speaking?” Job 3:2

They couldn’t simply comfort. They had to offer advice. Or explanations. Or even accusations. Job lamented in their presence, and they decided it was a teachable moment. Indeed, grief is a moment for great lessons; however, friends are not intended to be the teachers during loss. Supporters are supposed to comfort and not accuse.

“[Job] suffered the counsel of fools by listening to the advice of his friends.” R. C. Sproul, *The Holiness of God*

Shock, numbness, grief, and mourning become a platform for deep lessons. God uses the platform to teach and deepen the mourner. You, the friend, don’t need to give a mourner advice. You need to care. Job’s friends started out well but quickly decided it was their responsibility to teach Job.

Their comforting care for Job was at a deficit.

So, Job’s friends ask, “Who can keep from speaking?” My answer? You should keep from speaking if you’re tempted to offer quick answers or explanations for God. Pat answers do not help. Silly platitudes are not helpful.

“Resist seeing a hurting person’s sadness as something to fix...
Don’t slap a Jesus sticker on someone’s devastated life...”
Katherine and Jay Wolf, *Suffer Strong*

Oftentimes, Christians feel a need to protect God’s reputation by offering unfeeling theological platitudes. Now, I want to state clearly that in my experience, I cannot think of anyone who said anything to me that was inappropriate in my early days of grief. So, relax and read on. However, inappropriate and unhelpful comments are tempting to make, so I’ve decided to use my platform to speak into how we comfort others in their grief.

“Christ fiercely opposes matter-of-fact detachment.” David Powlison, *Suffering and the Sovereignty of God*

Some people say, “This was for the best.” Sometimes you hear, “God needed your loved one more than you did.” Bad theology. “God is in control,” it is said. True, God is in control, but skipping grief to jump to “all is well” is unhealthy and definitely unhelpful. God does not require you to diminish the loss or detach yourself from the pain in order to trust him.

“... comfort one another, agree with one another, live in peace...” 2 Corinthians 13:11

I have a colleague and friend, James Strange, who joined me for dinner at a meeting in Spain while on a work trip. After praying at our meal, James asked a question. He asked, “What’s the question you get tired of being asked?” As an aside, sometimes I wish I was an introvert because their waters run deep. I responded, “That’s a great question.” I explained a difficult question to answer is, “How are you doing?” It’s just too broad. It’s better to ask, “How are you doing today?” It’s narrower and easier to answer.

James followed my answer to his first question with another, more insightful question. James asked, “What’s the question you wish people would ask you?” Again, I was impressed by his question. I replied that I like to be asked, “What are you learning on this journey?” It’s a good follow up question.

“You are not facing your difficulty alone, for the Lord is closer than a friend or brother.” Robert L. Morgan, *The Red Sea Rules*

Recently, I met a new friend who is twenty-nine years old and is two years into his second marriage. Joe Hall lost his wife, Perrin, when he was twenty-six after a battle with cancer. He is wise, gentle, and experienced beyond his years. He shared with me the question he wished people had asked him during his early grief. “Can you tell me about your wife, Perrin?” He’s right. This is a great question because we want you to know the person we have lost.

Don’t be afraid to ask someone who has lost a loved one about the very loved one they’ve lost. Our loved ones leave an impact upon our lives. Joe is remarried now, and he and his wife named their sweet little daughter after his first wife. Our absent loved ones made an impact on this world, and we want their lives to continue to impact the world with their beauty, with their story.

“... when we minimize the pain we fail to love others and we failed to honor God.” Dustin Shramek, *Suffering and the Sovereignty of God*

So, don’t be like Job’s friends. Instead, care enough to broach the subject without easy answers, excuses, lessons, or accusations. And ask good and redemptive questions. You might encourage someone, and you might learn some life lessons for yourself.

“For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.” Philemon 1:7

“You’re thankful for the kind things people say, you forgive the dumb things, but you’re crushed by the silence... Most people are illiterate in the language of grief...” Nora McInerny, *It’s Okay to Laugh*

[Comments](#)

Here I Raise My Purple Redbud Tree

“We’ve come this far by faith leaning on the Lord; trusting in His Holy Word, he never failed me yet...” Carlton Pearson, “We’ve Come This Far By Faith”

I couldn’t help myself. I had to add a tree to our front yard. Honestly, I had a spot I always wanted to fill with a smaller, decorative tree. Kim wasn’t sure we needed it.

After Kim’s death and during my healing, I knew exactly what I was going to do.

One thing you miss when facing loss is the little repeated conversations that help you know a person. Kim loved Redbud trees. Every time we moved from colder to warmer temperatures, she loved the purple flowers on a Redbud tree and commented. Every time. Without fail. She loved the created wonder represented by that vibrant new growth every year. However, this reminds me of one thing that has always bothered me. Every time the topic came up. You see, in my opinion Redbud trees have purple flowers. I don’t want to argue about it, but I’m convinced. But I digress.

“Then Samuel took a stone and set it between Mizpah and Shen, and named it Ebenezer, saying, ‘Thus far the Lord has helped us.’” 1 Samuel 7:12

An Ebenezer is a reminder, a monument. We, the created, need to be reminded of how the Creator carries us on this journey through a broken world. We must place reminders on the journey as a part of the road maps we live out.

“Here I raise my Ebenezer. Here there by Thy great help I’ve come. And I hope by Thy good pleasure safely to arrive at

home...” Robert Robinson, “Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing”

Celebration may sound like it’s too much of a stretch here, but it’s not. We celebrate our journeys. We mark our journeys with reminders. We may be mourning a loss, but we’re celebrating his presence. We celebrate his help. We celebrate his goodness. We really have come to this point by faith. Not by sight. Faith is not strong unless the object of the faith is strong. He is worth celebrating on a long and difficult road. Dare I say more so than other times?

God has been faithful to help me with great help like the hymn writer proclaims. Great help reveals the solid foundation. A solid stone-like foundation. I join Samuel in saying that “Thus far the Lord has helped us.” Samuel placed a stone as his Ebenezer. I needed a reminder, too, of his great help.

And I had a spot in the front yard that needed a tree.

So, here I raise my Ebenezer became here I raise my purple Redbud tree. It’s a celebration of the wonder of creative beauty. In purple Redbuds and in the gift of grace known as my bride.

He has led me this far by faith. I have leaned on the Lord. I have trusted in his Word. Through a long and unwanted journey, he has never failed me. So, I planted a tree.

Here I raise my purple Redbud tree.

“Instead of the thorn bush the cypress will come up, and instead of the nettle the myrtle will come up, And it will be a memorial to the Lord, for an everlasting sign which will not be cut off.” Isaiah 55:13

[Comments](#)

Immanuel in Woe or in Weal

“Moment by moment, in woe or in weal, Jesus my Savior abides with me still.” Daniel W. Whittle, “Moment by Moment”

Merry Christmas! It’s a repeated greeting that can easily become commonplace.

Christmas is described as merry because Jesus abides with you and me. Still. Enduring. Faithful. He never leaves us; nor does he forsake us.

In woe. In weal.

Woe is defined as a condition of deep suffering from misfortune, affliction, or grief. These are moments when life takes a painful turn. Yet, he is still Immanuel, God with us, even in pain.

Weal, on the other hand, is defined as a sound, healthy, or prosperous state of life. These are moments when life is good. Things are going our way.

Moment by moment, God is with us regardless of whether our state, condition, or experience is best described as woe or weal. Both. And always.

“It’s no major news flash that the bodies and the world we live in are not safe; our circumstances are unknown, and the very laws of nature in and around us are moment by moment causing us and everything else to fall apart.” Katherine and Jay Wolf, *Suffer Strong*

Let’s be honest, it’s pretty easy to acknowledge God’s presence and goodness when all is well. In weal. However, the crisis comes when we are face-to-face with woe. Crisis. Disbelief. Shock. Numbness. Death. Loss. Pain. Despair.

I could go on.

“Jesus! What a help in sorrow! While the billows o’er me roll,
Even when my heart is breaking, He, my comfort, helps my soul.
Hallelujah! What a Savior! Hallelujah! What a friend! Saving,
helping, keeping, loving, He is with me to the end.” J. Wilbur
Chapman, “Jesus! What a Friend for Sinners”

By contrast, I have learned that if we turn to God and not away from him in times of woe, that is when we see his help and comfort most clearly. We receive his saving, helping, keeping, and loving ways. We embrace his presence, his companionship. We spontaneously exclaim, “Hallelujah! What a Savior! Hallelujah! What a friend!” Immanuel. God is, indeed, with us.

And it began in a manger in Bethlehem. Humble.

Christmas is that seminal and historical moment that changed everything. In the string of moments this is a pivotal moment. In the string of gifts this is a pivotal gift. God’s presence was infused into human history in the birth of Jesus. Immanuel is with us. Merry was made possible.

This Christmas, we need to press into the moment when it all began. Remember. Celebrate. Believe. Trust.

**“For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior,
who is Christ the Lord. Glory to God in the highest, and on
earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!” Luke
2:11, 14**

Again, ponder that first Christmas and the gift he is for mankind. For you. Peace has now been made available to you and all mankind. Joy-filled merriment is appropriate.

In woe or in weal. Moment by moment. He is Immanuel, God with us. He abides with us. Still. Therefore, whether we face woe or weal we must abide with him. He is our peace, our gift.

**“For you make him most blessed forever; you make him glad
with the joy of your presence.” Psalm 21:6**

**“Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your
Holy Spirit from me.” Psalm 51:11**

Note: As I celebrate my recent engagement, I acknowledge I am in a good “micro-story.” However, God was also good to me in the valley, my other “micro-story.” That is my testimony, my story; God is good in woe or in weal.

[Comments](#)

Four Lessons Learned from an Encourager

“And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works...” Hebrews 10:24

There are many [brutal details](#) and decisions that crash in upon you in the wake of loss. I came to a point when I was ready to pull together several piles or stacks of memories into one place for storage. Packing a few important memories in a storage bin is an excruciating step. I came across a stack of over one hundred letters Kim had kept. These were letters I received from her while we dated long-distance over the course of almost two years. Once we married, she kept the letters.

I’m so glad she did.

I could not simply pack the letters without reading through them one more time. It took me several weeks to slowly read through the letters. As an aside, we were so immature and even a little cute. I walked down memory lane, and I read every letter again. My first reading was before I married Kim; my final reading was after I had lost Kim.

And I learned something.

Kim saw the potential of attributes and gifts in me while we were dating. Raw material. I read letter after letter commending me and encouraging me to be who God created me to be. Specific and focused encouragement. I don’t want to overstate this, but I want us to all learn some lessons. I look at the man I have become, and she encouraged me and believed in me to become that man. Her encouragement bore fruit. The man she encouraged grew, in part, because of her encouragement.

I learned four lessons about encouragement from her.

I. Encouragers selflessly live for the good of others. Let’s be honest, it’s easy to focus on ourselves and our own needs, even in marriage. It takes intentionality to get to know others. Of course, we were falling in love and

neither of us minded getting to know the other. However, Kim selflessly gave herself through her letters to encourage me in specific ways. It was obvious she was seeking my good. She was building me up, encouraging me.

“... we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers.” 1 John 3:16

2. Encouragers carefully speak truth into lives. I’m not talking about general encouragement. I’m talking about inspiring me to walk with Christ. Godliness. She commended me for my leadership in our relationship. She encouraged my kindness and other attributes. She reinforced and encouraged godly traits. She reinforced truth and applied it to my life. I grew and matured because of her investment.

“Love... rejoices with the truth.” 1 Corinthians 13:6

3. Encouragers genuinely love. Her numerous letters, written across two years, declared her growing love for me. She was genuine. She expressed love and humility. She encouraged me to take on the world! Her belief in me inspired me. She was transparent and authentic. One thing about her is that she was who she was all throughout our marriage. Genuine. Seeking to love me and others all of her days.

4. Encouragers establish confidence. I never doubted Kim’s love. She was unwavering in her commitment. I knew it. My confidence came from her consistent encouragement.

“Oh, how I miss you sweetheart. You are great... I’ll love you ’til the day I die.” Kim Plumblee, May 8, 1982

And she did love me until the day she died. I was confident in her love. And now, I have a question rolling around in my head.

What would I have been without her encouragement?

My experience inspires another question. What could your encouragement do in the life of your spouse? What about your children? Your grandchildren? How about your friends? Are you mentoring others younger than yourself? What will your encouragement mean to them?

Let's learn four lessons from an encourager's example. Let's live for the good of others; let's speak truth into the lives of others; let's show genuine love to others; and let's establish confidence in others.

“Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.” 1 Thessalonians 5:11

NOTE: As I release this entry written over a year ago now, I am being encouraged by another encourager in my life, my fiancé. Thank you, Amanda.

[Comments](#)

The Notable Distinction Between Isolation and Solitude

“Perhaps the bereaved ought to be isolated in special settlements like lepers.” C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*

Grief brings more than loss and sadness. In some ways, it brings the feelings of rejection. You don't seem to fit any longer. Not in the way you did before. Sometimes loss instantaneously moves you into another category of humanity. Leper. If C. S. Lewis felt it, surely, I will experience it, too.

“Loneliness brings with it another feeling of not belonging.” H. Norman Wright, *Experiencing Grief*

Bottom line, loss can lead to isolation. Isolation is the negative side of the coin—being alone. Lonely. Isolation can be done to you, or you can do it to yourself. You can be excluded, or you can pull away on purpose. Not healthy.

However, when it comes to the other side of the same coin, you have to intentionally get away to seek needed solitude. There is a healthy side of being alone.

Isolation. Solitude. There's an important difference.

Isolation should be identified, and preparation should be made to address it. Being isolated for extended periods of time is not healthy. Proactive, intentional steps should be taken to develop a plan for your self-care. Allowing yourself to be isolated increases the prospect of depression. Four walls start to close in on you. Isolation breeds loneliness. Loneliness breeds lack of clarity which gives birth to a multitude of mistakes. History is replete with the mistakes made by those in grief.

“Whoever isolates himself seeks his own desire; he breaks out against all sound judgment.” Proverbs 18:1

My children asked me to take care of myself, and they suggested I get outside every morning. Their intent was that I get some exercise. The result was I got outside of my four walls; leaving the isolation of my four walls gave context.

I’ve discovered isolation and solitude are very different. It’s important to know the difference.

*“Only in silence can our souls be resuscitated by the Savior. He will work wonders in us if we wait before him. He can speak calm and contentment into our personal storms.” Boyd Bailey, *The Spiritual Life of a Leader**

Solitude was necessary for my healing. Where isolation happens to you, solitude is planned. Solitude is getting alone for the purpose of healing. Boyd Bailey says “... an inner stillness serenades the soul with tranquility so that the cares of the world lose their caustic control.” Solitude provides space to process your loss. Solitude gives the opportunity to commune with God about your loss.

“Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted.” Psalm 25:16

Proactively seeking solitude enables our healing from the plague of loneliness. Julie Yarbrough writes, “Solitude is aloneness without loneliness.... Solitude inspires the courage... as we adjust to the vicissitudes of grief.” While suffering loss, we pull away on purpose for times of solitude to entreat our God of sorrows to turn to us and to be gracious to us.

“For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.” Hebrews 4:15

In our affliction we lay ourselves before a loving God—our loving High Priest. We pour out our hearts to him who sympathizes with our weakness.

Our Father sent his Son to the very depths of loss to meet us. Now, meeting him only comes through solitude. And as Richard A. Burr has aptly penned, “There are some things that God only says in secret, and there are some secrets that are only heard in solitude!”

“One must get alone to find out that he never is alone.” S. D. Gordon, *Quiet Talks on Prayer*

There is an important difference between isolation and solitude. Where isolation breeds loneliness, solitude delivers intimacy.

“Be with me in my silence ... in company and in solitude ... Cheer the lonely with Thy company and the distracted with Thy solitude.” John Baillie, *A Diary of Private Prayer*

“But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”Matthew 6:6

[Comments](#)

Three Insights on Marriage in My Rearview Mirror

Kim graduated the year before I did and was working in Madison, Georgia. I must include, however, that she was younger than I am—she would want you to know. I was finishing school with a six-month diversion to sing at the 1982 World’s Fair. Kim wrote letters prolifically, and she kept all of them once we married.

Now, thirty-seven years later, I have the blessing of being reminded how we pursued each other and God as we explored a future. To be perfectly transparent, we were immature and had no idea what we were doing. As I have healed from my loss, I have read these letters from Kim written to me while we dated long-distance.

She was growing to love me as I was growing to love her. But in these letters, I am reading of her growing love and anticipation of our marriage. I am in awe of the gift of love. As I read the letters—and consider where we ended up—I was reminded of a few insights that I believe provide profound marital guidance in my rearview mirror.

The Bible calls for selfless commitment. The wise person practices commitment. This is much more difficult than a simple sentence. However, it’s as simple as this singular sentence. The night I asked Kim to marry me, she and I had a heart-to-heart on what that decision included. Commitment. For life. Decisive. In my rearview mirror, that commitment made all the difference.

“This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called ‘woman,’ for she was taken out of man.’ That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh.” Genesis 2:23–24

The Bible calls for unconditional love. The wise person practices love.

Love has a number of faces and all are valid. However, for marital love you must tie every other love to unconditional, agape love. Selflessness. Loving the one loved without conditions. I love what a German theologian, H. W. J. Thiersch, says to explain the power marriage exerts over the emotional aspect of love:

“Marriage rescues love from the tyranny of strong but immature emotions; in marriage, we are not the helpless pawns of passing moods, rather we train love to be the willing servant of our union”
H. W. J. Thiersch

Indeed, there is emotion in marriage. But marriage rescues your love from simple, emotional love. Unconditional love, born of marital commitment, is a gift. As I look in my rearview mirror, I do not regret my unconditional love for Kim. And I enjoyed the confidence of unconditional love from her.

The Bible calls for the fruit of love. The wise person fully builds an environment marked by the fruit of love. There is an environment that comes from unconditional love. However, it takes intentional building upon that foundation of love. Love gives birth to an atmosphere that defines the marriage.

“Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends...” 1 Corinthians 13:4–8

Love frames marriage with patience and kindness. Love resists envy, boasting, arrogance, and rudeness. It is selfless and is not irritable or resentful. It rejoices in truth and does not rejoice in misconduct. Love frames a marriage in bearing, believing, hoping, and enduring all things. Unconditional love provides the context for the bliss of the fruit of love. In my rearview mirror, I see clearly the fruit of love.

Three brief insights in my rearview mirror remind me why the Creator of marriage should be trusted to build marriages. Selfless commitment,

unconditional love, and intentional building out the fruit of love stand as a monument to the beauty of marriage.

“It is not your love that sustains the marriage, but from now on, the marriage that sustains your love.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*

Note: The release of this entry, written over a year ago, is timely as I prepare for marriage nearly three years after my loss.

[Comments](#)

Stand Against the Curve

“We become absorbed in the world of our own experiences, thoughts, feelings, and opinions... We curve in on ourselves.”
David Powlison, *Suffering and the Sovereignty of God*

We curve in on ourselves.

When I read this statement, it resonated. It struck a chord in my mind. I got it. I agreed that curving in on yourself is a danger presented in life—but especially in grief. I’ve experienced the temptation to curve inward.

But so have you. Or so will you. Ready yourselves and stand firm.

“But the Lord God called to the man and said to him, ‘Where are you?’ And he said, ‘I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself.’” Genesis 3:9–10

By virtue of the Fall, we’re a self-centered lot. All of us. Regardless of our station in life. Regardless of our race, gender, age or political views. Doesn’t matter. We tend to curve in on ourselves. Adam sinned and immediately he shrunk into himself and hid from God. The older I get the more I understand the power of any tendency. Habits are strong. Defaulting to known tendencies is a reflex. It’s subtle but strong.

Add the prospect of grief brought on by loss, and the magnetic draw of self-preoccupation is an even stronger tendency. Left to our own feelings, we curve in on ourselves. We begin to interpret everything through a self-centered lens. It’s not the kind of self-centeredness causing you to be identified by others as prideful or arrogant. Not that kind of self-centeredness. Not hubris. It’s more self-pity or feeling sorry for yourself. Abandoned. We might say, “My problems are worse than your problems.”

Our grief has colored the lens through which we see everything. Everything.

Martin Luther popularized the Latin phrase “*homo incurvatus in se.*” Basically, this phrase means humankind is curved in upon itself. Luther was picking up on a description of sin written about earlier by Augustine. The basic idea is we tend toward curving or turning inward or toward ourselves, away from God.

Like Adam, we hide ourselves. It began with original sin. Paul explains it:

“For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members.” Romans 7:22–23

Earlier Paul speaks of sin as doing what one doesn’t want to do and not doing what one knows to do. Curving in on yourself. Away from God. As A. W. Tozer said in *The Pursuit of God*, “Sin has twisted our vision inward and made it self-regarding. Unbelief has put self where God should be...”

Any tendency to turn in on and trust ourselves is misplaced trust, right?

The idea of turning in on oneself comes into crystal clarity during loss. There is a tendency to curve away from God. Draw inward. You’ll even curve away from supportive fellow-journeymen if you’re not careful. You might say, “I just don’t want to be around anyone.” Or “I need to be alone.” This is not to be confused with the healthy need for [solitude](#). This curving is toward isolation and self-dependency. It’s seeking to be an island. Alone.

“... our hearts are bent in the wrong direction, away from what gives life... it’s effortless to be mindful of self... work to be mindful of God.” Matt Smethurst, *Before You Open Your Bible*

You need to fight the tendency to curve in on yourself.

When grief is driven deep into your heart, it acts as a centripetal force. Everything is curving in toward the center—*curvitas in se*. This is one of those times, among many others, when we need to listen to Paul and stand against this tendency to curve in on ourselves by fastening the belt of truth and the breastplate of righteousness. Christ’s righteousness.

“Faith looks out instead of in and the whole life falls into line.” A.
W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God*

Curve toward Jesus.

**“Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and
having put on the breastplate of righteousness...” Ephesians
6:14**

“... some have swerved from the faith...” 1 Timothy 6:21

[Comments](#)

Beware of Two Opposite and Dishonest Faces to Loss

“I could strengthen you with my mouth, and the solace of my lips would assuage your pain.” Job 16:5

Loss has many faces. Loss presents itself in the life of any mourner in various ways. There are two faces that emerge during loss, and they are both lying to you and to me. There are two dishonest faces to loss. These two perspectives may come from the opinions of others, or they may come from pressure you put on yourself.

Don't underestimate the seriousness of your loss. On one hand, you are tempted to dismiss, diminish, or downplay your loss. Eventually, you feel or receive pressure to move on. The temptation is to treat your loss as if it's no big deal. Everyone else has moved on, it seems, so you need to push your pain beneath the surface. As one person told me, “I just don't want to be a downer around everyone.” There is pressure—perceived or real—to downplay your loss and recover quickly.

“People must process pain and sorrow, not simply ‘let go’ of it.”
Ligon Duncan, *When Pain is Real and God Seems Silent: Finding Hope in the Psalms*

Loss is simply not pleasant. All we know is life, and we don't want it to end. We love our family and our friends. We are invested in our community and our church. We feel a calling to our causes. So, on one extreme we seek not to think about loss more than we have to think about it. Again, it's just not pleasant.

But beware. Don't make the mistake of underestimating your loss. However, there's another dishonest face to loss.

Don't overestimate the seriousness of your loss. On the other hand, we are tempted to crumble in despair, overemphasizing our loss. Your ongoing pain overwhelms you, and you decide it's simply too much to handle. Recovery is impossible. You might be tempted to say, "My loss is so much worse than the losses of others." I was talking to a friend whose mother saw no purpose after the loss of her lifelong partner in marriage. The outcome of such unbridled despair is to give up and give in. Your loss is allowed to overflow and overwhelm your ability to live. You couldn't move on even if you wanted to.

Loss is top-of-mind. It's hard not to think about. It's difficult to face loss in a healthy manner. It is easier to fall into the trap of despondency where we are overcome by the pain of loss. We simply pull up our anchor and go where the heartbreak takes us. Loss is unpleasant, but it's unavoidable, also.

But beware. Don't make the mistake of overestimating your loss.

"By embracing the depth of... pain we are enabled to marvel at the eternal weight of glory." Dustin Shramek, *Suffering and the Sovereignty of God*

Please take note that both of these faces to loss are being dishonest with you. Loss is horrible and should not be diminished; however, loss is surmountable if you walk by faith and refuse to despair.

"Death and grief enjoy a remarkable taboo in our society. Not because of their sacred and inviolable nature, rather because of our innate aversion to the consideration of our own mortality." Julie Yarbrough, *Inside the Broken Heart: Grief Understanding for Widows and Widowers*

Both extremes come from our basic aversion to contemplating our own unavoidable death. Again, loss is not pleasant. So, beware of the two dishonest faces to loss. Do not underestimate or overestimate the seriousness of your loss. Face loss with endurance and a sober mind. Acknowledge loss while trusting our good Father.

"As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry." 2 Timothy 4:5

[Comments](#)

Unexpected Insights Into a Providential Love Story

Providence—in one definition—is described as timely preparation for future eventualities. I like that definition, especially when contemplating meeting, pursuing, and marrying Kim. Future eventualities need a touch of patience while waiting through timely preparation. The discovered eventual reward is worth the wait.

“He who finds a wife finds a good thing and obtains favor from the Lord.” Proverbs 18:22

Finding a wife is an act of providence. Well-timed. Let’s just say I came along at the right time, and I know it. Kim was ready for a boyfriend by the time we met. She had dated before, but that makes this revelation even more important. Of no cause of my own, I intersected life with Kim and played the pursuit game well.

Over a year after Kim died, I came across a couple of Kim’s old diaries. I’d never read them, but I figured now I could do so without retribution.

After I met Kim in college, I always told her I wished I could have known her as a younger girl. Finally, my wish came true. I had discovered her diaries for her twelfth to thirteenth year and her fifteenth to sixteenth year. Priceless.

And I learned a little bit about providence, too.

There were entries about school and grades, friends and boys, best friends and changing friends, highs and fallouts with friends, church and youth group, and the normal topics. But then imagine with me—for just a moment—reading alone at night in the quietness of my own room and stumbling upon and reading the following words.

“I wish I could get a boyfriend. Everybody is getting one but me! Someday a prince will come into my life.” Kim Plumblee, January 22, 1976

“I did come into your life,” I spoke, breaking the silence in my room. What a precious moment. What a sweet moment. What a gift to me. But also, what a funny moment.

I got to peer into Kim’s life as she was gaining interest in boys. She was beginning to notice a desire to couple. And fast. Fast-forward to a mere two weeks later, and she would write more on the subject of her need for a boyfriend.

“I wish I would get asked to our church Sweetheart Banquet. By anybody!” Kim Plumblee, February 5, 1976

By anybody? There’s a twinge of growing desperation. She was only a sophomore in high school. God was awakening her to this idea of boys becoming friends and more than just a friend. She decided she wanted one. Granted, she speaks of having one as if having some possession. It almost sounds like, “I need that album. Everybody else is getting one.” But you have to start somewhere. Give her a break—she’s only fifteen years old. Instead, look at it from another perspective. In God’s providence, he was preparing her for her future marriage.

“An excellent wife who can find? She is far more precious than jewels.” Proverbs 31:10

God was protecting me for her and her for me. Far more precious than jewels. His timing is perfect. If she was growing in desperation in February of 1976, imagine how I was set up for success by the time I came along in 1981. We met just over five years after this entry in her diary.

A timely preparation for future eventualities, indeed.

“Then the Lord God said, ‘It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.’” Genesis 2:18

One added note: This entry was written over a year ago. As I release it, I’m now nearing three years since Kim’s death, and I’m in the middle of a

new providential love story.

[Comments](#)

Why I'm Hopeful—How the Gospel Annihilates Hopelessness

“The wonderful thing about Christ dying is that he rose on the third day. Not just any man can do that... he's more than just a man.” Kim Plumblee, April 16, 1976

He's more than just a man.

It doesn't matter who says it. The Bible teaches it. Preachers proclaim it. In the case of the quote above, fifteen-year-old Kim Plumblee wrote it in her diary in 1976. Bottom line: Jesus is more than just a man. And not just any man can resurrect on the third day.

His resurrection changed everything.

In God's providence, he had a plan that was enacted in history. Jesus said, “Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world” (John 17:24). This plan was born in eternity past, and it included us.

**“... even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him.”
Ephesians 1:4**

This gospel plan came to pass at a point in history because created humankind was not holy or blameless. A very real historical Jesus, who lived in Israel, was put to death nearly 2,000 years ago. He died a criminal's death according to God's plan.

“He it is who came to win me on the Cross of shame...” Frances Bevan, *Hymns of Ter Steegan and Others*

This gospel brought about the payment of sin. This is a mercy to us, God paying a price we owed. Romans 6:23 heralds, “For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” The wages we owed were paid by Christ. Grace was given to us as a gift. Grace is defined as receiving something we do not deserve. His grace delivered to us the gift of Christ’s righteousness to fulfill the requirement of his holy Father. Paid. Gifted.

It’s not the gospel if it has to be earned. Yet, salvation is not free; it cost Jesus his life. The gospel includes the birth, life, death, burial, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus. To quote the hymn writer, Elvina M. Hall, “Jesus paid it all...” Finished.

However, salvation is free to us. Mark this again—if it has to be earned, it’s not the gospel.

“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.” Ephesians 2:8–9

The gospel heralds a free gift. In humility and in faith, we turn to God and receive his offer of salvation in Christ. Once this gift is in my hands, I’m justified. I’m forgiven. I’m redeemed. Further, I am a changed man. I’m made new. Once simply a creation, 2 Corinthians 5:17 reveals I am now a new creation.

And here’s why the gospel annihilates hopelessness in this life. Here’s why the gospel gives comfort and context to loss. The gospel doesn’t end with my forgiveness. While it is a gift to be redeemed and to be a new creation, that is not the best part of the gospel. Yes, we’ve now been made new before God. However, his gift, at its essence, is himself. He made us righteous so that we have him as our treasure. What sort of eternal hope is it if I’m simply a better version of myself? The way to God has been forged.

And this gospel changed everything.

I’m not hopeful about temporal loss because I’m forgiven; I’m not hopeful because I’m better than I was before. I’m hopeful because the gospel annihilates eternal hopelessness. By faith, any loss will pale in comparison to the eternal gift of his presence.

“No longer looking to his hand but gazing on his face ...” Frances Bevan, *Hymns of Ter Steegan and Others*

The gospel doesn't just promise I can see Kim again one day. It promises that I will see Jesus. The gospel reunites me with my Creator.

The gospel changes everything. It annihilates hopelessness. That's why I am hopeful.

“The sorrow of a loss can lead us to the man of sorrows because Jesus is the answer to the cause of every pain.” Mark Vroegop, *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy*

“No longer will there be anything accursed ... They will see his face ... And night will be no more ... the Lord will be their light ...” Revelation 22:3–5

[Comments](#)

On Shed Blood, Testimonies, and Selflessness

“And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death.” Revelation 12:11

My friend and fellow traveler, Mike Wall, asked me to pray as he was preaching on *Psalms 23* one August Sunday in Oklahoma. He and Vanda were walking their own path of suffering. Vanda is in treatment for a brain tumor. Mike and I are friends because we were thrust upon each other by pain and loss. Knowing of my loss, he brought up the difficulty he faced. I have prayed for him and Vanda every day. I was compelled. Let's just say that comforting with the comfort with which you've been comforted is real.

So, Mike's preaching this August Sunday revolved around the unveiling of their faith journey in suffering. Basically, he was transparently testifying to his faith community. He asked me to pray for him because I understand loss. I understand shadowy valleys.

I listened in on Sunday afternoon.

“I didn't want to preach this passage... I knew I was going to have to be transparent... I would love some company.” Mike Wall

And apparently, therein lies the power. Transparency. With fellow journeyers. With God. He wanted others to wade into transparent waters with him. This is not misery loves company; this is testimony loves company.

In Revelation 12:11, we learn that believers overcome or conquer Satan by the Lamb's blood, by our stories of redemption, and because we love God and others selflessly. Three important lessons.

We overcome Satan by the blood of Jesus.

Ultimately, the power delivered by the humility of our Savior squashed Satan's domain. Jesus pulled a power play by shedding his own blood. The purchase price of humanity's redemption was Jesus's blood.

“Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.” Hebrews 9:22

No one comes to the Father on his own. The work Jesus did on the cross overwhelmed Satan. A definitive blow was leveled in one conquering act. We overcome by the blood of the Lamb.

We overcome Satan by our testimonies of changed lives.

Jesus' blood has to be received as a gift. Once a person confesses sin and repents, they are gifted salvation and a testimony. They have a salvation story. The redemptive act of Jesus' death is applied to an individual, and a life is changed. As H. Ernest Nichol wrote in 1896, “We've a story to tell to the nations...” The shed blood has given us a story to tell, a conquering weapon.

Mike Wall continued that August Sunday as he wove his testimony with *Psalm 23*. He exclaimed, “We had to depend upon God every single minute.” His faith walk raised as a testimony to “turn their hearts to the right,” as Nichol continues in the hymn. I texted Mike after his message that there was some overcoming and conquering going on in Oklahoma during his message.

We overcome by the word of our testimony.

We overcome Satan because we deny ourselves selflessly.

Redemption by Jesus' blood and testifying of Christ's work in our lives lay the foundation for selfless living. We love God and others. We crucify ourselves.

“I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me...” Galatians 2:20

As a reminder, Mike's context for his testimony is a wife facing a tumor. It's time to turn inward, right?

Mike shared an experience while jogging the morning after hearing of his wife's diagnosis. Stunned and in shock, he jogged past two guys sitting on the back of a truck. When he jogged past them again on his return—as clear

as day—God impressed upon him to share his faith with them. After a brief attempt at an argument with God, he stopped and shared his faith. As he jogged away God made known that Mike’s role through Vanda’s illness was to represent Christ. That’s his role in this trial. Later when Vanda was being rolled into the operating room, she told the doctor that she was not afraid. Both Mike and Vanda chose to walk by faith and press into trust. Both of them chose to be good representatives—by loving God and others more than themselves.

We overcome because we do not love our own lives even when faced with death. Selfless.

Thank you, Mike and Vanda. Our world is full of incredible stories of people standing firm in faith during pain, loss, and suffering.

Remember these three lessons from Revelation 12:11: Jesus shed his blood. We share our story. We live selfless lives.

We overcome Satan.

“Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world.” 1 Peter 5:9

Note: This week, on February 18, 2022, my family marks the third anniversary of Kim’s death. This truly has been an unwanted journey. And there truly have been lessons of hope. I like to believe Kim would be proud of her husband and children as they have faced loss together.

[Comments](#)

How Loss Creates a Taunting Play on One Word

“It was a delicate business to honor the past but lean into the future, to remember the old but embrace the new, however unwanted it was.” Jerry Sittser, *A Grace Revealed: How God Redeems the Story of Your Life*

Alone. It is a very good word.

When a young man awakens to love and begins to pursue time alone with a young woman, alone is a very good word.

I’ll never forget the evening Kim and I both stayed at a friend’s parents’ house. One evening, we stayed up long after everyone else retired to their rooms. We sat on the floor and talked. We weren’t even dating yet. But we enjoyed a one-on-one conversation. From that point on, I sought alone time with Kim. She was my focus. Alone. Getting to know each other.

Aloneness equals discovery.

Weddings are known for gathering numerous people to celebrate and witness the joining of two lives into a union. While surrounded by the masses the new couple longs to be alone. Finally, the wedding ends. Away. Alone. Secluded.

Aloneness equals oneness.

Eventually children are born, bills await payment, and responsibilities grow. Diapers. Clambering. Demanding attention. Diapers. Parents are worn out. Careers. Diapers. Exhausted. A couple ends their days asleep on the couch with promises of a date night to get away and alone.

Aloneness equals survival.

Children grow into teenagers, young adults. A new existence being established. Independence desired. Feeling their way. The dance of give and take begins—an artful skill. Parental responsibility grows in significance. The stakes are higher. And work or church or community opportunities and

responsibilities increase. Varied quadrants seeking your wisdom or even your availability. Couples long for time for each other.

Aloneness equals sanity.

Graduation. Empty nest. Alone at last. Over the days, weeks, months, years, and decades the momentum builds; at every turn you are seeking to be alone. And now aloneness arrives. I recall our last trip alone to Glacier National Park, Yellowstone National Park, and Grand Teton National Park for our 35th anniversary with great joy.

Aloneness equals reward.

Alone. It can also be a very difficult word. I've learned.

“... we do not enter into grief. Grief enters into us.” Julie Yarbrough, *Inside the Broken Heart: Grief Understanding for Widows and Widowers*

Suddenly, the proverbial lightning strikes, and the definition of alone changes in an instant. Or it could be over a grueling journey into illness and loss. Death visits uninvited. Alone. For real this time. Grief enters your story. And you're alone in a very different way.

“Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone... a threefold cord is not quickly broken.” Ecclesiastes 4:9–10, 12

How can one word be both blissful and blistering? And just when you are discovering the definition of blissful aloneness, the ultimate bait and switch is pulled off. The bliss is tauntingly exchanged for blisters. Blistering aloneness. Death—and the resulting grief and loss—introduces you to a new type of aloneness.

Once you clawed after some alone time as a couple. Now you want to escape the uninvited [isolation](#).

Alone. One word. Two very different meanings. A taunting play on a word.

There is only one way to face the taunting nature of loss and the loneliness that accompanies it. The deep love of Jesus is unchanging. Immutable. As Robert Grant wrote in his hymn, “O Worship the King,”

Jesus is our "... Maker, Defender, Redeemer, and Friend!" He is our Companion, and he never leaves us nor forsakes us.

He does not leave us alone.

"... he has said, 'I will never leave you nor forsake you.'"

Hebrews 13:5

"O the deep, deep love of Jesus! Love of ev'ry love the best: 'tis an ocean vast of blessing, 'tis a haven sweet of rest." Samuel Trevor Francis, "O the Deep, Deep Love of Jesus"

Note: I have just crossed the third anniversary of Kim's death. In mystery and providence, this "alone" cycle has begun again. Next month, many people will gather for a wedding for Amanda and me. Then, we will depart for two weeks "alone."

[Comments](#)

Psalm 89—He Will Not Be False to His Faithfulness

“‘Great is Thy faithfulness,’ O God my Father, there is no shadow of turning with Thee; Thou changest not, Thy compassions, they fail not. As Thou hast been Thou forever wilt be.” Thomas O. Chisholm, “Great Is Thy Faithfulness”

I am so conflicted right now. I would never wish loss on anyone. I would never hope for someone to experience tragedy or disaster. Who among us would seek out trouble? However, once loss, tragedy, or trouble visits you, prepare to be overwhelmed by what God does for you during your loss.

“Even in our struggles, God lays out signposts along our journey, reminding us of His faithfulness.” Matt Carter, *The Long Walk Home*

There’s a nugget in *Psalm 89* that jumped off the page and is a case-in-point example for this lesson of how God overwhelms you in loss. He overwhelms you with his goodness. He overwhelms you with his presence. You’ve been given a painful gift that leads you to hear his voice in clarity and in power. To underscore these lessons more, this psalm was written during great trouble and served God’s people during exile and captivity in Babylon. Days of great trial.

One morning as I was reading through *Psalm 89*, six life-giving lessons flowed off of the page and into my heart. My heart became confident and instantly filled to overflowing with reinforced, reinvigorated faith.

“... I will not remove from him my steadfast love or be false to my faithfulness. I will not violate my covenant or alter the

word that went forth from my lips. Once for all I have sworn by my holiness; I will not lie...” Psalm 89:33–35

1. God will not remove his steadfast love.

This lesson that God’s love stays with us is one of the clearest of all. I’ve been surrounded by the steadfast lovingkindness of God. He’s blessed me in so many ways. Now, don’t hear that I like what happened to me. But I’m watching God care for me in the trial.

Even in pain—especially in pain—he does not remove his steadfast love.

2. God will not be false to his faithfulness.

We overcomplicate humanity’s response to the gospel. It’s simply an issue of faith. Either you’ve been given capacity for faith or you haven’t been given capacity for faith. To be clear, faith is a gift itself. We don’t earn salvation; and even though it’s by faith and not by works, even faith is a mysterious gift. And that mystery is what complicates it for so many. Some want answers. I understand the desire for proof. I get it. But that would no longer be faith.

That said, this gift from *Psalm 89* enthused me. My faith is dependent upon him. My faith is a gift from him. My faith is only as good as he is—the object of my faith.

Let this sink in: he will not be false to his faithfulness.

3. God will not violate his covenant.

The Good News is about promises made and kept. God entered into covenant with us. He initiated it. There are weeks and weeks of study we could do on this idea of covenant alone. He can’t be false to his faithfulness, and he cannot violate his covenant.

He’s committed himself.

4. God will not alter his word.

Some of us wish we knew more. Theologians debate the veracity of the Bible. *Psalm 89* doesn’t debate it. In this chapter—like so many other chapters—the words spoken by God assume them to be true. And here he promises that he will not alter his word. Promises will be kept. Prophecies will come to pass. The end will come. People from every nation will be around his throne.

He will be with you through every trial.

5. God swears by his holiness.

Some of us are hardheaded. We aren't quick to catch on. We doubt his love, faithfulness, covenant, and his word. So God swears on his own holiness.

God can swear by nothing more convincingly than his own holy nature.

6. God will not lie.

If the case for faith is not yet made, God adds that he will not lie. Psalm 119:160 states emphatically, "The sum of Your word is truth, and every one of Your righteous ordinances is everlasting." God will not lie.

He is by nature truth.

These brief verses in *Psalm 89* are strong reminders that God will remain steadfast in his love, he will be faithful and keep his covenant. He will keep his word and he will not lie. He can be trusted to be true to his faithfulness. These gifts from *Psalm 89* are crystal clear from within my experience of loss.

"In the same way God, desiring even more to show to the heirs of the promise the unchangeableness of His purpose, interposed with an oath, so that by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have taken refuge would have strong encouragement to take hold of the hope set before us." Hebrews 6:17–18

[Comments](#)

The Obvious, Foremost Problem with Loss

“Then the Lord God said, ‘It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.’” Genesis 2:18

God gave Adam a gift. If you’ve been blessed to know the love of a woman you know what I mean. God gave Eve to Adam, and he kept on giving the gift of marital love from that point forward. I cannot speak for women, but hopefully this gift of companionship is equally a gift to them.

I’ll not speak for all men or for any women. I’ll speak for myself. God gave me a gift when he gave me Kim. She lived up to the Proverbs 31 woman.

**“She does him good, and not harm, all the days of her life.”
Proverbs 31:12**

Kim did good to me, and she did not do harm to me. She faithfully lived in our union all the days of her life just as she promised she would do. And this beautiful love was in keeping with God’s design for selflessness in marriage.

God designed that men should leave their fathers and mothers. God intended for men to hold fast to their wives and that their union would create one flesh. Further, men are to love their wives as they love themselves.

**“Therefore, a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh....
However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.” Ephesians 5:31, 33**

God created a scenario that is mutually beneficial. Selflessness in marriage feeds the union—it keeps growing. A husband loves his wife and she respects her husband. Don't read this as he loves her only and she respects him only. Spouses love each other. Spouses respect each other. I know I respected Kim.

This creative and beautiful design called marriage is at the foundation of the problem with loss. Marriage, as designed by God, is blissful union. It's attractive. It's idyllic. It's comforting. It's rewarding. It's stretching. He said it's not good to be alone. If you want a big laugh go back to a post about my first Sunday back at church a month after Kim's death. My pastor, who was working through Genesis, came to this clear and unmistakable lesson. Genesis 2:18 is profoundly correct. It's simply not good for man to be alone. Let's just say [the message was awkward](#). But, it is so very true. Clear. Unmistakable. Spot on. Because marital love is intended as a blessing. Separation is tearing into two. Marriage was to be oneness. One flesh. Not alone.

“So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.” Matthew 19:6

To delve in further to the problem with loss, no one was to ever separate a husband from his wife nor a wife from her husband. Emphatically, one translation states that a marriage is never to be torn asunder. One flesh ripped apart. Painful separation. Tearing.

It is without question the foremost problem with loss. Obvious. What was brought together and grew together was ended abruptly.

**“He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.”
Ecclesiastes 3:11**

Note: I am entering a new marriage later this month revealing I am not afraid of this obvious, foremost problem with loss. Blissful union is worth the risk of loss. I praise God for Amanda and our upcoming union.

Comments

An Abrupt Step Upon an Unwanted Stage

“Keep steady my steps according to your promise, and let no iniquity get dominion over me.” Psalm 119:133

While I was in college, I auditioned to sing at *The 1982 World’s Fair*. I made the cut and sang in a group called *PowerSource* for six months. I know. Hard to believe.

Musical parts were sent ahead of time for us to learn, and then we gathered two weeks before the start of *The 1982 World’s Fair* to put it all together. It was a pressure packed two weeks as we all tried to get to know each other, blend our voices, and become a group. Added to that, we had to learn our acting parts.

We were to perform a live staged musical. We would perform on one of two teams and perform about four or five times each day for six months once it all began.

As the time approached for the fair to launch, I had a recurring nightmare. In my nightmare, I stood at the door of the stage ready to run out to begin the performance. My mother appeared beside me and asked, “Are you going to get dressed or not?” I quickly looked at myself, and I was not wearing any pants. I was about to run on stage—at least in my nightmare—in my underwear. The dream recurred several times as the start date for the fair approached.

Horrifying.

Loss is like that; but, it’s worse.

Losing a loved one is like hearing, “Lights, camera, action,” and you find yourself standing on a stage to play a part. Forgetting your pants is the least of your worries. You don’t even know your lines. A spotlight blinds your eyes. You’ve not rehearsed for this new role. You’ve not even been told about the new role. The audience goes silent. You feel as if all eyes are on

you. Everyone is awaiting your performance, your response. The silence is awkward. As you look around this stage you realize the rest of the cast has stepped backstage. There are no supporting actors. It's a soliloquy. A monologue. A lone performance. No teleprompter.

**“Be watchful, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong.”
I Corinthians 16:13**

Previous to that fateful moment, you were on another stage. You were totally comfortable with your role. You knew your lines. Memorized. You knew where you were to stand for your role or even roles. Second nature. Then, in an instant, you are thrust onto another stage. You don't know the lines. You don't know where you're supposed to stand. A fish out of water.

**“Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise,
making the best use of the time, because the days are evil.”
Ephesians 5:15–16**

When you face an abrupt step onto an unwanted stage, that's when faith is the victory. Your response to difficulty is paramount. You have to doggedly force yourself out of the storyline of your new role. You have to force your mind out of the previous storyline. Everything has changed. You have to force your eyes of faith onto a grander storyline. You have to rise above the micro-story and press into the macro-story. You know those lines of faith. You've rehearsed that script throughout your life over the course of days, weeks, months, and years. The Bible has been your guide, and it will now be your guide on this unwanted stage.

You bask in the spotlight of the gospel. You are comforted by the invisible Spirit guiding you. When you face an abrupt step onto an unwanted stage, you have to press up under the shadow of his wings. You need God to steady your steps, keep you far from iniquity, and walk with you through the deep waters and flames of an unwanted stage.

**“When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and
through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you
walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall
not consume you.” Isaiah 43:2**

[Comments](#)

One Surefire Remedy for Sorrow from Psalm 119

“My soul melts away for sorrow; strengthen me according to your word!” Psalm 119:28

I was asked a telling question by someone after I was well into my journey of loss. “How can I get through grief more quickly?” I would have asked or thought about a similar question probably *before* I experienced loss and grief. So, it’s not a bad question.

However, it’s a misguided question, at best.

The question assumes grief is a task or process to be hurried. After all, no one enjoys pain. However, I have found that grief must not be hurried; grief must be processed on your own unhurried schedule. You are an individual, and your grief timeline is personal. Wounds take time to heal. Wounds need care.

“This is my comfort in my affliction, that your promise gives me life.” Psalm 119:50

There is one surefire remedy I have discovered. This remedy is not a simplistic platitude. Nor is it a quick fix. It’s much more difficult or, better said, more involved. The surefire nature does not diminish the amount of work it represents. But I contend, it is surefire none-the-less.

God’s Word is a surefire remedy to make sense of and provide comfort in sorrow. But that doesn’t mean it’s easy. Back to the question I was asked. Why did I say that seeking a quick resolution to grief is misguided? I have learned the journey of grief must be guided by truth. And life is complicated and serious. Loss is multifaceted.

“It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn your statutes.” Psalm 119:71

The truths of God's Word have been a balm to my heart. Not to lessen the pain. The pain is very real. However, God's truth does give context for my journey. God speaks to loss. His story provides a comforting salve for your soul for the journey. He meets your pain with his presence through a love letter written to mankind.

“God did not write a book and send it by messenger to be read at a distance by unaided minds. He spoke a Book and lives in his spoken words, constantly speaking his words and causing the power of them to persist across the years.” A. W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God*

It turns out that the Scriptures meet multifaceted and complicated sorrow with richness and completeness. God comes close to you in your brokenness. It's actually beautiful, and I stand in awe of God's omniscience. Truth. Inspired words. Promise. Trustworthy.

“Let your steadfast love comfort me according to your promise to your servant.” Psalm 119:76

Grace and mercy flow from God's mouth to your ear to meet you and to support you. Sufficient. New every morning. Peace and hope from the pages of Holy Writ await you when you embrace and spend time in this surefire remedy. Surpassing. Unhindered. Love and comfort overflowing from the love letter from God are gifts from our Father. Steadfast and lavish. Contagious.

“Trouble and anguish have found me out, but your commandments are my delight.” Psalm 119:143

A melting soul is strengthened. Affliction is met with promise. Affliction provides a pathway for lessons born of his statutes. Comfort is delivered by his promises born of steadfast love. Trouble and anguish are turned to delight by his commandments. Pleas—turning toward God—are heard and met with the surefire remedy according to his word.

“Let my plea come before you; deliver me according to your word.” Psalm 119:170

[Comments](#)

Wistful Peace and Long Unwanted Journeys

“For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it?” Luke 14:28

I’ll never forget the day. I wasn’t sure it would ever arrive, honestly. But I had been told it would come. Eventually.

Within hours of Kim’s death, I had quickly realized that I had a long journey before me. Unwanted. But it had already begun. Within a few weeks, I met with Dr. David Fort, a friend and counselor. He helped me think through much of what was before me. And one thing he told me gave me some hope. He assured me that a day would come when I would experience what he called “wistful peace.” I wasn’t convinced in my current state of mind. Feelings are a powerful force to contend with in loss.

Eventually, I looked it up in a dictionary to make sure I had a good understanding. “Wistful” refers to a vague or regretful longing. But what does that mean when using wistful and peace together? To understand it fully, you need to take note of something important. Wistful is one letter away from wishful. Wishful is hopeful of something to gain. Wistful, while looking forward also, carries with it a regretful longing about something lost.

Add peace, and it signals trust for the journey. And peace signals and leads to healing while on the journey. Wistful peace recognizes loss but embraces a confidence in the present and future regardless of how painful or chaotic it may be. Wistful peace acknowledges loss—faces the loss squarely—while experiencing and enjoying healing peace.

“In peace I will both lie down and sleep; for you alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety.” Psalm 4:8

Again, I remember the day. Shortly after nineteen months on my long and unwanted journey, I was in my house alone. I started singing about the steadfast love of the Lord. I was taking care of some chore and heard myself singing about his mercies that are new every morning. It was different. It surprised me, too. Caught me off guard.

But it was welcomed.

Sure, I have worshipped in song since losing Kim. But not spontaneously. Singing was a worship discipline. I sang in church during worship times. I sang sometimes even in my quiet times. But anytime I sang, it was intentional. I don't want to say it was forced. It was planned. It was an act of worship, but it was a disciplined act of worship. Heartfelt but doggedly delivered.

And then on this particular day, I heard myself singing. I had a song in my heart. Spontaneous declarations of praise out of nowhere. Unintentional. Escaping from within my heart. The pain, while still very real, was vague at times. The pain was distant in some moments. Not top of mind. Other important thoughts could also invade my mind. Other people. Other callings. Other duties. Songs. Peace was present.

I am convinced of two things: First, unwanted journeys must be intentionally faced and endured. Second, wistful peace comes after a period of healing.

If you're in an unwanted journey, stand firm and do not waver. Rest on the solid promises of God. Trust and obey. Walk by faith. Believe him. Healing will come, and wistful peace will visit you.

Vague. Yes, regretful. But peaceful.

“And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called...” Colossians 3:15

Note: This entry—written a long time ago—is being released a few days after my marriage to Amanda. How appropriate!

[Comments](#)

Who Transfixes Your Gaze?

While worshipping one morning, I was reminded of an important aspect to survival during grief: It matters where you focus your eyes. It matters where you fix your gaze. Looking to Jesus is for good times and for hard times.

“And I will rise among the saints, my gaze transfixed on Jesus’ face...” Dean Ussher, Marty Sampson, and Benjamin Hastings,
“O Praise the Name”

Your attention is diverted. It’s unavoidable. Your mind is consumed. Again, it’s unavoidable. However, you can employ the discipline of looking to Christ. Repeatedly. Over and over fighting the battle. And it is a battle.

“I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.” Psalm 121:1–2

Sometimes, you need an eye lift. Perspective matters in grief. Again, it’s unavoidable for your eyes to be diverted and drawn to your immediate circumstances. But it is possible to lift your eyes to look upon Christ. It’s entirely possible to train your eyes.

The nature of grace becomes consuming. I thought through a great statement made in one book I read. Granger E. Westberg says, “It would be stranger still if we could easily put aside our grief for routine matters.” I agree with him completely. However, Christ is not a routine matter. Training your eyes to look upon Christ will overwhelm grief with gospel hope. Grief may consume you, but your gaze will be transfixed by the face of Christ.

Train your eyes of faith.

“If we think only of what lies in the little dusty circle about our feet we miss the glory for which we were made.” J. R. Miller, *The Ministry of Comfort*

Life during loss is a constant battle to focus your eyes on the object of your faith and away from loss or even other crutches. You have many choices to make. You can turn to any would-be relief. But eyes trained by faith can have their gaze transfixed on Jesus’ face.

“... the most important thing about you is your mind, and the most important thing about your mind is what it is fixed upon.”
Dallas Willard, *Life Without Lack*

This is no simple task. One author, H. Norman Wright, calls the unavoidable impact of loss “grief spasms.” He further describes it as being “ambushed by grief.” He explains it further:

“Some refer to it as being ambushed by grief. When it happens, stop what you’re doing and deal with your feelings until some level of calm is restored. The more you try to put these feelings on hold the more pain you will experience.” H. Norman Wright, *Experiencing Grief*

Note the intentionality Wright describes. I agree. A repeated lesson I have addressed is the discipline to acknowledge loss, face it head on, and deal with it within a gospel perspective. A truth perspective. And as J. R. Miller has said in his book, *The Ministry of Comfort*, “There is in Jesus Christ an infinite resource of consolation, and we have only to open our heart to receive it.”

And there could not be a more appropriate response to a grief spasm or a grief ambush than to train our eyes upon the Creator and Savior of all the world for all of time.

Who transfixes your gaze during times of disappointment or loss?

“Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice. You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy. John 16:20

[Comments](#)

Remedial Rehearsal—Time to Practice What You Preached

“How can a young man keep his way pure? By guarding it according to your word.” Psalm 119:9

Grief is a time of role reversals. That’s an understatement. But there’s one role reversal I was alerted to immediately—a mere week-and-a-half after Kim died. My son, Paul, asked if he could talk about something with me. Visits and funerals had come to an end, and both of my sons came home with me for a few more days. Everyone was concerned about me; and I’m glad they were concerned. I felt loved and cared for no doubt. My boys wanted to help me get back home and settled.

We traveled back to my house, and the three of us sat down for the first time after all the events ended. I was beginning a new stage. A new normal. Late that afternoon, we were doing what guys do—talking about what we would do for dinner—when Paul asked if we could talk. “Of course,” I said.

He said, “Dad, I want to know if you have safeguards in place against temptation to use pornography.” I was stunned—but in a good way. My son cared enough for me and my well-being to bring up a difficult topic. My purity and faithfulness were important enough to broach a very private, even taboo, topic. I assured him I did have safeguards in place, but I encouraged them both to have the freedom to check on me. To hold me accountable.

The shoe is on the other foot.

“So flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart.” 2 Timothy 2:22

“Turnabout is fair play,” they say. The shoe is definitely on the other foot now. For well over thirty years, I have taught and challenged younger men, who were single, to remain pure. Run from youthful temptation and passions. Set boundaries and plan. Walk in purity and integrity. Live lives above reproach.

Well, what goes around comes around. It’s my turn, once again.

Thoughts of purity, singleness, and marriage came into my mind occasionally, and I mulled them over through the next months of grief. I was jogging one morning and was listening to my Bible and was hearing what Paul wrote about marriage. Freedom poured over me as I heard the following:

“To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single, as I am.” 1 Corinthians 7:8

I remember that morning wondering what the future held for me. But after hearing Paul’s instruction, I relaxed. I realized I could remain as I am unless the Lord interrupted my journey and made it clear for me to take another direction. As I read books on grief, I remember considering the caution against making any decision out of loneliness. Again, it’s time to practice what Kim and I had preached numerous times to younger singles. We cautioned young men and women that to marry wrongly is so much worse than the loneliness of not being married. Marriage is a significant commitment and carries important responsibilities. Marriage is a picture of Christ and his church. That’s a tall order.

No doubt on February 18, 2019, I re-entered an intense school. Call it a remedial rehearsal. I’ve referred to this journey as an [intense schoolhouse](#) because that’s what it truly has been for me. Suddenly, I was interested in topics and subjects dismissed long ago. Loss initiated a time for rehearsing remedial lessons.

The time to practice what I’ve always preached had come around, once again. It was time to preach to myself.

“Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.” James 3:1

Note: At the release of this entry, I am a few weeks into my marriage to Amanda. God, it turns out, did interrupt my long journey with a priceless gift. And for the record, with God's grace, I practiced what I preached.

[Comments](#)

Addressing Your Compulsion to Seek Answers Surrounding Death

**“Cain spoke to Abel his brother. And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him.”
Genesis 4:8**

One thing I learned is that varied experiences of death are similar but diverse. While loss is loss, the circumstances surrounding a particular death deliver dynamics that must be addressed.

First—to reiterate—you should never diminish or downplay your loss. Never compare losses. Your loss is in relation to your life before your loss and not in comparison to someone else’s loss. Second, however, you should consider the specific dynamic circumstances accompanying your loss.

For example, a long journey into loss such as a battle with cancer brings a long goodbye. It delivers anticipatory grief. Juxtapose the long journey into grief and loss to a sudden and stunning loss. The suddenness delivers a dynamic that must be addressed. Then consider the dynamics of sudden natural causes to sudden unnatural causes. Consider loss delivered by an accident or a murder. Those unique circumstances deliver dynamics that must be recognized and faced. Layers of questions unfold as you consider your loss.

Depending on the circumstances, you will face a compulsion to find answers. Some answers may remain hidden forever. I found there to be a balance that must be struck. A healthy balance.

**“For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die...”
Ecclesiastes 3:1–2**

For us, our loss was unexpected and very confusing. Kim was healthy. I lived as if I would never have to face her death. Her ancestors lived long lives, one even past 100 years old. Some life circumstances impact expectations. Expectations are powerful. While it was a very difficult decision for me, my children and Kim's parents wanted an autopsy. We all wanted answers.

I waited nine weeks for the report. Since I had requested the autopsy, the findings were mailed to me. I will never be able to “unsee” that report. Painful. Even confusing. I'll never forget reading the cause of death: “diffuse alveolar hemorrhage.”

That report began a journey. Those three words were not very helpful to my medically untrained mind. Nurses and doctors know immediately what that means. I didn't. I shared the findings with family. I shared it with a doctor friend who explained the alveoli are where oxygen and carbon dioxide are exchanged in the bronchial system. It hemorrhaged and cut off oxygen, and Kim collapsed and died. But why? That set me on another journey—a compulsion—to find more answers. Why did she hemorrhage and die? What caused it? I sought to speak with Kim's doctors. One didn't reply. One replied and helped me somewhat, but she could not definitively answer all of my questions.

“*Why* is not just a question—it's a heart-wrenching cry of protest.” H. Norman Wright, *Experiencing Grief*

Eventually, I called the medical examiner who had performed the autopsy. She could only answer what had caused her death. But she could only speculate as to what precipitated the failure of her alveoli.

A friend of a family member was killed in an accident. In their case, there are simply no answers for some parts of the story. In the case of murder, you may never learn who or why—no matter how compelled you are to discover answers.

My experience led me to realize there are simply some difficult circumstances surrounding death. If you're facing loss, seek to strike a healthy balance in your quest for answers. It's absolutely normal to seek answers. However, I found there came a point when I realized I may never fully understand what precipitated my wife's death. Acceptance is an important part of the survivor's healing and recovery. You may have a

compulsion to seek answers but consider the importance of addressing that compulsion appropriately. Seek answers, yes, but seek healthy acceptance, as well.

“A good name is better than precious ointment, and the day of death than the day of birth.” Ecclesiastes 7:1

[Comments](#)

It Is Appropriate to Lament Our Current Former Things

“He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore...” Revelation 21:4

Revelation 21:4 is a mere forty-four verses from the close of the whole Bible. We should take note. This broken world is marked by many good things. Life created by God is a gift. However, it is marked by many pains, as well.

If our Father has to wipe away every tear, there is reason to believe that time on earth is marked by grief and crying. Death will one day be no more; however, while there is life, there is loss. There will come a day when there will no longer be mourning because death will be defeated. We will not be compelled to cry anymore. We will not be overcome by pain brought on by the brokenness of this fallen world.

There's a reason.

“... for the former things have passed away.” Revelation 21:4

Tears, death, mourning, crying, and pain will be done away with literally. A day is coming when these “former things have passed away.” I love how one version translates this phrase. Instead of “former things,” it is translated as the “old order of things.”

Often when I'm on a vacation or a trip of some kind, I pause to reflect on how the trip is going. I think about what I did the first few days of my vacation and plan ahead for what is to come. Taking stock, acknowledging the map, is a healthy discipline.

Our map in this world is marked by a journey that includes tears, death, mourning, crying, and pain, no doubt. But, take stock of the road itself. It is a rough road, but it is built on a strong foundation. It is taking us somewhere. There is a destination. The bumps on this road will one day be no more. The old order—tears, death, mourning, crying, and pain—will be former trappings.

“And he who was seated on the throne said, ‘Behold, I am making all things new.’ Also he said, ‘Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.’ And he said to me, ‘It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment.’” Revelation 21:5–6

Old order gone. He is making all things new. Faith, therefore, is pressing into and believing what is currently unseen. This newness is promised in the midst of all the old and broken. Yes, there are tears, death, mourning, crying, and pain. But his promise is trustworthy and true. In fact, it is done already. It’s the promise of already-but-not-yet. The new is coming. Write it down. The dry parched existence sometimes experienced on earth will be met with free water from the spring of the water of life.

“Then came one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues and spoke to me, saying, ‘Come, I will show you the Bride, the wife of the Lamb.’” Revelation 21:9

During loss, we all need to dive into the redemptive story and tell ourselves *the* story that is coming. It is a story with an ending that differs from our current stories marked with pain. John, at the end of Revelation, had an angel tell him to come and see a Bride married to a Lamb. If you’re part of the Church, your story ends with a wedding to Jesus. That beautiful faith-truth overwhelms painful loss.

However, for now we live in the old order. There is pain in these former things. Loss must be faced. Lament is a healthy spiritual discipline. Jesus died to conquer the old order of things, the former things. While we live in the old order we should lament.

It is entirely appropriate to lament the current former things that plague our existence. Glory is coming but is not yet. Imagine—in your current darkness—a place of hope needing no sun because the Lamb is the light.

**“And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb.”
Revelation 21:23**

“... I will hold the Christ-light for you in the nighttime of your fear...” Richard Gillard, “The Servant Song”

[Comments](#)

Facing Loss in Light of the Whole Armor of God

“Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God...” Ephesians 6:10–11

My friend, Zane Pratt, preached from Ephesians 6 at our home church, bringing clear light to the importance of spiritual armor. We live in a battle. We have an enemy. Loss is proof of this temporal battle with eternal implications.

“... the schemes of the devil...” Ephesians 6:11

I’ve always thought of myself as levelheaded. I’ve taken my faith seriously. I uprooted my family when I was about thirty-one and took them on what turned out to be a faith adventure. We were missionaries in South Africa and Zimbabwe. I witnessed the oppression and possession of our enemy vividly in Africa.

I still serve to see the nations come to Christ by serving churches. I’m serious about my faith. These evil schemes show up in different ways on this side of the globe. The less confrontational way to put it is we tend to live for ourselves (2 Corinthians 5:15).

However, loss put an exclamation point on the schemes of our enemy. His schemes caused a battle that still rages to this day. Death is proof of the fallout of that ongoing battle.

“... to withstand in the evil day...” Ephesians 6:13

The goal for us who name the name of Jesus is to endure this temporal ordeal. Schemes are short-lived. We need to stand firm, and we need the whole armor of God to do it. So, Paul does not leave us without instructions. He lists the armor needed to withstand the evil day. Every day.

“... the belt of truth...” Ephesians 6:14

We need to fasten the belt of truth. I cannot overstate the value of this one simple act. In the throes of loss, lies seem to have a laser leveled at you. I experienced a [paralysis](#), a numbness. I endured [confusion](#). I had to engage in what I’ve learned to be self-talk. You have to [preach the gospel to yourself](#). You have to correct the lies. You need to tighten the belt of truth around you.

“... the breastplate of righteousness...” Ephesians 6:14

I also found the depth of loss to be healthy but dangerous. I felt attacked. I felt singled out. I felt I was being punished. To be clear, loss is a perfect time for introspection and dealing with conviction. Loss can bring correction; it can be related to the fall, in general. However, I found a proper posture is to seek to open my soul up to learn and correct anything in my life. And yet, you must not ever forget that your righteousness is not earned. It is a gift given by our Savior. So, the breastplate of righteousness is vital protection.

“... shoes for your feet... the gospel of peace...” Ephesians 6:15

[Surpassing peace](#) is a gift from God. Cheap peace will not do. The kind of peace needed in the depth of loss is gospel peace. When facing loss, place the shoes of the gospel of peace on your feet to provide firm footing and protection. “I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world” (John 16:33).

“... the shield of faith...” Ephesians 6:16

Very early in my journey of loss, I realized [I could not walk by sight](#). I needed to walk by faith. Faith shields against the very attacks directed your way. Fiery darts are aimed at you, and while you may be experiencing a terrible injury to your soul, faith is indeed the victory. It really is that simple.

“... the helmet of salvation...” Ephesians 6:17

When I faced loss, I learned to press into the redemptive macro-story. It put my micro-story of loss in perspective. I retreated up under the helmet of salvation for protection. Salvation really is our ultimate defensive weapon. Throw all of hell at me. Throw every loss at me. Pile them up. And ultimate victory is still ours. Every loss will be worth the pain when we are invited into eternal life. Our salvation has been purchased and held until that day.

“... the sword of the Spirit...” Ephesians 6:17

Interestingly, every other item of our armor is defensive. The sword of the Spirit is the only offensive weapon. The Word of God is the sword of which Paul speaks. Like Jesus who countered Satan in the wilderness, I found truth correcting my thinking. I found [Scripture made sense](#) of my chaotic circumstances.

Finally, we must remain alert. We must endure. We have God’s strength available to us, but we must turn in prayer and supplication in absolute dependency as we battle the schemes of our enemy.

Put on the whole armor of God to face loss.

“... praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end, keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints... Ephesians 6:18

“Paul... understands that on this side of forever, life *is* war... With sin still living inside of us, we are still torn between our love for the claustrophobic little kingdom of self and the grand and glorious purposes of the kingdom of God.” Paul David Tripp, *New Morning Mercies*

[Comments](#)

Dancing the Freestyle Dance of Grief

When I was in junior high, my physical education class included a foray into lessons on dancing. Early teenage years for boys and girls—combined with dancing—create awkward, uncomfortable situations. It's also known as torture. So, I've really never been a dancer. While I actually have tried dancing, I'm just not that good at it. Apparently, loving music doesn't necessarily make you a good dancer. Simply stated, I'm not good at gliding on my feet.

However, in one period of our marriage, Kim and I took dance lessons so we could be ready to dance at an upcoming wedding. About that same time, we celebrated our anniversary by going to the *Homestead Inn* in the western part of Virginia. This historic site has hosted at least twenty-two US presidents. On our anniversary night we enjoyed a delicious meal in *The Dining Room*, their fine dining area. They describe their cuisine as refined and influenced by regional tastes. And they proudly claim their inn has a culinary heritage.

And there was a dance floor.

Actually, Kim knew there was a dance floor because she had talked about us dancing. Practicing what we'd learned.

I don't like to dance. Awkward. Torture.

However, love calls on you to do things that you don't like to do. And so, Kim and I got out on the dance floor and practiced what we had learned. Only one or two other couples stepped onto the dance floor that evening. So, it was more awkward and more torturous that you can imagine. But we did it. We tried the *Fox Trot* and the *Waltz*. Don't miss that word, *tried*. However, Kim had fun, and so I was glad I had acquiesced to her wishes. But I was glad when it was over. Again, love calls on you to do some things you might prefer not to do.

Later that evening, we were walking down a hallway in the hotel. A woman and her mother stopped us and asked if we were the couple that had been dancing on the floor. Kim smiled, and I sheepishly tried to hide my smirk. I was embarrassed for trying, and now I was about to be even more embarrassed because someone saw me. My smirk said, “I told you so” to Kim. But then the woman said, “You two must be professionals.” My smirk quickly turned to a proud-of-myself smile. Kim’s response was less surprised, as if she fully expected the compliment. “Thank you,” she stated matter-of-factly, as if she heard this very same affirmation daily.

I still think dancing is awkward.

Grief has been similar to dancing. It’s just awkward.

When it comes to grief you have to dance. Regardless of how awkward or torturous, you have no choice. And you cannot get off of the dance floor. Neither can you stand still. You have to get out on the floor and dance. It’s not a Grief *Waltz* or a Grief *Fox Trot* either. You could practice those carefully executed steps. It is not a pretty dance. It’s not elegant nor is it rehearsed.

Call it the *Freestyle Dance* of Grief.

You go with the flow. You make it up as you go. *Freestyle*, in the dancing world, is described as dancing without choreography. It’s dancing improvisation. It’s described as spontaneous movement—and most importantly, it is said since it’s your own original dance, there is no wrong way to dance the *Freestyle* dance.

But you must dance. Grief enters and you have no choice. You prefer to excuse yourself from the dance floor, but grief has instantly forced you out onto the dance floor. And it will not allow you to leave.

My smirk at the dance of grief over time has turned to a knowing smile. Not pride, so much, but gratefulness. I didn’t sit still. I didn’t get stuck. I got on the dance floor, and I danced the dance. One step forward and ten steps backward. Grace. Pivot to the left. Mercy. Slide and duck. Peace. Regroup. Love. Twirl around. Hope. Jump or hop. Comfort. Make it up as you go. Original. Most certainly, it was a *Freestyle* dance. It wasn’t pretty. It wasn’t as dignified as a *Waltz*. It wasn’t as well-timed as the *Fox Trot*. But I danced. And the *Freestyle* Dance of Grief is a dance all the same.

And I found the *Freestyle* Dance of Grief was a dance with a gracious and merciful High Priest.

Note: As of March 26, 2022, I'm learning a new dance with a new dance partner. Amanda is a beautiful gift and treasure, and the dance is the *Freestyle Dance of Marriage*.

[Comments](#)

Our Near and Busy Christ

This title may seem strange. And I agree. So, bear with me.

Reading a book about Christ, I was enthralled at the idea of Jesus as our advocate. My heart came alive as I thought about this powerful truth of Christ's advocacy. Now to be clear, this book—*Gentle and Lowly* by Dane Ortlund—is addressing Jesus as standing in our behalf. He defends us before the Father when we are sinful and unclean—sinful on our own merit but clean because of Jesus and his shed blood. We call it justification when we are redeemed by Jesus' payment of our debt.

“My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.” 1 John 2:1

We need an advocate to defend us before the Father. Ortlund contends that we keep Jesus busy. He juxtaposes intercession and advocacy. Intercession is Jesus' ongoing prayer for his followers. Advocacy is provided on an as needed basis. You fail, Jesus goes again before the Father to defend you. He is your advocate. You sin again. Jesus advocates. Ortlund's book is focused on Jesus' gentleness. His lowliness. His humble, tender love. He loves us so much that not only did he die for us, he advocates for us every time we need him to defend us.

Jesus stays busy.

But, it occurred to me how transferable this truth is to any time of dire need. When we are sinful—without excuse—we need an advocate. True. This is the heart of the gospel. Sin is a result of the brokenness of this world. Sin is general—our sin. And sin is specific—my sin.

Loss is related closely because it, too, is a result of brokenness. Ruin descended upon mankind—the Fall of Man. Brokenness. Sin entered the

world. And with it, loss burst onto the scene. Sin gave birth to death. A broken world delivers pain and suffering.

“Christ, as Priest, acts in time of peace; but Christ, as Advocate, in times of broils, turmoils, and sharp contentions . . .” John Bunyan, *The Work of Jesus Christ as an Advocate*

And Jesus stays busy advocating for us who are victims of the loss and brokenness, the pain and the suffering prevalent in our world. Busy advocating for us when we sin and busy advocating for us when the brokenness of the world born of sin plays havoc with our lives—our spouses, our children, our family members, our friends, our bodies, our jobs, our homes.

Jesus is a busy advocate.

“His advocacy rears up when occasion requires it.” Dane Ortlund, *Gentle and Lowly*

Dane Ortlund goes on to say, “It’s difficult to capture the meaning of parakletos [the Greek word translated advocate] with just one English word.” In translated works, it shows up as helper, advocate, counselor, comforter, and companion. To be honest, these are some of the most beautiful words you’ll ever hear.

Jesus is busy, yes. But, he’s also near. Near as our helper. Near as our advocate. Near as our counselor. Near as our comforter. Near as our companion. All beautiful expressions of our near and busy Christ.

“Are you walking alone through the shadows dim? Place your hands in the nail-scarred hand; Christ will comfort your heart, put your trust in him . . .” B. B. McKinney, “The Nail-Scarred Hand”

[Comments](#)

Kim's Very Good and Helpful Bad Habit

Kim was a prolific reader. Perhaps that's why she was such a good writer—or so I'm told. One memory I vividly picture in my mind has her sitting on the couch or in bed reading. I would call her name multiple times to get her attention. That girl couldn't help but be drawn in and enthralled in a story!

However, I'm reminded of a bad habit she had when reading. She just could not help herself. Oftentimes, something in the story caused consternation. She didn't like where it was headed. So, she would interrupt her reading, hold her place, and look to the very last page of the book to see how it was going to end. She wanted to see the outcome before she continued. Knowing where the story was headed gave her enough encouragement to be able to go back into the story.

“... let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.” Hebrews 12:1–2

I would always make some comment about how she was ruining the story. But as it turns out, I have discovered Kim's very bad habit is actually very good and helpful.

Especially in grief.

Especially for people addicted to good times. Especially for people with an aversion to pain. Especially for those who consider whether they can go on in their current story or not.

Especially for me. Mimicking Kim's bad habit has helped me to press on.

Real life is full of heavy weight. Even clingy sin. We're instructed to run a race—a marathon as it turns out—with endurance. Life is a long journey.

To keep running, we need to occasionally look to the last page of the story. The goal. The outcome. The prize. The joy.

Jesus. Look unto Jesus.

He inspires us and perfects us. There was a joy set before him in his journey—a final victory, and he bore up under the cross. The cross was a story plot-twist like no other. The death of Jesus overwhelms brokenness. Shame is now defeated, and joy is delivered. And he sat down at the right hand of God.

“Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” Philippians 2:9–11

The end of the story—in spite of the immediate pain he endured—has him exalted on high with a name proven to be above every other name. Above every other would-be god. In fact, all knees will bow before this exalted One. Every tongue will confess that he is Lord.

The end of the story has the Savior honored, the Father glorified, and a multitude from every people, tribe, and language before the throne. People redeemed. God worshipped. Finished.

“... a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne...” Revelation 7:9

Pain is real. Brokenness is ever-present. Loss is devastating. But don't close the book too soon. Learn a lesson from Kim. Her very helpful bad habit will inspire faith, hope, and endurance. Go ahead and look at the end of the story. Look at the last page. Look at those last verses.

Suffering may accompany your life now, but the end of the story tells you that Jesus is coming. Then go back into your story and cry out in your low moments, “Come, Lord Jesus!” By faith, rest in the grace of Jesus that is yours now.

In the middle of a story, it turns out that Kim's bad habit is very good and helpful. The end of the story says, “Amen.” So be it. It is done, and all will be well.

“He who testifies to these things says, ‘Surely I am coming soon.’ Amen. Come, Lord Jesus! The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all. Amen.” Revelation 22:20–21

[Comments](#)

How Steadfastness Is Born Out of Our Trials and His Inexhaustible Love

To be steadfast is to be like God. I now know it more completely than at any other time in my life.

“Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.” James 1:2–4

Once thrust into loss, one of the reverberating themes was I had to trust the steadfast love of the Lord. I was told that his steadfast love never ceased. I was desperate, and I believed it. Pressed into it. Relied upon it.

One Sunday I shared my story and spoke out of *Psalm 89* in my home church. I remember stating emphatically, “If your circumstances are telling you that he has removed his steadfast love from you, your circumstances are lying to you.” I believe that more as my journey goes on. I also believe it is important to coach yourself to believe it more and more as time progresses. Paul tells us God is faithful because he cannot deny himself (2 Timothy 2:13). He is trustworthy. Dependable. Unchanging.

“I drink of the depths of the love of Heaven, the mighty, exhaustless tide. ‘Drink, drink abundantly, O beloved! I was smitten, accursed for thee.’ O lips as lilies, O mouth most sweet, that tell Thy heart to me!” Frances Bevan, *Hymns of Ter Steegan and Others*

James opens his book by telling us that a goal in our lives is steadfastness. To be steadfast is to be like God. It is to be like Christ. And what is it that gives birth to steadfastness? James tell us that various trials deliver steadfastness. Testing delivers. So, it follows that if I want steadfastness, I need to rest in his steadfastness during difficult times. My steadfastness comes from doggedly trusting him, especially in tough times. No matter what I face. Trials give birth to steadfastness in my life.

“Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.”James1:12

As we are told in *Psalms 89*, God cannot be false to his faithfulness (*Psalm 89:33*). So, in that declaration, we can stand strong. He is steadfast so we can press into his lavish love and rest assuredly. Trust in him in and through any trial. And you’ll be blessed if you remain steadfast. Stand the test and receive a crown of life. God promises this gift of glorification—made perfect in eternity with him.

This truth, this foundation, can project confidence into your present journey. Regardless of the depth of your pain, his steadfast love never ceases. He cannot be false to his faithfulness. He can be trusted. He is the only one who can be fully trusted. Therefore, blessed are you if you remain steadfast under your present trial. You will be rewarded for your Christ-like response to pain and loss.

James goes on in his first chapter to give some further instruction. In light of counting it all joy and remaining steadfast under trials and in light of the promised blessing and crown, we are to put away all filthiness. We are to run from rampant wickedness.

Instead, we are to receive the implanted, delivered word with all meekness.

“Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.”James1:21

Comments

No Shadow of Turning in Any of Life's Circumstances

“... the richest and deepest and most profitable experiences we had in this world were those which were gained in the very roads from which we shrink back with dread.” Theodore Cuyler, *God's Light on Dark Clouds*

When tragedy strikes, you don't enter grief; instead, grief enters you. That statement delivers insight to help us understand unwanted journeys. When grief enters, it is not dissimilar to an arrow lodging in your soul. It's an injury. And it's good to medicate the pain of tragedy with timeless truths that are not subject to the vicissitudes of circumstances.

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases.

If you submit to God's word, simple promises such as this one serve as medication, a balm for a wounded soul.

Jerry Sittser, in his book, *A Grace Revealed*, contends that circumstances play a limited role in your life. Your life is a story, but various circumstances are merely props in the story. Simply put, they provide scene and setting for the story of your life as it unfolds as a part of an even larger redemptive story arc. Don't miss this: your story is a sub-story to a larger story.

Sittser recounts how early desert fathers and mothers sought to be spiritually ambidextrous. There are proactive and reactive aspects to life. You have to learn to respond and pivot. For example, I chose to proactively get married; but, I had to reactively rebound from the loss of my wife. These early desert fathers and mothers embraced prosperity—while seeking to avoid carelessness; and they embraced adversity—while seeking to avoid despair. Both prosperity and adversity act simply as the backdrop to and props on a stage on which God writes a beautiful redemptive story. In short,

Sittser claims circumstances are neutral—like props, they simply provide scene and setting through which God redeems the story of your life. Further, your story is part of a larger, more important story arc, the redemptive story.

“Sometimes prosperity is tenfold more damaging to us than sharp adversity.” Theodore Cuyler, *God’s Light on Dark Clouds*

On the surface, circumstances do not tell the whole story. William Cowper understood this neutrality regarding circumstances. In his hymn, “God Moves in a Mysterious Way,” he states, “Judge not the Lord by feeble sense, but trust him for his grace; behind a frowning providence he hides a smiling face.” This is so very helpful. The issue at hand is trust. Belief. Doggedly holding on by faith. Not sight. Not proof. It is feeble sense—temporally wise at best—to run from difficult circumstances. Instead, we should embrace the eternal nature and truth of God’s sufficient grace. Why? Because we know—by faith and not by sight—that what seems to look like a temporal frown hides an eternal smile.

“The clouds ye so much dread are big with mercy, and shall break in blessings on your head.” William Cowper, “God Moves in a Mysterious Way”

Dreaded clouds—any loss of any kind—are full of God’s every morning mercies. Stand by faith and allow the blessings of grace to burst open over your head. This truth delivers such comfort. Another way to say it, the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases. His mercies never end, and they are new every single morning.

I can plant my feet on the foundation of his steadfast love.

Thomas Obediah Chisholm said it well when in the hymn, “Great Is Thy Faithfulness,” he wrote, “Thou changest not, Thy compassions, they fail not. As Thou hast been Thou forever wilt be.” He does not change.

Regardless of the circumstances you face, are you ambidextrous? Can you embrace prosperity without being careless? Can you embrace adversity without plummeting into despair?

There is no shadow of turning with God, regardless of the circumstances you face.

“‘Great is Thy faithfulness,’ O God my Father, There is no shadow of turning with Thee... Morning by morning new mercies I see; All I have needed Thy hand hath provided—‘Great is Thy faithfulness,’ Lord, unto me!’” Thomas Obediah Chisholm, “Great Is Thy Faithfulness”

[Comments](#)

How Plentiful Redemption Speaks Directly to the Fog of Loss

“... with the Lord there is steadfast love, and with him is plentiful redemption.” Psalm 130:7

I have come face-to-face with the meanings of the words sufficient, new, and surpassing. But I did not want to learn these adjectives experientially. I guess I preferred simply believing them to be true. More comfortable at a distance. I don't like needing to heal. I don't like loss. I didn't want to need support. Understatements, no doubt.

A broken world delivers unwanted journeys. Unwanted grief comes in all shapes and sizes. If I can repeat one lesson it is that loss is loss. So don't diminish or sidestep your loss. In the church, we do not do a very good job in helping people face varied losses with hope. To sidestep the topic of loss is to sidestep the topic of brokenness. If you ignore the illness, you do not seek a doctor (Mark 2:17). Face the brokenness and find the hope-filled cure. To sidestep the topic of loss or brokenness is to sidestep the topic of redemption.

“But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.” 1 Thessalonians 4:13

Better said, those not currently carrying the weight of loss do not recognize the depth or breadth of loss when others experience it. Loss can be pervasive and all-consuming; however, it is not to be endured without hope. Thick, yes. Foggy, yes. However, we need to learn how to face the fog of loss and help others face it, as well. And the gospel makes obsolete

the need to hide or avoid the existence of loss. Again, to sidestep the topic of loss or brokenness is to sidestep the topic of redemption.

“... we somehow have the impression that grief is out of place in our society. We conduct a quiet conspiracy of silence against it.”
Granger E. Westberg, *Good Grief*

It's time to speak up about God's answers to grief. In a broken world that gives rise to unwanted journeys, the gospel gives meaning and answers to loss. The gospel communicates resurrection power. So, even when I don't want to have to experience and learn about words like sufficient—which pairs well with grace, new—which pairs well with mercies, and surpassing—which pairs well with peace, I know them to be true. I knew it before, but now I know them to be true experientially—reality added to theory. Practical and experienced. Jesus takes grace, mercy, and peace and delivers them personally to you. In abundance.

“You may feel lonely, but you're not alone.” H. Norman Wright,
Experiencing Grief

Sufficient grace, new mercies, and surpassing peace result from the unrivaled benefits of the redemptive story. As Psalm 130:7 states, “... with the Lord there is steadfast love, and with him is plentiful redemption.”

Plentiful redemption. Steadfast love.

The word plentiful communicates the idea of abundance or large quantities. Overflowing. Words such as rich and lavish come to mind. His redemption is plentiful. More than enough.

“The hope of all who seek Him, the help of all who find, none other is so loving, so good and kind.” Alfred H. Ackley, “He Lives”

Hope and help are copious when you turn to Christ during loss. He is loving, good, and kind to the one who mourns in the context of the gospel. He is faithful and can be trusted. Our task is to simply hold fast and revel in his plentiful redemption.

**“Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering,
for he who promised is faithful.” Hebrews10:23**

[Comments](#)

Taking Your Thoughts Captive: The Antidote to Stinking Thinking

“Left unattended, our brains can be dangerous places!” Boyd Bailey, *The Spiritual Life of a Leader*

Early in grief, I wrote about confused thinking. My perceptions and thoughts were [warped and distorted](#). Your thoughts, too, will be a bit crazy. It’s especially true the more shocking your experience of loss. Shocking loss plays games with your mind. You learn your thoughts, left to themselves, run in all sorts of directions and if anyone knew what you were thinking at the time, they would be concerned for you. In essence, you’re dealing with stinking thinking.

I remember thinking within hours of Kim’s death that I could walk out the door of my house, drive to the airport, move to Africa again, and people probably wouldn’t know I had done it. To be clear, the crazy part was not about moving to Africa, but that I thought no one would have known I had done it. As an aside, moving to Africa was one of the most wonderful decisions we ever made as a family. But I digress ...

I had recurring thoughts on a few occasions that if I just stood firm in this test that all would return to normal after some undetermined time. Secretly, without any real or valid confidence, I had this idea that returning to normal meant everything would return to how it had been. Including Kim back in full health. Not helpful thinking at all.

In fact, it is stinking thinking.

You need to take your thoughts captive. All the time but definitely during grief.

“We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey

Christ...” 2 Corinthians 10:5

There are arguments and opinions circling in your mind that are not healthy. It's that simple. It's also that complicated. Paul, in 2 Corinthians 10:5, warns against knowledge that is raised up against God. Your wild and distorted thoughts may not be arguments or opinions aimed against God and his righteous ways, but they can most assuredly cause you to miss the mark of wisdom. You need to patiently wait for emotional healing; but in the meantime, you need to take your thoughts captive.

Take every thought captive to obey Christ.

If you back up a couple of verses for context, you learn that Paul is speaking of spiritual warfare—waging war and destroying strongholds.

“For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds.” 2 Corinthians 10:3–4

So, while this is a different context than the confusion of grief, my experience taught me that you're vulnerable to mistakes. Look around and you will see men and women who made mistakes based on stinking thinking after major loss.

I am grateful I was surrounded by men who counseled me. I am grateful to the grace and mercy of God. Biblical lament begins with turning to God and ends with trust.

“Oh that my ways may be steadfast in keeping your statutes! Then I shall not be put to shame, having my eyes fixed on all your commandments.” Psalm 119:5–6

In the context of steadfast ways and not being put to shame, you can cleanse your mind from silly myths (1 Timothy 4:7) or other stinking thinking. I found that exposure to God's Word and quiet time in God's presence clarified—and captivated—my thoughts.

“A pure mind grows from our intimate encounters with Jesus.”
Boyd Bailey, *The Spiritual Life of a Leader*

[Comments](#)

Brokenness Is More Dire Than You Knew

Loss delivered grief to my doorstep. Grief, though uninvited, entered my storyline. Brokenness is like an unwelcomed yet ever-present guest. Painful loss forced me to come face-to-face with the effects of the Fall of Man. Again. When you experience a significant loss, the grief does not leave you alone. For a long time. And I've concluded it's ugly. Very ugly.

Like sin and evil.

As I continue to delve into brokenness, I see that God agrees with me. Or better said, I agree with him. Loss is horrible. You're tempted to deflect attention. Downplay your loss. You don't want to mess up everyone else's perfect life. You don't want to be a downer all the time. But ignoring your loss, as I have learned, would be a massive mistake.

When I saw brokenness in my life, I saw more clearly that the entire world is broken.

**“You are not your own, for you were bought with a price.” 1
Corinthians 6:19–20**

Brokenness is worse than I knew. Dire.

I was simply unaware. Better said, I knew it in my head but not so sure I knew it in my heart. Knowing it and feeling its weight are not the same.

Brokenness is all around us. We're infected with it because the world is held captive to the effects of sin. Death. Pain. Crime. Hate. Loss. Accidents. Strife. Disasters. I could go on.

Brokenness is more dire, more insidious than I knew.

**“For he himself is our peace... that he might create in himself
one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might
reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross,
thereby killing the hostility.” Ephesians 2:14–16**

Dive deep into loss and, eventually, you come to comprehend that the cross of Jesus Christ is the price paid to overwhelm the loss and brokenness of the world. The victory is already-but-not-yet. We live in the here-and-now. The world is a painful place. The world is pain-filled. Loss is debilitating at times. Some pain is worse than others, but it's all loss. And it's everywhere.

“There is no more comforting message in the world than the one preached from the cross of Jesus Christ, and there are no more powerful promises of transformation than those found in the grace of that cross.” Paul David Tripp, *New Morning Mercies*

The temptation is to pull away from loss. The tendency for most is to put a premature bandage on the wound. It's easier to divert your attention and think happier thoughts. But stay with the loss, get comfortable with it, and you will learn a lesson.

Brokenness is more dire, more insidious than you knew.

As you dive deeper to face and process your loss, your eyes are somehow lifted, and you see the exponential brokenness across the world. In an amazing twist, your eyes are lifted from your own problems. The pain in your locale comes into focus. Brokenness around the world is clearer. The reporters deliver news reports about it. Incomprehensible pain surrounds us. Conflict is evident. Hatred spills out. Hunger. War. Disease.

At first you didn't even really notice the brokenness of the world. But then, the brokenness of the world visits you personally. And as you press into your own loss to heal, you see that it's a worldwide pandemic of brokenness and loss. Pervasive. Unimpeded. The loss of the world is overwhelming. And it's so bad it cost Jesus his life. The cross was necessary because brokenness is so dire.

The brokenness is more dire than you knew.

The brokenness of the world required the gospel story, the Son of God, and the cross to overwhelm it.

“By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers.” 1 John 3:16

Comments

Does God Mock at the Calamity of the Innocent?

Job makes a disturbing declaration; yet, I understand what he's experiencing. Sudden death. Shocking. I have felt his pain. God is bringing restoration to me—I'm healing. However, you still have vivid memories. You recall that moment. Job hints at a sense of abandonment. I understand. Loss is excruciating, confusing. And later, you cringe at the memory of the shocking nature of the tragedy. It comes over you.

“When disaster brings sudden death, he mocks at the calamity of the innocent.” Job 9:23

I differ with Job's accusation, in Job 9:23, that God mocks at the misfortune of the guiltless. His flawed statement errs in two aspects: First, God doesn't taunt us; and second, we aren't innocent. Job's statement is simply without defense.

But why?

First, God does not mock at the tragedies of those experiencing brokenness.

The psalms of lament begin with complaint and end with trust. Even before an answer is given. God is good, and his perceived mocking points instead to the dire state of brokenness itself. Brokenness is what mocks us. Our enemy derides us. Evil taunts us.

God agrees with our complaint. It's astounding, I know. As I have poured out my heart in prayers of lament, I have heard the Spirit say that the redemptive story heralds the Trinity's agreement with complaint. God would describe to any mourner that brokenness is so horrible, unspeakable, and hideous he had to send his Son to overwhelm that brokenness. Paul explains, “He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son...” (Colossians 1:13–14). Sin and brokenness entered the world. We are victims of this evil system, and, at the

same time, we are evil. Brokenness in every form entered our world with the entrance of sin.

“The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit.” Psalm 34:18

God does not mock at our calamity. Yet, this reality of brokenness born of sin leads us to the second error in Job’s declaration.

Second, none are innocent. Job wasn’t guiltless, and neither are we.

Socrates famously said, “To know thyself is the beginning of wisdom.” Solomon said, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom...” (Proverbs 9:10).

Socrates focused on the need to know yourself; Solomon focused on the need to know and fear the Lord.

But both are correct.

Proverbs 14:6 says, “A *scoffer* seeks wisdom in vain...” Proverbs 28:26 says, “Whoever trusts in his own mind is a *fool*...”

Proverbs 14:8 says, “The wisdom of the *prudent* is to discern his way...” Proverbs 17:24 says, “The *discerning* sets his face toward wisdom...”

Scoffer. Fool.

Prudent. Discerning.

Every man and woman must know themselves and how they seek to approach God. Are they an arrogant and foolish person or a humble and wise person? These verses in *Proverbs* show us our identity matters. We are not innocent. *Scoffers* seek in vain. A *fool* trusts his own mind. Yet, the *prudent* discern. And the *discerning* sets his face.

We assume the best of ourselves. However, when the kindness of the Spirit’s conviction overwhelms us in our depravity, we acknowledge who we are—we know ourselves. We acknowledge our need for the wisdom of God. Because we are not innocent. We move from being a *scoffer* to being *prudent*.

Paul says, “... all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). All. Every. I could include numerous other passages, but this example is clear.

We are not without guilt.

**“For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” 2
Corinthians 5:21**

So, we are not innocent, and God does not mock. On the contrary, we are guilty but have received the gracious and merciful offer to be made clean by the blood of Jesus. And he does not mock, but he has shed his love upon us by giving us his Son.

“For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person... but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” Romans 5:6–8

[Comments](#)

Helpful Sermon Notes in a Drawer

As time progressed, I needed to wade through a few more boxes and drawers of memories. I was cleaning house and saving important stuff. Stuff may just seem like stuff, but it represents so much more. One day as I cleaned a drawer by Kim's side of our bed, I made a discovery.

Kim was not only a prolific writer; she was a prolific note-taker, also. She had taken notes during Sunday sermons and stacked them in the top drawer of the bedside table on her side of our bed. I removed them from the drawer and, as has been my practice, I perused everything in the drawer. In this case, I walked through a multitude of notes from various Sunday sermons.

On one bulletin, the first line of her handwritten notes caught my attention: "*Why does God allow pain and suffering?*" I was hooked. I leaned back on my couch to continue reading. I have thought about this question a lot over the last couple of years. A lot. More than any time in my life. I've considered the question from various vantage points. Your mind takes you down paths, and you just can't stay there too long. Honestly, there is a lot of mystery involved in the question *and* the answer.

But I read on.

Following the question above were three answers given in a sermon by Cliff Jordan, our pastor. Looking back upon my suffering loss, I can give a hearty agreement to each of these answers.

- 1. "Your capacity to experience God is expanded when you experience pain."**

As I look at my journey, the most important takeaway has been how turning to God has expanded my capacity and trust of God. I know. It seems antithetical. And sometimes it does happen that people turn away from God. I'd seen it enough to fear it. I ran to the God of the Bible and believed what

I read. Some people in grief become angry at God. Some question God. And to be clear, all these responses and more are common.

“Christ is all the more precious to them for having painfully felt the need of him.” Theodore Cuyler, *God's Light on Dark Clouds*

Your capacity to experience your Father is expanded when you experience pain. You feel your need for God deeply. And your capacity to experience him is expanded.

2. **“Your capacity to experience grace is increased.”**

As I consider my experience, I agree one hundred percent that my capacity was expanded to experience grace. I came to understand and fall in love with the word “[sufficient](#).” We read that Paul described God’s grace as sufficient in 2 Corinthians 12:9.

“But he said to me, ‘my grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.” 2 Corinthians 12:9

Weakness opens the door for power. Capacity to experience grace is expanded. You’re thirsty and receptive to God’s gift of grace, mercy, and peace.

3. **“Your capacity to show grace is increased.”**

Pain addressed appropriately lifts your eyes to recognize the pain of others. Your capacity to give grace is multiplied. I was given more ability to offer [sympathy and empathy](#). Your painful experience has given you renewed capacity to experience grace and renewed capacity to give grace. Grace is undeserved but given. Do not withhold grace from others. Share it liberally.

“When we live a grace-based life, we not only *receive* more grace, we *give* more grace. Aware of our weaknesses and frailties,

we extend more grace to others who are failing and falling.”
David Murray, *Reset*

Why does God allow pain and suffering? While there is mystery in this question, there are at least three helpful answers found in a drawer. Your capacity to experience God is expanded. Your capacity to experience grace is increase. And your capacity to share grace is increased.

“... we should emerge from [trouble] ready for better service and for greater usefulness than ever before.” J. R. Miller, *The Ministry of Comfort*

[Comments](#)

Lingerie: A Painful Contemplation

I'm going to be careful, I promise.

You didn't think I was going to talk about such delicate topics. Did you? Well, grief forces a lot of decisions, topics, and contemplations. Some topics you probably would tell me you'll never have to think about. I'm telling you that you—or your spouse—will have to think about these tender topics one day.

I've broached a lot of topics that I never thought I'd face. I'll never forget the day my oldest son, Paul, talked to be about pornography. My son talking to me? It was a mere ten days after Kim's death, and he wanted to make sure I had safeguards in place. Nine weeks after Kim's death, I had to read an autopsy. To understand the report, I had numerous conversations with various doctors. Later, I had to go through all of Kim's belongings. A year after her death, my kids and their spouses returned to mark the one-year anniversary with me. We went through all her clothing. The length you are forced to go is surprising. Most likely, you've never thought of these topics in the way I have unless you've lost someone very special.

I'll try to be careful.

A week or so before my children came to go through Kim's clothing, I realized there was something much too personal and intimate not to consider ahead of time. And I needed to figure it out alone. I may be judged for even writing about it. But go back to my introduction, [*Welcome to My Intense Schoolhouse: An Introduction*](#), and you'll read that I found there are a lot of aspects to grief that we don't talk about. And we should. We should face loss. We have the gospel. We have the answer to brokenness. We should be able to talk about difficult subjects in gospel hope.

Even lingerie. Private. Intimate.

“Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled...” Hebrews 13:4

Over coffee one day, a fellow grief journeyer heard me share about this painful contemplation I had to face. He encouraged me to include this experience in my writings.

I resisted the idea.

However, God invented intimacy, so I need to be able to talk about it.

But again, I'll be careful.

So, what was the question before me? What do I do about her lingerie? Again, some things you never think about until you are forced to think about them. Grief does that to you a lot. And you'd better give grace and not judge me until you're walking in those same shoes. Believe me, grief forces you to contemplate choices you never would dream of having to consider.

I mean, think about the options with me. Go through it with my kids? Nope. Give the lingerie to Goodwill? No way! Throw it away? I'm not going to dispose of it as if it were garbage. Not going to do it. Take it somewhere and dispose of it in some other manner? It's just not practical. It was a dilemma. A painful contemplation. I wrestled with this predicament. I thought about it and processed the options. And one day I knew what I had to do. I decided there were no other viable alternatives to consider.

I burned the lingerie.

Almost ceremoniously. Not like burning an idol, I promise you. It was an act of respect. Acknowledging we were in a covenant only ended by death, as in our marriage vows.

So, I built a fire in my back yard and spent some time alone burning everything of Kim's that could be considered intimate apparel. It was a time to honor the beauty of marriage and oneness. It was a time to take an important step. It was a time to address a difficult decision with grace and hope. It was a special time. It was a difficult time. It was a healthy, Kim-honoring, God-honoring, and healing step. Another of the many dimensions to loss that need to be processed. Yes, on a journey when you're facing loss, you have to consider some difficult, painful, and tender contemplations. Even lingerie.

There. I did it. And I did it carefully.

“Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.” Genesis 2:24

[Comments](#)

My Anniversary of Gratitude

If you determine to face your loss, torturous grief will begin to show up as delightful gratitude. After all, as J. R. Miller states in *The Ministry of Comfort*, "... love and grief grow on the same stalk..." We grieve because we loved. We loved; therefore, we should be grateful. Love is an incredible—albeit undeserved—gift.

“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” 1 Thessalonians 5:16–18

If we are to give thanks in all circumstances, even my loss can be turned to gratitude. I’m not talking about a morbid or morose happiness over loss. I’m talking about deep and sincere gratefulness to God who is the giver of all good gifts (James 1:17).

I’m not saying this mindset or perspective is easy. It’s not. It’s a decision made in faith. And it’s a decision that requires a strong grip provided by grace.

“Here is one of the most beautiful fruits of grace—a heart that is content, more given to worship than demand and more given to the joy of gratitude than the anxiety of want.” Paul David Tripp, *New Morning Mercies*

Grace enables gratitude. Believe it and stand upon it. I did. Or better stated, I kept on doing it because it is not a onetime decision. You must keep at this grace-enabled-gratefulness.

And gratitude can be liberating.

As I approached what would have been my thirty-eighth wedding anniversary, I turned the anniversary of my wedding into the anniversary of

my gratitude. Sure, it's both—it will always be the anniversary of my wedding to Kim. I would never consider forgetting the gift of love God gave to us. But now, I was approaching two-and-a-half-years after losing Kim, and I decided to call this date the anniversary of my gratitude. As I release this entry, I am now at what would have been my thirty-ninth anniversary and nearing forty-two months since losing her.

I've learned something in my increasing years in life. Gratitude inspires gratitude. Grace-enabled-gratitude gives birth to momentum for a grateful heart. We are told to acknowledge God in all our ways. If we do so we are promised that God will straighten our paths.

“In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.” Proverbs 3:6

Solomon sandwiches verse six with verses five and seven. He instructs, “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding” (Proverbs 3:5). Then he warns, “Be not wise in your own eyes...” (Proverbs 3:7). Trust and acknowledge. Do not lean on your own understanding, and be not wise in your own eyes. These things are not for the temporal mind.

Trusting the Lord through a long journey, facing your loss squarely, and acknowledging him opens your heart to healing—a path made straight in the [turbulence of grief](#). A firm foundation of faith is exercised and strengthened.

“In circumstances for which there is no final answer in the world, we have two choices: accept them as God's wise and loving choice for our blessing (this is called faith), or resent them as proof of his indifference, his carelessness, even his nonexistence (this is unbelief).” Elizabeth Elliot, *The Path of Loneliness*

Determine to choose faith, and gratitude is made possible. Even in the deepest pain I've ever experienced, my heart overflows with a good theme. Psalm 45:1 states, “My heart overflows with a pleasing theme; I address my verses to the king; my tongue is like the pen of a ready scribe.” As I have deeply contemplated this long unwanted journey, I am not happy nor will I ever be happy about my circumstances—loss is painful and horrible; however, I am enabled to give thanks in my circumstances.

From now on, July 30 is my anniversary of gratitude. To quote Paul David Tripp again, I move more toward "... the joy of gratitude than the anxiety of want..."

"He loves us just as truly and as tenderly when he takes away the things or the beings we love as he did when he gave them into our hands." J. R. Miller, *The Ministry of Comfort*

Note: July 26, 2022 is my four-month anniversary with Amanda. And she is a gift and a treasure!

[Comments](#)

A Twentieth Anniversary Lesson to Pass on from Mr. Robinson

“He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.”

Revelation 21:4

I found a small leather journal in a cabinet with Acadia National Park stamped on the front cover. I opened it and found it to be a diary in which Kim journaled about our twentieth anniversary trip back to Bar Harbor, Maine. We honeymooned in Maine in 1983; in 2003, we finally returned. Returning had been a dream since our honeymoon.

Memories flooded over my heart and mind as I recalled our favorite trip ever. And there was a lesson that week worthy of passing on from Mr. Robinson.

I remembered this trip to be among our favorite trips. And reliving the week through Kim’s journal convinced me that she felt the same way. She wrote from a delighted heart as she chronicled our day-by-day activities.

We visited with her brother’s family at their lake house on the way from Richmond to Atlanta where we put our children on an unaccompanied flight to stay with Kim’s parents—I had forgotten about that detail. We stayed with her cousin’s family in Atlanta as we made our way on our trip. We flew to Bangor, Maine and drove to Ogunquit for one night. A stop on the way allowed us to shop at L.L.Bean. I had also forgotten about the free back massages being offered at L.L.Bean that day! Then a romantic start to our anniversary trip in the quaint village of Ogunquit. We stayed on Perkins Cove in a cottage made available to missionaries.

The next morning, we drove north toward Bar Harbor which gave us the privilege of stopping at Kennebunkport, Maine, the home of George Bush,

Sr. After a few stops along the way, we arrived at our room at Cleftstone Manor. It was a beautiful room in our bed and breakfast accommodation, which Kim described as “the best (and most expensive) room called the Cleftstone Room.” The manor was built in 1881.

Kim described every meal that week in detail. Breakfasts. Lunches. Dinners.

Our first full day included a visit to [Acadia National Park](#) where we took a guided tour. Kim described the sky as “cobalt blue with a few puffy white clouds.” She chronicled every stop and every sight we saw—especially the blueberries on the trails of our many hikes. She wrote several pages about the blueberries. One of our favorite places we experienced was [Jordan Pond House—tea, popovers, and strawberry jam](#). We drove up Cadillac Mountain, over to Northeast Harbor, and then stopped at The Docksider Restaurant—more about that beautiful experience in a moment.

“Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life that he has given you under the sun...” Ecclesiastes 9:9

The next day we took a cruise where we saw humpback whales. One breached. What a sight! That night we took a carriage ride at sunset. Imagine my laughter as I read about us being in the front seat when the horses “passed wind.” She wrote about sitting by the fireplace in our room where we enjoyed reading and writing about the day. I felt a sense of accomplishment as I read, “... we couldn’t have had a more glorious day.”

The next day was our anniversary. We did some shopping and dropped by Llangolan Inn where we had honeymooned twenty years before. We took a picture at cabin number seven, our cabin. We ended that day at an evening concert under the stars by the local Bar Harbor orchestra in Blackwoods Park.

Our last day included a foray on a four-sail windjammer where we enjoyed seeing wildlife before we ate at Café This Way in Bar Harbor. We ended our anniversary trip that night at a local theater where we enjoyed a play, “I Do, I Do.”

I know, perfect.

“He who finds a wife finds a good thing and obtains favor from the Lord.” Proverbs 18:22

Back to The Dockside Restaurant for a moment. Sitting near us was an elderly man who was sitting quietly by himself. Kim’s heart was touched, and she suggested we invite him to join us. Finally, I acquiesced. He declined my invitation at first but then got up a few minutes later and said, “Why not.” We learned that his name was Mr. Robinson and that he had lost his wife the year before. Through tears, Mr. Robinson told us his story.

And his story was a twentieth anniversary gift I will never forget.

He looked at me at one point, pointed toward Kim, and with great emotion moaned, “She’s your precious!” To be honest, I always knew what a gift it was to be married to Kim. Honestly, marriage is a gift. By the goodness of God, I had that message reinforced that evening. I never forgot his tears, his quivering voice, or his words.

“She’s your precious.” Mr. Robinson

Indeed, Mr. Robinson, I knew you were right then; I fully understood your statement just over fifteen years later when I joined you on the journey of loss. I get it.

Men, your wife is precious. Cherish her.

“An excellent wife who can find? She is far more precious than jewels.” Proverbs 31:10

Note: As of the release of this entry, I am four months into my marriage to Amanda. And I recognize how precious she is to me; I’ve repeatedly told her she is a gift and a treasure.

[Comments](#)

Accepting, Avoiding, Embracing, or Engulfing Grief

“We should never forget that redemption, the world’s greatest blessing, is the fruit of the world’s greatest sorrow.” J. R. Miller,
The Ministry of Comfort

In *Be Still, My Soul*, a book compiled and edited by Nancy Guthrie, Tim Keller has a chapter called, “Suffering: The Servant of Our Joy.” In his chapter, he recounts a study by Marilyn McCord Adams, a philosophy professor at Yale, who studied female Christian mystics of the Middle Ages. Her findings point to some important lessons regarding some pitfalls to facing grief or suffering of any kind.

And she offers some poignant counsel, in the end, which is helpful when facing grief or suffering.

Adams “... has distilled out of [the female Christian mystics’] teaching some remarkable teachings about suffering.” Further, “Adams says that the Stoics said to accept suffering, the Epicureans said to avoid suffering, and the aestheticians and masochists said to embrace suffering.”

Beware of Accepting Suffering

The Stoics, according to Adams, *accepted suffering*. Two aspects of the grief process are first denial and then acceptance. Early in grief you simply cannot get your mind around the new reality. Your mind fluctuates between two tracks: accepting your loss is real or denying your loss is real. While acceptance is a healthy part of the grief process, quick and simple acceptance is not healthy.

At least not in the way of the Stoics. Acceptance for the Stoics was to be... well, stoic. To be stoic is to endure without revealing your humanity. It’s the stiff upper lip approach. Grin and bear it.

Facing loss requires recognizing your humanity and accepting your loss. Accept loss, but remember your humanity.

“There is nothing incongruous in a set jaw along with tear-dimmed eyes. . . . We do not have to choose between crybaby sentimentalism on one hand and stoicism on the other.” Vance Havner, *Though I Walk Through the Valley*

Beware of Avoiding Suffering

The Epicureans, according to Adams, *avoided suffering*. This is a significant warning for us in our modern day. We tend toward sanitizing pain, suffering, and death. We keep it at bay. We ignore it. We hide it. We avoid it at all costs. Our modern approach is to do everything possible to stiff arm any manner of suffering. We are unable to talk about it. It’s uncomfortable. We seem to believe suffering reveals a weakness in God’s character. So, we avoid suffering and the subject of suffering.

Facing loss requires recognizing suffering is part of living in our broken world. Refuse to avoid suffering.

“We are so accustomed to luxury we think of traffic jams as hardship.” Elizabeth Elliot, *The Path of Loneliness*

Beware of Embracing Suffering

The aesthetes and masochists, according to Adams, *embraced suffering*. The idea here is that they seemed to be drawn to pain. In fact, pleasure is gained from their suffering. I was cautioned early in my journey to be aware of pathological grief. Basically, I needed to avoid enjoying, and thus, staying in grief. Stuck. I’ve done my best to keep a balanced approach, but I have met or heard about people who seem to seek the pity that comes from staying in their valley. They embrace and enjoy their grief to such a degree that they prefer to stay in it.

Facing loss requires that we not embrace or enjoy suffering in such an unhealthy manner. Be careful to avoid staying in and embracing your suffering.

“Few perversions of life could be sadder than this dwelling ever in the glooms and shadows of past griefs.” J. R. Miller, *The Ministry of Comfort*

To be fair, there is a sense where it is appropriate to accept, avoid, and even embrace suffering. However, these responses to suffering are incomplete at best.

The Gospel Engulfs Suffering

Finally, Adams "... points out, the gospel does not accept, avoid, or embrace suffering; it engulfs suffering." It is simply incomplete, not enough, to accept, avoid, or embrace suffering. It's preferable to overwhelm suffering. Grief can be engulfed. Grief is redefined by the gospel.

You don't simply have to accept suffering or grief as the last word. You don't have to avoid or fear suffering because it is so distasteful. Neither do you need to embrace suffering in an unhealthy, masochistic manner. The gospel should redefine how you face your grief. We do not mourn without hope.

So, don't succumb to some bowed-back acceptance of grief. Neither should you fear grief, and thus, seek to avoid it. And do not settle into grief, enjoying it in a pathological sense.

Instead, allow the gospel to engulf your grief!

"... every genuine disciple of Jesus, every heir of heaven, ought to possess deep and abiding resources of joy, that lie ... beneath the tempests of trial ..." Theodore Cuyler, *God's Light on Dark Clouds*

[Comments](#)

Honoring God Through Loss

The week Kim died, I said to several people around me that I did not want to dishonor Kim or God in the way I responded to loss. In time, I learned I would not dishonor Kim if I honored God. So, honoring God became a rallying cry in my heart. This is nothing to be prideful of; this is the most obvious response a believer should make. It should be a foundational assumption that we would seek to honor God even in times of loss.

Easier said than done.

“He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” Micah 6:8

Humility is a key to walking through grief in a healthy and God-honoring manner. Walking humbly with God makes sense. I mean, who thinks walking arrogantly with God makes sense? Trusting the Father’s heart in humility is a recipe for resiliency. Failing or refusing to trust God is a recipe for bitterness.

I need to state the obvious, again. I’m not suggesting in any way to [diminish or sugarcoat](#) the pain of loss. I have found that you can trust God and feel pain at the same time. Jesus died a gruesome and painful death. Don’t tell me I should expect an easy road in this broken world. Brokenness cost Jesus his life. We are promised we will suffer in this world. To be clear, suffering comes in many forms out of brokenness. Death. Illness. Persecution. Evil. Injuries. Emotional pain. In the case of Jesus, death was required to pay the penalty of sin and to bring life out of death.

“Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?” Luke 24:26

So, honoring God during loss requires humble acceptance. In God's providence he has given this gift of pain to you. Stiffen your neck and resist at your own peril. Receive and embrace the pain and learn lessons only gained in difficult times.

“Too often sorrow's gifts are not accepted, the messengers are not welcomed, and they can only turn and bear away again the blessings which they had brought in love, but which we would not take.” J. R. Miller, *The Ministry of Comfort*

Honoring God means trusting him through the painful darkness. Honoring God means facing the loss but with gospel hope. Honoring God does not require you to redefine the loss by calling it gain. Honoring God means humbly receiving all things from the hand of God. Honoring God means receiving all things with faith and trust.

I have learned to receive good gifts and painful gifts with the recognition that they are both filtered through God's providential hands. God invites me to honor him through all circumstances. Knowing I am his property, his child, settles a lot of questions.

“The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him...”

Romans 8:16–17

If I am his child, I am an heir no matter the temporal pain I endure. Therefore, we walk in humility enthused to honor God in all circumstances. We count everything else as loss, says Paul in Philippians 3:8.

If you're facing loss, seek to honor God on your difficult and unwanted journey.

“But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.”

Philippians 3:7–8

“To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever.” 1 Timothy 1:17

[Comments](#)

Condole Before You Console

“There is immeasurable comfort in the revealing that the Son of God suffers with us in our suffering, is afflicted in all our affliction, is touched with the feeling of our infirmities.” J. R. Miller, *The Ministry of Comfort*

There are two words that are worthy of exploration and consideration as we seek to serve those who are grieving. If you’ve suffered loss, don’t forget what you needed from others while you were in the depths. You’ll need to remember your experience so you can help others. These two words can give us insight and instruct us about the needs of a mourner in their greatest hour of need.

These words are so very similar and yet so very different. And they are packed with meaning.

The difference between them is where the lesson lies. The greater importance lies in the difference in the two words. The difference in the words gives insight into the posture you take when you have a friend who is suffering loss.

The first word, *condole*, means to express sympathy or to grieve with. The second word, *console*, means to comfort someone during a time of grief or disappointment.

So very similar. So very different.

Condole before you console.

Condole

Condole carries with it the act of entering grief with someone. You’re not there to fix someone’s grief. You’re there to join them in their grief. You enter in. Feel the pain. Risk losing some control of the situation. Enter the fray.

“To grow in grace is not only to become more devout, obedient, and holy, but also to grow more loving—more gentle, kindly, thoughtful, patient, unselfish.” J. R. Miller, *The Ministry of Comfort*

To embrace the act of condoling is to embrace hard and painful work. You must enter grief. Get in the dirt. Vulnerable. Transparent. It’s much too simple to look at grief from the outside. That’s too safe. Too comfortable. You need to come alongside someone and face grief with them. Sit with the person grieving. Side-by-side. Together.

“... the sorrow itself deepens our spiritual life and enriches our experience, giving us a new power of sympathy through which we may become better comforters and helpers of others.” J. R. Miller, *The Ministry of Comfort*

Console

Console, once again, is to comfort a person grieving. Where *condole* comes alongside the person and grieves with them, *console* faces the person administering comfort and seeks to provide support to them. The one who consoles seeks to stay strong to uphold the person.

Both *condole* and *console* have their important parts to play. But considering them juxtaposed provides helpful understanding. In some cases, you need to come alongside someone and grieve with them—*condole*. In other situations, you need to seek to provide support and ministry—*console*. Considering *condole* and *console* helps us take our eyes off the duty and places our attention on the mourner. We determine what they need and we either *condole* or *console*.

When in doubt, *condole*. Come alongside a mourner without answers. When a specific need has been shared, *console*. Approach the mourner with the ministry encouragement that is needed.

Both. *Condole* and *console*. But *condole* before you *console*.

“There is something about deep sorrow that tends to wake up the child-feeling in all of us.” Theodore Cuyler, *God’s Light on Dark Clouds*

[Comments](#)

Guard Against the Tendency Toward Self-Centered Faith

“Jesus suffered ‘not that we might not suffer,’ wrote George MacDonald, ‘but that our sufferings might be like his.’” Elizabeth Elliot, *The Path of Loneliness*

Let’s be honest and transparent about a very real tendency. When brokenness visits us, we are often driven to those beautiful passages about having faith and overcoming. We are compelled to claim promises in God’s Word. Our problem is we interpret those biblical promises of God for the here-and-now and not for eternity. We tend to put ourselves in the center.

We must be very careful.

There’s a real danger. The danger is a self-focused, simplistic faith. We must beware of misusing—even abusing—the weapon a faith for our own good, kingdom, or will.

Instead, we must abandon ourselves to a faithful embrace of his Kingdom coming and his will being done here as it is in heaven. Thus, we would be wise to guard against the temptation to claim a tidy faith to meet our immediate wants, even immediate needs. God is love, but we must trust his love and not attempt to manipulate his love. We are compelled by his love, but we must not seek to compel him to love in the way we desire.

C. S. Lewis reminds us, in *The Problem of Pain*, that God’s love is not some “... senile benevolence that drowsily wishes you to be happy in your own way... nor the care of a host who feels responsible for the comfort of his guests...” Instead, Lewis describes God as a consuming fire himself loving us with the love that created the world. God’s powerful love drove him to go to the Cross. He redeemed us for all eternity. Thus, our redemption is pointing beyond our temporal days and the temporary fixes in this life to eternity’s goal.

“The power of the Cross is not exemption from suffering but the very transformation of suffering.” Elizabeth Elliot, *The Path of Loneliness*

Maybe the battle in this faith journey we call life is about attaining a proper context. Each of us need to lift our eyes beyond the dirt around our feet—our own world. We need to lift our eyes off our kingdom and will and place our gaze upon his Kingdom and will. Context is vitally important. Perspective is crucial.

“... I have come to understand even suffering, through the transforming power of the Cross, as a gift, for in this broken world, in our sorrow, he gives us himself; in our loneliness, he comes to meet us ...” Elizabeth Elliot, *The Path of Loneliness*

Be ruthlessly honest and observant with your heart. Proverbs 4:23 warns, “Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life.” Subtly, we conflate our hopes, dreams, and desires with the promises of God. He promises us good, and we determine what that means. I’ve learned that it is dangerous to confuse my kingdom and will with his Kingdom and will.

We must relentlessly guard against any tendency toward a self-centered faith.

“... the worst thing that ever happened became the best thing that ever happened. ... At the Cross of Jesus our crosses are changed into gifts.” Elizabeth Elliot, *The Path of Loneliness*

[Comments](#)

A Christian Widower Contemplates Intimacy Lost and Intimacy Gained

Yes, I'm going there. Put on your seatbelt.

Candidly, I've had some of these thoughts since this Christian man married a beautiful Christian woman in 1983. I was reluctant to ever talk about these insights except with my wife. I was afraid people might not understand. I feared they would think poorly of me or question my motives. However, even when I was younger my motives were pure about this insight.

But now, I've been through a journey of grief, and you're going to give me a lot of grace as I contemplate "out loud" the topic of intimacy lost and intimacy gained. Don't worry, I'm going to be very careful, once again, and try to keep this from being uncomfortable. I am aware of the need to be careful with my words and avoid any sort of coarse language.

I still remember the first moment I saw a young woman. I would later learn her name was Kimberly Elaine Plumblee. It was the summer of 1981 in Athens, Georgia. We were at a break during the first day of class at the University of Georgia, and she was standing near a Coke machine. She was wearing a purple polka-dotted dress. Yes, I noticed. I'm a man who normally doesn't notice the color of your shoes or shirt. I'm just not that observant. Here I am nearly forty years later, and I remember Kim's dress.

Get off your high horse and hear what I'm saying and not what I'm not saying. Men notice and are attracted by sight. At least at first. Yes, it can go awry, but it's how God made us. Sure, it requires discipline, but that doesn't make it wrong.

I was attracted to Kim. Eventually, I pursued her. She slowed down long enough for me to catch her, and we married on July 30, 1983.

As a twenty-three-year-old young man, I was introduced to intimacy. But that's not what I was thinking about at first. Again, get off your high horse!

“Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.” Genesis 2:24

One flesh. Oneness. Intimacy. Marriage is a doorway.

You’re leaving father and mother on one side of the door, and you walk through the door. You close the door behind you and hold fast and become one flesh.

Private. Between a man and a woman. Blissful. Bonds are formed over time and before you know it you begin to contemplate and reflect upon what has happened. You’re no longer one person. You’re connected to someone—physically at first. But later, you recognize the emotional and spiritual oneness that has emerged.

This intimacy is so much deeper, more profound than physical love alone.

You stand in awe at God’s design. You are known and loved, and you know and love. Oneness takes on dimensions. Its invisible tentacles begin to invade every part of you, and you rest in the joy and comfort of belonging. You are changed. The allure of attraction goes deeper, much deeper. This is not about you meeting your needs. You recognize you would serve this other person in any way.

That’s when it first happened for me. I realized intimacy with my wife was a holy picture. I’ve read the verses, of course. I believed the verses. But experiencing the verses was different.

“This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.” Ephesians 5:32

After lining out marital and relational instruction, Paul says that he’s addressing a profound mystery that is about Christ and the church. In one of the most important mysteries ever unveiled, Paul gives marriage—and intimacy—an eternal and not only a temporal purpose.

That’s why marriage is so important. More important than most of us realize. Or we’d protect it.

The beauty of intimacy between a man and woman is revealing something of the intimacy of Christ and the church. I had some of these

insights as a young man, and it changed my understanding of my relationship.

When Kim died, our intimacy died. Death has stolen her from me.

However, my experience of intimacy lost was eclipsed by an intimacy gained. And this is not simply talk.

Intimacy that foreshadows a relationship between Christ and the church was lost and now had to live up to its promised shadow of intimacy.

In death, intimacy was gained. With our good Father. With a sacrificing Son. With the comforting Spirit.

Intimacy lost gave birth to intimacy gained.

“The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom’s voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete.” John 3:29

Note: In God’s grace and after a journey through loss, I have been blessed to marry Amanda. This entry, written about a year ago, has taken on new meaning as I release it. Amanda was wearing a rust-colored shirt under a blue-jean jacket the day I asked her out.

[Comments](#)

Sundial Mottos Are Solemn for a Reason

If you focus your attention on time itself, you will clearly see that it is slipping away. Eternity is in our hearts for a reason.

And sundials are solemn for a reason.

“Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity. What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?” Ecclesiastes 1:2–3

Solomon recognized the seeming senselessness of toiling under the sun in the temporal. It’s vanity of vanities. It’s all vanity. Vanity is defined as being worthless or futile. Hopeless. Purposeless. Marking time is depressing.

Sundials have captured this most depressing idea of time marching on. For a reason. If time is all we have we begin to acknowledge that we have little time and every day that marches on we have less than we had the day before. It’s slipping through our hands. A solemn realization. Again, sundials have captured this depressing reality that time is fleeting.

Sundials are known to include mottos or sayings about time and its fleeting nature. One sundial reads, “Tedious and Brief.” Because life is hard, and it’s short. The creator of the sundial sees the glass half empty. Honestly, most of them are pessimists. Or maybe realists. Another sundial instructs, “Make Haste but Slowly.” I guess the creator of this sundial recognizes that life is busy and out-of-control but admonishes you to hurry slowly. Another says, “Soon Comes Night.” In other words, vanity of vanity. It’s all coming to an end too quickly. Day will end too soon.

The psalmist understands.

“How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I take

**counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day?
How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?" Psalm 13:1-2**

Indeed, how long? Apparently, considering eternity not long at all. Or not long enough. Life is short, and it's painful. It's fleeting and frustrating.

Another sundial creator says, "Life Passes Like the Shadow." Shadows march on unimpeded. Unstoppable. Slowly but surely. Methodical. One sundial creator seeks to be a little more optimistic or, at the very least, instructive saying, "Use the Hours, Don't Count Them." Trying to put a positive twist on the unstoppable passage of time. Invest your hours, and don't simply count them as they march on or slip away. Time is of the essence.

"For he says, 'In a favorable time I listened to you, and in a day of salvation I have helped you.' Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation." 2 Corinthians 6:2

Now. Eternity may be in our hearts, but it is intended to put a fire in us to respond to him in our temporal existence. Humble ourselves. Repent. Turn to him. Receive mercy. Receive grace. Today. Now. Salvation is only available now. And time is passing. Today is the day of salvation. Use your hours wisely. Don't just mark them off by counting them. Make your hours count by turning to Christ and receiving the free gift.

Sundials proclaim solemn warnings for a reason. Urgent. Beware of the ticking clock.

Here is one final example of mottos on sundials. One states, "Even as You Watch I'm Fleeing." The sun rises and sets. Repeatedly. Don't waste your seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, years, or decades. Live in your temporal life wisely by making eternal decisions. Now.

Sundial mottos are solemn for a reason. Eternal decisions must be made in our temporal existence. And time is not kind to any of us. It marches on. Live wisely in your temporal days.

"The sun rises, and the sun goes down, and hastens to the place where it rises." Ecclesiastes 1:5

[Comments](#)

How to Face Loss in a Healthy Manner

Early in my journey of grief, [I was asked if you can prepare for loss](#). I responded with a yes and a no. The way you live prepares you for life and loss. However, you cannot prepare for the exact manner in which you lose someone. The circumstances cannot be known or prepared for, but the way you live provides a foundation for anything you face, whether desirable or undesirable.

“Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths. Rather train yourself for godliness...” 1 Timothy 4:7

Refuse Irreverent and Silly Myths

When loss descends on you, uninvited, your shocked mind and numbed emotions give birth to thoughts out of nowhere. “Where did that come from,” you think. I remember a crazy thought within the first day or two after my loss. There were many people, comforters, in and out of my house. And a thought out of the blue crossed my mind. “Maybe I can just walk out of the house, go to the airport, move to Africa... and maybe no one will even know.” Bizarre.

Worse than these spontaneous thoughts are the silly narratives in our culture that surround death. A few examples...

Death is the end, and my loss will lead to unavoidable despair. Or another. When a person dies, God will weigh the good and bad things done. Or worse. You deserve the best, but God has let you down. Another. God needed your loved one more than you did. Silly and irreverent. And terrible theology.

Rather, Train Yourself in Godliness

Training in this passage carries with it the idea of athletic training. This passage uses terms such as train, toil, strive, devote, and do not neglect. These are active words requiring energy and intentionality.

The target for training is godliness. Paul says, "... set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity" (1 Timothy 4:12). Instead of listening to reckless silliness and irreverence, apply discipline and train yourself in godliness.

"Practice these things, immerse yourself in them, so that all may see your progress." 1 Timothy 4:15

Practice and Immerse Yourself in Truth

Paul continues in delivering good advice for life and loss. Practice. Rehearse. Immerse yourself in a training regimen that will promise to bear fruit. In missionary circles, there are numerous strategies for language learning. One strategy, language immersion, is a method where you surround yourself with those who speak the language you're seeking to learn. You immerse yourself in the language. Similarly, Paul instructs us to immerse ourselves in truth.

Make and Show Progress

Paul's instructions for life reveal good advice for dealing with loss. Progress can be made in maintaining your emotional, physical, and spiritual health. In fact, you can thrive and not simply survive. Your circumstances have nothing to do with your thriving or surviving.

Paul says, "You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all" (2 Corinthians 3:2). Living a life known by godly traits displays a message to others. The Corinthians were a letter to be known and read. Likewise, we are to make and show our progress.

So, lessons for a godly life delivered to us by Paul are also lessons that aid us in facing loss in a healthy manner. We should refuse irreverent and silly myths and, instead, train in godliness. We should immerse ourselves in truth and make and show our progress.

"He isn't so much working to transform our circumstances as he is working through hard circumstances to transform you and me."
Paul David Tripp, *New Morning Mercies*

Comments

Loss Is an Opportunity to Spread the Aroma of Hope

“But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere.” 2 Corinthians 2:14

The Fragrance of the Knowledge of Christ

Faith leans into words such as “always.” Christ *always* leads us in triumphal procession. *Always*. In the depths of loss, are you willing to have his fragrance permeate your environment?

I remember the first night after the loss of my wife and how God brought words to mind from the song, “Forever Reign.” The line, “You are love, you are love, on display for all to see...” has come back to mind many times. Almost as a rallying cry. Almost as a mantra. On display. Others are watching.

“For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved... a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things?” 2 Corinthians 2:15–16

The Aroma of Christ to God Among Those Who are Being Saved

Christians emit Christ’s aroma to God. The outcome is that their words and deeds lead others to Christ. New Christians come to Christ through the testimony of Christians. The fragrance of the knowledge of Christ is an aroma to those who taste of salvation. If you have the gift of faith, you will willingly and joyfully repent and receive the gift of salvation. It smells good and attractive, and you embrace salvation. Christ’s aroma is an aroma of life.

“For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who... are perishing... a fragrance from death to death... Who is sufficient for these things?” 2 Corinthians 2:15–16

The Aroma of Christ to God Among Those Who are Perishing

Conversely, the aroma of Christ to God emits offense to those who are obstinate and faithless. Unwilling to repent. Where those of faith embrace the aroma of Christ, those without faith reject the aroma of Christ. They are perishing, and the aroma is a fragrance of death. Eternal separation. Ultimate death. Christ’s aroma, to the faithless, is an aroma of death.

“For we are not, like so many, peddlers of God’s word, but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ.” 2 Corinthians 2:17

Commissioned as a Fragrance of Christ

I have learned in my journey through loss that I have to doggedly hold on in faith. Again, faith leans into that word “always.” Christ *always* leads us in triumphal procession. Faith is the evidence of things not seen. Candidly, these things are not seen. Faith is believing something while not seeing it. Faith versus sight is ground zero of the battle.

And yet, we are commissioned as men of sincerity. We truly believe what we do not see. We truly believe what we’ve been told. We take God and his word by faith. Without sight.

And by faith we receive the commissioning, the compulsion, to speak of Christ in the sight of God. In sincerity. Not like peddlers.

If you’re facing loss, you are being given a commission to walk by faith in triumphal procession. You are being given a compulsion to spread the fragrance of the knowledge of Christ. His love is on display, and you are spreading the aroma of hope.

“The world of sense triumphs. The visible becomes the enemy of the invisible; the temporal, of the eternal.” A. W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God*

[Comments](#)

Numerous Choices—Choosing to Turn to God in Grief

“I regret that I have made Saul king, for he has turned back from following me and has not performed my commandments.” 1 Samuel 15:11

Ray Palmer, in “My Faith Looks Up to Thee,” gives us a map for walking in dark times. I learned early in my journey that I had a multitude of choices I could make. In fact, the plethora of choices terrified me. I had heard about all the missteps made by others, especially men.

Palmer’s hymn begins, “My faith looks up to Thee, Thou Lamb of Calvary...” Wisdom prevails when you turn to the Lamb of Calvary. Every other choice you may turn to is a mistake. Palmer is speaking, primarily, to that initial turning from guilt to salvation. However, as I have learned, that turning to look with faith upon Calvary is a repeated daily response beyond salvation, and especially in grief. Our eyes of faith should be trained to the Cross. We doggedly take our eyes off of sight—what’s before us—and we fix our eyes upon the Lamb.

“Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other.” Isaiah 45:22

In the second verse of Palmer’s hymn, we sing, “May Thy rich grace impart strength to my fainting heart...” Do not ignore that your temporal default is to faint in life. Adversity. Loss. Pain. Disappointment. We need his grace—[his sufficient grace](#)—to impart strength to our weak and fainting hearts.

The title of my blog is *Facing Loss: Lessons of Hope from My Unwanted Journey*. There’s a reason. I did not even have to come up with

the title. It just emerged from my experience. I realized I had to face my loss squarely and I needed to do it with hope. Palmer continues in verse three, “While life’s dark maze I tread, and griefs around me spread, be Thou my guide; bid darkness turn today, wipe sorrow’s tears away, nor let me ever stray from thee aside.” Face it. Life is a dark maze. Grief has or will spread around you. You need a guide. You have numerous choices. Choose the Lamb of Calvary as your Guide! He will walk you by faith through the darkness and sorrow. He will keep you in his paths. Tempted to stray, you will be enabled to stay by his side.

**“No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.”
I Corinthians 10:13**

“My Faith Looks Up to Thee” continues. “When ends life’s transient dream, when death’s cold, sullen stream, shall o’er me roll. Blest Savior, then, in love, fear and distrust remove; O bear me safe above, a ransomed soul.” Palmer captures the destination on our life’s map. The transient dream has ended. The chill of death visits us or, in some cases, rolls over us.

We will see with eyes of sight what we have embraced with eyes of faith. Our blessed Savior! The lover of our souls! Love demolishes fear and distrust. Fear and distrust are gone. No more need for faith. Now sight delivers what faith promised. He, our Savior, bears us safely above. The promised ransom has been delivered! Faith becomes sight. Hope gives way to joyful union.

In a world where there are numerous choices, the wise choose to turn to the God who made heaven and earth.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.... Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven...” Matthew 5:3, 12

Comments

Three Deliberate Keys for Thriving in Grief

There are no quick fixes to grief. Get used to it and embrace it. Settle in for a process and not an event. However, there are some key disciplines that promise to set a trajectory if you desire to endure and even thrive. Thriving through grief requires stubborn faithful endurance in three key disciplines.

“Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer.” Romans 12:12

Three key principles, or disciplines, stand as a light to aid you as you walk through grief. We must rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, and be constant in prayer.

We must rejoice in hope.

If you have been following my journey at all, you will know what I do not mean. I do not mean we are to rejoice callously or be happy about what has happened. We never rejoice at brokenness. We do not celebrate the effects of sin and the fall.

“If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.” 1Corinthians 15:19

We who are people of faith have eyes that see the eternal. There is a glorious day coming when all pain, suffering, tribulation, and all brokenness will be defeated. This fact of faith calls for rejoicing. And if you want to endure and even thrive through grief, rejoice in hope. If we cannot have hope in life's most broken moments, we are among all people most to be pitied.

We must be patient in tribulation.

One of the biggest lessons I learned is that grief puts you on a journey that is longer than you ever anticipated. The title of my blog, *Facing Loss*,

is purposefully chosen to take note of this most important lesson. You cannot sidestep or divert your eyes from grief. You cannot ignore this journey. You must face the journey. You cannot hurry the journey of grief.

“Wishing has its place and working is ever commendable but waiting also has its rewards.” Vance Havner, *Though I Walk Through the Valley*

Patience reveals faith. Patience reveals dependence. Patience also reveals confidence in the strength and character of God. Don’t miss this—tribulation by definition will require patience on your part. Tribulation requires endurance. Patience is a virtue, and it is especially virtuous in tribulation.

We must be constant in prayer.

David Jeremiah claims, “Prayer is my Declaration of Dependence.” Always true, but especially true during grief, we are dependent even when we don’t know we are dependent. Turning to God is a discipline of faith, recognizing dependence. The more I understand my feeble nature, the more constant I will be in prayer.

“Difficulties and discouragements have sent us to our knees, and then we have been surprised by the advent of the Master in great power and blessing.” Theodore Cuyler, *God’s Light on Dark Clouds*

To be clear, prayer is not intended to change your circumstances but to change you in your circumstances. In fact, I must be constant in prayer so that I may rejoice in hope. Further, I must be constant in prayer so that I may be patient in tribulation.

These three keys for thriving in grief are simple, and yet they are difficult. They will prove to unlock instructions not to avoid grief but to thrive in grief. These three—rejoice, be patient, and be constant—are weighty and deliberate instructions. I have learned, grief is not for the faint of heart. However, if you will fight for joy based on the hope of the gospel, if you will endure patiently in the midst of whatever tribulation you face, and if you will press in under the wings of the Almighty in constant communion with him, you can thrive in grief.

“God’s comfort can keep the heart sweet and unhurt in the midst of the sorest trials, and bring the life through the darkest hours, shining in transfigured beauty.” J. R. Miller, *The Ministry of Comfort*

[Comments](#)

A Word About Emotional Connection to Men Who Are Facing Loss

“My perspective matured, informed less by pain and more by understanding.” Bob Terry, *Struggling Toward Hope: Life After the Death of a Spouse*

Within the first few weeks following my shocking loss, I had a few men speak into my life. They cared, and they spoke up. They were [not like Job's friends](#).

My father was my first and the most repetitious advisor. Three times within the first week or so he either said or texted me to say I should not make any major decisions too quickly. After the dust from the fury of the first couple of weeks settled, I finally asked him to elaborate. He said I should not quit my job, sell my house, or begin a relationship too soon. Additionally, my own son asked if I had safeguards in place against the use of pornography. Another young man asked if I had any temptation to abuse alcohol. It's good to have people who care about you.

These were caring advisors willing to broach difficult subjects for my good. They had discernment, some beyond their years, and cared enough to bring these topics up for discussion. All three of these advisors with their concern and advice were welcomed by me.

In retrospect, I have observed one key issue at stake when it comes to grief and relationships. Men, you are vulnerable. You are set up for problems if you're not careful. Be vigilant. Your enemy is a devouring lion.

“Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.” 1 Peter 5:8

The primary concern I realized was the danger of even conversing or reaching out to grieving women. The beauty of relationship is when initial interest takes the more serious step of emotional connection. Spend time with someone enough, and you'll begin to sense a connection. I've discovered I have an instantaneous connection with anyone who has experienced grief. If you interact with a grieving woman you can feel that instant connection. It's going to happen by virtue of your shared experiences. You've both faced loss, and you understand each other.

“There is nothing lost by waiting patiently and submitting willingly to the Lord's disposal.” John Flavel, *Facing Grief*

I longed to be understood. I needed people to sense the depth of my loss. I wasn't looking for pity, but I was seeking to plumb the depths of my loss in order to heal. And when I met another person who had experienced some level of loss, it was a huge step forward. The danger lies in the next step. The danger lies in the subtle connection based on shared feelings. “She gets me,” you may be tempted to say. “Finally, someone who cares for me,” you might think. Your heart takes a step closer. You mistake the emotional connection surrounding grief for an emotional connection signifying love. In essence, you're blinded. At least momentarily. This is not to say love cannot be born between two grieving people in a healthy manner, but it is to say we should be on guard.

“It is possible both to accept and to endure loneliness without bitterness when there is a vision of glory beyond.” Elizabeth Elliot, *The Path of Loneliness*

Beware and be on guard surrounding the emotional connection with another grieving person. John Flavel says, in *Facing Grief*, “When it is a dark hour of trouble with us, then is [Satan's] fittest season to tempt... our suffering time is his busiest working time.” Be wise. Be alert. Be careful. Be afraid of your own feelings. Be guarded.

“Don't capitulate to the siren songs of your unredeemed thoughts. Pay attention to where these thoughts come from and who is whispering them in your ears. Then reject them.” Boyd Bailey, *The Spiritual Life of a Leader*

I've confessed to my new wife that I'm grateful to God for protecting me from seeking to begin even a friendship with her earlier than I did. We are work associates and friends but never one-on-one outside the office. She's not a grieving spouse, but I am convinced I would have done two things if I had begun a relationship too soon. First, I'm absolutely convinced her listening ears and caring spirit would have opened a door to emotional connection with the same rapidity as when we finally did begin dating. Second, I am absolutely convinced I would have usurped a significant part of my own healing, processing, and recovery. Such timing would not have been healthy for me. Or fair for her.

When it comes to relationships, discipline is necessary. Serious attention is needed. Prayerful pondering is required. Beware of emotional connection when it comes to considering a relationship following loss.

“True freedom consists not in obsessing about circumstances but in trusting that God who transcends them, not in pursuing our own way but in surrendering to God's way.” Jerry Sittser, *A Grace Revealed: How God Redeems the Story of Your Life*

[Comments](#)

I Prayed in the Sanctuary Alone—A Rite of Passage

“He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.” Psalm 23:3

Kim and I started the youth group at our church, Movement Church, in Richmond, Virginia. She loved the youth and they responded well to all that she planned for them. Kim was genuine, and I am convinced the youth knew of her love for them.

We had been at the church for about five years when she died. Movement Church, therefore, was where we had her funeral.

Early in grief, you flash back to the funeral as you process what has happened. Where you sat during the funeral. Some of the content of the funeral. But not all of it. It’s a blur. The casket. The music. The sanctuary.

Eventually, you [return to church](#). You flash back. Over time the flashbacks lessen. You don’t forget, but you stay in the flashback less in time and intensity. However, you create new rhythms and new normals. You stand alone and sing during worship in the sanctuary. You don’t hold a hand during a prayer. You don’t share knowing glances during a sermon when something resonates with both of you at the same time. New rhythms are created by yourself. Alone.

I finally reengaged with our youth group. Of course, a year after Kim’s death a worldwide pandemic interrupted everything including our youth gatherings. As an aside, online meetings are no replacement for in person interaction, and a youth group is a prime example and illustration.

Eventually, we were back at church on Sunday evenings for youth gatherings. One evening, I walked by the sanctuary when no one else was around. It had been about two years since Kim’s funeral at the time. I looked into the darkness of the sanctuary, and I thought back to that painful

day when I gathered with hundreds of loving supporters to mourn Kim's passing and to worship her Lord. I stood there for a moment looking in at the sanctuary as I recalled what had happened in that room on February 25, 2019. I thought about the months of healing. I thought about the pain. I thought about supporters. I thought about new rhythms in my life. I thought about the power of the gospel.

And then, I walked into the sanctuary alone. I walked around the sanctuary and prayed. I worshipped. I turned to God. I complained some, respectfully. I asked God again to bring his Kingdom and his will to bear in whatever was left in my life. I told him I only wanted his ways to be accomplished in my life. But I begged him to continue to pour his steadfast love upon me. I told him I trusted him.

I prayed these things again. As I have done so many times before in my own home.

That day turned out to be a rite of passage. I marked the journey. A funeral in February of 2019. Water under the bridge. The passage of time. They say, "Time heals all wounds." It's not that simple, but time does play a part, no doubt. Now, I prayed alone in the same sanctuary over two years later. Again, a rite of passage. A moment marked. Moving forward in health. Another important step is taken—alone.

I was healing to a point where I was ready for a new relationship. I was ready to invest in my life again and in someone else's life. I didn't know who or when, for sure, but I was recovering. I was taking careful steps. Slow. But sure. I knew like Paul that God was not finished with me yet, and I should invest in life.

**"For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account."
Philippians 1:21-24**

Note: I am convinced this experience prepared me to take a very important step a year or so later when I married Amanda.

Comments

The Disloyalty of Destroying Memories

I've observed grief now from numerous perspectives. Grief is like the proverbial onion with seemingly endless layers! Early lessons taught me that I could plan for mourning—protected set-apart daily time was important for my healing and even survival. However, I also learned to be prepared for the ready-or-not-out-of-the-blue grief. I had to learn to be intentional with planned mourning and responsive to unplanned ready-or-not mourning.

Crashing waves are another analogy used with grief. In the beginning the waves are higher and crash harder and come at you more often. Over time, the waves lessen in intensity and their visits are spread out.

This morning, a volcano was reported to have erupted on an island in the ocean, and a tsunami warning was issued. That same afternoon I was packing pictures and photo albums in some boxes.

A tsunami hit at my house today. Without warning.

“The memories, unbidden, spring into their minds, scattered perhaps over the years. There is, maybe, something to be said for say facing them all deliberately and straight away.” Sheldon Vanauken, *A Severe Mercy*

I should have been ready, but the waves of grief have been smaller and more sporadic lately. I've grown accustomed to a reduction in my level of pain. Healing has visited me.

However, I felt the rumbling as I packed up the first couple of boxes of photo albums. I made the mistake of glancing at the pictures. And I should have recognized the rising emotion. But I'm better. I even sense that I am healed, but every time I say so I add that I know I will always be healing. Healed but healing. It's a new reality.

Album after album told a story that I knew had ended. Early life with Kim in the Atlanta area. Paul's birth. Emily's birth. Subsequent birthdays and times with family. I was so young. Appointment as missionaries to South Africa. Setswana language school. Trevor's birth. Visits from our parents. Furlough. Our move to Zimbabwe. Church-planting efforts in Epworth and Ruwa near Harare, Zimbabwe. Our move to Richmond, Virginia. Picture after picture told story after story. All past tense.

“We need to grieve the hard story, yes. We must take as long as we need.” Katherine and Jay Wolf, *Suffer Strong*

The ready-or-not-out-of-the-blue eruption hit me. The baby pictures did the deed. The tsunami just rose out of the calm waters of my soul and hit me. A huge wave came over me. One picture in particular was obviously taken by me. Kim was holding our three young children. And I saw her life's impact flood over me. And there was pain because I felt disloyal. I'm packing up memories. It's almost like I'm destroying memories of her. I'm disrespecting my life and the wife of my youth. In his book, *Seasons of Sorrow*, Tim Challies described cleaning out the room of his son following his death as “... rude and imposing.”

I'm accepting the need to pack and move out. As I write I am preparing to sell my house. Challies also says, “I notice the room is beginning to echo as it gets progressively emptier.” It's forcing more pain. Healing is a process. The pictures are stories of the past. No more. A chapter ended.

A massive reminder wave in the form of a tsunami is crashing on me today.

“... we need to let the redefined story be part of our grieving process, because it will also be part of our healing. And there will be joy.” Katherine and Jay Wolf, *Suffer Strong*

The tsunami seems like a setback. I feel old pains revisiting me again. Like a boomerang. Like a bad penny. Like a sin that finds you out. Crashing. Out-of-the-blue. Ready-or-not.

The wave crashes and subsides. Perspective is gained. A new chapter is good. The old chapter, while closed, is also good. The possibility is considered that this step is not disloyalty. It's not destructive. The packing

up of memories and pictures is a step of healing. Respecting the past and embracing the future.

“There is a balm for every pain, a medicine for all sorrow; the eye turned backward to the Cross, and forward to the morrow.”

Gerhardt Ter Steegan, *Hymns of Ter Steegan and Others*

Note: On the day this entry was written, it was wonderful to have a new relationship in my life with a woman who is strong, gentle, and kind enough to allow me to discuss these steps and feelings with her.

[Comments](#)

When You Realize Your World Is the Groaning World

“For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now.” Romans 8:22

When you face loss, you realize the world groans awaiting redemption. Waiting. Enduring. Women understand this groaning better than men do. Paul, in Romans 8:22, compares this groaning of the whole creation to the pains of childbirth. I’ve heard it’s painful. I don’t pretend to understand. Apparently, it’s all-consuming. Again, enduring pain.

Not the way it was supposed to be.

“And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good.” Genesis 1:31

The story of creation, chronicled in Genesis 1, was a story of good delivered by the hand of God. In the beginning, in fact, God declared what he had created was good. And then Adam, and subsequently all mankind, fell hard and ugly. One man.

Never underestimate the impact of your response to anything. Feel the weight of responsibility. Never underestimate the impact of your response to your loss.

Never underestimate the impact of one person’s decision to respond the way they respond.

“Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned.” Romans 5:12

With the fall of man, instant *spiritual* death became a reality. Likewise, gradual *physical* death became a reality. Further, ultimate *eternal* death became a reality.

On that day, all of humanity for all of time experienced spiritual death. Our new starting point was a groaning world, a groaning existence. What was good was tainted by the bad. Spiritual death entered the world and became the common existence for all of us. Me. You. The whole world. On our heels.

“So if a person lives many years, let him rejoice in them all; but let him remember that the days of darkness will be many. All that comes is vanity.” Ecclesiastes 11:8

On that day, all of humanity was introduced to gradual physical death. The day of birth is the beginning of the end. Death awaits all who are born because of the response of Adam, of one man. Decay was introduced to our experience. A slow demise is in the future of mankind. Our bodies slow and weaken. Death awaits us all. It’s gradual, but it’s real. Days of darkness will be many.

Finally, on that day, ultimate eternal death was introduced as the destination for all mankind. “For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:6–8). That destination of ultimate eternal death is not inevitable for every person. Through Christ, God has made a way of rescue. Christ died for the groaning world.

“You live in a fallen world that itself groans, waiting for redemption.” Paul David Tripp, *New Morning Mercies*

My experience underscored an awakening to realize my world was a groaning world. My world was a broken world. My world was a sin-scarred world. My world was in need of redemption, of rescue, of restoration.

“In my groaning, I joined a chorus of groaning that is billions strong.” Jerry Sittser, *A Grace Revealed: How God Redeems the Story of Your Life*

Allow loss to reveal your world is the groaning world; allow the gospel to reveal God's answer to your groaning, broken, sin-scarred world. Walk by faith in this groaning, broken world and refuse to walk by sight alone.

“Give ear to my words, O Lord; consider my groaning.”

Psalm 5:1

“I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their groaning, and I have come down to deliver them...” Acts 7:34

[Comments](#)

Navigating New Normals—The Art Form of Moving Forward With

Following major loss, your mind seeks to come to grips with your new normal. The absence of the one loved creates a massive emotional hole—a vital missing piece—and [phantom impulses](#) cause you to fluctuate or vacillate between old and new. Back and forth. Your hard drive is overwriting new painful realities over old happy memories. It's wise to make no major decisions in these early days. I received that advice repeatedly. I'm grateful. The road you walk is uneven and there are illusions. It's confusing when you finalize a decision based on what you consider good information, and it turns out it is skewed, unreliable information. You're navigating a new normal. Take your time.

And navigating this new normal takes longer than you expect.

“We get in a hurry to tear open the cocoon and release the butterfly. Our clumsy hands wreck God's delicate timing.” Vance Havner, *Though I Walk Through the Valley*

Eventually, your mental hard drive is overwritten, and your new normal is firmly ensconced in your mind. No more denial. Eventually, your thoughts increasingly turn toward *moving forward*.

Note, I said *moving forward*.

This is a good place to differentiate between two vastly divergent ways to talk about recovery. Many people struggle with *moving on*. In fact, well-meaning supporters encourage mourners by pointing out they have been sad long enough. They encourage the mourner to *move on*. However, it is simply not appropriate to try to *move on*. *Moving on* carries with it the idea of putting the past behind you. *Moving forward* carries with it the idea of taking the influences of the past with you.

I have [Nora McInerny](#) to thank for this subtle but important description she communicated in a TED Talk. She helped me put a framework in my mind to guide my own healing. I am who I am today, in large part, because of the influence of my wife. It is absurd to *move on from* your loved one when you can *move forward with* the lessons, memories, and values they poured into your life.

“There is no retreat; we have nothing left to us but to grasp the very hand that brought us there and push forward.” Theodore Cuyler, *God’s Light on Dark Clouds*

I have found the same transition is in play if you consider entering a new relationship after your grief journey. No matter if the relationship is serious or not. You’re, once again, navigating a new normal. [Nora McInerny](#) calls it an “alternate universe.” In the early days of consideration or exploration, you need to monitor your thoughts, emotions, and expectations. It’s not bad, it’s just the reality. You must talk yourself through this new normal.

Just don’t do it publicly. You don’t want people to see you talking to yourself. Especially if you get animated. That would be awkward.

You need to carefully consider aspects to your new normal. First, have you taken appropriate time to heal? You cannot love well again if you have not healed. I’m not talking about an elusive return to the previous state of health before loss. I’m talking about a new normal healthy state in the context of your loss—a place where you can love again. You’re not replacing your previous spouse, but you’re seeking to love again, nonetheless. Different. New. Moving forward. Not a stoic moving on.

Second, are you ready to give your mind time to entertain a new normal? This importance to navigate your new normal is a new insight for me. You may not need the same amount of time it took to embrace the new normal of your loss, but you need time to navigate the changing landscape. You navigated yourself into singleness, and now you’re considering changing that status. Take time. Monitor your heart, your emotional health. Contemplate the changes your steps could lead you to face. Monitor the rewriting of your hard drive, once again.

As you move forward, be careful to navigate your new normal with patience, wisdom, and peace.

“[Yielding to the will of God] does not make the pain of the sorrow less; it does not give back the loved one who has been called away, but it brings the heart into full accord with God, and thus gives sweet peace.” J. R. Miller, *The Ministry of Comfort*

[Comments](#)

She Is Able to Swim

I've written before about my fellow grief traveler, Joe Hall. As a young man in his mid-twenties, he married his wife knowing she was dying. He's an amazing young man. Later, God brought another beautiful young lady into his life. He's much younger than I am but farther along in grief. And wisdom, too. He's been good for me.

We met one day for coffee after I began dating Amanda. I wanted to catch him up on my recent status change and get some counsel. We talked about the confusing transition when you move from full grief to exploring new possibilities. It's gradual but stark. Moving on is not healthy but [moving forward](#) is a necessity. And there's a difference. It's not a ninety-degree turn. Nor is it a one-hundred-and-eighty degree about face. Again, it's gradual. It's a transition.

[Navigating new normals is an art form](#). One normal is ended, but the [phantom impulses](#) do not simply go away. Your new normal is bombarded by the old reality. Slowly you come to fully accept your new reality only to have it change again with the prospects of a new relationship. Confusing for sure. Again, it's a dance from old to new. And it's a time for patience as you seek to take steps with great care in a new aspect of your grief journey.

Besides, grief really never ends. It changes and comes at you in different forms. Healing comes, but it keeps coming. Healing continues slowly. You seem to be healed but still healing. The waves are spread out and smaller. Most of the time.

In our coffee conversation, Joe said something insightful like he always does. As we talked about Amanda, he asked me if she'd ever been through deep grief. Amanda, like all of us, has been through her own experiences with brokenness but not the loss of a spouse, I explained. His reply was quick and to the point. "She doesn't need to have been through deep waters," he said, "but she needs to be able to swim." I looked at Joe in the

same way a zealous student fixes his eyes on a favorite, wise, valued, and respected teacher.

Profound.

“She doesn’t need to have been through deep waters, but she needs to be able to swim.” Joe Hall

She needs to be able to swim.

I had not even considered such a thought. Mine is not just a new relationship with another person. Not nearly so simple. It’s a relationship involving someone who has lost a spouse after a long and happy marriage filled with lots of wonderful memories and someone who does not have that same experience. Amanda has never been married.

So, she needs to be able to swim in deep waters.

“An excellent wife who can find? She is far more precious than jewels.” Proverbs 31:10

Amanda is a godly woman who exudes kindness and gentleness. She’s a woman of high character. She’s a woman who loves the Word of God. She’s a woman who prays. She’s a woman who thirsts for righteousness and follows Jesus. She’s selfless and understanding. And she’s full of love. She is a woman who fears the Lord.

She has also served as a missionary in the jungles of South America and knows how to use a machete!

But I digress.

“The heart of her husband trusts in her, and he will have no lack of gain.” Proverbs 31:11

Amanda is able to swim.

She has told me repeatedly she knows my grief is not over and never will be fully complete. She has told me she will walk with me with loyalty through whatever comes our way. She cares deeply for me and my journey. And my family. And Kim’s memory.

As I prayed about my future and the prospect of marriage again, I had three primary hopes: first, I refused to settle for just any relationship after having had a wonderful marriage—I hoped for a woman of character;

second, I hoped for someone who would not be intimidated by Kim's memory but would honor her; and third, I hoped for someone who would love and invest in my children and their families.

God answered that prayer in an Ephesians 3:20 fashion—beyond what I asked or imagined—because Amanda is able to swim.

“She does him good, and not harm, all the days of her life.”

Proverbs 31:12

[Comments](#)

His Brokenness Heals Our Brokenness

It's a beautiful paradox. It's a mysterious gift. His brokenness overwhelms our brokenness. He has been broken to heal us. Brokenness is at the heart of the gospel. We, broken humanity, are unable to heal ourselves. He who knew no sin became sin for us. He was broken for our sake so we could become righteousness (2 Corinthians 5:21).

“He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds.”

Psalm 147:3

As I have processed my loss—seeking healing for my grief—I have been sensitive to the Spirit's speaking to my heart. Let's just say loss removes a layer of life and makes you more perceptive. More observant. More discerning. As Jerry Sittser wrote in *A Grace Revealed: How God Redeems the Story of Your Life*, “Such is the paradox of the redemptive story—we lose to gain, die to live, renounce to inherit, surrender ourselves to get ourselves back.” Again, it's a mystery. Once broken, lost, dead, and renounced we are renewed, found, given life, and accepted because of his brokenness. Our brokenness addressed by the suffering Savior.

“... looking through the broken grave of Christ, as through a window, we see green fields on the other side...” J. R. Miller, *The Ministry of Comfort*

We should expect brokenness, no doubt. Jesus was willing to give his life because brokenness is real, and it's serious. Brokenness breeds and gives birth to all manner of pain and loss. And as Dane Ortland wrote in *Gentle and Lowly*, “Christ's heart is not drained by our coming to him; his heart is filled up all the more by our coming to him.” He was broken for our sake.

He gave himself out of love for us. His heart is full of love for us and is glorified and pleased when we turn to him.

“... looking through the window of Christ’s rent tomb we have a vision of life immortal and in the truth of immortality we find boundless inspiration, comfort for every sorrow and gain for every loss.” J. R. Miller, *The Ministry of Comfort*

Brokenness was annihilated on the cross. Paul David Tripp wrote in *New Morning Mercies*, “It is the cross of Jesus Christ that gives you reason to hope, sing, celebrate, and live.” Brokenness is already defeated and at the same time not yet. This is important to understand. I know we know it in our head. However, get this wisdom down into your heart. Faith causes us to stand firm and strong. We know by faith that brokenness will be defeated ultimately. However, we live in a broken world today. We experience temporal brokenness in the here-and-now. Eternal redemption is yet-to-be realized. Have faith. Hope. Stand strong.

“The whole work of God in redemption is to undo the tragic effects of that foul revolt, and to bring us back again into right and eternal relationship with himself.” A. W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God*

Christ’s brokenness overwhelms our brokenness. His sacrifice overthrows the revolt and reunites mankind with the Maker. His broken body was given for us to heal our souls.

As you walk through loss brought on by the brokenness of the world, never forget that his brokenness heals our brokenness. His sacrifice delivers our redemption. His faithfulness inspires our faithfulness.

“And as they were eating, he took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to them, and said, ‘Take; this is my body.’” Mark 14:22

[Comments](#)

My Experience with the Liberating Discipline of Lament

I am indebted to Mark Vroegop who wrote, “To cry is human, but to lament is Christian.” I’m indebted for the liberating experiences delivered to me after reading his book, *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy*. These lessons helped me on my journey through grief.

Lament, Vroegop explains, has four vital parts; all are necessary. You turn to God, complain to God, ask of God, and trust in God. And now, in the rearview mirror of my deepest grief, I have some practical meat to put on these four bones.

Turn to God

“When brokenness becomes your life, lament helps you turn to God. It lifts your head and turns your tear-filled eyes toward the only hope...” Mark Vroegop, *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy*

Early in grief, I had family and friends speak into my life. My father offered counsel. My children encouraged me. Friends offered support.

Later, I learned the language of lament. As Vroegop says, “... lament helps you turn to God.” Earlier experiences, caution and counsel, helped me realize that the issue is we have many options to which we can turn. In loss, you can turn to a new relationship, pornography, or alcohol. Or numerous other destinations.

Or you can turn to God.

The first intentional and faith-filled step in lament is to turn to God.

Complain to God

“Complaint is central to lament. But Christians never complain just to complain. Instead, we bring our complaints to the Lord for

the purpose of moving us toward him.” Mark Vroegop, *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy*

Honestly, complaining seemed very uncomfortable to me. It seemed disrespectful. However, I could not deny it was biblical. Vroegop takes you through *The Psalms* to prove his point. It’s biblical. David and other writers complained. Even Jesus lamented in Matthew 27:46, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” And Jesus was quoting *Psalms* 22.

So, I complained. Uncomfortable, yes. But I sought to complain respectfully. Carefully.

And something beautiful happened. Jesus spoke to my heart and helped me see I was right to complain. This brokenness was not God’s design. However, brokenness is real. But he whispered to my heart that brokenness was worse than I could even fathom. Beyond my singular loss, the whole world is broken. And then it was as if he leaned in and delivered the news that brokenness is so bad that it cost him his life on the cross.

The second part of lament, complaint, liberated me from seeing only my perspective on loss.

Ask of God

“... lament stands in the gap between pain and promise.” Mark Vroegop, *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy*

At some point following my staggering loss, I realized I had lost my highest earthly treasure, my wife. And I had a distinct realization that I wanted only what God brought to me in my future. God led me to pray four overarching requests. I prayed in keeping with his Kingdom. I prayed asking for his will alone. I wanted his Kingdom to come and will to do be done in my life as it was fully accomplished in heaven. Unimpeded. Further, I began to pray for God to orchestrate my steps. I asked that he keep me walking in his ways—according to his statutes, instructions, and commandments. Finally, I had come to bask in God’s steadfast love. And so, I prayed that as he brought about his Kingdom, will, and ways that he would allow me to continue to enjoy his steadfast love.

The third aspect of lament, to ask, focused me to pray in agreement with God.

Trust in God

“... in the Bible lament is more than sorrow or talking about sadness. It is more than walking through the stages of grief. Lament is a prayer in pain that leads to trust.” Mark Vroegop, *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy*

After turning to God, complaining to God, and asking of God, it is appropriate to trust God. Further, lament is incomplete if you do not take the final step to declare your trust.

I have been encouraged on my journey through *Psalms 89*. One verse that represents so many other passages is Psalm 89:33 which states, “... I will not remove from him my steadfast love or be false to my faithfulness.” If your circumstances tell you he has removed his steadfast love from you, your circumstances are lying to you. He will not remove his steadfast love. Further, he will not be false to his faithfulness. He cannot deny himself.

The final component, trust, completes biblical lament.

Lament is born in brokenness. Biblical lament leads us to turn to God alone, risk the discipline of complaining to God, turn our complaint into a request and ask of God, and then rest in faith by trusting God.

“Lament is the honest cry of a hurting heart wrestling with the paradox of pain and the promise of God’s goodness.” Mark Vroegop, *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy*

[Comments](#)

How GriefShare Can Be an Important Part of Your Journey from Mourning to Joy

Every individual's grief journey is unique. The journey is as unique as every individual facing the grief brought on by loss. However, I have found several important disciplines that I believe are transferrable to anyone who is facing loss. To one degree or another.

I found I needed time alone to process what had happened. In my times alone, I spent time in God's Word, books and testimonials about grief and loss, and uplifting worshipful music. I prayed. Prayer was stunted at first. Another important aspect to my own recovery was being with people, some facing loss and others not facing loss. You need both to maintain perspective.

**“Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.”
Galatians 6:2**

And that's where *GriefShare*, the ministry, comes into the picture. I joined a *GriefShare* group toward the final stages of my journey of loss. It doesn't matter when or how often you join a group. What I needed was someone outside of my journey to help me make sure I had addressed all I needed to address. Their methodical approach to address grief and mourning from all directions provides a helpful guide to anyone seeking to face loss in a healthy manner.

“GriefShare is a friendly, caring group of people who will walk alongside you through one of life's most difficult experiences. You don't have to go through the grieving process alone.”
GriefShare Homepage

GriefShare's design is threefold: There is a workbook to guide personal study and reflection, a weekly video with experts on grief, and support groups with guided discussion.

The effectiveness of this format leads you to cover every grief-related aspect of your journey. Further, you get to join with other grievers to hear expert testimonials. Expert may mean counselors, or it may mean fellow travelers. Going through grief makes you an expert on at least one person's grief journey. Yours. Finally, the discussion groups are filled with real-time mourners. This is not a hypothetical discussion. These groups are full of grief practitioners.

"GriefShare seminars and support groups are led by people who understand what you are going through and want to help. You'll gain access to valuable GriefShare resources to help you recover from your loss and look forward to rebuilding your life."

GriefShare Homepage

GriefShare groups follow a thirteen-week cycle. I joined at the beginning of a cycle; however, the course is designed in such a manner that it doesn't matter when you join. What matters is that you complete all thirteen weeks of material, video content, and discussion groups.

While grief emerges from many forms of loss, *GriefShare* is specifically designed to address the loss of a loved one or other significant relationships. A person grieving the loss of a job or the loss brought on by divorce would be out-of-place. *GriefShare*, again, is laser-focused on the loss of a significant relationship to death.

One of the key benefits of joining a *GriefShare* group is the instant sense that you are understood and validated. You escape the busy and chaotic world for an hour or so and dive into a grief subculture long enough to talk to other like-minded people. It's healing. It's validating. It's permission to mourn. But to mourn well.

For more information, go to www.GriefShare.org. Here you can find a group, gain access to resources, and learn all you need to learn about *GriefShare*.

I commend the *GriefShare* ministry to you. Their vision is to move those of us who are thrust into grief from mourning to real joy. Joy is possible, even in the darkest of circumstances.

“Few of us get through life without having the winds of difficulty blow through our lives at some point—cold and unrelenting winds that threaten to knock us down for good.” Nancy Guthrie, *Be Still My Soul*

[Comments](#)

Packing Up Dreams and Memories

I sold my house just after the three-year point following my loss. If you're selling due to loss, you need to know it's part of the journey. Not always. But oftentimes. I have lived in this house for seventeen years, fourteen years with Kim. I went through her clothing at the end of the first year. Now, moving three years after loss requires you to look in nooks and crannies. No proverbial stone left unturned. Closets. Drawers. Attic. Shed. Under beds. Boxes. Boxes everywhere.

Brutal.

“Packing up the dreams God planted in the fertile soil of you...”
Michael W. and Deborah Smith, “Friends are Friends Forever”

It wasn't brutal in the emotional sense. Sure, it was at times. I came across a journal where Kim recorded her initial thoughts of me after we were beginning to get to know each other. Of interest was one comment I read where she stated, “Maybe I'll marry him. Maybe I won't.” I was obviously not a slam dunk. However, poring over all these items hasn't been like cleaning out Kim's clothing that first year.

However, it's brutal because it is a lot of work. The initial pass through the mountain of stuff is a job you must do alone. Loss comes later in life and so do body aches. Sore muscles reflect the soreness of the soul. It's brutal because you're ending a long journey through loss.

“... means a chapter in your life is through...” Michael W. and Deborah Smith, “Friends are Friends Forever”

Selling a house is so final. It brings a chapter or a period to an emphatic close. Painful. Even if you know you're starting a new chapter, it's a significant step. In my case, I'm cleaning out so I can move to my new

house with my soon-to-be wife. As I write this entry, I'm within 1,442,100 seconds (just under seventeen days) of my upcoming wedding. But who's counting? So, I have a happy chapter about to begin.

However, it doesn't erase the past. It doesn't require you—or even allow you—to ignore the past. And it's not healthy to attempt to ignore or bury your history.

And what a history lies hidden on every shelf and in every drawer. A history of dreams and memories lies beneath the surface waiting to be discovered. It's amazing the things we keep. And what a story those hidden items tell.

Brace yourself.

Pictures. Handwritten notes. School reports from every grade, including college. Books from every era of childhood. VHS tapes. Cassette tapes. DVDs. CDs. Pictures—pictures in almost every drawer. Clothing. School projects. Wedding notes and plans for children. Files. Cords that go to who knows what! Furniture. Toys. Pictures. Baby blankets. Medicines. Decorations. Prized possessions from every trip ever taken.

It almost seems sacred.

“Do not move the ancient landmark that your fathers have set.” Proverbs 22:28

While the things you come across are not the people in our family, the things point to the interests, accomplishments, events, and years of the people in our family. Again, it's almost sacred.

Especially when it comes to those possessions of the one lost. A note they wrote. A journal. Favorite items. The memories they kept.

Maybe these things are not sacred, but they are important to work through. Packing up dreams and memories can be a part of healing. You can celebrate the gifts as you pack up the memories. The hardest part of this task is determining what is kept, what is given away, and what is thrown away. And so, it feels disrespectful to hurriedly walk through the numerous items. And yet, it's a job that must be completed.

When it's time to sell the house, it's time to process the things in your house. It's time to appropriately address the things in your house without letting the things in your house own or paralyze you.

As Michael W. and Deborah D. Smith wrote in “Friends are Friends Forever,” “... our hearts in big and small ways will keep the love...” As you pack up the things in your house, keep the memories of love and the eternal treasures.

**“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal.”
Matthew 6:19–20**

[Comments](#)

Flashback: The Torturous Funeral Parade

I'm married now. Marriage was never my goal, but I came to a point where I made a conscious and careful decision. I was very disciplined to safeguard myself from responding or making decisions out of loneliness. However, intentional processing, facing my loss, and healing gave birth to the openness to a relationship with someone.

But not just any someone.

I had been considering, praying for, and seeking counsel about Amanda Dimperio for over a year when I asked her out. As an aside, she is more than I even dreamed she would be. Let's just say I was right in my initial observations made from a distance.

Amanda and I have talked incessantly, and in one discussion we recalled an event early in my grief. I was on a trip to Amsterdam for a meeting of missionaries. Amanda was there also. Imagine lots of families with children all rising every morning to grab breakfast before the day's meetings and activities. Then imagine a man at the meeting in the sixth month of grief. You walk in, see the beehive of activity, and you go sit alone. Breakfast is a task to get done before taking kids to children's activities and getting to worship and Bible study or the rest of the day. Who has time to sit with a grieving man? Besides, people just don't know what to do with you.

I'm reminded of a heartwarming quote by C. S. Lewis. He compares grievers to lepers. What a blessing, right?

“Perhaps the bereaved ought to be isolated in special settlements like lepers.” C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*

Lewis was in the depths of his grief, and he masterfully relives his grief for all to *observe* in his book. Take note, it's a grief *observed* and not a grief *resolved*. It's raw, real, and gives permission to grieve. His book of his

experience gave me permission to grieve well. However, this comparison of mourners to lepers is not exactly the stuff of sweet devotional thoughts.

Amanda, my new bride, and I went to a funeral for a friend, Betty. George is a colleague, and his loss hit us all. Sometime after we took our seats, we were all asked to stand in honor of the family. Within two weeks, at another funeral for April, we did the same thing. We stood as the family paraded in to take their seats.

I had a flashback of pain.

I remembered my own walk into the church over three years before while everyone stood for my family. It's intended to be a moment to honor the family. It's intended to show solidarity. Support. It's intended to show the family that all their friends stand with them in the wake of their loss.

However, my flashback carried with it some memories of the torture. I did not ask to be there. I did not ask to be paraded. I remember feeling like a leper, an outcast, or an undesirable. I remember it feeling like I was being [forced onto a stage](#). I wanted to refuse to play the part. As George and his family walked in, I was in pain for them and for myself. Just over a week later, as Peter and Ray and the family walked in, I was in pain for them and for myself.

Torture.

I'm not suggesting a change to this tradition. It does, indeed, show honor and care for those who are hurting. It's a good ritual. It really is. But it carries with it pain. It's almost a reality check. It's almost forcing reality in the faces of the family like a pie thrown in the face. You have lost someone of significance, and now we're going to parade you in as we all stare at you on your lonely stage. This ritual of honor forces acknowledgement on the part of the mourners. No denial is allowed.

If you're attending a funeral, realize the pain endured in that moment by the family. If you're walking in the parade of torture, realize it's a part of the ritual to help you face your loss.

One foot in front of the other.

“If we follow him we may find the steepest cliff a path of pleasantness and the lowest vale of humiliation a highway to peace.” Theodore Cuyler, *God's Light on Dark Clouds*

Comments

Beware of the Deceptive Illusion of Temporal Permanence

Strange title, for sure. But hear me out.

My own life experience leads me to believe that while eternity has been placed in our hearts, the here-and-now seems to crowd out that deep God-given gift. The eternity in our hearts has been pushed to the background. Eternity is simply not top-of-mind.

An illusion is created by our experiences and our day-to-day sight. In any given moment, this life seems to be permanent.

“He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end.” Ecclesiastes 3:11

I was thinking about this deceptive illusion late in my grief journey. I was traveling in Texas for a conference at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. I had not been back to Fort Worth in a while, and it was my first visit after Kim’s death. For a little history, Kim and I uprooted our family in 1992 and moved to Fort Worth, Texas for training before going to Africa. We lived in campus housing. So while I was visiting on campus, I decided to drive over to campus housing and found what was our home for seven months on Ferguson Court. A surge of renewed pain coursed through my body. I had this thought cross my mind. This place is still here; but Kim is not here.

While visiting Texas, I went for lunch one day to a favorite restaurant, Cousin’s BBQ. It was still there and still very, very good. Nostalgia poured over me since Kim and I visited this restaurant several times while living there. The restaurant, too, is still here; but she is not here.

On another occasion months before, I drove by her high school, South Cobb High School, near Smyrna, Georgia. Within months of her death, I visited Bar Harbor, Maine [where we honeymooned](#). I've visited place after place where Kim and I had been together in the past. Those places are still here; but she is not here.

Those places seem unchanged. To be fair, they are not unchanged, but they seem to be unchanged. Change slowly takes place and hypnotizes you to not see the change. So, those places are still here; but she is not still here.

And it occurred to me: There's an illusion of permanence represented by places that endure especially when a loved one has passed away and is no longer here. These places stand as monuments and reminders that the one who walked these places with you is forever gone.

These and other geographical places have tempted me to ignore the eternity in my own heart. No, not fully; however, it is a subtle lure. While eternity is placed in my heart, I recognized I have a daily battle to rehearse it and keep it top-of-mind. Unchanging places coax me into thinking that this life is permanent.

“... as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.” 2 Corinthians 4:18

What we see is temporal. Transient.

What we do not see is eternal. Forever.

If you do not understand this faith lesson, you will be forever distracted by the here-and-now. What we see—even these seemingly permanent places—is temporal. Embrace the eternity in your heart, and learn its lessons.

Walking through grief has reminded me that I need to take captive my thoughts. I must embrace the gift of God's grace whereby he places eternity in our hearts. I must demolish arguments, every pretense of knowledge, and take distracted thinking captive.

The temporal may seem perpetual. What you see and touch now may seem enduring. Places may seem permanent.

Yet, it's only a deceptive illusion. Therefore, beware of the deceptive illusion of temporal permanence.

“We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.” 2 Corinthians 10:5

Note: As it turns out, the trip to Fort Worth, Texas (that inspired this entry) was within weeks of my decision to seek a relationship with Amanda who is now my wife.

[Comments](#)

The Hidden Delight of My Third Marriage

I got your attention, didn't I!

One morning several months after marrying Amanda, I was praying for her alone on our back patio. I was praying that she would be encouraged in her walk with Christ, that God would overwhelm her with his goodness, and deepen her faith daily. I was praying that God would use me to bless Amanda. And as I was praying for her, I was overcome with God's kindness to me. I thanked God for his kindness to me by bringing Amanda into my life. I was so overcome with joy that I blurted out, "I have been blessed my whole life!"

You see, I was blessed with over thirty-five years with Kim. She was a blessing to me, to our children, and to so many others. And here I am—again for a second time—receiving kindness from God. This time through my marriage to Amanda.

How I have been blessed!

"It is a miserable condition, my brethren, to depend upon creatures altogether for our contentment." Jeremiah Burroughs,
The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment

I began to delve in a bit deeper into this line of thinking on my back patio. I needed to be transparent and honest. Losing Kim gave rise to an unwanted journey of over three years before my marriage to Amanda. So, I began acknowledging that—while I had just blurted out how blessed my whole life was—I did have that one very, very painful period. You could say my blessed life took a bit of a break—an interim period so to speak.

Or was it really an interim period? Was my blessed life interrupted? I pondered those three years for a moment.

And as clear as day, Jesus reminded me I was also betrothed to him. I am, as a part of the Bride of Christ, married to him. Yes, it's undeserved grace.

But even in that three-year valley, I experienced my delightful union to Christ. And this marriage will never end. Not in death. Not in loss. Not divorce. No abandonment. No leaving. No forsaking. I had, indeed, experienced the depths of his intimacy and presence in my interim period, my unwanted journey. Josh Smith shares of an experience when his wife was facing a health crisis. He says, “I began to fall in love with Jesus.” Why? Because, sometimes, you don’t know the depths of love for your Savior until you face the loss of other loves.

“This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.” Ephesians 5:32

A reminder was hand-delivered that morning on my patio that my first marriage to Kim—regardless of how wonderful—was not the answer to my ultimate delight. My second marriage to Amanda—regardless of how wonderful—is not to be the answer to my ultimate delight. Both marriages are evidence of the kindness of God, yes. But no creature can be my answer to contentment and blessing. To think otherwise is “a miserable condition,” as Jeremiah Burroughs has stated. No earthly relationship can carry such a responsibility.

**“... so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God...”
Ephesians 2:7–8**

Ultimate delight comes from Jesus. He is the Lover of my soul. He is the great I AM. He is all I need. He is enough.

No, he is more than enough.

My third marriage—my relationship with Jesus—is my hidden delight. It’s a secret learned from the Word of God and a secret learned—and most certainly reinforced—in loss. Strip away my first, even my second marriage, and you’ll see an impenetrable third marriage, a hidden delight.

“Every man has been called to truly fall in love with Jesus. . . . He passionately loves us and is calling us to passionately love him.”
Josh Smith, *The Titus Ten*

[Comments](#)

A Few of My Favorite Things... About Grief

I was on a call with a new grief traveler, Pat, a few weeks ago. His wife died suddenly about six weeks before our ninety-minute call. Now almost four years down the road, I have perspective and insight that I did not have at the time of Kim's passing. I told Pat that I know how strange this may sound but that he should learn to enjoy the pain. Press into pain. I told him not to rush the healing. One of my favorite things about grief is that you learn a lot. And enduring—even enjoying—the pain is one of those favorite things about grief.

This is all going to sound crazy, I know. But I have been thinking how there are some favorite things about grief. I know. It sounds strange to say.

In my journey's rearview mirror, I have a few favorite things about grief to share with you.

Deep lessons of faith are available for the learning when you face loss.

Back to my advice to Pat. I learned on my journey that grief must be respected. As a believer in Christ, I know grief is or will be overwhelmed by [grace](#), [mercy](#), [peace](#), [love](#), [hope](#), and [comfort](#). It will be overturned and defeated because death is routed and vanquished. However, it must not be ignored or diminished in the here-and-now, the temporal. Therefore, grief must not be rushed, and it must be respected. It must be faced. The title of my blog site, *Facing Loss*, is aptly titled because it communicates one of the most important lessons—or favorite things—I learned. Loss must be faced and endured. Even enjoyed, might I say? Probably too far. It's a terrible ride with lots of lessons, blessings, and hope along the way.

Unhindered hope really is available on unwanted journeys.

Another of my favorite things about grief is the overwhelming hope that rises to meet the waves of grief. Don't get me wrong, it takes a while. [Grief is like an amputation](#), and there's real healing that must take place. But grief

also requires the openness to heal. Friends of mine told about a woman who was grieving the death of her husband over fifteen years ago! I immediately blurted out, “She doesn’t want to heal!” You have to want to heal.

You have to open your eyes to the hope in the Word, in music, prayer, and through friends and supporters. Through hope in Christ. Those gifts have become a few of my favorite things. But you have to turn to God and trust him on the journey.

You must face the difficult journey with hope. The subtitle of my blog site, *Lessons of Hope from My Unwanted Journey*, represents a powerful lesson I have learned.

Other grief journeyers have authored their stories or lessons to help you.

Another of my favorite things about grief has been [the authors](#) I have met in the more than fifty books I’ve read. They have been fellow travelers. I commend the discipline of reading from experts on grief and other grief journeyers in addition to reading *The Bible*, especially *The Psalms*.

So, I share a brief excerpt of a few important and impactful quotes from a few of the authors I read:

“... circumstances play a limited role in the Christian life, providing little more than the context—scene and setting—for God’s redemptive work.” Jerry Sittser, *A Grace Revealed: How God Redeems the Story of Your Life*

“Lament is the honest cry of a hurting heart wrestling with the paradox of pain and the promise of God’s goodness.” Mark Vroegop, *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy*

“... every trouble that comes to us is really a trust, something committed to us to be accepted by us, used as a gift of God and then accounted for.” J. R. Miller, *The Ministry of Comfort*

“In circumstances for which there is no final answer in the world, we have two choices: accept them as God’s wise and loving choice for our blessing (this is called faith), or resent them as proof of his indifference, his carelessness, even his nonexistence (this is unbelief).” Elizabeth Elliot, *The Path of Loneliness*

“The bitter cups we try to push away contained the medicines we most needed.” Theodore Cuyler, *God's Light on Dark Clouds*

“God makes many promises, and the best of them are for our worst times.” Tim Challies, *Seasons of Sorrow*

“Suffering . . . pushes us deeper into the mystery of God. It makes us more desperate for him, to hear from him and sense his presence.” Nancy Guthrie, *Be Still My Soul*

“There is no sin in complaining to God, but much wickedness in complaining of him.” John Flavel, *Facing Grief*

“... the truth is the afflictions of God's people come from the same eternal love that Jesus Christ did come from.” Jeremiah Burroughs, *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment*

I could go on but know that a favorite part of grief is the healing that has come through men and women who went before me on this journey. Authors such as Jerry Sittser, Mark Vroegop, J. R. Miller, Elizabeth Elliot, Theodore Cuyler, Tim Challies, Nancy Guthrie, John Flavel, and Jeremiah Burroughs have been my counselors. And many more.

These are a few of my favorite things about grief. Receiving insight and compulsion to press into and face grief is a life-giving gift with many lessons. Another gift of grief is the onslaught of ministry through the Word, music, prayer, and through friends and supporters. Priceless gifts resulting in hope! And then the gift of other grief experts and grief journeyers provide lessons of hope poured out. These authors remind you that you are not alone in this journey.

These are a few of my favorite things . . . about grief.

[Comments](#)

She Is To Be Praised

I have said to many people that I have done twice now what most men only do once. I have married up and over my head for a second time. I am blessed beyond measure.

I had observed Amanda from a distance for some time after Kim's death. Amanda, a colleague, knew Kim; and Kim knew Amanda. We have served as missionaries in different parts of the world but ended up at our home office together.

As I focused on healing, I also considered the future. I disciplined myself not to take any steps too early. However, I knew enough about Amanda; she was a highly respected colleague. She was a woman of character.

I had waited long enough to consider marriage to know I did not want to settle. I endured loneliness to get beyond it as a driving force. After having a wonderful marriage, I did not want to end life with a placeholder. Amanda, however, was a woman I looked up to with respect.

So, I took the risk. As an aside, asking a woman on a date at sixty-one years of age is brutal. Amanda was so disciplined, so above reproach, that I had no confidence she would reciprocate my interest. But, through stuttering, nervousness, and sweating, I blurted out a question one day: "Would you consider spending time outside of the office with me?"

The rest is history.

Now, over these days, weeks, months and into the second year, I have discovered three things about Amanda.

"Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised." Proverbs31:30

Amanda Fears the Lord

I start here because her respect for the Lord is an attribute that is infused into everything else about her. Amanda is a follower of Christ who fears the

Lord. She lives by Proverbs 31:30. Her focus in life and ministry is to be a woman who fears God. She walks humbly with God. She walks in reverence. She displays awe for God. She respects the Lord with a holy fear.

Again, her fear of the Lord has permeated her being. Her beliefs, her thoughts, her actions, her love, her calling, her passions, and her relationships have all been influenced, shaped, and guided by her respect for her Creator and Lord.

And thus, she is to be praised!

“... her husband... praises her. Many women have done excellently, but you surpass them all.” Proverbs 31:28–29

Amanda is Charming

While Proverbs 31:30 speaks of the deceitfulness of charm, I still find charm built upon the fear of the Lord to be a beautiful trait. Another word for charm is allure. Her gentle and kind ways have been a gift to me. Her charm, gentleness, and kindness have drawn me to her. And I have not been disappointed. She is a Philippians 4:8 woman. She is a woman of truth, honor, justice, purity, loveliness, commendation, and excellence. Worthy of praise.

She is to be praised!

Amanda is Beautiful

While Proverbs 31:30 speaks of beauty as vanity, I have found Amanda's beauty built upon her fear of God to be so very attractive. Ladies, learn this lesson. Physical beauty is not your goal. Fear of the Lord, character, is your goal. Beauty follows fear or reverence. Fear and respect defines your beauty. I have found Amanda to be a beautiful woman.

She is to be praised!

I continue my discoveries about Amanda, my bride. And I've not been disappointed ever. She is a charming lady. She is a beautiful woman. She is a woman who fears the Lord.

Amanda is to be praised!

“An excellent wife who can find? She is far more precious than jewels. The heart of her husband trusts in her, and he will have no lack of gain.” Proverbs 31:10–11

Note: I read this entry to Amanda before releasing... and she replied, “Don’t you think that’s a bit much?” So, a woman who fears the Lord is humble, too.

[Comments](#)

The Glorious Unfolding—My Testimony and My Gratitude

I've come to the end of my journal and my lessons of hope as I have faced [my staggering loss](#). Or I've come to the end of one part of my journal. Continue with me, and I'll take you on a new journey starting next week. I'll introduce *Facing Loss Through The Psalms*. I journaled through *The Psalms* and share it because I wish I had such a companion while I was walking my journey. It will be a vastly different journey. Less personal. More about soaking in the praise and lament and allowing it to flood over our hearts.

In this entry, I reflect on my unwanted journey ever so briefly.

“God’s plan from the start for this world and your heart has been to show His glory and His grace; forever revealing the depth and the beauty of His unfailing Love. And the story has only begun...” Steven Curtis Chapman, “The Glorious Unfolding”

In this final entry, I briefly summarize my journey and say thank you for journeying with me. I have been overwhelmed with the steadfast love of the Lord and your companionship on this journey.

As I reflect, I rehearse that all things are not good. Brokenness delivers pain in life. Don't I know it. You know it, too, or you will know it one day.

“And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.” Romans 8:28

However, Jesus is so good and so powerful that he can take all things—including broken things in life—and cause them to work together for good.

It's miraculous.

This is my testimony. I have seen God bring good. Again, my loss was not good. However, God has used this painful loss to teach me so much. I have been given an opportunity to invest my pain and hope. This good in no way diminishes the significance of my loss. Or yours. Loss is staggering.

And yet, I have learned lessons of hope on this unwanted journey. I trust these lessons shared for the past few years through my blog, *Facing Loss: Lessons of Hope from My Unwanted Journey*, are helpful. Journaling and sharing them has been therapeutic for me. Almost a redemption of the loss for good. Kim would be proud, I hope. Or at least surprised.

I loved my children before Kim's death. We had good relationships. However, losing Kim thrust me into a deeper love for and appreciation of my children. They have been so good to me. Kim would be so very proud of them. Few things strike my emotional chord now almost four years later. But they do. I am choked up even as I write these words.

Also, I learned about the beauty of the Body of Christ. The people of God are a people redeemed from brokenness. We are ministers. And I have been the recipient of a [tapestry of ministry](#). Those who receive comfort give comfort. The gospel comforts a people marred by sin. That redeeming mercy and grace equips the church to love. And I have been loved. Again, a recipient. I grew in my understanding of the gospel. Redeemed from a broken life. Forgiven of sin. Reunited with Christ. [Grace, mercy, peace, love, hope, comfort](#). All deep lessons.

As a result, I was privileged to comfort others. Candidly, when you walk through grief, mourn with hope, and receive comfort, you are compelled to comfort others. You are literally compelled. You must invest your journey so as not to waste the loss you've faced.

While on this journey, I risked a new journey. Loving again risks losing again. As J. R. Miller wrote in *The Ministry of Comfort*, "... love and grief grow on the same stalk..." Or as John Flavel wrote in *Facing Grief*, "According to the measure of our delight in the enjoyment, so is our grief in the loss..." And yet, I risked the pursuit of Amanda Lillian Dimperio just after the two-and-a-half-year point after losing Kim. And I made her Amanda Dimperio Davis on March 26, 2022.

In this entire journey, I've learned the story is not about me or Amanda or Kim or my children or you. It's a story about the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. Mine is a micro-story in a macro-story. Your story is a micro-story,

as well, and it only makes sense in the context of faith and hope—the macro-story.

And there is glory in the story.

This phrase, “glory in the story,” became a theme rehearsed by Gordon Fort when he performed our wedding. Indeed, there is glory in this story. It takes eyes of faith, yes. However, the glory is there whether you’re looking or not. For my story and for your story.

This story has been a glorious unfolding. That is my testimony. I sign off at this point in my journey; however, I want to thank you who have walked with me.

Jesus is deserving of great glory. As I reflect on this unwanted journey, I lift my voice to the King who needs nothing. I rejoice over his kindness to me as I have faced my staggering loss in the context of his steadying gospel hope.

“You deserve the greater glory. Overcome, I lift my voice to the King in need of nothing. Empty handed I rejoice...” CityAlight,
“Good and Gracious King”

[Comments](#)

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