Hurting in Hope

Mom Has Died



Alan Lester

HURTING IN HOPE

Hurting in Hope

Mom Has Died

ALAN LESTER

Hurting in Hope: Mom Has Died
Alan Lester

© 2013 Alan Lester

Published by Graceunlimited
www.graceunlimited.co.za

All rights reserved. This book may be freely downloaded, read, printed and distributed, provided that its contents are not altered in any way.

Scripture taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved.

To Charleen, my beloved wife, companion, friend and helper, at the cost of whom I have penned these pages in tears, in both the agony of sorrow and eternal hope in Christ.

CONTENTS

Foreword xi

1 Mom Has Died 1

2 Charleen's Grief 5

3 Living Your Goodbye 9

4 Beautiful Family Life in the Blackness 15

5 Lights in the Darkness 23

6 Believing and Living 31

- What God Says About What He Has Said 34
- What God Says About Himself 37
- What God Says About Mankind 43
- What God Says About Christ and the Holy Spirit 45
- What God Says About How He Saves People 48
- What God Says About the Church 49
- What God Says About the Future 51

7 Grieving and Thinking 53

8 Twenty Minutes 65

9 Those First Days 75

10 Those First Months 89

11 Why Hasn't Anyone Said Anything About This? 99

12 Hurting in Hope at Sixteen 111

Conclusion 115

Another Book by This Author 117

Foreword

A rugged wasteland is journeyed with far greater comfort through the lens of a reckless adventurer than it is in person. A voyage through the hostile wilderness of sorrow does not draw crowds of tourists, yet in this short memoir, I would like you to be my companion on a personal crossing into the heart of the experience of losing my dear wife, Charleen. Consider this the drawing of the curtains of a window into one man's discoveries through facing the hard realities of death, rather than a textbook on the subject. It is for your encouragement that I have written, understanding that no two experiences of grief are identical. May it be that as you embark on this emotional voyage with me, you will find true biblical and personal hope in Christ.

Here you will find frank details relating to the actual event of her death, an attempt at a description of the black pain of the first few days and what I found to be of greatest comfort. I have also included a consideration of how this massive loss has impacted me over the first few months and finally, personal comments on frightening medical issues that surround grieving. To be immersed in the fresh pain of loss, stokes a furnace of questions that must be quenched with answers if you are to find freedom from their scorching demands. What should I expect for the next few days or weeks? Is there something important I should know that I don't know? Does this pain decrease, and if so, how long will it take be-

fore it begins to feel better? How will this impact my health and how can I prevent the loss of my health too at this time?

I request your kindest interpretations as you peruse these pages. Keep in mind, please, that as I have written about this crisis, I have been in the actual crisis, still kneeling under the sting of its lash. It is the unrefined reality of fresh pain that I have worked to capture in this booklet; a genre of literature for which I have searched in vain in the biblical counselling world. I can understand this vacuum. One possible reason material such as this has not been written is that people suffering under the stroke of such calamity do not consider themselves to be in a state to apply themselves to such a work. A successive reason could be that authors who would ordinarily pursue a topic such as this, fear writing out of a heart that is not sufficiently moved by it, bringing offence rather than comfort to the grieving. So if my attempt lacks the refinement of an accomplished author, I trust it exposes the agony of a heart that can understand your pain.

Your kind indulgence, dear reader, would be appreciated in matters that relate to faulty memory. I, like other fallen human beings, have difficulty remembering details accurately under the best of conditions, let alone during a time of emotional turmoil. I am grateful to Kathi Macias, who at an early stage, planted a seed-thought in my mind, that I may eventually write about this experience. With her e-mail in mind, I endeavoured to keep a record of details. Yet, for any unavoidable omissions, I beg your forgiveness in advance.

I should also add that in order to protect my daughters' privacy in a hostile world, I have chosen to withhold information about them in this work. They have of course featured where necessary, yet the reader should not interpret the obvious lack of detail about them as a lack of care for them.

To whom am I actually writing? It is a deadly flaw in a book to aim it at too broad a spectrum. Yet what you hold in your hands is intended for people who have been shaken by the death of a loved-one, people who know others who have lost a loved-one, or for people who themselves

are facing death. Which, of course, ends up being the broadest spectrum audience one can imagine. It is the sheer universality of death that makes a book like this applicable to every living person. I have written both about the hurt and the hope in facing death from a Christian perspective. My words are intended to encourage you as a believer in Christ. If you have not yet found real hope in Christ, this book offers you a rare introduction to exactly what sustains Christians through real calamity. True biblical hope, in the face of the hurt of death, is the most valuable asset you will ever own in this world.

Finally, since you have been as charitable as to read this work, I have returned that thoughtfulness by labouring to avoid wearing you out with excessive detail. This has been no small feat because the experience of this calamity has impacted even the most remote areas of my life. I am grateful that you have picked up this little book, and would be even more grateful if the Lord uses it to give you such hope in Christ that you will gladly recommend it to other hurting people.

Alan Lester
29 July 2013
hope@graceunlimited.co.za
www.graceunlimited.co.za

1

Mom Has Died

Lightning scribbled across a darkened, rugged terrain, momentarily sketching the frowning skyline of the Gouwsberg mountains rising beyond a four-strand barbed-wire fence and a stretch of thorny bushveld to my left. Fifty-year-old Bluegum trees strained and flexed, against an aggressive blast that had charged in from the north, determined, it seemed, to uproot them. Before my numbed eyes, leaves and plant debris swept and churned, mingled with oversized raindrops that strove in vain through the gale to strike the earth. The gentle glow emitting from the screen of my well-used Blackberry Torch illuminated a small patch around me as I sat in vast blackness. I stared at the mobile phone in my left hand, and at the familiar number I was preparing to dial. With my right hand on the steering wheel, I could hardly hear the hum of the engine as it twisted the wheels slowly forward over a rocky road. I tightened my lips, as if it would compose me; this was the hardest call I would ever make. How could I do it? Yet how could I not?

Chyreece, my sixteen-year-old daughter was still at home with Hope, her younger sister, not knowing at what hour of the night I would return from the hospital with their mom. She had known that her mom had not looked well as I had left the house earlier in a hurry, but certainly, the words I was about to utter, were the worst she could expect to hear.

Still playing before my mind's eye was the scene that had unfolded not even ten minutes previously. As Charleen had sat down in the passenger seat of our red '97 Toyota Camry, Chyreece had followed her closely and had bent down to hug her mom and kiss her goodbye. I had departed with such haste that I had not even seen my sister, Jean, running with all her might behind me in the darkness to open the gates at the farm entrance for me so that I wouldn't have to slow down. She was left far behind in a cloud of dust. Such was the urgency and chaos of that night.

With my thumb, I eventually touched the screen to dial Chyreece's number and was soon met with the purr-purr of a ring-tone. Moments crashed by as I waited for her voice to answer as I cleared my throat and tried to compose myself so that I could speak when she answered. Far too quickly, as if she had been anticipating the call, her melodic voice fell like music upon my cowering ear. So much like her sunny mom. I clenched my teeth in grief, swishing my head from side to side, as if I could shake this whole reality away.

"Hello Dad!" I heard her smile in her relentlessly cheerful and trusting way.

"Hello my sweet Reecie." I said, not able to even finish saying her name before I was choked with emotion. She waited patiently as I breathed heavily through my tears, trying hard to form a sentence. "Reecie." I finally sobbed, "I have some very sad news for you."

"Yes Dad." she replied meekly, seemingly summoning enough strength to hear the devastating news that hung poised to crash down upon her. In my mind's eye I could see her dear form, dreading my words.

"It's very sad Reecie," I said, trying as hard as I could to prepare her for the shock and cushion the blow.

"Yes?" she responded in a tiny, almost inaudible voice. She was trembling, I could tell.

"I'm so sorry Reecie, Mom has died. I'm so sorry!"

Never in my life have I ever uttered a sentence with greater anguish. Together we wept through a silence too deep for the jangling of noisy

words. The crashing thunder, jagged lightning, and the mayhem of the breaking storm well pictured the havoc in my heart as I pressed the phone to my wretched ear, as if holding tightly to my dear daughter.

"Are you alright Reecie?" I eventually reached out from an aching heart, longing somehow take away the pain I had inflicted upon her through my words and this brutal reality that would undoubtedly alter the course of her life.

Her voice returned, controlled, yet under the strain of powerful emotions that assailed her heart, ""Yes Dad." she responded breathlessly.

Oh how my heart broke for our daughters. Oh how it pained me to break that news to Chyreece in that way; over the phone, and under such chaotic circumstances. Yet it seemed I had no choice. The news had already reached others and it would only be a matter of minutes and she would find out anyway. I wanted to be the one who spoke to her first. I knew I should be the one to explain.

How impotent and vulnerable I suddenly felt, like a fragment of debris hurtling before the ravages of a violent storm. The vast angry sky above me, unfriendly, rocky mountains curbing me in from the south, a black surging river beyond my line of sight to the north. The road before me had erupted into a steaming muddy hash as raindrops pelted the gravel surface. From my car's headlights poked a ridiculous attempt at illumination, the beams of light seemingly swallowed up in the deluge. Wave after wave of muddy water slopped down onto the bonnet and over the windscreen as I drove, too numbed to even swerve for obstacles through that dreadful night.

2

Charleen's Grief

"That's strange", Charleen remarked, her face a mixture of mild surprise and cautious concern as her phone rang in her hand. "It's John."[1] We both knew this was a significant call, especially because of what had happened between the two of them in the not-so-distant past. Charleen had responded privately, with great care and kindness, to some comments John had made publicly on Facebook about his gay lifestyle. It grieved her that he had replied publicly in such a harsh way. How it pained her to see him reject loving advice and to go ahead and lead a self-destructive lifestyle. We had not even expected to hear from him in an e-mail for a long time, let alone an actual phone call; and at this time of the night too. She answered cautiously, yet with a cheerful friendliness in her manner that had made me love her from the moment I had met her.

I listened as the tone in her voice turned to dismay and watched a cloud of sorrow descend upon her beautiful face.

"Oh no!" She exclaimed, her voice crestfallen with grief as she began to breathe a little harder. "How did it happen?"

The voice at the other end explained some brief details. Charleen lifted the tips of the fingers of her right hand to cover her mouth, as if that

[1] I have chosen a fictitious name for this person.

gesture would rewind time and erase the tragedy of which she now heard. After a few minutes the call ended and she approached me as I sat on our bed, looking up at her with my concerned enquiry written on my face. It was her turn to speak, and it was not going to be good. Her face saddened and crumpled into gentle tears as she shakily voiced, "It's my brother; he died yesterday."

I opened my arms to her tender, breaking form and hugged her, weeping while she wept. The girls, hearing what she had said, came too and we all embraced each other for a long time. Gavin had died very suddenly. He had finished mowing the lawn on a Tuesday afternoon at the small coastal home he had shared with his girlfriend, and had descended the steep garden stairs to enter the house and run a bath. With the water running, he had begun to feel a little unwell and had decided to lie down on the bed for a few minutes to recover from his exertions in the yard. At forty-nine, he had begun to feel his age, his reckless past having now caught up with him. Suddenly, his shouting voice had echoed through the sparsely furnished rooms he had shared with Casey[2], his girlfriend. Responding to his frightened cries for help, she had run from another room to his side. Looking puzzled into his face, she had not been able to understand why he had not spoken about this pain in his chest before; now it would not pass as it had usually done in the past. After only a brief exchange of words, Gavin had died there on the bed.

As our daughters and I comforted our beloved wife and mom, my mind reached back to several other dark memories that had shaken our little family.

The first was the late night on which I had broken the news to her that her father had committed suicide. He had been very unhappy in his homosexual lifestyle for a long time. Earlier in the evening he had called me, having already indulged in too many drinks, and had vented his rage against me. Out of concern for his soul, I had shared the gospel with him in a variety of ways on different occasions. Sadly, he had interpreted my words and intentions in the worst possible way and had developed a

[2] I have chosen a fictitious name for this person.

covert aggression toward me. Earlier in the evening, he had called me to vent his hostility, accusing me of judging him and neglecting to properly evaluate all of the admirable attributes of his lifestyle. He had not understood the wonder of freedom from slavery to sin, of which I had spoken; a freedom that comes through the gospel of grace. He had plugged along in drudgery for decades and my heart had gone out to him.

He had chosen, tragically, on that night, after his drunken rant on the phone, to terminate his own life. Charleen had already been in bed, asleep, when the call had come through. How sad it had been on that night too, to approach my sweet wife who lay waiting for me in bed, and to have to confront her with such a tragic reality.

Another memory that came to mind that night, as we comforted Charleen at the news of the death of her final remaining relative, was the day on which her own mom had died. I had been busy in the workshop on the farm while Charleen had been inside the house calling the local hospital. We had taken her mother to the hospital for what had seemed to be a minor ailment. In response to Charleen's innocent, hopeful enquiry, a nurse in the hospital had bluntly informed her that her mother had died during the night. Stunned and shocked, Charleen had come out to the workshop to tell us the news. How my heart had gone out to her as the tears ran down her face, yearning to absorb the pain for her. She had been very close to her mother and over the years, she had felt the pain of loss very deeply.

The year before Charleen's mother had died, I had planned a special weekend away for our eleventh wedding anniversary. It had been a surprise for her. I had made a very sneaky arrangement through my sister Jean, and had taken my beloved wife to a hotel in White River; a very scenic part of the country. On the second and final morning, Charleen and I had been enjoying our breakfast together in a delightful setting, when my phone had rung. Charleen had answered. The expression on her face had changed from one of grateful contentment to pain, shock and confusion. Our eyes had locked into each other as she stared at me, as if conjuring any possibility to avoid telling me what she had just heard.

“It’s Wayne” she had eventually squeezed out, obviously still trying to evaluate what she had heard. That morning he had not woken up. Wayne was my eldest brother. He had died in his sleep at the age of thirty-seven, without any prior evidence of failing health. In tears we had finished our breakfast and driven the four hours back to Pretoria to be with Tanya, his devastated widow, and with his two grieving daughters.

Grief has a way of accumulating all past hurts into a pile, and then dumping them on you again with every new personal calamity. As the girls and I comforted Charleen that night, at the news of the death of her brother, the unspoken impact of all of these past assaults, and all they meant to us, lay heavily over our little family. We embraced one another for a long time, understanding something of her pain that would be there for a very long time. There was nothing we could do to take it away; we had learned that from experience.

3

Living Your Goodbye

"I think you should just call this lady and ask her." I could see Charleen was very excited as she pointed to the listing on the internet page flickering on an old computer screen. It had been four years since I had managed to treat my family to a holiday at the sea. During that week, I had been able to sense the longing in my dear wife's heart for a change of scenery. For those four years, she had worked hard, without complaining, at schooling our two daughters at home, and also working with me on all of the ministry activities our church life required. Although she always remained cheerful, she had said to me at the breakfast table one morning, with a fake pout, "I want to go to the sea." I had ached and smiled at her, and squeezing her hand, desired more than anything in that moment to be able to do it.

That week I had worked in my office, unsettled, trying to work out how I could possibly treat her to a holiday at the sea. Charleen was such a grateful wife. She would get excited about the smallest of things, knowing they were gestures of kindness. How she appreciated even a cup of coffee. To see her cute smile reaching all the way to her friendly blue eyes was worth any effort anyone made for her. To take her to the sea, I knew, was the ultimate temporal gift.

It was a Saturday morning. I poured out my heart before the Lord, asking Him, please, to allow me the opportunity to take my family down to the coast for a break. Like any father who loves his family, I wanted wonderful family experiences that would form lasting memories. I knew that the plan I had conjured up in my mind was a little on the reckless side, yet my desire to lavish blessings on my family had become even greater at the end of a long stretch. I packed up my computer in my office and went inside the house. There stood my beautiful wife, smiling at me, to welcome me as if it were a special occasion. She always made it clear that she was happy to see me, even if I had worked late, or if I was just coming in for a meal, or to pick up something I had forgotten to take with me.

"What brings you in so early?" she asked, smiling before hugging me with a kiss.

I smiled back at her, knowing what I was about to say. Putting my computer bag down on the floor, I put my arms around her and whispered in her ear, "Would you like to go to the sea?" Her response was instant. She knew me well enough to know that I would never joke with her about something like that. She instantly knew I was serious.

She bounced on the tips of her toes like a little girl at an ice-cream shop, "Yes, yes, yes!"

"Shhh!" I said, playfully, with big eyes, placing my right pointing finger over her lips. I looked around the room with teasing exaggerated caution, as if I were a secret agent avoiding detection, "Don't let the kids find out" I whispered in her ear. She nodded mischievously, with her teeth clenched in a broad smile, and followed me to the computer the girls used for their school work. In lowered voices, we discussed our options. I didn't tell Charleen how I was going to have to stretch the budget to make this holiday happen, but she knew it was an unusual privilege I was planning to pursue.

We spent most of that Saturday morning looking for last-minute accommodation at the coast; something we could afford. Hours crept by. Our initial excitement faded as we scrolled through the prices, unable to

find anything that was even close to the maximum figure we would be able to spend.

For years, Charleen and I had dreamed about spending a holiday in a new set of holiday apartments at our favourite beach; Uvongo. We had watched them build those apartments as we had spent previous holidays nearby, and had consoled each other, half humorously, "One day, we will stay *there*." As I clicked with the mouse on link after link, these particular apartments surfaced in our search, yet the price was, as we had expected, double what we were able to spend. Other places where we may have gone otherwise, were fully booked. Hope faded and so did my original surge of spontaneity.

"I think you should just call this lady." Charleen said to me, pointing at one of the open tabs in Internet Explorer. I eventually called, only to show that I respected my wife's advice, rather than because I thought there was any chance of success. She had set her eye on one of the apartments in the building we had set our hearts on for so long. I knew that if all of the other apartments were between two and four times our budget, this one would be no exception. But I called anyway, much to her delight.

Nicole answered my call cheerfully. When I explained what I was planning, she was immediately happy to help me. To our even greater amazement, she offered that very apartment to us at the rate I had set as a maximum figure. We could afford it! Charleen could tell by the tone of my conversation with Nicole that this could really happen. So on Saturday, at about midday, I ended the call and smiled at my sweet wife who had waited so long and so patiently and so contentedly for this moment. "I have an idea, honey." I said, embracing her and looking down into her excited blue eyes.

"Yes?" she retorted playfully, "What is your idea?"

I whispered the words, "Let's go to the sea tomorrow!" again looking around to make sure the girls couldn't hear me.

She smiled broadly, nodding her head as if by that gesture, it would all remain real; and it worked. The very next day Nicole was waiting for us upon our arrival after nine hours on the road. Her warm welcome will re-

main among my most cherished memories. For two weeks, our family was in paradise, living in an apartment that overlooked the breaking waves of the KwaZulu-Natal South Coast. We slept with tall glass doors flung open, the sea breeze cooling us in that hot March weather. Not a shadow passed over that idyllic vacation.

Toward the very end of that vacation, I again succumbed to a further temptation to treat my family. Not far from where we were staying was a stretch of coastline called the Wild Coast, situated in the Transkei. A stone's throw from the Transkei border, a well-known hotel and casino group has operated a facility for years. Apart from their golf course and their casino, one of their major attractions is their Wild Waves water park. They spent many millions of dollars importing high quality features from foreign destinations, making it a water park unlike any I have ever encountered. So, one sunny morning, we paid our entrance fee and found ourselves surrounded by an array of enticing water rides. From one to the next, amid the screams of delighted children, we climbed and skied and splashed ourselves to our heart's content.

Toward the end of the day, Charleen and I found ourselves floating in a double tube, face to face, on the Lazy River. We bobbed upon the gentle swells, drifting slowly in the yellowing rays of the setting South Coast sun. We talked from time to time, but for much of that meander, we kept catching each other's eye. We smiled at one another, but didn't look away. In a strange way, there was nothing left to say. She understood me and I understood her. She was content. I was content. All of the happiness of nearly two decades of satisfying married life culminated in those wonderful moments. Yes, it was an outstanding treat to be enjoying that much-desired holiday, yet our mutual contentment came from far more than that experience. It flowed from a lifestyle of contentment. In those moments, looking at my beautiful wife's blue eyes, I felt a sense of finality, something like the end of an engaging novel with a happy ending.

We enjoyed the Lazy River so much that at the conclusion of our journey, we turned and did it again, and then again. We were living in a state of goodbye. If either of us had died at that moment, there wouldn't have

been words we would have wanted to squeeze out as the light faded from the other's eyes. Everything had been said, and said well, long before the time.

Working as a paramedic during our first few years of marriage, I had been so impacted by the tragic loose ends fluttering around the deaths of loved-ones. Young men and women, children, grandparents, fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters facing the sudden death of those they clung to in love. How many times did I hear sorrowing family members and friends lament that they had not even had the opportunity to say goodbye. How many sentiments had been left unspoken. How many of those people died shortly after an argument and had stormed out in a rage and been killed on the road or in a drunken brawl. Loose ends. Loose ends. Loose ends. They galled me and drove me to my wife in love after long, heartless shifts.

I still remember the day when I eventually sat down with Charleen and explained how sickened I was with these galling loose ends. I urged her to make a commitment to me that I too would make to her; that if either one of us died in a sudden, unexpected way, we would leave no loose ends. We would leave nothing unsaid. We would have already said goodbye. We would each know that in the face of death, we would not be in a state of panic because there were things we still needed to explain to each other. We lived in a state of goodbye.

Today, nine months after her death, I can't even begin to explain the value of living in a state of goodbye. With my left hand, I held her hand as I gripped the steering wheel with my right, racing through the night over a dirt road toward a distant hospital. "Honey," I said, as she gasped for air, more and more rapidly, "I'm so sorry you're struggling." She smiled. Then a little later I squeezed her hand, my heart yearning to help her, "I love you Honey."

She smiled again, and even though she was in such distress she smiled back, "I love you too." Moments later she arrested, dying with her hand in mine. In those horrible moments, there was no time or opportunity to say things that had been left unsaid, had there been any. Yet we

had already said our goodbyes over the years that led up to her departure. As I brought the car to a halt to establish whether she was truly dead or not, I knew that I had nothing left to say, it had already been said. The moments after her death turned to minutes, hours, days, weeks and months. Through the blackness of mourning, it has been the fact that we lived in a state of goodbye that has brought me immense comfort.

4

Beautiful Family Life in the Blackness

I must admit, I had been surprised by her request; nonetheless, she had made it. Charleen was not the type of person who ever desired to stand up in front of a group of people to speak; she even used to feel nervous for me before I was due to preach. On this particular Sunday however, she had asked to address the congregation before the Word was preached. She was serious.

That week we had driven down to the KwaZulu-Natal South Coast on short notice to attend her brother Gavin's funeral. From the day of the funeral, a burden had been weighing upon her heart; it was something her brother's girlfriend had said. She had stood up at the funeral and spoken of how the church had been like family to her. Yet then directly after the funeral service, in private conversation, she had expressed her desolation saying, "Now I have nobody."

It had so troubled Charleen that the lady could speak about the church being family, yet in reality, in her personal, private world, she has no-one. This was an obvious contrast to the way in which Charleen had come to experience the church. The church, for her, had truly become family. Family that cared. So as she stood before the multiracial, multina-

tional, multicultural congregation at Living Hope[3] on that Sunday, 14 October 2012, she simply thanked the church for the way they had proved themselves to be true family through the darkness of facing her brother's sudden death.

She quoted a verse from a favourite hymn on that day;

"*No guilt in life, no fear in death.*
This is the power of Christ in me.
From life's first cry, to final death,
Jesus commands my destiny.
No power of hell, no scheme of man,
can ever pluck me from His hand.
'Til He returns or calls me home,
here in the power of Christ I'll stand."

Watching my beautiful wife express her gratitude to the congregation, and publicly profess her final faith in Christ alone, I knew not that within three short days, I would come to re-live the experience of the church as true family.

My parents had been visiting friends down in Knysna and Plettenberg Bay on the Eastern Cape coastline. Charleen had enjoyed her five kilometre walk that morning with my sister Jean, and had then accompanied me to Bronkhorstspruit, our nearest town, to do some paperwork, and then to OR Tambo International Airport to meet my parents upon their arrival home. The journey back to the farm from the airport remains vividly transcribed upon my mind. I was behind the wheel, my parents relaxing in the back seat. Charleen had turned around in the front passenger seat to chat to our mom and pa. She was so excited to hear all about their trip and questioned them for all of the details, also fitting in exciting everyday events that had happened around the farm since they had been away. I loved the way she, from the very first day I met her, had fallen in love with my parents and had gone out of her way to befriend them with her ever-cheerful and bubbly manner. With a smile on my face, I fingered

[3] Www.livinghopechurch.co.za

the steering wheel and listened to serious, funny, happy, welcome family chat. Family; how wonderful.

Night had fallen by the time we arrived home, yet we all stopped in at my sister Jean's home to say hello before the weary travellers went off home and to bed.

"See you in the morning, Lord willing." I eventually smiled to Jean when we had finished chatting.

Charleen bumped against me playfully, "Ha! You're just trying to get your birthday presents early." Obviously, she was referring to the way I had added, "Lord willing" onto the end of my goodnight. The next morning would bring with it my forty-second birthday. How could I not smile and kiss her?

She had only just finished eating a light meal and drinking a mug of rooibos tea that I had made for her when she began to feel nauseous. Within two hours, I was a devastated and broken man, standing in the emergency ward of the local hospital beside the lifeless body of my once vivacious wife. Even the suspicions of the hospital staff had piqued as I had arrived with her body in my car with a bizarre story to tell. They reported the case to the local police, who opened a docket in order to conduct an investigation. My hand scribbled across hospital paperwork, distorted through my tears, my writing punctuated by splash marks. Even some of the hospital staff stood around me in a half-circle, staring disbelievingly upon the spectacle before them. Through the circle emerged the dear face of my stunned father. We fell into each other's embrace as if characters in an unreal movie scene, half expecting the music to play, the movie to end, and everything to shuffle back to normal. Yet the pall of death remained, heavier than saturated black clay, the now placid face of my lovely wife, in whom I had delighted for almost twenty years, covered with a worn hospital sheet.

My face awash with tears, in the private room where they had taken her, I fumbled with her favourite earrings; the metallic grey bead-shaped ones my mom had given her. I took her tender hand into mine to remove the wedding ring with which I had vowed to love her until death, nine-

teen years before. I had just not envisioned it happening in this way or this soon. Soft hands that had loved me and served me and had done good for me now lay motionless and unresponsive to my touch. I lingered beside her, brushing her dark hair out of her face, knowing with agony that my dear Charleen was no longer there. Beside me stood my beloved father, living with me through the agony of this grief.

The forty-kilometre road that led me back home to the farm that night could've been on another planet, so ethereal was my journey with my dad's Chev Aveo headlights poking through the dark behind me all the way. How he cared for me, even though he too was suffering immensely under the weight of grief, which added to his health concerns.

Barely had the lights of the little town vanished from my rear-view mirror when my phone began to ring. The first call was from an unknown number; which I normally don't answer because they end up being telemarketing numbers. Oh the emotions that flooded through me as the voice of my dear brother Kevin found me, spanning vast emptiness between the African and Australian continents, reaching my desolate ear in my car, tiny and alone in that black night. Just to hear his voice as I drove, and to hear that the magnitude of this tragedy had reached his heart too, was a soothing comfort beyond description. At the same time, however, how it grieved me that it was my tragedy that was cutting into the hearts of those so dear to me. Yet they clung to me in love. I was simply unable to speak to Kevin. I managed to say, between sobs, "Kev, I can't speak, but I can listen."

I was on a journey to nowhere. Yes, my car was headed over the tar road, and then the rocky gravel road toward the family farm Charleen and I had called home for so many years, yet now it simply didn't feel as if I belonged anywhere anymore. Charleen's death had made me feel like a stranger, even in the place where I should have felt most at home. In my mind's eye, I could see Chyreece and Hope's grief-stricken faces, waiting for me. Oh how I both desired to comfort my daughters, yet to not have to see them go though this torment at all. I earnestly desired to be at home, yet I knew that the very heart of what I called home was no longer

there; I was now driving away from her cold body at the local hospital. Blinded by tears, I somehow arrived home and unlocked the back door of our home, weirdly alone; every action so mechanical and other-worldly. I passed through our familiar kitchen where I was still in the process of building new cupboards for her, through the living room and down the passage past my daughters' bedroom, then into our bedroom. Before I could reach the far side of the room, from the doorway ahead, two dearly familiar figures emerged with their heads hanging down. Beside the bed where their tender mother had been sitting less than two hours before, I drew my sweet girls into a tight embrace and we just cried and sobbed together, not wanting to let go. No words could take away the stinging pain of loss in those moments. What could I say?

"I'm so sorry" I breathed to them, hardly able to even form a whisper, "I'm so sorry." With their faces buried in my heaving chest, they simply squeezed me tighter in response to my words, rather than trying to speak. For a long time we just held each other with our eyes closed, as if consolidating our strength to help each other stand. The living flesh of our happy family had been ripped, leaving jagged, bleeding edges that could not be treated. The searing pain of losing our beloved Charleen would scar all of us for life.

Stepping through the doorway into my sister and brother-in-law's adjoining home, after eventually breaking our embrace, the girls and I found the family assembled in the living room. My mom was there, as well as my dad who had followed me home from the hospital. Jean, my sister was also there, along with her son and daughter. From one dear broken loved-one to the next, we hugged one another, uttering words that we all knew were just ribbons fluttering in the wind, yet issued from hearts that completely grasped the devastation and were filled with matching compassion. Our faces all glistened with tears that spilled over constantly.

As tortured as our family was on that night, how wonderful it was to be with them. I was so grateful to the Lord that in this time of utter blackness, He had granted me people to come back home to; people who

cared; people who understood; people with whom I could share this new overwhelming affliction. Over the days, weeks and months that lay ahead, I would come to appreciate afresh the immense value of these dear people God had placed around me; family. People who, even though they too are hurting, still care.

Yet there is more to family than this family. By the time I arrived home from the hospital it was almost midnight. In the conversation around the room I heard Jean say, "I think Josh is here" and she rose from her seat to look out through the window.

Surprised, I asked, "Is Josh coming?"

"Yes," she said softly, "He's at the gate."

Deeply moved that my dear pastor and brother in Christ would come out to meet me in my distress at this time of the night, I rose to my feet and went out to open the driveway gate for him. A single light bulb above the front door dimly illuminated his familiar form as I walked out into the darkness to meet him. Cut to the heart he pulled me into his embrace and wept in sorrow with me. He had known Charleen well and she had loved and appreciated him very much. When we broke our brotherly embrace, I said to him, "We have no regrets brother. No regrets." So wonderful was that knowledge that we had lived our goodbye, that it was one of the primary comforts I experienced even within the first few hours of that horrific night.

Josh Mack was not the only member of the church family who came that night; within an hour of hearing the sad news, there were others. My dear friends Pieter and Almari Swart also came, as well as Hamilton Ganesan. Together we sat in the living room discussing the events of the night. What strength I found in the fact that not only did I have family who cared, but I also had church family who cared enough to travel more than an hour over some unpleasant terrain in order to hold me up in my grief. This gave me hope for the future. Brothers and sisters in Christ who loved me enough to do *that*, could be trusted to be real family in the painful days, weeks and months that lay ahead. Into the early hours of

Thursday morning they truly wept with my family and I as we wept. What a wonderful blessing church family is.

Toward the end of that night we began to pray. One voice after the other called out to our heavenly Father. Real pain and impotence appealing to boundless Power. No hostility, no demands for an explanation, no sarcasm; only beautiful and complete acceptance of this piercing loss and full trust in our compassionate Lord. Family in the flesh. Family in Christ. Family with God. O for the words to describe the sparkling jewel of family, shining against the blackness.

5

Lights in the Darkness

It was already after three in the morning by the time exhaustion began to take its toll and we saw both our church family and our farm family leave to go to their homes. Alone, I made my way to our bedroom, where a few hours earlier, we had been preparing to settle down for another ordinary night. Upon entering the privacy of our bedroom, there seemed no more appropriate action than to drop to my knees at the edge of the bed and cry out from an aching heart to my God. It was no ornamental prayer, rather a gasping and heaving of messy words like, "Oh God, have mercy on me. I beg of you, give me the power to live through this." Yet even as the cries of my crushed heart, carried in the tender hands of the Spirit, pierced directly to the craning ear of the Father at the throne of mercy, I knew that the world was watching. Submerged in social networks in our day, I was acutely aware that people were waiting to hear the words I would issue as my life spiralled into personal crisis.

I couldn't avoid thinking about Job as he faced blast after blast of calamity in his life. The audience waits in silence as Job stands before them, preparing to utter his first words. What will he say? How will his faith survive this onslaught that strikes at the most personal levels of his life. Then Job breaks the tension and speaks out of the vortex of un-

speakable grief.[4] His words, of course, irritate Satan, who is expecting him to curse God for taking away that which was so dear to him, yet God knows that this is an impossible thing. Job's faith is a God-given faith. Such a faith cannot be assaulted to the point of failure. How firm I stood on this conviction on that night in spite of the blinding pain. So as I knelt beside that bed, filled only with wonderful memories and adoration for my Saviour, I pulled out my mobile phone and, like Job, broke the silence. I wanted the world to know that as devastating as this fresh blow was to my family and I, it was impossible for us to fail to cherish our loving God whose hand had tenderly received my dear wife into His direct presence.

I carefully posted the following words on my Facebook wall;

As many of you, my friends, already know, it pleased the Lord, at 21:45 on 17 October, to receive my beloved wife and companion, into glory unspeakable. I praise Him for the wonderful 19 years I was privileged to enjoy her. My daughters and I will miss her very much.

How that post expressed both the pain and the sense of nearness to glory that mingled in my heart. I wanted the world to know that the burning eye of faith that gazes on the beautiful face of God was not dimmed for a moment even in the most extreme emotions. More than anything, I wanted the saving and sustaining grace of our Saviour to be held in high honour, regardless of what happened to me.

The time came for us to try to sleep that night. The girls and I, stinging with our sense of loss lay down together on the bed Charleen and I had shared for many years. Even the distance between two bedrooms on this night was more separation than we could endure. How we longed for sleep to come over us and grant us a moment's relief, but the moments of sleep were nightmarish and antagonistic. Our stomachs heaved with grief throughout the remainder of the night, waking from shallow nods again and again to the shock of what had happened the night before. It just couldn't be real. The agony of sorrow filled every part of us with its black ink.

[4] Job 1:20-22

That is how I describe those first three days; black. Just black. Horrible, thick, repulsive, smothering blackness. Black, blinding, intrusive agony. How terrible those long, long moments, minutes and hours were. There is no appropriate language for such heartache. Our tears flowed unrestricted without provocation. An event in David's life kept coming to mind during those black hours; where he wept aloud until he had no strength left to weep.[5] I felt I had reached that point, yet I continued to cry. It didn't take me long to learn to leave the tears to dry by themselves. To wipe them up every time just makes your skin raw.

Long before the sunrise, I could no longer lie down and found myself sitting broken on the edge of the bed. The silence had begun to swirl around me like a gory legion of vultures, anticipating the moment I would drop my guard. It pecked at me, antagonised me, tormented me. This was not just silence, it was a special kind of silence that had only been in the house since Charleen had been gone. It was the silence of her absence. A loud silence that called my attention back at strategic moments to remind me of her absence. It was a gloating silence. This silence was not broken by seeking out company around the house; as kind and as loving as that company was. It was a hard silence that could not be driven away.

I wore her small wedding ring on the little finger on my left hand, alongside my own; I could only get it on as far as my first knuckle. Whether this brought me comfort or pain, I don't know, but I couldn't lay it aside. This ring was the closest thing I had to her. It would bring me a sense of pride to wear it, but also a sense of shame. Never before had I sensed such intense opposing emotions.

Making my way to the kitchen to make breakfast that first morning was no small challenge. I couldn't even look into her kitchen without "seeing" her there, cheerfully preparing food for us. Struggling to see through my tears, I helped our little family get breakfast onto the table. Every single thing we touched still had her fingerprints on it, lying exactly where she had last set them down. Eating was a lifeless, mechanical

[5] 1 Samuel 30:4

chore. It was now a logical decision to eat because of the common sense consequences of not eating. I couldn't even give thanks for the food, I couldn't even utter the first word. I did learn—it sounds foolish to those who have never experienced this—that it is easier when choked with grief, to communicate by whispering rather than trying to speak. So I was broken to the point of whispering, or gesturing with my hand to ask others to speak or pray. When that failed, I would simply nod my head to acknowledge that I had heard a person speaking to me, and focus all my attention on speaking a word or two in response.

Not only did a simple prayer of gratitude prove too much, but as the three of us sat around our little square table, one corner loomed larger than life. The empty corner. I couldn't even look in that direction without crying again. There stood Charleen's stool, empty. When we held hands to pray, her kind hands were excluded altogether; how that simple act overwhelmed me with grief.

Moreover, we have had a long-standing family habit. Every morning, as a part of our family devotions, we pray. But we each take turns to pray on a different day. On Monday, it is my turn. On Tuesday it is Reecie (our nickname for Chyreece). On Wednesday it is Hope's turn—her nickname is Bean. On Thursday it was Charleen's turn. Because our younger daughter always forgot whose turn it was to pray, we would say, every morning in rhyme, "Dad, Reecie, Bean, Mom" while pointing at the appropriate person. It was just a fun family thing we did. When it was her turn to pray, Charleen would always begin with the words, "Our dear heavenly Father..." So gentle and earnest was her prayer that I couldn't help but love the person God had made her to be, every time I heard her pray. The first morning was a Thursday. We said, "Dad, Reecie, Bean, ..." None of us could say the word, "Mom." All we could do was look around at each other in tears and allow the silence to speak for us in our brokenness. As we altered our routine that morning, it seemed that there was just so much more missing than one smiley woman. It seemed that the bulk of the family had been torn away and a small remnant left. Even ten-year-

old Hope told me one morning; "Dad," she said, "Even though there is only one person gone, it seems as if so much more is gone."

Passing through our bedroom after breakfast to brush my teeth, my eyes fell upon her handbag on the floor beside the bed where she had left it the night before. Her personal belongings kept filling me with momentary hope that she was there, yet reality would immediately crush that spark. Charleen had been such a generous person, in spite of the fact that she didn't have much. What she did have, she would without hesitation give to someone else. How often had I seen her slip her hand in through the zip on that handbag, moved by compassion, and extract what she had to give. So kind-hearted. Again and again I walked past that handbag. I could neither bear the sight of it, nor move it away. I wanted to avoid looking at it, yet such was my agony that I couldn't bear to stop looking.

Stepping into our bathroom, where we always went together at that time of the day, I automatically took both of our toothbrushes out of the cup on the basin and after applying toothpaste to mine, I aimed the tube at hers. It hit me again. Sobbing and scrubbing my teeth simply added to the absurdity of those first three days.

As I write about the black agony of this time, there is so much more I could say, but I would like to share what it was that brought me the most comfort during that initial strangling distress. What were the lights in the darkness for me?

I have already spoken about the first light in the darkness. Of more comfort than anything else was to know that the faith that God gives is robust enough to withstand even a blast of this magnitude. Even though I was weakened beyond words, my faith in Christ, received as a gift from God, was immovable. I thank and praise God for this and for His wonderful saving grace.

Also, of primary comfort to me in those pitch-dark days, was the compassion shown to me by my family and Christian brothers and sisters. Their simple consistency in being with me was of inestimable help. I was feeling helplessly abandoned, weak and alone. Their willingness, even

though they themselves were hurting, to simply be with me and allow me to speak about the things that were grieving me, was a true light in the darkness. This brought small, but significant relief from the galling separation I was feeling.

Another light in the darkness during those first days was knowing that everyone in the world faces the death of people very dear to them. I had previously thought through the stories of some believers who had faced the deaths of their spouses and excelled in their faith to the point where God is glorified through their immediate commitment to harness that tragedy for God's glory. One such story was that of a friend of my father. He was due to speak at a conference in South Africa. Yet, as he flew over in the plane, his wife died in the seat next to him. When the plane landed, he went on to the conference. When he stood up to speak, he explained what had happened and asked the audience to understand if he became emotional as he preached. He discharged the responsibility to which he had committed, and left a story that will remain as a shining testimony in the hearts of many who don't even know the man.

Another story was the universally known account of the events that unfolded in the life of Job. How God was truly honoured in the way Job responded to calamities that make my tragedy seem insignificant. Job lost far more than I have ever even owned, yet his commitment to the honour of God stirred me to the core during those times of blackness. The faith that turned on the lights for Job in the darkness was the same faith that gave me hope to grieve well.

So in connection with the testimonies of these and many other people, such as the hundreds of thousands in Foxe's Book of Martyrs, I made it my resolve, within minutes of Charleen's death, that my life, by the grace of God, would go down as such a testimony. I completely understood that this was not something I was capable of doing in the face of this crushing sorrow, yet it became the cry of my heart to my Lord. The simple fact that others had honoured Christ in similar pain was a light in the darkness that led me to desire the same.

Opinions regarding social networking are as plentiful as people with opinions. Some even have more than one. My opinion is closely bound to the massive value of the social networks and instant messaging in facing the blackness of fresh grief. God uses these networks to bring the comfort of His people to those who are grieving even though they cannot be there because of the restraints of life. He did this for me. Day and night, a populated planet is at your fingertips. Christian people whose hearts long with compassion to comfort you, and at the moment of their choosing they can do so. Christian people who have not yet learned to show such compassion, or are afraid to do so, can see how other Christians do it and are encouraged by the grateful reception they receive. Unbelievers who look on, still trying to make up their minds about the reality of the Christian faith, see the rock-solid evidence of a God-given faith. They see something completely real, reliable, and desirable. The world scours the internet longing to find something real. Here they find it; real calamity, real compassion, real comfort, real pain, real gratitude and joy in Christ. So apart from responding with grace to those around you, so that Christ may be honoured in your life, a light in the darkness is the social networks.

After Charleen's death, people I had not known previously, moved by my story, mailed me and told me how they had been impacted. It encouraged me more than anything that even though I knew I was more impotent than I had ever been, God was using my life events to change the lives of others around the globe. That was a light in the darkness.

One other light in the darkness I will mention is this: The pain of that penetrating, highly specific silence is very hard to bear. It didn't take me long to discover the inestimable value of Christ-honouring music. From the very first morning, I put music on in the house and played it day and night, filling the sucking vortex of silence with the comforting sounds of the Christian faith. How comforting it was to be constantly reminded that even though I was in a deep black hole, true biblical hope had not changed. The words of the songs were just as true as they had been while my beloved wife was still with us. To be more specific, I purchased all of

Keith and Kristyn Getty's albums online and wrote them all to a CD and listened to them relentlessly. Because their music focuses so beautifully on the objective facts of the Gospel, rather than on personal devotion to Christ, they lifted me out of despair. What a wonderful light in the darkness this music was. Keith and Kristyn, if you ever get to read this page, thank you, thank you, thank you![6]

[6] Www.gettymusic.com

6

Believing and Living

Deep sorrow is a hard schoolmaster. It pages through your theory books, criticising every concept and notion you have erected in your defence against your pain. You need to make sense of it, and nothing but a solid understanding of objective theology will support you in the quicksand of relentless grief. Death is unnatural for a human being. Death came as a result of the fall.[7] It is therefore no wonder that the human mind struggles to understand the concept of death and to come to terms with it. Death deals a blow that leaves loved-ones reeling and staggering because it snatches and destroys what seems so permanent. It is likely to leave you yearning to know what is truly permanent and solid; something to hold onto as you deal with the transient nature of life.

As I write, it has been nine years since my eldest brother Wayne was called home to glory. I still sometimes dream about him. My dreams always seem to be an effort of my mind to work out a rational explanation for his absence. This has also been my experience since losing Charleen. As an example of what I'm saying, the other night I dreamt about her. In my dream, I was at a church camp, hosted by another church. While mingling with other campers who dotted the camp site, I entered one of the

[7] Genesis 2:17, Romans 5:12

dormitories. In the dormitory, Charleen was busy preparing her bed for the night. She looked up and smiled in greeting.

"Ah!" I said to her, "So this is where you have been all this time!" I was so happy to have solved the mystery of her absence at last. When I awoke, of course, the reality of her absence came down upon me again, as it often did when waking up. This is the time when a flimsy spider's web belief system will fail to sustain the gravity of the reality of separation through death.[8] Nothing has been more valuable to me in facing the life-scrambling aftermath of grief than a proper theological framework within which to think.

Your framework needs to be significantly more mature than the notions put forward by babbling crowds of "pastors" today. They say things like this, "You must not find yourself living in bondage to poverty, sickness, disease or death. Jesus died on the cross to set you free."[9]

If your understanding of how God relates to Christians requires Him to grant you freedom from such calamities, you will struggle to make sense of the death of loved-ones whose lives were devoted to Christ. It will unsettle you at the deepest level when you find yourself in a doctor's office receiving the news that you have contracted a terminal disease. You may be able to play cleaver word games for a time, convincing yourself that what you believe is true, and that you have simply interpreted reality wrongly, but when it comes to death, you can no longer deny the cold fact. Everyone you know will die. You will die. How does that fit into God's universe? Is it only people who lack sufficient faith who die? Is death an illusion? Is death a friend to be embraced? If God loves you, and has the power to prevent these calamities, why has he not prevented this calamity in your life?

The framework of theology necessary to carry you with power through crises such as the death of a person very dear to you, is not born in the moment of crisis. It is a beautiful jewel that is discovered, studied and appreciated over time. It is a network of truth that is solid and unassailable.

[8] Job 8:14

[9] This was a quote from such a pastor on Facebook.

It is fabric that forms a part of who you are so that when you come under assault, you respond in the way you do because of the person you have become, grounded in the objective facts of the Gospel. This, I have discovered in pastoral work, is the very point at which far too many people suffer poverty in our time. In this chapter, I would like to set you off in the right direction.

When I speak about grasping a theological framework that can sustain you in your grief, people often look at me with unveiled confusion in their eyes. The next level of confusion is to link what I am teaching, to the nearest thing they know to Christianity—a local church they may have attended on occasion when they were children. From there they walked away with some moral lessons from Bible stories; be like Daniel, or don't be like Samson, or God will bless you but only if you allow Him to. These and millions of other notions form the empty chatter of Christian communities—notions that can't support you in your hour of dire need. When I speak about a theological framework, I am speaking about developing an understanding, love, and appreciation for the following truths by reading and studying resources such as:

Wayne Grudem's *Systematic Theology*,

J.I. Packer's *Knowing God*,

Charles Spurgeon's myriad of transcribed sermons and books,

John F. MacArthur's many books and sermons,

John Piper's books such as *Future Grace*, *God is the Gospel*, *Desiring God,* among others,

One of the many *Puritan Paperbacks*,

The expositions of Dr. D. Martyn Lloyd Jones of texts like Paul's letter to the Romans, Paul's letter to the Ephesians, and the Sermon on the Mount,

Many books written on practical life issues by outstanding writers of our day such as Dr. Wayne Mack and Dr. Jay E. Adams,

Freely downloadable sermons from powerful preachers such as Dr. Albert E. Martin.[10]

[10] You will find links to many such resources on my website; www.graceunlimited.co.za

There are many more resources, but these will set you on the right road. To bypass quality teaching such as this is to send yourself on an extended journey of emotional turmoil and confusion that will eventually drive you back to a quest for the truth.

What God Says About What He Has Said

One fact is certain; when you are plunged into pain, your built-in conviction that God truly exists is exposed. His name is one of the first names within the reach of your grasping mind, regardless of whether you use it to praise Him or to curse Him.[11] I am not going to argue here for the existence of God, because God Himself doesn't even consider that necessary.[12] But I would like to take you to the next question. If God exists—and He does—then we must ask, "Has God spoken?" Yes, God has spoken, revealing boundless information about Himself both through His created order, and also in His written word.[13] Moreover, God Himself came into this world in Jesus Christ to publicly unveil His heart.[14] God has spoken volumes!

I mention this in connection with grief because of the bewilderment that accompanies grief. Of prime interest in your mind may be what God has said about this tragedy. How do you find out finally what God has to say about the extreme circumstances you have found yourself in? Do you need to find a guru who claims to be able to communicate with the dead in order to bring you peace from the afterlife? Do you need a dream specialist in order to interpret your dreams to make sense of what God is trying to say to you? Do you need to take note of strange noises in your home and try to listen carefully with your soul so that you don't miss something important your loved-one is trying to say to you? Do you need to formulate your own framework of thought so that you can settle the questions in your heart and come to terms with this tragedy—regardless

[11] Romans 1:18-20
[12] Genesis 1:1
[13] Psalm 19, Romans 1:18-20
[14] Hebrews 1:1-2, 2 Corinthians 4:6

of whether your conclusions are correct or not? Do you need to consult a so-called prophet in the church to give you a word from God? Do you need a priest or renowned exorcist to identify and cast out supposed demons or evil spirits? Do you need to seek out a famous preacher to pray for you in order to give you the mystery power to break free? Do you need to be hypnotised in order to unravel the hidden secrets of your pain? Is your loved-one still floating around you, trying to say something to you? Is God angry with you; is that why this has happened?

People resort to the most surprising extremes when trapped in intense pain. The safest and only place to start is with this unshakeable conviction; God has spoken.[15] Take courage in this fact; you really can know with complete confidence what God has to say about your calamity. Moreover, when you see what God has said, written on the pages of the Bible, you need to know that because it is God who has spoken, those words are as dependable as if God Himself has spoken them.[16] You have just witnessed a loved-one pass from this life into eternity; it is critical that you know how to think about that, not only as it affects the person who has died, but how it affects you. You need the final statement of God on this matter, and you have it. No deeper wisdom exists. No surer truth is floating out there somewhere in the hands of the gurus. Here you have God's final say.

A story about a tragedy that unfolded late one stormy night comes to mind. Heavy rains had fallen, causing rivers to swell and overflow their banks, taking with them some important bridges. After the bulk of the water had receded, the authorities dragged their feet when it came to erecting warning signs that the bridges had been washed away. On this sad night, vehicle after vehicle, speeding through the darkness beside the safety of the white centre line on the tar, plunged over the edge into the blackness, smashing into previous vehicles that had plummeted from that same precipice. Obviously, none of the victims on this night were in any condition to alert the authorities, so no-one was warned. At long last,

[15] 2 Timothy 3:16-17, Hebrews 1:1-2
[16] 2 Peter 1:3, Matthew 24:35

word reached the authorities, who set up a warning sign to stop other motorists from destroying themselves in the same way.

God, of course, is not guilty of dragging His feet when it comes to erecting a warning sign; rather, His signboards have been positioned with precision since the creation of the world.[17] God has been, as it were, standing in the road in front of you to warn you that the bridge has been washed away. How tragic that so many simply swerve in irritation around Him and blunder into the disaster that lies ahead.

Because God has spoken, as I looked into the face of my dead wife, I had peace because I knew the mind of God regarding her life and death, my life and death, and the lives and deaths of the masses who populate this planet.

Not only can you find peace in knowing that you have God's final word on this matter, but you can know that God has spoken clearly.[18] If you are serious about knowing what God is saying, and are willing to prayerfully apply yourself to understanding the Bible, you will understand.

Although you already have a built-in knowledge that God exists, it is absolutely necessary that you understand what God is saying in the Bible in order to know the specifics you need to know about God.[19] You cannot discover this information about God in any other way.

Finally, as you study God's word, you will discover that it contains every last detail that it is important for you to know in order to understand God accurately and how He relates to you, your calamity, and the world around you.[20] What a confidence you can have in the face of the turmoil in your heart, knowing that you have God's final, clear, authoritative word on every detail. This is what God says about what He has said.

[17] Hebrews 1:1
[18] Psalm 119:130
[19] Romans 10:13-17, Matthew 4:4
[20] 2 Peter 1:3, 2 Timothy 3:15

What God Says About Himself

Now that we know that God has spoken about everything you need to know about Him, we will consider some of the central truths God wants you to know. Don't be fooled into glossing over these; Moses warned his people, "They are not just idle words for you—*they are your life*."[21] As pain drives you to the floor, one of the first questions you will need to settle is that of the character of God. Why would God allow this to happen to the person I love? Why would God allow such agony to darken my path right now? Is God expecting me to work out what He is trying to teach me through this calamity? Will I ever truly discover what He is intending to accomplish? Was my life so bad that God had to do *this* in order to rectify my failures? Remarkably, the mind of a sorrowing person begins to revolve around God. That is a wonderful mercy of God that has been received gratefully by millions of sorrowing people, and also abused by those whose hearts turn away from God under intense pain.

Within moments of my wife's death, and my brother's death before that, there were solid facts I knew about God that brought me immense comfort, even though tears. Armed with these facts I knew that if I constructed this tragedy in such a way that God turned out to be the one who should be questioned, I had understood it incorrectly. This is true because of what the Bible teaches about the Person of God. Allow me to share some of these encouraging truths with you.

God created the universe and through His astounding works of Providence, sustains, works with, and governs it. He has purposes that, if we could see them all, would leave us stunned by His wisdom and beauty.[22] God has even chosen that the prayers of His people will play a role in the way He orchestrates the events of this created order. In grief, prayer is far from a powerless muttering of words into empty space—God hears and responds to this desperate breathing of your soul. These facts have brought me comfort.[23]

---

[21] Deuteronomy 32:47
[22] 1 Corinthians 2:9-10
[23] Psalm 139:4

The Bible teaches that there is only one God, yet that there are three Persons who are called God. Each of these three Persons plays an indispensable role in the salvation of a soul. Every member of the Godhead is devoted to the good of the people of God and has applied Himself for their good. Even while facing the ghastly reality of death, this is a delightful reality.

The Bible also teaches that we can know God.[24] He is not a mysterious impersonal force that we can never completely understand. No, God is a Person, and we can know Him accurately in His devotion to His glory in lavishing kindness on His people. Because you know this about God when facing death, you can have complete confidence and calmness.

Another comforting fact about God, taught in the Bible, is that God is not man-centred; He is independent. He doesn't need people or creation at all. God is not a needy God. This may sound more like a discouragement than a word of hope, but the contrary is true. God actually created people in a created universe with the purpose that they would bring joy to His heart and glory to Him. So this becomes a massive comfort![25] Even though I feel the sting of grief, God is experiencing joy because of the way I am thinking accurately about who He is and how He relates to people and His created order. God, oh the mystery, has chosen to find joy in my response to grief; a joy that will remain with Him forever and impact the way He lavishes His love on me forever.

People find it unsettling to live or work with people who are unpredictable. Unpredictability is a bad character quality that God can never be accused of cultivating. God is beautifully consistent and unchanging.[26] Whether you are living in happy life-circumstances or whether you are barely surviving under the blistering agonies of grief, you can depend on God to never impulsively lash out at you or ignore you. He is always the same. He can be trusted to always act according to His excellent character. He is not like friends who desert you in your time of dire need, or

[24] He is unfathomable, Psalm 143:3, yet He allows people to know Him John 17:3, Psalm 139:17.
[25] Isaiah 40:17, Job 41:11, Isaiah 43:7, Revelation 4:11, Ephesians 1:11-12
[26] Psalm 102:25-27, 33:11

become impatient or exasperated with you. His moral glory will always shine through every interaction.

Not only is God knowable, independent and unchangeable, but He will never cease to exist in that form. He will always be the excellent Person He is now and has been before He created this world for you to live on. God can accumulate every detail of forever into one single thought, and He can think clearly on one tiny detail forever, all at the same time. This makes Him the God for whom the big picture is always completely in focus, but that doesn't make Him unable to be completely absorbed with a single wail of agony that you utter while stark alone in the dead of night. God places that single utterance perfectly into the vast scheme of His eternal design. Because God is eternal, your moments are important to Him.[27]

Also of inestimable comfort is the fact that God is always everywhere. It would be a sad Christian who thought of God only as a massive being, like a giant striding through the universe. In that case, your God would be so immense that you could despair of ever reaching His almighty ear with your whimpering prayers. You may, in grief, even imagine yourself to be crushed under his foot by accident, and it will take some time for Him to realise that He has trodden on you. A view of God like this would certainly rob you of true biblical hope. While the Bible does speak of God as immense[28], wonderfully God is also shown to be the all-powerful Person who is present with His entire being at every single point in space, all the time.[29] Even as you kneel on the floor in agony in a private room, shedding tears that no-one will ever see, God is there with His whole caring being and His full attention and compassion. Not a tear, a yearning, a groan, a pang, is ever wasted as God stares kindly into your aching heart.[30]

God reveals much more about Himself in the Bible. He is a spirit being, making it possible for Him to be present in this mind-stretching way. He

[27] Psalm 90:2, Revelation 1:8, Psalm 90:4, 2 Peter 3:8
[28] Isaiah 66:1 for example.
[29] Jeremiah 23:23-24, Jeremiah 23:23-24, Acts 17:28, Colossians 1:17
[30] Hebrews 4:14-16

is invisible, but this doesn't make Him less present—we simply can't see Him. This reveals something of His amazing wisdom. He is able to be completely present with you, yet because you can't see Him, you have the opportunity to reveal who you truly are in your motives, desires, and lifestyle. God is brilliantly wise. He is also truthful, evaluating every life and circumstance with complete accuracy. He truly understands all of the complexities of your heart and the multi-stranded hurts that you yourself can't even explain to another person. This too should be an encouragement. He is faithful, never failing to do what He has promised to do. Just as an example of one of His promises, we could look at a verse like this, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you."[31] God also knows everything; even the billions of strands of knowledge that impact your situation that you have not even thought of yet. The gravity and hope of your calamity are far more forceful in the mind of God than they are in yours. He is good—something you may be hard pressed to question while in pain. Yet because He is good, God always works toward the most wonderful objective for you and He does so in a beautiful way. While grief may not appear to be beautiful in the moment, you need to convince yourself that when you one day see it in the full picture God is painting, it will be unspeakably attractive and satisfying. You can know this as a fact because you know that God is good.

God is a loving God, always doing what He knows is best for every individual. What *is* best, as we even know from ordinary life events like visiting the dentist, is not always what *feels* best. It is unwise to conclude that what has happened is not best because you can't see how it could possibly be best. Remember that in addition to being loving, God is merciful. This means that the heart of God is moved by people trapped in misery and He works to relieve that misery. Closely related to His mercy is His grace. Because God is a gracious God, He is kind and patient to people who truly deserve to be punished severely. He gives people time as an evidence of His grace and patience. Still having fresh images in your

[31] Hebrews 13:5

mind of the death of a person you really loved, your mind and heart are well engaged in considering the time God has given you.

God hates sin and will never be guilty of sin. You can be quite sure of this because God is both holy and righteous. It is wise to remember this as you think about God in the context of pain. Regardless of how you construct God's role in your calamity, you should never come to the conclusion that God has done something wrong. That is the wrong conclusion. That is to sin against God by attributing to Him motives, thoughts, and actions of which He is not guilty. This is a self-destructive way of thinking that will increase your sorrow and decrease your chance at recapturing true biblical hope.

God is peaceful and ordered in His affairs, never panicky or uncertain about how He should accomplish an objective or what the result may be. You may be exhibiting such tendencies, yet you can find courage in the fact that God is not. Everything is under complete, ordered, peaceful control. You may even be struggling with an overwhelming awareness of your own mortality; God is in peaceful, ordered, calm control of that too. Life and death are in His competent hand.

You may be surprised to discover that God's jealousy too is an encouragement to you in your grief. Just as a loving father passionately protects his wife and children from harm, even to the point of death, so God jealously shields and guards not only His children, but also His own honour. God is the final standard of what is right and praiseworthy and glorious; His honour should be defended. As a child of God, the jealous eye of the Father is fixed unblinkingly upon you, and not one single moment of calamity that is not for your good and God's glory will ever befall you. So, knowing the jealousy of God, you can anticipate with excitement the wonderful eternal blessing of God that will come about as a result of your present pain. He shields you in the hollow of His jealous hand, wholly invulnerable to even the threat of permanent evil.

If God fiercely guards His Children in this way, how does He respond to those who attempt to destroy His loved-ones from the outside of His protective hand? I am grateful to know that God is a God of wrath. If life in

the Father's hand involves the degree of pain experienced in the face of death, how terrible will be the ultimate pain and calamity for the enemies of God? For God, this is personal, and He will deliberately destroy any individual who attempts to intrude upon the well-being of His beloved people. This is not to say that no true believer will never suffer at the hands of wicked people, and if you are reading this page, you have probably been such a victim already. What this means is that *ultimately* and *permanently*, this has no negative impact upon you. The current pain is temporary and as God destroys His enemies forever, for you it is a weight of glory and joy and peace that you would find impossible to bear, had God not given you remarkable new strength. Because God is a God of wrath, you, as a child of God, can have true biblical hope.

God exercises His own will. He does this in complete freedom from the opinions of others. Imagine that God felt compelled to live up to the man-centred image modern society wants to mould Him into. He would not be able to do anything that is either truly good or glorious, rather He would be an indulgent God who permitted vile rebellion into His presence. This would not be glory but a continuation of the present misery of this fallen world. As God majestically sweeps through time and space, accomplishing His own desirable objectives, He displays His immeasurable power and sovereignty. He does as He pleases. I say, if a God, such as the one we have been describing, does as He pleases, He must do wonderful things!

God is perfect. He lacks not one facet of His personality or being that would render Him imperfect. There is not a single feature about God that any eye may one day see that would disappoint that eye. Pain may press you to believe that there are certain facets about God that are disappointing. This is a distortion of this truth. God is also happy. A beggar on the street may consider you unkind for not tossing him a copper coin in his distress, yet at the same time you could be happy that, unbeknown to him, you have purchased him a house of his own; he will soon find out! God, knowing what He knows about what He has in store for you, child of God, has no alternative but to be happy. Moreover, because God is the

most excellent being, happiness must unavoidably be one of His attributes. If you were perfect, and if you were *like God,* you would be happy too. The thrilling news is that God will do that for you in a coming day; He will make you *like Him*!

Not only is God perfect, He is also beautiful. Not only does He not lack any facet of His person that would detract from His perfection, but in addition to His perfection, He possesses every character quality that makes Him the most desirable being ever. We can catch a feint glimpse of this when we encounter another person who is outstandingly attractive. They have a way of enchanting us with their beauty. God is clothed in such a beauty that a single glimpse will arrest that eye spellbound for all eternity. If you are suffering under the weight of losing a person, who to you was the most beautiful person in the world, take courage that it was the beautiful God who made that person for you. That beloved person is a small sample of the appreciation for beauty in the mind of God, and a tiny reflection of the true beauty of God.

These are some of the tantalising facts God has been pleased to reveal about Himself in the Bible. There is just so much more to be discovered as you endure the agony of grief. We could, as others have said, combine all of these desirable perfections of God under one shining term, and that is the term *glory*. To think about any of these attributes of God and to appreciate them deeply is to be forced to exclaim, "Glory!" in spite of pain.[32]

What God Says About Mankind

Grief showcases the human condition. From God's hand, people were created in a noble and honourable form. Human beings were granted the privilege of being more like God than any other of God's astounding works.[33] To exist in this form is to own a calling, dignity, and capacity of

[32] This section is so highly condensed with biblical teaching that I have chosen not to flood it with endnotes.

[33] Genesis 1:26-27, 5:3, 9:6, James 3:9

the most excellent order. Mankind being the pinnacle of God's creative work, God found most joy in him.

Yet as it is in relationships today, the greatest damage can be done by those who are closest to you. When mankind chose to rebel against God, we tumbled into a blackness from which we can no longer see, understand, or appreciate the glory of God.[34] Rather, the knowledge that God has such intimate knowledge of us has become irksome and annoying. Every part of our being has been damaged so that we not only rebel against our glorious Creator in our actions, but in our attitudes, and even in our very nature.[35] There is a principle of hostility toward God, an antagonism and a rebellion that has soaked down to the very heart of who we are. The result, to borrow an illustration my older brother Wayne used to use, is not unlike a prince, dressed in all of his royal finery, brawling in the mud. Sadly, the human condition is now so far removed from its original splendour that when the King comes and asks us what we are doing, we look up at Him from the mud, agitated and self-assured and shout, "What?"

It has been helpful for me to remember that I am fallen and that by default I will not handle pain well. This is a danger that I have had to bring to my Lord in prayer. As a child of God, I no longer desire to have the animal-instinct of desire for personal happiness drag me into sin. I desire more than anything to grieve well and to live with beautiful motives, actions and attitudes that will last forever. My name, as a Christian, is closely tied to the name of God, and I no longer want to bring Him disgrace or pain.

It is a powerless and delusional argument that if God created you, and permitted you to fall into sin with Adam, then you have no excuse but to sin. Yes, God did permit sin's entrance. Yet God cannot be blamed for that; people chose to deliberately sin, and you and I still choose to deliberately sin every day. Those who sin bear the blame for sin.[36]

---

[34] Genesis 3, 6:5, Jeremiah 17:9, Romans 3:23

[35] Act, Exodus 20:13-16, attitude, Exodus 20:7, Matthew 5:28, or nature, Romans 3:10-18.

[36] James 1:13-15, Genesis 18:25, Deuteronomy 32:4

Sadly, the wages of sin has always been death. Even a person who has been saved by God will still die as a result of sin—death of the body. Death is a dreadful reminder of how shocking sin really is. Like sin, death brings agony that escapes description; something like the agony in the heart of God as He stares upon a corrupted human race.[37] The illicit treasures of sin are an illusion. For a few deluded years we may enjoy living outside of God's framework, drinking deep of the pleasures God has kindly built into His world, but the full-stop at the end of that sentence is death. Terrible death. Black death. Painful death. Morbid death. Lingering death. Terrifying death. Dreadful death. Unsatisfying death. Hateful death. There is no attractive adjective that can prefix death. It is the hellish just punishment for this magnitude of rebellion against God.[38]

When glaring at death, there is no comfort like the comfort of knowing with unquestioned finality that death is not the final word for a child of God. Yes, the body has died as a consequence of sin, and this brings unspeakable pain, yet that soul lives on, free from the damning corruption of sin in every form for ever. They are now free to live up to the royal dignity for which they were originally formed in the hand of God. This is the only worthwhile goal for human life. Make up your mind, as you grieve, to refuse to grovel after your cravings for restored personal happiness and freedom from pain at any cost. Rather, use this opportunity to see the ugliness of the end of that road and set your heart on the glory of eternal restoration. To lack a proper understanding of sin renders you powerless to deal adequately with the concept of death.

What God Says About Christ and the Holy Spirit

Jesus Christ, the Son of God, subjected Himself willingly to the complete human experience. God was so passionate about purchasing human souls for Himself that the Son was willing to become a man in order to do that.[39] God condescended to be conceived without the agency of a hu-

[37] Genesis 6:6. I have preached a sermon on this text http://tinysa.com/110289
[38] Romans 6:21, 23
[39] Romans 8:32

man father in the womb of a virgin for me.[40] He was even pleased to be born as a human baby and to live through the stages of a perfect childhood for me. Christ exchanged the delightful luxuries of heaven for the discomforts of a fallen world, tiredness, thirst, hunger, physical weakness, and even death itself, for me. Heroically, He arose from the dead and ascended to His Father, the very essence of the explosive joy in the Father's heart. Christ had lived an entire human life with a human mind, soul and emotions, yet remained entirely sinless.[41] How wonderful!

Grief brings with it the experience of utter weakness and brokenness. This experience makes the complete competence and power of Christ's full accomplishment *for me* a satisfaction of the highest order. The powerlessness experienced through sorrow reminds me that it was absolutely *necessary* for Christ to live as a human being in my place, to delight His Father as me. It was necessary for Him to stand before His Father and represent me to Him and to fulfil the purpose God had for a failure like me. It was necessary for Him to live as an example and to be glorified; these give me hope! Moreover, because Christ has lived the complete human experience, He can look upon you even in the distress of grief and understand every detail of your suffering. Because He has been a man, He can relate to your distresses and joys. These facts bring courage and comfort through even the blackest hours.[42]

If Jesus was only a man, His remarkable life would impress us, but would provide us with no hope. What brings hope is that He is also fully God and has the authority and power to present you to His Father under the umbrella of His accomplishments.[43] Jesus had to be God because no other solitary being in the universe was capable of bearing the wrath of God against your sin and surviving. That is something only God can do. Only God can save a human soul, based on a life-record that only God

[40] Matthew 1:18, 20, 24-25, Luke 1:35, 3:23
[41] Acts 2:27, 3:14, 4:30, 7:52, 13:35, 2 Corinthians 5:21, Hebrews 7:26, 1 Peter 1:19, 1 Peter 2:22, 1 Peter 3:18, 1 John 2:1, 1 John 3:5
[42] 1 Corinthians 15:45-49, Hebrews 2:16-17, 1 Peter 3:18, 1 Timothy 2:5, 1 John 2:1-2, Hebrews 2:8-9, Matthew 28:18, 1 John 2:6, 3:2-31, 1 Corinthians 15:42-44, 23, Hebrews 2:18, 4:15-16
[43] John 1:1, 18, 20:28, Romans 9:5, Titus 2:13, Hebrews 1:8, 2 Peter 1:1

could live. Only God can enter the presence of God and represent human beings. Only God can display to human eyes what God is like.[44]

It was not necessary for God to create this universe, yet knowing what would happen, He still chose to do it. Once the human race rebelled against God, it was not necessary for Him to save even one, yet He chose to save people for Himself. When God chose to save individuals, it became necessary for Christ to die.[45] It is a powerful motivation for me to know that God chose to create this world, knowing that He would do so at the cost of the agony and death of Jesus. Having the burning acid of death still swirling in my heart helps me to appreciate what it was that both the Father and the Son were willing to endure for me in Christ's death on the cross; such compassion permeates the heart of God!

Bringing more real hope in the face of death is the knowledge that Jesus rose from the dead.[46] Yet He did not simply return to the life that He lived before, He rose to a quality of life that is of an entirely higher order. He rose to glory. He rose to the new order of human life, into which He has purchased His people, forever. To witness the death of a child of God is to witness a powerless redeemed sinner receiving an honour from God that it took God to earn. To know and depend upon this truth is to give life ultimate meaning; death is not the end, it is the beginning.

The Father's compassion is written all over the fact that this world exists. The Son's passion is seen in His complete abandonment to His Father's purposes. There remains the third Person of the Trinity; God the Holy Spirit. The Spirit gives spiritual life to God's people, He lives in them, assuring them of the full blessings of God to come. There is no therapy or hope in this world that can even hold a smouldering wick to the blazing sun of this glorious assurance in the face of death. He also infuses God's people with the power to live remarkable lives of faith; lives that surprise others to the extent that they praise God. He works, even through pain, to kindly purify the heirs of the kingdom. Grieving is not an inconvenient

[44] Psalm 49:7-9, Hebrews 10:4, Jonah 2:9, Isaiah 59:16, 1 Timothy 2:5, Isaiah 33:14, Hebrews 12:29, John 1:14

[45] 2 Peter 2:4, Matthew 26:39, Luke 24:25-26, Romans 3:26, Hebrews 2:17, 9:23-26

[46] Matthew 28:1-20, Mark 16:1-8, Luke 24:1-53, John 20:1-21:25

pause in an otherwise efficient Christian life, it is a time of accelerated growth, marked by extraordinary sensitivity to sin, the ultimate evaluation of personal objectives, and a needlepoint appreciation for the Person of Christ. This is because the Spirit also helps His people to understand the heart of God. As believers grow out of the blindness to God that is brought about by sin, the Spirit grants them ever-increasing unity. The Spirit works unweariedly with every believer, expressing at different times, either the pleasure or displeasure of God according to their response to His influence. More than at any other time, the moments, days, weeks, and months of sorrow provide excellent pivot points to change and respond passionately to the wonderful care of God for you through the work of His Spirit.[47]

What God Says About How He Saves People

Christ earned a glorious salvation for His people. It is that which Christ earned that the Holy Spirit applies to the individuals whom God has elected. How does the Spirit apply Christ's work?

God sends a preacher of the Gospel. Through the words of that person who faithfully presents the true Gospel, God issues a call to the individuals of His choosing.[48] Many may hear the Gospel with their ears, yet ignore it. The individuals, however, who hear the call of God in their hearts, will always respond with joyful abandonment to Him. This is true because along with such a call, God also issues spiritual life. A good illustration of this is the incident where Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead.[49] Lazarus was dead when Jesus commanded Him to come out of the tomb. The only logical explanation is that along with the command, Jesus granted Lazarus life. Just as Lazarus then responded, so people who have been called in this way respond with faith and repentance. To this person, God grants the perfect life-record of Jesus in the place of his life of rebellion, and He grants the death of Jesus as His substitute, to pay for

[47] John 3:5-8, Romans 8:23, 1 Thessalonians 1:5, Romans 8:4, 2 Peter 1:21, Ephesians 4:3
[48] Romans 8:30, 10:13-17, Acts 13:48
[49] John 11

his life of sin. Because this person now stands clothed in the perfect life and death of Christ, God can call him just.[50] The brand new Christian comes to believe the full reality of this astounding truth through the eyes of faith—faith which itself is a gift from God. Appreciation for this truth grows until it becomes the all-consuming passion of the child of God[51] until He is welcomed, at death, into the presence of the God he loves.[52]

The certainty and beauty and completeness of this work of God for you, a rescued rebel, gives a solid peace in the face of death, whether the death is that of a loved-one, or your own. This is a critical point that I would like to stress in the strongest possible way.

God has also committed Himself to making every believer He saves, pure in their thoughts, motives and actions. This is the struggle of the Christian life that will come to completion at the moment when God glorifies him at death or the return of Christ. It is because salvation is a work of God that it is so thrilling. To face death on the basis of what you have done will always leave you in the fear of doubt.

What God Says About the Church

In the war Christians face in this difficult world, God has granted a beautiful living body to help them stand; the church. I caution the reader to avoid the sad error of looking at the current state of deformity in many local churches and concluding that the church is no longer a properly functioning entity in this world. Not every person in the local church has been truly saved, yet every person who is truly saved is a member of the universal body of Christ. Some key features to look for in a good local church are *accurate teaching and preaching of the word of God*,[53] and the *administration of the sacraments* (believer's baptism by immersion and the Lord's Supper).[54] A satisfactory local church will also be involved in

[50] Romans 8:30, Romans 4:5
[51] Romans 6:11-14, 18
[52] 1 John 3:1-3, Romans 8:30
[53] Acts 20:26-28
[54] Luke 22:19, 1 Corinthians 11:24

ministry on three levels; ministering to God in lives of worship,[55] ministering to believers in the church,[56] and ministering to the world through evangelism and acts of mercy.[57] A good church is often not the largest church with the most impressive building, sound system, air-conditioning, professional music and presentations, and the youngest-looking leadership. At a time of grief, to be a member of a local church that cares about what God cares about, is to experience the surprising wisdom of God in establishing the body of Christ to help you in your time of need.

Even among true churches, however, you will find those that are more or less pure. The two key words in this consideration are *purity* and *unity*. More pure churches care about purity of doctrine and practise, yet the preservation of those treasures is not effected at the cost of unity—ruthlessly dealing with people so that doctrine and practise are the only issues that matter. On the other hand, neither will they pursue unity, indulging people to the point where doctrine and practise no longer matter. In this way, the church can care for and love her members *by* caring about doctrine and practise. Even in an extremely emotional time, the gentle influence of the church helps us to keep our eye on the honour of Christ rather than on using desperate emotions as an excuse for sin.

In the New Testament, the church is governed by a number of elders, who in turn are assisted by deacons. These are men who have distinguished themselves in Christian service and are identified by the church as people who are qualified to serve in this capacity.[58] To know that you are under the care of men who are experienced in life-issues, and who have grown in grace through different stages of spiritual growth, understanding how biblical principles are lived as well as taught, is a comfort that gives a grieving soul a place to call home.[59] You are in no doubt that you are cared for by people whom God has raised up for you for this very day. To live through dire circumstances in the hands of Christ through the

[55] Colossians 3:16, Ephesians 1:12
[56] Colossians 1:28
[57] Matthew 28:19, Luke 6:35-36
[58] 1 Timothy 3, Titus 1:5-9
[59] 1 Peter 5:2-4

church, is to come to love the church and hold her close to your heart. If you are not a committed member of a good local church, grief and loneliness will pierce far deeper. Yet it is not only the added difficulty of the process of grieving in your personal experience that you need to consider. To be outside of the compassionate hands of a true biblical church, is to be outside of the body God has designed for you. It is to be outside of the household of God.[60] Come home where you can not only experience the comfort of Christian fellowship, but the smile of Christ.

What God Says About the Future

The Christian life can be more likened to a river than to a pool. It has a direction and will converge majestically with the glory of God in nearby future. Even though you are grieving, you are being swept along at a surprising pace in a current that will surge into the vast consummation of all things. The great Son of God will return to earth for those who have not yet died physically.[61] Whatever your view of end times is, we all look forward to this glorious confluence. That will be the day of freedom from every last struggle in your tired mind and body; pulverised as it is by the indwelling corruption of sin. The day of freedom from lack of desire for our glorious God. The day of freedom from all crying, sickness, and pain. The day of receiving brand new resurrection bodies that can worship fully for the first time and for the first time understand the spectacular glories of our Redeemer. The day of at last grasping the bigger picture and marvelling at God's master plan. The day of resetting our value system so that what is truly valuable will become eminently valuable to us forever. The day of being endowed with a most excellent quality of life that means so much more than the experience of fallen existence. The day of being re-united with full joy, with those we have loved and lost and grieved over in this world. The day of first appreciating the precious nature of human relationships, even with Christians we have known and loved in an imperfect way in this world. The first day of seeing sin on a

[60] Ephesians 2:19, 1 Timothy 3:15
[61] Acts 1:11, 1 Thessalonians 4:16-18, 1 John 3:2

universal scale destroyed beneath the feet of the One toward whom every eye will be turned; Jesus Christ. The first day of looking into the eye of the Saviour and being struck by the intensely personal nature of His passionate love for His own people. The first day of truly living.

The thought of death in this world tends to be a fearful thought. When a life is at stake, we call it an emergency. Yet when the life of a Christian is forfeited, this is the beauty and glory into which he is received. He has come home at last, as will every other believer. While death is a tragedy that brings indescribable heartache, it is at the same time the equivalent of the return of Christ for that believer who has died. To understand death in this way is the only way to face death without fear, and to find final peace in the face of the death of someone you dearly loved.

7

Grieving and Thinking

The experience of grief has been a hard journey. Mingled together in my heart, vastly varying emotions have shunted and tugged. Things that I miss about my dear wife assail me on a minute by minute basis, reminding me of the sting of loss. If you will grant me the privilege of sharing a few of the many things I miss about her, I will make an important point in this chapter.

How difficult it was for me to enter her kitchen after she died. Every kitchen item has a history of memories. For example, the set of special knives I bought her. I can't look at those knives without remembering the day I took her to the mall to choose them. How my heart went out to her as she simply made do with what she had in the kitchen, and those knives were an expensive gift to say, "I love you!" I can still see us spending almost two-and-a-half hours at the display, settling on the right ones. When I'm in the kitchen, her gentle hands still hold those knives, serving us relentlessly because she loved us. For months, I added my tears to the dish-washing water, with my feet placed where hers stood cheerfully for years.

Not far from her kitchen window, in the back yard, is the caravan/trailer I have used as an office for a long time. She would always tell me how happy she was that she could simply look up from her work in the

kitchen at any time and see me working in my office. I too would only have to swivel around in my chair and look behind me to see her smiling face through the kitchen window. We would often catch each other's eye and wave with a smile. It is now hard to work at the kitchen counter and see my caravan/trailer outside. It now stands empty because I work inside the house to be with our daughters; all of that interaction is now only a memory.

One of Charleen's personal "demons" was that she had grown up under a mother who had done everything for her. As a result, when she had married me, she had been at a loss in the kitchen and had struggled to be a home-maker. This was a constant source of unhappiness to her and I could see how it bothered her. I helped her as much as I could, and she appreciated the help, yet she still desired to excel in this area. For at least the final six years of our marriage, I saw her surge forward. She began to depend on the Lord to empower her to love her family in an extraordinary way and did she become passionate about it! She learned to cook all kinds of different meals. She began to apply herself to the children's home-schooling. She would always greet me warmly at the door after I came home in the evening from my office, with a cheerful smile and a hug. She would declare with a sense of triumph that she had completed the ironing. The girls and I always expressed plenty of appreciation to her for the meals she cooked for us every day. We told her often how much we appreciated her. She began to love deliberately because she was conscious of God and desired to please Him in the way she loved the children and me. I could write many evidences of this, but I will just say this; Charleen was not perfect, but she had truly engaged in the battle. I cannot tell you how I miss that intentional love.

She was interested in what I was working on in my office. The one day, I had just finished grading a pile of assignments and slipped them into a large envelope. As I bumped the bottom of the envelope on my desk to get all of the assignments in, I heard her cheerful voice cover the distance between the kitchen and my caravan/trailer, "Yay!" she called. I was so encouraged that she cared that the grading of this pile of assignments

had been a difficult task for me, and that she rejoiced with me as I finished that task. I miss that so much.

Since the middle of 2009, I have been working on a multi-volume fantasy novel called *Chariss: Escaping Emptiness*. I spoke with her for many hours about the book, yet never revealed the core of the plot. I wanted to one day place the finished series into her hands and watch her enjoy reading it, discovering the scenes that had captured my passions for so long. I used to find such satisfaction in her excitement about my book, and her confidence that her own husband could pen a novel that would become a significant success. Regardless of how my novel turns out, I desperately miss her confidence in my efforts. It made the journey so worth taking and the sacrifice worth making.

She would often accompany me when I did counselling. I would spend so much time with people that anyone else who accompanied me would have grown impatient. Yet she sat through extended sessions as I listened to people's heartaches and struggles, coming to conclusions very slowly. I could always see her out of the corner of my eye. It was clear that she was moved by the plight of the counselee. Then, as I spoke, she would begin to write notes. She would always tell me after the session that she was so grateful that she was with me, because she couldn't wait to see how I would go about helping people whose lives had spiralled into such a mess. Again, regardless of the measure of success or failure the Lord has granted me in counselling, how I miss her gentle, confident presence as I counsel. How I miss discussing those sessions with her afterwards.

I miss seeing her in the congregation when I preach. I still preach mostly in the same places where I used to preach, and the actual seats in which she sat are still there. In my mind's eye I can still see her settling down with her open Bible, her notebook and her pencil, smiling and waiting to hear what I will say on that day. I would discuss the sermons with her in the car on the way home afterwards, asking her how they came across. Her kind encouragement and gentle patience, even if I had preached the same message three times in different places, was something that made me love her to bits.

Charleen and I were founding members of the church where I currently serve; Living Hope Church Sunnyside, Pretoria, South Africa.[62] It is very difficult to mingle with our dear church family and not notice the huge void left by her absence. It just seems as if my eyes could settle upon her form among the people at any moment. I miss catching her eye through the crowd, as she cared for other people.

I miss her when I page through her Bible and read the thousands of little comments she wrote in pencil in my presence. I miss her when I handle our wedding rings and remember all of the years she wore that ring. The day I had it made for her still lingers fresh in my mind. I miss her on special days, like birthdays, Mother's Day, Father's Day, Christmas, New Year's Day. I miss her when we go to new places and she's not there to enjoy it with us; she used to get so excited about small things.

Whenever we had the privilege of enjoying a journey to the KwaZulu-Natal South Coast, we would check in at the place where we were going to stay, after our seven-hour drive, and then go and enjoy a meal at the Panarottis at the Shelly Centre, Shelly Beach. After such a long drive, what a satisfying thing it was to just sit with the family and relax, knowing we were at the sea and that we didn't need to rush anywhere. We have such fond memories of Panarottis from those occasions, that just the sight of their signboards, décor, cutlery and crockery, is enough to reignite the pangs of devastating loss.

One morning I was helping her make our bed, as I usually did. As I was straightening the sheet, she joked, "Hey! You're stealing my half of the sheet; the lines are supposed to go here." She was pointing to a set of stripes on the sheet that lined up neatly with the corner of the mattress. I of course apologised in jest too and corrected my error. For years after that incident I knew I could always get an extra smile out of her when I would be helping her with the bed. All it took was for me to point at the sheet or duvet or blanket and prod, "Hey! The lines are supposed to go here", regardless of whether there were lines or not. I miss that every time I make the bed in the morning.

[62] Www.livinghopechurch.co.za

One attractive feature I miss about her is the way she simply resolved early on in our relationship never to take offence or even take issue with anything I would say that could be upsetting. Over the two decades we were married I felt a freedom in our relationship that she knew the worst about me, yet she still poured out love and affection on me. How I miss that generous, accepting spirit in her interactions with me.

Of course I could extend this list almost indefinitely, but I will just mention this one other thing that makes me miss her. She loved to be with me wherever I went. For hundreds of thousands of kilometres she sat beside me in our various cars over the years. Driving was always such a pleasure when she really wanted to come along for the ride, regardless of where I was going. Her empty seat in the car, lacking her cheerful presence and friendly smile, always there, makes me miss her constantly.

While these words fall far short of capturing the essence of what I'm trying to say, I have taken the time to briefly mention a few of these real-life heartaches to show that for a grieving person, two realities can be equally valid simultaneously. In the previous chapter, I summarised some of the core theological structures that have supported me, not only through grief, but through every other life-circumstance as well. A person who is grieving is fully capable of grasping these two worlds at the same time. Both are real, both are valid perspectives.

When you have suffered a devastating loss, the people around you, who love you, will struggle to know what to say to you and probably fear speaking to you. You will have to be on your guard to be gracious in your responses because some of the things people say will even be annoying and insensitive. Of these comments, there is one class that I have found less easy to receive than others. It would be wise to consider this also if you are the person intending to comfort a grieving person.

A comforter will approach you, having seen you unable to restrain your weeping. They will assume that because you are weeping, it must mean that there is something about this calamity that you have not understood. That if they came and explained these facets to you, your face will brighten up and you will stop crying. Their intentions, mostly, are

kind, and they really do mean well. They may stoop down and speak loudly to you as if they are speaking to a person who is unable to hear clearly, or they may speak very softly as if on sacred ground. As they begin to speak, you will hear that their sentence is structured so that it all pivots on the emphasised word "but" in the centre. "I'm so sorry for your loss, but...", "You must miss her, but...", "This is a tragedy, but...", "We are all shocked, but...".

Somehow, they seem unable to simply acknowledge and linger on the actual loss, the actual tragedy, the actual valid grief. Everything in its time. I say this in the kindest possible way; often what comes after the "but" is true enough, but a grieving person wants you to stop with them for a few moments and appreciate the magnitude of the shock and the actual value that has been lost. The words of Jeremiah in Lamentations 1:12 come to mind, "Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Look around and see. Is any suffering like my suffering that was inflicted on me, that the LORD brought on me in the day of his fierce anger?" How many "but" phrases could have been suffixed to the calamities that came upon Jerusalem? While promises of hope and joy and restoration were spilled out on the ruined city in Lamentations, the author is intent of having any observer of that ghastly scene, stop, stop, stop. Stare. Ponder. Allow the calamity to penetrate with its merciless barb into their hearts. Jeremiah wants you, the modern reader to take the time to feel the depths of this disaster. More than anything, a grief-stricken person wants you to stand beside them, take the time to look upon the tragedy and acknowledge that this has indeed been a major loss. A loss of unspeakable proportions. They want you to witness this loss with them as they stare into the ruin. More than they want sympathy, they want you to see what they see and agree with them that this is indeed dreadful.

To rush a sentence through the acknowledgement of grief, because you are uncomfortable with it, so that you can get to the "but cheer up" part, is to abandon a grieving person in their sense of loss. They know you are not prepared to stop and stare with them as you pass by. Your counsel that comes after the "but" wafts away into the darkness because

you have not truly seen their plight. To stop and stare is not to deny the reality of hope we have in Christ. Whether this is true or not, it appears to be true when you are sorrowing, that when a person comes to comfort you with a "but" sentence, they think that your grief has erased your past memory and understanding. It appears that they think that because you are crying, that you have become like a baby again, and you have reverted to the mindset of a baby. I don't believe this reversion was true of Jeremiah as he lamented the ruin of Jerusalem. Neither do I believe this is true of a believer who has always appreciated good theology. For a person who has never understood a biblical world view, this will be a time of significant questioning of what he believes, battling through the turmoil of finding something solid to hold onto, but even for him, the tragedy is real. It is unkind and insensitive to use the "Yes, but he is in a better place" argument. That approach lifts up the corner of the mat of a grieving person's life and sweeps their pain underneath, as if it never happened. If you use that approach with them, you are probably one of the last people they will come to when they truly desire help to understand how this tragedy fits into a more robust world view.

As I have turned these thoughts over in my mind, one particular text has proved significant. I have thought of God's creation of the world and the human race. Unquestionably, God has the most theologically geared mind in the universe. When He spoke the created order into being, there was not even a hint of a grey area in His thinking, He knew every last detail regarding what He was doing. He was composed, ordered, calm, and deliberate in His acts of creation. Yet only six chapters into the Bible, we see God grieved that He has made man on earth, and His heart filled with pain. In this state, He raises His hand in judgement to destroy all living creatures, man and animals.[63] Just stop on that thought for a few long moments. Consider this reality; God Almighty is grieving. There is pain in the heart of God.

There is of course no indication anywhere in Scripture that had God had the chance to create again, He wouldn't do it a second time. No.

[63] Genesis 6:6 I have preached a sermon on this text http://tinysa.com/110289

These are things He understood before He created. He was quite aware of every single motive behind every single thought in the heart of every single person to whom He granted life.[64] In God, both a full understanding of the situation, and a full pain and grief, co-exist. The issue is this; while God *knew* this would happen, the *actual experience* of it still brought with it the agony of grief. This is true of the beautiful Saviour on the cross too. He was the lamb that was slain from the creation of the world.[65] The cross was no surprise to Him, rather, it was with the intention of dying that Christ came into this world. Yet as He is plunged into the terrible experience of the cross, He cries out in the agony of abandonment. He had the entire theological understanding of God Himself, yet He is in pain.[66]

All people have a built-in knowledge that they will one day die, and that others around them will die.[67] Yet the experience of living through the death of a loved-one brings with it emotions of unexpected proportions. My point is that because a grieving person has been dashed by these emotions, doesn't mean they have lost their understanding. Because a grieving person is crying, doesn't mean they have lost true biblical hope. Quite the contrary. In my experience of facing the deaths of a number of people I have loved, I have found that grief magnifies a believer's grasp of theological issues. It presses your faith to its limits, questioning it, rooting it, solidifying it, giving you confidence in it. It observes how God carries you through such calamity. It makes Christ more dear to your soul than you ever dreamed possible.

I remember, as Charleen began to feel nauseous, on the night she died, she came and sat next to me on the bed. I put my arm around her to comfort her. I told her I was sorry she wasn't feeling well. Then, two hours later, I was standing on those same floor tiles next to the same bed, embracing our two daughters to comfort them in the loss of their dear mother. An absolutely devastating tragedy. Yet within that same hour, we find ourselves in the next-door room, sitting on the floor, praying with

[64] 1 Chronicles 28:9
[65] Revelation 13:8
[66] Psalm 22:1, Matthew 27:46
[67] Ecclesiastes 3:11, Hebrews 9:27

gratitude in our hearts to our loving heavenly Father. Nothing but gratitude, praise and dependence.

For the next two days, I would walk through our bedroom and see her handbag on the floor where she had placed it with her own hand. I only had to catch a glimpse of it out of the corner of my eye to begin crying again. How deep the agony ran, yet at the same time, I could be overwhelmed with emotion at the thought of the small amount of money in her handbag, compared with the inestimable wealth she is currently relishing in the presence of a beaming Christ.

Every time I opened our bedroom cupboard to take out clothes to wear; clothes washed, ironed, folded, and packed by her own sweet hands, I would see her own clothes in the shelf below mine. The mere sight of those familiar garments overwhelmed me. Yet at the same time I could be stunned by the glorious garments in which she is now arrayed; shining like the sun before the face of Christ.

The day after the funeral, with a very heavy heart, I took off my wedding ring. The marriage had come to an end by the unwelcome tragedy of death. I couldn't even see my finger through the tears. Yet as I, my beloved Charleen's husband, took off that ring, I knew I had freed her into the embrace of Christ, the excellent husband who will love her with a devotion of which I was never capable. He will provide for her and protect her and care for her in a spectacular way.

True grief is compatible with true theology in the heart of a believer. Don't be afraid to simply stop and acknowledge the tragedy. You don't have to say anything profound that will go down in the pages of history. Grieving people appreciate and desire that. I don't think it is insignificant that when Paul comments on this he says, "...mourn with those who mourn."[68] He doesn't say, "Teach those who mourn." What a mourning person desperately needs is the simple courtesy of someone to mourn with.

There are two other approaches to grieving people it would be wise to avoid.

[68] Romans 12:15

Clearly, if a sorrowing person desires you to stop and sense the depth of their loss, the last thing you want to do is whisper in their ear, "Don't worry, with time you will forget, then it won't be as bad." They don't want to forget. That is precisely what is causing the pain. A whole person who meant the world to them has suddenly been snatched away permanently. They are gone. The tragedy here is that this valuable, lovable person will be forgotten and people will just carry on making cheese sandwiches and scratching itches without so much as a thought of them. In these days, weeks, and months, they want to remember everything. The thought of forgetting is galling. Rather than trying to comfort a grieving person with the idea that they will soon forget, understand that they are more concerned that they will forget than they are about their grief. This approach resembles that of the unwelcome proverbial well-wisher who sings songs to a heavy heart. Rather than providing comfort, his efforts are likened to the taking away of a garment on a cold day.[69]

In reality however, it is forgetting, over time, that turns out to be a veiled mercy. To never forget would mean the destruction of your life within a short time.

The other approach is also cruelly unhelpful and prevalent. Cast your mind back to the devastation in the life of Job. After the string of calamities that brought Job to cruel grief, you would expect his closest friends to be stunned to compassion. Their intention was to sympathise with him and to comfort him. Granted, they were moved to appropriate grief and tears at the sight of his distress, and they remained speechless. It would have been better if they had just left it at that.[70] This is also true with people who come to comfort the bereaved today.

When Job's antagonists opened their mouths however, it was in accusation rather that in sympathy and comfort. It seems that there is a theological atmosphere afoot in our day that excels in this very type of assault on the broken. When they see your tears, it is their thinly disguised intention to prod into your personal affairs to the point where they can place

[69] Proverbs 25:20
[70] Job 2:11-13

their finger on some or other sin in your life and pin the current tragedy on that sin. Similar to this is the approach that suggests that these tragedies come about as a result of a lack of faith, or even personal negative talk. If you would like to damage, possibly irreparably, your relationship with your grieving friend, this is a good approach to take. Just as this approach was in the days of Job, it is still unkind and wrong. Such notions have no place in a proper framework of evangelical theology—the framework considered in the previous chapter. You will remember that this was God's own evaluation of such counsel too. He said, "I am angry with you and your two friends, because you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has."[71]

So Charleen died on Wednesday night, the 17th of October 2012. On Saturday the 20th, I found the courage to clean my car so that it would be ready for the drive to the church service in Pretoria the next day. Being the third black day after her death, I simply couldn't stop crying, so I couldn't see what I was doing. My hands simply moved in the haze before me, wiping with a damp cloth. This was true grief. Yet the very fact that I was there, cleaning the car to make that journey was evidence that my main objectives in life were still intact. I could not imagine not being with my church family on that first Sunday, as painful as it would be, because that's where I was committed to serve. Commitment based on a biblical world view, informed by good theology. These commitments had become so much a part of me that not even the death of my dear wife changed anything. Commitment to Christ in the practicalities of life is an overarching commitment that faces the tragedies of life with an unassailable, glorious hope. Everything had changed, yet nothing had changed. I was grieving and thinking.

I set up the sound system at the church, as I usually did, plugging wires into fuzzy holes through tears. Not because I was a fumbling zombie, just trying to get through my pain in the only way I knew how. No, I was doing what I judged to be of eternal value before Charleen died, and it was still of eternal value after her death. I was grieving and thinking.

[71] Job 42:7

I would like to encourage you to consider these thoughts as you encounter people who are in grief, or even as you yourself are called upon to respond graciously to insensitive people who come to comfort you in your sorrow.

8

Twenty Minutes

Still dazed, I sat on the floor beside my dear friend Pieter Swart on the night Charleen died. Midnight had just passed when he turned to me and said, “Happy birthday brother” and put his arm around me again. To an outside observer, it may seem inappropriate to wish a man happy birthday at his blackest hour, but it was not. The simple fact that they had all come to visit me at this ridiculous hour of the night to grieve with me was a testimony to their love. As he said that, it triggered a memory. Earlier that day, before Charleen and I had left the farm to run some errands in the local town and make the trip to the airport to pick up my parents, I had come walking into the room where she had been busy on the computer. She quickly covered the screen with her hands and smiled at me. “Don’t look,” she said, “I’m posting something on your wall.”

I of course didn’t look, and within minutes we were both in the car on the road. I had completely forgotten about her wall post until that moment. Suddenly, I really had to know what she had said, now that she could no longer speak to me. I pulled out my phone and opened Facebook. There, at the top of my wall stood this message from my dear wife, embedded in an image, “Stay calm and dream big.”

How I treasured her sentiment as she posted those words that she knew would reach my heart. It was an expression of her desire for me to excel. She knew I was always a man who dreamed big. I'm afraid I may have made her weary with some of my big dreams, especially in the realm of Gospel work, but she journeyed with me as I set my heart on big things for Christ. There was something very comforting about reading that last statement which was so expressive of her love for me as a wife and helper; so comforting in fact that it occasioned even more tears. *Everything* made me cry in those first days. Memories of what had actually happened seemed so ethereal.

I could still see her precious last minutes playing and replaying on the big screen of my memories. It was very unusual for Charleen to be unwell. The only time I had ever had to take her to see a doctor, apart from the doctor's visits associated with the birth of our two children, was for a minor ailment within the first two years of our marriage. When I took her to the dentist for a check-up, he told me to rather use the money I would have spent on her teeth to take her out for a treat. She didn't even have a single filling. Neither could the optometrist find a problem with her eyesight. She had not been conscious of any health concern at all, except that during the week, she had felt as if she may be getting a touch of the 'flu. Even that she treated with anti-bacterial throat spray and our usual natural remedies. She had been vibrant and cheerful the whole day, just as she had always been—even doing her usual five-kilometre walk in the morning before breakfast.

When she got up from the edge of the bed after drinking the tea I had made for her, and disappeared into the bathroom, I was concerned about her, but not more than you would be for someone with a normal case of nausea. I felt sorry for her when I heard her throwing up and my level of concern increased. My mind drifted to the medicines we had available in the house that would help her with her nausea—fortunately I made sure we always had a supply of these basic aids. I gave her some privacy and waited for her to come out. After I heard the toilet flush and the water at the handbasin running, the door handle turned and her form emerged

from the doorway. She walked toward me and I could see some small beads of sweat on her forehead. That was understandable—she had just run the bath before she had gone into the bathroom, and it was steamy in that closed environment.

She smiled as she sat down beside me on the bed, but I could see she was not feeling well at all. I put my arm around her and could immediately feel how she was sweating all over her body. “Are you alright Honey?” I asked, looking into her now pale face.

“I’ll be alright,” she replied, sounding only slightly breathless, “I just need to sit down for a while.”

She spent hardly a minute in my embrace when she became visibly uncomfortable and stood up again. She walked toward the lounge. As she left the bedroom, I went to the cupboard to get my blood pressure cuff, stethoscope, and the thermometer. Now I was becoming significantly concerned. I found her in the lounge, seated on the three-seater couch under the ceiling fan with her face tilted upward toward the fan, as if trying to get more air. I sat down next to her, looked into her eyes with a smile of concern, and told her I would like to check her blood pressure. She nodded and smiled, but didn’t say anything. She seemed to be concentrating on conserving air. Quickly, I fastened the cuff around her left arm and pumped the little rubber bulb, watching the needle on the gauge bob slightly.

Then I became alarmed. Her eyes met mine as she waited a few seconds for me to speak. “Is it high?” she breathed in a breathless whisper.

“No,” I replied, trying my best to hide my concern and think through what could be happening to have caused her blood pressure to have dropped so sharply and her pulse rate to have elevated so rapidly, “It’s actually quite low.” I knew what I had to do, but in her current condition I didn’t want to cause her any additional stress. I stroked her cold, sweaty arm and smiled at her. “I would like to take you to the hospital” I said. Yet in the moment I said those words a transaction took place between her and me. She highly valued my medical opinion, going back to the years when we had first met and I was working as a paramedic. She looked me

straight in the eye; her beautiful blue eyes now stained with an emotion I had never seen in them before. There was complete trust. There was longing. There was dismay. There was sadness. There was a little fear. If it was *me*, the one she trusted, telling her in this specific moment that I needed to take her to the hospital, then it must be bad.

"Do you think it's necessary?" she breathed; the concern written all over her face.

"Please don't worry Honey" I reassured her, squeezing her arm, trying not to create panic so I would have more chance of getting her to the hospital safely. "I'm just going to tell Jean what we're doing, and I'll be back." I walked briskly through our bedroom and through the door that joined our house to my sister and brother-in-law's house. I found Jean seated in a chair in the lounge after a long day. "Jean," I began, "I'm going to take Charleen to the hospital, she's not looking well."

As I looked into Jean's face I could see a range of emotions pass through her. At first she was casual and relaxed, listening as if I had returned to add a relatively insignificant, but friendly conversational detail to an almost complete day. Then, as she listened to my calm, but serious words, I could see some confusion. What her senses were telling her and what I was telling her didn't match up. It had not even been half-an-hour earlier that Charleen and I had stepped out of her house in good spirits and seemingly perfect health. It seemed she thought there was a catch in what I was saying. Then by the time I finished that first sentence, I saw a deep concern, tinged with fear and a longing to do whatever she could to help me. "What can I do?" she said immediately, almost before I had even finished my initial sentence.

"You can communicate with pa and tell him what is happening" I said, while turning to leave. She sprang into action and followed me through to my house. Charleen had gone from the couch in the lounge to the bathroom to empty her bladder before this trip. I quickly picked up my car keys, unlocked the house, reversed the car out from under the carport to the front door of the house, and then walked briskly toward the front door to aid my dear wife to the car. Before I reached the door, she

came out, leaning heavily on Jean and Chyreece, and made her way to the front passenger seat. She sat down and rested her head backwards on the headrest, looking very uncomfortable.

Chyreece, our elder daughter, then sixteen, leaned in and embraced her. “I love you mommy” she said.

“I love you too Reecie” Charleen breathed back and smiled into her face.

I couldn’t spend any more time there. I closed the passenger door and as I was striding around to the driver’s seat, I called over the car roof and the sound of the idling engine, “I’m going to Cosmos!” Cosmos was the name of the hospital in the town of Witbank, approximately sixty kilometres from the farm. I knew I would have to drive quickly to get there in time; and that is just what I did. Someone had already opened our driveway gate for me, so I would only have to open the main gate at the entrance to the farm. I didn’t realise it until a few days later, but Jean had foreseen that I would have to waste more time by opening the main gate, and she had sprinted toward the gate in order to open it before I got there. I didn’t see her in the darkness in my rear-view mirror straining her body in her desperation to help. I arrived at the gate far ahead of her, leaving her in a cloud of dust, opened it and surged out onto the sand road.

The sand road is treacherous. Over the years I have lived in this valley, it has claimed the lives of many drivers who underestimate it. I knew I had to pass over the thirteen kilometres between the farm and the tar road in safety in order to help Charleen. Also, I didn’t want to drive recklessly and cause her unnecessary anxiety. So I steered and accelerated smoothly, yet reached speeds that I would not normally reach on that road. Rounding the first bend, and then dropping down over the single-vehicle bridge over the Wilge River, I accelerated briskly up the steep slope on the far side, approaching a sharp bend. Just as we reached the sharp Left-hand bend, she sat forwards in her seat, throwing off the seatbelt and tugging at the clothes around her neck. “Open the window” she puffed breathlessly as she fumbled the controls on the door, trying in

vain to find the switch to open the window. So sweet was she, that even as those words were coming out of her mouth, she seemed to have realised that she may have spoken too directly to me, and after only a pause of about two seconds, she added, “Please” and attempted a smile.

I was driving slowly around the sharp corner because the road there is very bumpy, scarred by soil erosion grooves, and also, vehicles sometimes appear unexpectedly from the opposite direction. I opened her window, knowing that I would soon have to close it. If not, as soon as I got up to speed again, the car would fill with suffocating dust, which would not help her at all. I turned the car’s interior fan on to full, and then as I accelerated, I closed her window.

As the window pressed closed, I realised that she was breathing much more quickly. Slipping the car into top gear, I reached over and held her hand as we sped over rough terrain through the darkness, drawing a billowing plume of dust behind us. Storm clouds had been gathering in the sky that evening, and were now issuing random flashes of lightning. I kept looking across at her, yet her condition was clearly deteriorating. “I’m sorry you’re feeling so unwell Honey” I said to her, squeezing her hand.

She turned to me and smiled. “It’s OK” she puffed. I could see it took a lot of effort for her to speak, so I didn’t want to tax her by engaging her in conversation. Oh how I longed to be able to help her, or do something for her. I was afraid that she was having a “heart attack”, and that at any moment she may arrest, and given her condition, there would be nothing I could do to save her.

We had discussed most things, including this, in the years before this moment. We both knew that we had made a commitment to each other, that if either of us ever needed to be resuscitated, we chose not to be resuscitated. As a paramedic, working out of the busiest ambulance station in the Southern Hemisphere, I had performed countless hopeless resuscitations. Not even a single case was successful. There was one incident where I had resuscitated a man who had died in my presence from an asthma attack, yet he had died again, two days later from the condition

that had killed him in the first place. We both agreed that we would show our love for the other in this way; if either of us had the opportunity to enter glory, we would love each other enough to let the other go.

Still holding her sweating hand, I turned to her and said, “Honey, I love you.” Even though I had spoken these words to her more times than can be counted, they still had meaning between us, and especially on that night as we both faced a tragedy, the outcome of which seemed more and more obvious with every passing moment.

“I love you too” she replied immediately, gasping the words. She was now panting like a dog in the hot sun; rapid, shallow breaths. And then suddenly, there was silence. Oh the grief of those moments, as she fell backwards, with her head between the headrest and the doorpost, I will never be able to describe.

“Honey!” I said, squeezing her hand and then shaking her gently. It felt as if I was speaking to myself; I suddenly became aware of the eerie sense that I was alone in the car; my dear wife was no longer with me. Those had been our final words to each other. At that moment, my phone rang. It was my dad. He had heard that I was on my way to the hospital with Charleen. Because we have two medical doctors living in the valley, he had it in mind that I could go to one of them for help, to save me the trip to the hospital in Witbank. I said, “If they can help me, it’s going to have to be *right now*.” Without wasting time, we ended our call, and I turned right, off the sand road into the driveway of a share-block residential farm named Hephzibah.

There I stopped the car and turned to the still form of my beloved companion and friend and calmly checked for a pulse through my tears. “Honey!” I said a few more times, shaking her tenderly, hoping against hope that I was somehow misinterpreting this obvious scene. I sat there beside her for approximately a minute, yet my father had not yet called back. I dialled his number, not knowing whether I would even be able to speak to him or not. The time had come for me to bring clarity and reality into the confusion of this night.

“Hi Al” he said, full of compassion, “Where are you?”

"I'm at the gate of Hephzibah" I said, dreading the information I was about to share with him, knowing his health was not in an exemplary state either.

"Has anyone opened the gate yet?" He asked.

"No." Words were becoming difficult for me to form.

"I've phoned..." He began, but I spoke his name, to redirect the conversation.

"Pa," I said, fighting to give voice to the words that jammed sharply in my heart. "I'm afraid it's too late."

"What do you mean it's too late?" He asked.

Earlier when I had said the doctors would have to respond *right now*, he had interpreted it to mean that I was passing the place of their residence, and that it was too late to turn around and go back there. So now, he wanted to know what I meant by *too late*.

"Pa, I'm afraid Charleen has died." The sound of those words passing my lips in that quiet car, alone in the darkness, had a devastating effect on me. Wind blasted across the sand road, whipping up clouds of dust that swirled across in front of my headlights. The car's engine was still idling. I adjusted the speed of the interior fan; she wouldn't be needing all of that air anymore.

"Hey? My boy? No!" Came his stunned reply. "How?"

"I don't know pa. She just suddenly began to feel unwell, but before I could get her to the hospital, she died." By that stage we were both crying and could no longer have a proper conversation.

"Oh my boy" my dear father breathed heavily through the phone, overwhelmed by the breaking tragedy.

"I'm taking her to the Bronkhorstspruit Hospital" I said, not knowing what else to say. What could I say? Powerful emotions began to surge through me; emotions of ruin and loss, emotions of unbridled joy at her glorious reception into glory and the fact that we had parted with no loose ends; emotions of peace; a crushing sense of separation. I wanted to share this with her, but I couldn't.

I turned the car around in front of the locked Hephzibah gate, and slowly retraced the journey I had just taken at speed. There was no longer any rush. Nothing mattered anymore. There was no longer any need to get to Cosmos Hospital in Witbank, sixty kilometres south east of the farm, where I would have received the best medical help available in the area. Now, I could drive slowly to Bronkhorstspruit Hospital, forty kilometres to the south west. The quality of medical attention was no longer an issue; I could go to the closer hospital. I can only describe my state as I drove through the storm that night as *numb agony*. I thought of our dear daughters at home, ten and sixteen years old, and I knew that within minutes, the news would reach their ears. I wanted have the opportunity to speak to them before the devastating news came down upon them from the mouths of others. As I drove through that dramatic, blustering, South African thunderstorm, over a muddy, rocky road, I made the heartbreaking call to Chyreece.

To understand something of the shock of that night, you must realise that from the time Charleen set down her tea cup and said that she was feeling nauseous, until the time I looked at the clock in the car, to take note of her exact time of death (an old habit from working in the medical field), was only twenty minutes. Twenty life-changing minutes. Twenty shocking minutes.

From there, I drove for close to an hour to reach Bronkhorstspruit Hospital to deliver her body. To add to my hurt, I was treated with suspicion at the hospital by the doctor on duty. She questioned me in an abrupt way, trying to catch me out in the details of my story, making me relate the events repeatedly. It is standard procedure to open a police docket in the case of a death such as this, yet to this procedure, she added her accusation.

9

Those First Days

With the sound of her final words still hanging in the air between us, my eyes clung in dismay and disbelief to my lovely wife's motionless face, as if she would at any moment draw a breath and smile. Nothing. With every passing moment the pain of what I had lost grew. Over and over I found myself wanting to draw a breath and make a comment to her, the one with whom I had shared everything for so many years, yet now there was no-one to tell. I wanted to tell her how painful this experience was. I wanted to embrace her and comfort her in the distress she had endured over the past twenty minutes. I wanted to be there for her to help her, to protect her, to love her in this calamity.

When God fashioned the woman for man, He designed a wonderful companion and helper. While I had always admired Charleen's companionship and help, both in my heart and verbally, I never felt the value of it as acutely and as intensely as I felt it in those moments. How desperately I just wanted to share the crushing burden of these moments with her, but I couldn't. The person who was most suited to sharing this personal burden with me, the only person who would really grasp what it meant to me, was no longer present to share it with me. The sense of desolation those moments brought to me still escapes my powers of description. Even as I turned the car around and set out slowly on the road to deliver

her dear body to the hospital mortuary, the front left wheel of the car bumped through a ditch in the road, causing her head to bang on the doorpost. In that moment I drew a breath to say, "Sorry Honey" but I exhaled that breath again in sobs. There was no-one to speak to. My personal companion was gone. It was shortly after this that I called my eldest daughter to speak to her.

Yet there is more that I have to say about those first moments after her death. Grief has taught me something about the complexity with which God has built the human mind and heart. At exactly the same time that I was cringing under the stinging whip of bitter loss, I was also consumed with thoughts of an entirely different order. Under that vast night sky, sitting beside my beloved wife, it felt to me as if heaven had been opened and that I had been permitted the privilege of accompanying her right to the very final step before stepping into the actual glory. There was an aroma of the kind, glorious Christ there. He was smiling and beaming as He approached in His unspeakable majesty and personal care, dripping with the glittering gold of personal worth and trustworthiness, taking Charleen's dear hand from mine, into His, in the gentlest way. That night, it was as if God mercifully thinned the membrane that separates me from seeing into the splendour of Christ in glory and granted me permission to see more. He knew what I desired and needed and granted it to me. As His Majesty appeared to receive her with joy unspeakable, it struck me with full force, that it was He who had lived and died *for* her and *because* of her and *as* her. What boundless love!

Seeing, through the eye of faith, how Christ had tenderly received one so dear to me, thrilling thoughts began to shoot through my heart as I drove slowly in tears through the thunderstorm toward town. The love I had for this woman was the kind of love a devoted husband cultivates for his wife over decades. It doesn't just happen, it is deliberate and intentional. Up until this evening, the safest and best place for this woman to be had been close to me. Under my care. In my protection. In my provision. Yet now that she had been removed, beyond my control, from that best place, the beauties of the Person to whom she had gone began to

shine even more brightly. Even though I had loved her desperately, it had been a love stained by sinful failure. Even though I had strained to provide for her in the best way, my provision was always lacking. Even though I protected her from so much, there was also a sense in which she wasn't safe in my weak, vulnerable protection. Yet now, she had been received, like a fragile treasure, into the warm embrace of the perfect Husband. The One whose provision knows no bounds. The One who is more generous with His provisions than any generosity ever encountered in this world. The One whose love is deeply personal, unmatched and endless. It was this Husband who had loved her to the extreme of the cross, for this very moment. It was this Husband who, at the moment of her death, received her to enjoy the full privileges of being His bride.

I couldn't help but look upon her expired form, forty years of living through the hardships of a fallen world written in the lines on her face—and no-one knew her struggles more intimately than I—and find wonderful satisfaction in the fact that my beloved wife and companion was *free* at last! She was *home*; the place we both knew we both longed to be.

Looking at her, the sense of certainty that she had not simply expired into the blackness of that terrible night, but had been received by the glorious Christ, brought me a joy inexpressible that has lingered and grown to this very day. Without a dependence upon these realities, this theological framework of which we have been speaking, and the way it impacts your response to this, the most dire of all human experiences, facing death is a dreadful scourge. If the glory of Christ is not the passion of your heart as you consider your own death, I assure you now, death is too terrible to face. You need Christ; you need to know that at death you are going to a Person, not a place.[72]

Evidently, Christians can both grieve and think clearly at the same time. Over the first few days there were other areas of thought in which this became apparent. One of those was in the galling sensation I carried

[72] Having said this, I certainly do believe that heaven is an actual place. I have emphasised the Person of heaven because if you do not have the Person, you may have a vain consolation in the face of death because you hope to be in a place called heaven. Without the Person, for you there is no place. 1 John 5:12

around with me that something of extensive value had been lost. Specifically, I had been working on building a loving relationship with my wife since the day I had met her in November 1992. Through a surprising series of events, Jean, my sister, had received employment in the offices of a large refractory. There, she had worked closely with Charleen. That rainy November, the people on my shift at the ambulance station had arranged a year-end function. Jean brought Charleen as a blind date for me. I still remember my first sight of her. She approached the glass sliding-door as I sat inside. Her shoulder-length dark hair shining in the late afternoon sun, her beautiful blue eyes, and, as soon as she saw me, that *smile*! If she was nervous about meeting me for the first time, it didn't show; from the first time we spoke, we were no longer strangers. We spent all of our free time together, and were married eleven months later. I so admired her wit; she really knew how to make me laugh. How I appreciated the level of comfort we enjoyed with each other. In twenty years, we never raised our voices at each other or broke down into open conflict. Even if she disagreed with me, she would accept what I was saying cheerfully and easily. Most of the time she would forget about it within a few minutes, but if not, she loved me enough to discuss it gently and kindly at an appropriate time.

Learning to love even a person who is lovable takes time. You hurt them without even knowing it, but when you find out, it all refines your intentional love. After a love-school of nineteen years, it feels as if we had built a relationship of immense value and strength. Yet, in one moment, it felt as if that living project upon which I had laboured so selflessly for so many years, had been destroyed and brought to nothing. I grieved over the loss of that which I had nurtured with such care; as if it had suddenly lost all of the value I had poured in.

Nothing, however, has been lost. This, I came to appreciate during the first few days of black pain. Not even a fraction of that value has been ultimately lost. Through those years of joyful self-sacrifice, the Lord brought me through a journey of growth in Christian character that would not have come about in any other way. He knew exactly where I

needed to experience pressure, and He provided for that need in Charleen. None of that character growth has been lost. On the contrary, through the experience of Charleen's death, the Lord has granted me even more accelerated growth in Christian character. Seldom would we willingly choose that which we truly need, yet God graciously grants it to us. This experience has been no exception.

Then there is Charleen's growth. Without her exposure to me for all of those years, she would never have grown in the way she did. God had mercy on her soul during those years and granted her the most wonderful gift of all; saving faith. He took her from weakness to strength and transformed her into a remarkable woman of God. None of those years of hard work as a wife and mother have gone to waste, not even one moment, decision or sigh. It has all been saved, not lost. Right now, as I type this page, she is delighting in the fruit of the way of life and Christian character granted to her by a gracious God.

Has a marriage been wasted? No. While I still miss her deeply, we had joyful companionship that truly was the delight of my heart. None of those years have been lost, they really did take place. Admittedly, our marriage has come to an end, yet in its place is something far more excellent. She has been drawn higher to a coveted new quality of life and relationship with Christ. She has been drawn to that for which we both longed. She has gone from something that was deeply satisfying to something that is beyond the boundaries of satisfying. I, on the other hand, have the privilege of being the one to experience the pain of grief, rather than my beloved wife. I have the privilege of being the subject of God's kindness; glorifying Himself through the faith He has given me in this trial. To dwell on the loss rather than on the glory of God is to spiral into a small world of self-pity and ingratitude toward the delightful God. Nothing has been lost.

Normally, at the funerals I am accustomed to attending, we do not view the body. Yet, for Charleen's funeral, I chose to have a time of viewing the day before the service. How hot and cold thoughts clamoured for pre-eminence in my mind as I looked down into her placid, familiar face.

Stunned disbelief still veiled my mind as I used the terms, "Charleen's funeral", and "Her body". This was my dear wife lying before me, her face still lined with evidence of years of friendly smiles. There was not a place on that lovely face I had not kissed over and over. Yet dancing behind those eyes now closed in pale death I could see her joy in the thrill of freedom with Christ. It is true that as you contemplate death so closely, it is a reality more ugly and painful than words can describe. Yet at the same time as death is thundering down with its most malicious stroke, it is bringing with it the experience of new life that can never be taken away. Looking into the dead face of a person you love dearly reminds you that death is the epitome of evil. Yet while that is true, death brings the child of God to the fullest experience of good. This is also what was true for Jesus Christ—an ugly, gruesome death, that purchased for His people eternal joy and peace.

One of the central joys I experience in the Christian faith revolves around the Bible's teaching on the doctrine of justification through faith. I have preached it, counselled it, shared it in evangelism, in conversation, and have written about it. In the face of death, this truth has proven robust enough to admirably support a grieving heart. Charleen, Jean was saying in a conversation with me, was just like us; a normal, everyday person. We knew her, and having been married to her for so long, I knew her very well. She had certainly not arrived at a level of personal accomplishment where she could stand before God at the moment of her death and expect to be received by Him on the basis of her own life-record. On the contrary; the longer we knew each other, the more we came to understand each other's weaknesses and powerlessness to change. Yet even in that state of imperfection, as she succumbed by surprise, to her invisible health condition, and lay dead in that coffin, she was completely accepted by God. The joy and peace this truth brings at the time of death dwarfs any other hollow notions. God calls her just because Jesus Christ lived *as her* and died *as her*, therefore she now stands accepted by God *as Christ* is accepted in full joy and blessing. This, as Jean was saying, brings such encouragement to Christians who are left behind, knowing our own

personal failures. You may be called home unexpectedly at any moment, yet the glorious life, death, and resurrection of Christ remains credited to your account for your moment of need.

The day after we viewed her body, we held her funeral service. Brothers and sisters from our church and a number of other churches all worked together joyfully to arrange and hold the most memorable funeral I have ever attended. Both the burial at the cemetery and the service were streamed live over the internet and viewed by family and friends from different continents.[73]

Shaun, my brother-in-law, drove my daughters and me to the cemetery. As we entered through the gates, our eyes were drawn to an unusually large group of mourners assembled to our left. Without even thinking, we all turned to look around to see where *our* people were. That was obviously the funeral of a very important person whom many people had come to remember. But then, from that distance, we began to recognise people in the crowd. How moved I was to see so many dear people, coming to witness my dear wife's burial and to support my family and me in our time of sorrow. We had to park some distance away from the actual grave site. Between us and that dreadful place, the street was lined with so many kind faces. How we longed to stop and tell every person how grateful we were that they had come; it meant so much to us!

There my daughters and I walked behind the coffin of our loving mother and wife, and laid her sweet body to rest in the ground. These were moments of desperate sadness; moments in which we were wonderfully carried both in the hands of the people around us who loved us and by our eternal hope in Christ. That very body that we buried would burst from that grave to glorious new life; and this is exactly what we focused on at the funeral service held after the burial.

What a triumphant funeral it was! Weak people singing the glories of our great Saviour in the face of death itself. We could do that because

[73] At the time of writing, the footage of the funeral was still available at http://www.ustream.tv/channel/charleen-funeral The audio files are available at http://tinysa.com/106774 In these resources, the individuals who worked hard to arrange the funeral are thanked by name.

without a doubt, Christ has defeated death for every one of His people. Charleen may have been buried in death, yet she was at that moment more alive than any of us at her funeral service! How moved and surprised I was to see approximately three hundred people arrive and fill the hall to capacity; men scrambled to carry in more seats. I know Charleen would have been amazed too.

One of the songs we sang at the funeral, her favourite, was *The Power of the Cross* by Keith and Kristyn Getty and Stuart Townend.[74] Even though I am writing this account nine months after the day, I still sing that song with strong emotions. Most often I am not able to finish because of the thrilling scenery of Calvary and glory painted in the singer's mind through those words. Singing that song, I could still hear Charleen singing it beside me as we led the worship at Living Hope Church. It soothed my mind, as we sang that song at her funeral, that as I pictured her beautiful face veiled in death, I could see her in glory unspeakable rejoicing in the full reality of which that song speaks.

If you are anything like me, you are afraid to speak to people in their hour of grief. Your heart breaks for them, yet you fear saying something to them because you neither know what to say, nor are you willing to risk offending them with your fumbling words. How grateful I was for the hundreds of people who conquered their fear of speaking to me during those days. I could honestly appreciate what it must have taken for many of them to approach me, yet they did. I could see that the shock had so impacted many of them that they truly didn't know what to say, but they came to me. That is enough. That communicates care that is of true value. I would like to thank and encourage everyone who was bold enough to come to speak to me, even if you were tearful and speechless. I appreciated the kind intentions in your heart and your appreciation for the magnitude of our loss. I appreciated your compassion.

The eleventh day after Charleen's death, the day after that sorrowful and wonderful funeral, was like the breaking of a wave onto the flat

[74] http://www.gettymusic.com/hymns-powerofthecross.aspx This link was still functional at the time of writing.

beach of ordinary life. Throughout the previous ten days my family and I had been surrounded by many people who cared deeply for us and who too were shocked and grieved by our loss. I found myself pierced with a deep longing; as if somewhere in the crowds I would find what I had been desiring; yet at the same time knowing that it was because of what I had lost that all of these people had drawn to my side. It was as if, at any moment, I could see Charleen coming toward me in the crowd, and everything would be back to normal. The previous ten days had been so different from the days that preceded them that the eleventh day—back to life—was very hard.

Everyone else had gone back to their daily grind, and I too needed to attend to ordinary matters of living again. Death had drained the colour from everything around me. Eating became a chore I knew I had to complete in order to avoid increased complications. It no longer mattered what it was I was eating because no flavour seemed any different from another. Eating has always been such a personal experience because of the care of a thoughtful individual that goes into the preparation of food. I was careful, throughout my years with Charleen to make sure she knew how much I appreciated the love she added to the meals she produced. To eat without that personal ingredient in the meal brought deep sadness. It was difficult for me in those early days to imagine that I would ever see beauty or colour, or taste satisfying flavours again. I knew, of course that it was a logical inevitability that my appreciation for those things would return, I just didn't know how it could come about, knowing that what I had lost in Charleen would never return.

Walking with my younger daughter, Hope, one morning after the eleventh day, she turned to me and asked, "Dad, will it always be like this?"

"Like what?" I asked.

"Crying all the time."

I looked at her little face that smiled through sadness, "No beanie" I said, hugging her, "It won't always be like this." If I was struggling to make sense of this whole calamity in my own mind, having experienced

grief previously, my heart went out to my daughters in their first real experience of grief. We cried for a long time. I do not intend to discourage you if you are reading this book at such an early stage of grief, but there was hardly a day in which I didn't cry for the first four months. I did everything through a curtain of tear-haze. Life had changed so radically, and it was in the picking up of responsibilities that Charleen had previously joyfully discharged that we found it so hard to avoid weeping. How grateful I am for my family on the farm who cared for my little family and helped us to break back into life with less pressure. They cooked for us, helped us with our laundry, and even house cleaning. Those were expressions of love that remain as rare jewels upon a black background in my memories.

Beginning a new lifestyle, in a new role was a painful experience that brought with it many tears. I remember being struck at many different junctures with the reality that *this* everyday task was something *she* used to take care of. This was true for each of us, and almost without words, we redistributed her responsibilities. We began to take ownership of different aspects of her life, seeing to them with far more than just a daily-grind mentality. This was personal commitment; an act of love. It was as if we were washing dishes for her, cooking, laundry, cleaning the kitchen, schooling, *for her*. Yet there was more. Beyond *her* was her devoted Saviour, who is our ultimate motivation.

During the first days, it is far too easy to develop a victim mentality. The pain is so blinding and disorientating that it can possess and control you in the way you deal with the people around you. You can be tempted to treat even people you love in a disrespectful or selfish way because you feel your pain entitles you to that supposed privilege. You can easily begin to think that they should be treating you with more care, more compassion, more help. This presumed right can press you into a cramped corner of misery beyond the reach of even your closest friends and family. I learned that it is critical to take control of your thought processes at an early stage and to fight against critical thoughts about other people. Remember that while you are struggling, they too are expe-

riencing pain, and if you find it hard to engage in acts of kindness toward others while you are in pain, so do they. Make yourself accessible to people who desire to help and comfort you. It won't take much to turn caring people away from you if you are prickly to approach.

Even more importantly, it is critical, at an early stage, to take charge of your thoughts as they relate to God. Yes, God preserves, works with, and governs His universe. In His wisdom, He has permitted sin entrance into the world, but God can never be blamed for doing something wrong. God's actions are always kind, wise, compassionate, and right. If in your thinking God owns the blame for calamity, you have come to a wrong conclusion that is insulting to God and damaging to yourself. This is a fight you can't possibly win. Rather, it will exhaust you in foolhardy combat. Rather than rising up against God, come to Him in your grief and abandon yourself humbly to His mercy.

Although I have not had even a fraction of a moment's struggle with God over the death of my dear wife, I did find the reinstatement of personal devotions something I had to work at. My old daily routine had been destroyed, like a formatted hard drive. With my mind constantly thrashing, it was so difficult to just stop and think about a text of Scripture, or to pray for any period of time. I found myself, during one of those first chaotic days on my knees at the foot of my bed, with my Bible open at Psalm nine. I worked to read through those words, depending on God in those moments to bring me extraordinary comfort; seconds were critical because I was in pain. I was desperate. By the time I reached verses nine and ten, God kindly came to me through His word.

> "The LORD is a refuge for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble. Those who know your name will trust you, for you, LORD, have never forsaken those who seek you."[75]

How I wept at the certainty of those wonderful words. I could hold them tightly in my heart as rock-solid certainties. All I could pray was, "Thank you God, thank you God, thank you God!" as I read those two verses

[75] Psalm 9:9-10

again and again. I read that psalm again the next day, finding extraordinary courage in those few words. These were my "emergency devotions" that I refused to abandon. It was a place to start a new habit even when I felt the prospect of simply thinking was beyond me.

One of the areas in which my thoughts meandered in those early days was to question exactly what it was that I had lost. What was it that had caused such immense pain? As I considered the essence of this feeling, I found myself coining a new term. What you have lost when a Christian dies is "withness". You no longer have that person *with* you. How your thoughts can take you on journeys while you are struggling in such agony. To understand what I am saying, ask yourself a question like this, "If I could just have this person back for twenty four hours, what would I do with them?" If you answered that question realistically, you would have to admit that that day would look quite ordinary because it is not the single moments that make life memorable, it is the long-term sweep of companionship that has the most value. It is the deep, satisfying, committed relationship that makes the high points most precious. It all comes down to simply being *with* that specific individual, even if you are not doing something outrageous; a simple smile is enough. From the moment a couple utters their marriage vows, this is what they have in mind. What they look forward to is to *have and to hold* their partner until the moment of death tears them apart. They are longing for the prospect of prolonged "withness".

This is something that helped me to think more clearly about the relationships I have with the people around me. It is about the thousands of ordinary interactions you have with those people while you are with them over time. Ordinary words, ordinary meals together, ordinary trips in a car or walking in a mall, ordinary chores. Life is about doing what God says is best for that person in those ordinary moments. That is what makes *withness* so wonderful that when it is gone it is far greater than words can describe.

My brother Kevin summed this up about Charleen so well in his Facebook post shortly after her death. He said,

> "Isn't it sad that it's only when someone passes away that you really think about how much they mean to you. Most of you will know that my little brother Alan's wife went to be with the Lord on the evening of the 17th. Charleen didn't achieve much in the eyes of the world, but when we think about her life, she really noticed those around her and made an effort to be nice to them. What a blessing she's been over the years. I wonder whether she had any idea of the impact she was making? It takes a lot of effort to consider others all the time. *Life is about people and Charleen had it right.* It's been quite a challenge to me. Charleen will leave a huge gap in the lives of those she's been close to. Charleen will leave a huge gap in the community she's moved in. Few, but continual words of encouragement and kindness add up to a lot of encouragement over a few decades. What a challenge." (emphasis mine)

Part of the sense of loss comes from the fact that the person who has died was so unique, and you will never be *with* that specific person again, this side of the grave. A human being can never be replaced; they are priceless. How deeply I have missed her thinking, moving, smiling, responding, everything. She really appreciated *withness*. How it helps me to appreciate the *withness* we all have with one another.

Let me conclude this chapter by relating one incident. Two weeks after Charleen died, I found an opportunity to go for a walk on the farm to be alone. I felt the need to be alone and to simply cry without concern for the sadness I may be causing others around me. I walked down to the dam and sat down upon an upturned rowing boat. Looking out over the water and the picturesque valley-floor stretching to the mountains in the background, I wept in the agony of sorrow. Relentlessly, one thought kept returning to my mind. I had loved Charleen very deeply and I had been careful to make that obvious to her every day. I had invested myself in her; if I may use that term. It was that wholesale investment, that loving deliberately, that had caused me so much pain at losing her. The cherished receptacle into which I had been pouring myself out was now removed, and I had nowhere left to pour my love. That love would now

have to be redirected over time, yet for the moment, her absence caused this pain.

I thought about a radio interview I had heard late one night, years before, as I had driven alone on the road between Pretoria and the farm after a long day of counselling. The woman being interviewed was a psychologist and she spoke about the impact of losing a life partner. She had come to the conclusion that some people invest themselves too deeply in their partners, resulting in irreversible damage when that partner dies. Her advice was for married couples to avoid investing themselves too deeply in each other. I of course laughed at the idea of that kind of marriage relationship. If a man is to love his wife, as Scripture teaches, as Christ loved the church and gave Himself for her,[76] then there is no limit to his investment of himself in his wife. Never could I invest myself in my wife to that stellar degree, yet, that was my aim.

Of course, when you have so invested yourself in your marriage partner, it is really going to hurt when they are eventually torn from your embrace, taking your entire life-investment with them. It really hurts. Yet, I still scorn the idea that a husband should prepare for this hurt by reserving himself in his love for his wife. As I sat on that boat, this realisation flooded in upon my heart. I thought about how painful Charleen's death would have been had I loved her in a reserved, conservative way, withholding love so that I would not be devastated at her death. The thought was unthinkable. This drew me to a pivotal conclusion that I typed on Facebook as I sat there in both pain and joy at the same time;

> "When a husband's drive is to love his wife as Christ loved the church, the sorrow of their parting at death defies description. Yet there is simply no other way for him to live with his wife and find within himself boundless joy at her parting. Any other lifestyle ends in regret."

[76] Ephesians 5:1

10

Those First Months

From the moment of Charleen's death, an irksome sensation began to bother me; an uncomfortable feeling that I was eventually forced to pin down, identify, and deal with. That was the feeling of having left her behind. It felt as if even that first journey to the hospital with her body, and leaving her there, was an act of leaving her behind. Returning home on that dreadful night, to the place we had both loved so much, felt like leaving her behind. It took some time to put my finger on this deep impression that was hindering me in moving forward, attached, as it were, by a bungee cord, pulling me backwards in my emotions.

I had to capture this thought process repeatedly over the first few months and remind myself of the truth that I had not left her behind, rather, she had gloriously surged on ahead on that night. As a result, I was the one left behind, not her. If that was true—and it is—then I could live to my full capacity as a believer in Christ, until either my own surging ahead in death, or the ultimate hope of the return of Christ. I have not left her to struggle behind me in a marathon, she has received a ride to the finish line, and is waiting there, with Christ and all other glorified believers, for me. How this has helped me to live with hope.

It sometimes takes the wise words of another person to put an experience into perspective. This is what happened one morning as I spoke

with my dad. The impact of the death of a person who was so close to you, thumps through your life like the beat of the next-door-neighbour's party that keeps you awake until the early hours of the morning. The initial piercing grief seems to grow as time progresses. For me, the immediate pain had more to do with the sharp tragedy of losing Charleen, yet as time has passed, the pain morphed into something else. Sadly, the pain has grown as its ugly presence has reached into every area of life. Strand upon strand, I have discovered how her death has affected everything I do, everything I think about. This is what my father meant when he said, "Real grief grows after the initial event." It is helpful to be prepared for a period of time where grief grows and changes. It changes form from an intensive pain to an extensive pain; from a sharp, penetrating, localised pain, to a general, thumping, aching, far-reaching pain. Mercifully, this extensive pain is something you can work against in smaller encounters. For example, I have been sharing a bed with Charleen for nineteen years. Now, as I settle down for the night alone, I deal with that specific aspect of losing her, rather than dealing with the whole shock at the same time. While I'm reminding myself of the wonderful truth that she is now glorified and no longer requires the primitive necessity of sleep in a bed in a fallen world, I don't, at the same time, have to deal with something like the emotions that surge within me as I stand up to preach and no longer see her smiling, receptive face in the crowd. So, although the grief does become more extensive, it becomes a more winnable battle. This is a mercy for which I am grateful.

As I grappled with grief over the first few months, I noticed a strange phenomenon. I am normally a person who appreciates order. Yet grief brought two temporary features to my life. One was a settled sense of weariness. I could understand how that could have come about because of the very powerful emotions I was constantly experiencing. This weariness eventually brought about a type of emotional numbness, it felt as if I was living through the eyes of a mannequin. I could not feel excitement about anything; a genuine smile was hard work because it felt as if there

were no smiles left in my heart. A wet blanket of extraordinary weariness plagued everything I did.

Yet, in addition to that weariness was a sense of confusion. Even the slightest challenge to my logical thought processes seemed too much. A problem to solve in my mind was a problem I simply scraped off until another time because of the seemingly overwhelming complexity of the task. How grateful I was, as a grieving person, feeling as if I was staggering around with glassy eyes, to be among people who could still think about what to eat for lunch, or that we needed to put petrol in the tank. Grief-stricken people have my full sympathy when it comes to this aspect of their journey. It debilitates them and robs them of hope. This, gratefully, passes, paving the way for a new sense of vitality in focus and thinking. It is as if the body deliberately grants grieving people a period of offline time in order to rejuvenate them for the journey ahead.

I have also found that there are two features of everyday living that help to ease the sense of grief over the first few months. This may not sound profound, yet while clenched in the fist of sorrow, you don't need something profound; any flicker of hope will help.

The first of these has to do with memories. How my dear wife has lived on in cherished memories through the months since her death. We were so close to each other that we did *everything* together. That means that *nothing* comes without memories attached. Memories swarm around every single aspect of life, bringing with them warm, painful emotions and many tears. Then, the only memories you have after the death of your loved-one are hard memories of gruesome pain. Yet I have found that as you begin to break out of the fog of grief, new memories that form, begin to create a more comfortable distance between you and that intensity. My daughters and I have taken a few trips that I struggled to take. Yet, as I look back on the pleasant memories of those trips, they have a soothing nature to them. Those memories are pleasant, yet they are not memories made with my dear wife. So I have discovered that the pursuit of new, pleasant memories, after the intensity of grief, has helped create the space I need to function more normally and less emotionally.

The second feature is the privilege of being able to let go in instalments. By far, the first two weeks of separation, for me, were the most intense. Since then, however, I have had the opportunity to "say goodbye" many times over in far smaller ways. Within the first week, I gave away all of Charleen's clothes. The pain of seeing them in our cupboard every time I opened the door was immense. Then, even as I wore my own clothes, they had all been neatly folded or hung by her own kind hands. With each garment, I had opportunity to smile and take it out fondly, remembering her, before wearing it. I saw toiletries in the bathroom run out one after the other; her shower gel, her shampoo; with every empty container, I could face a smaller, less intense moment of goodbye. The whole house is so marked by her presence and influence that there are very many opportunities for goodbye; especially in the kitchen. Even this week, I finished the last bottle of rosemary she had bought. Both in discarding the old one and buying a new one, I thought of her fondly. I am grateful for this mercy of saying goodbye over time.

There is one beautiful story I need to share at this point. When I took all of Charleen's clothes out of the cupboard, I gave my daughters the opportunity to take any of them they chose. The rest I gave to my sister and gave her the opportunity to do the same. But then, I received a call from the ladies at Benoni Bible Church, asking whether they could have the clothes left over.[77] Over a period of six months, they took those clothes and crafted from them two of the most remarkable, identical quilts for my daughters. What a wonderful gesture that was, and how we treasure those quilts. They tell a story. Sometimes we go over those quilts together, remembering when Charleen wore this or that garment, now represented by a little triangle or square in the quilt. To those ladies, for their kindness and outstanding efforts, we will always be grateful. Thank you so much for your practical compassion.

Another unexpected struggle developed within the first few months. For nineteen years I enjoyed the full joy of being married to a woman who saw me as a large part of her reason for living. She had a cute way, at

[77] Www.benonibiblechurch.co.za

the most appropriate times, of quoting the line from the 2003 Walt Disney movie, *Finding Nemo* to me, "When I'm with you, I'm home." How I loved being "home" for her, regardless of where we may have been. I would often tell her how sweet I thought she was, especially after she had done something kind—even a small thing—for me. She would just smile at me and say, "It's you that made me like this." She would never stray far from me in a crowd; normally we would be able to see each other, and after she had finished chatting to other people, like a magnet, she would be back at my side, kindly taking an interest in what I was saying.

The shock of losing her companionship unsettled me deeply. Having been a large part of her reason for living, I was now a widowed person, struggling with my emotions on a minute-by-minute basis. Yet with that struggle came a feeling of alienation. How I love the people who are close to me, and they have loved me and cared for me deeply. They are not, however, my own personal companion. I say this with caution and I do not want to be misunderstood, so I would appreciate the reader's most sympathetic interpretation; I have intensely missed being the large part of her reason for living. It has been like playing a game of musical chairs for a long time, and now suddenly, I'm the one without a chair when the music stops.

To this highly refined and specific sense of loss is attached, strangely, a sense of shame. I have sometimes thought of this in terms of the words of Joel the prophet, "Wake up, you drunkards, and weep! Wail, all you drinkers of wine; wail because of the new wine, for it has been snatched from your lips."[78] Whenever I think of the picture this verse paints, it stirs me. Yet sadly, there is a sense in which losing a treasure as prized as your own wife, is like having the wine snatched from your lips, leaving you staring bewildered and shamed.

It feels as if I have fallen from a position of privilege, having successfully cared for a wife and family for so long, the privilege has been revoked; not unlike a demotion in the workplace. I suppose it could be

[78] Joel 1:5

compared, at a primitive level, to the shock and embarrassment of a child who has just dropped his ice-cream into the sand. That look of grief and dismay as the reality dawns upon him. Or like a child who loses his grip on a helium balloon; he stares incredulously as it floats permanently out of his reach, disappearing into the sky.

This awkward feeling, I must confess, really took me by surprise. What has also surprised me is the tenacity with which it came upon me and affected the way I view everyone around me. This is a long-term struggle that needs to be dealt with through a clear understanding of theology, not psychological theory. What may feel like a demotion and loss, will in God's economy turn out to be a radiant promotion. It has granted opportunity for growth that centres on my gracious standing and identity in Christ. For the child of God there is no longer any shame; Jesus suffered under the weight of my shame at Calvary. I am now free to live confidently and joyfully.

Having said that, I should add that out of this unpleasant discovery, I have also learned another valuable lesson. Over the months since her death, I cannot even begin to describe how painfully I have missed her gentle, contented, friendly, companionship. This yearning, coupled with the sense of shame, can easily be misinterpreted as a longing for the companionship of marriage—as a general concept. I have of course continued to live by principle rather than feelings, knowing that to (re) marry in haste is to repent at leisure. If I have to be honest with myself, I have not missed companionship as much as I have missed *her companionship*. This is not a caution a newly widowed person receives lightly from a glib counsellor who has never experienced the shattering impact of losing his spouse. I trust, however, that this counsel will fall gently on the ear of the reader; it comes from a person who has both loved intensely and grieved bitterly. I have learned to be content in the situation into which my wise and loving God has brought me. It may not feel, in the first few days or months as if the pain will ever leave, but it does. When the pain does begin to lift, you will be grateful that you have conducted yourself wisely through the darkness—refusing to try to dull the pain through food,

drink, other people, or through abandonment of responsibilities. To learn to live contentedly, even in this pain, takes a deliberate decision and dependence upon the empowering grace of God.

Another feature of the months of grieving was encountering other people's expectations of me. As the months progress, people become bolder to speak their minds. They are of course outside of ground zero and do not feel the pain of loss that lingers for so long. Pervasive psychological ideas regarding the process of grieving have made unwise, unacceptable behaviour quite anticipated of grieving people. I have encountered quite a selection of comments that have given me the impression that people are expecting me to be in denial, or becoming angry, or bargaining, before coming to acceptance. These ideas stem from Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's theories on the universal stages of grieving.[79] I found it sad that such a framework of thought has become so much a part of the presuppositions of even some Christian people that they expect to see every grieving person go through those stages like clockwork. They nod their heads wisely and say, "Don't be surprised when he becomes angry with God. It is normal." I even received a booklet on the stages of grieving from a brother in Christ who is experienced enough in good theology to know better.

To be angry with God is not normal in God's world! A proper foundation of faith built before tragedy is what will carry you through that tragedy. The God who held you in the palm of His hand before your tragedy, will continue to preserve you after that tragedy. The God who managed your affairs for your good and His glory before your tragedy will still continue to do that in every moment of your tragedy. He is the God who is to be forever praised. May I caution you against morbid frameworks of thought that set even your loved-ones around you up to expect you to be unstable and irrational through grief. Trust God to grant you the power, as unlikely as it seems, to live with exemplary Christian character through this grief, for His honour. This is a unique time of pressure that will expose the reality of your current stage in Christian growth; embrace

[79] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/K%C3%BCbler-Ross_model

it as a positive opportunity for the glory of God in your life. If you tended to avoid responsibility before, that will now be magnified. If you were an angry person before, that will now become a strong temptation for you. As always, you are called upon, by the power of the Spirit, to put to death the misdeeds of the body, and live.[80]

Of the myriad of thoughts I could have shared in this booklet, I have decided to close with these last two.

As I have thought deeply about life and death over the past months, my eyes have settled upon Jesus' teaching at the well in Samaria. How His comments on eternal life thrilled me. All of these months of agony have been caused by the removal of life from the physical body of my dear wife. If the removal of such life from one person occasions such sorrow, how much more wonderful is the fact of *eternal life?* When Jesus stands at that well (among many other places) and declares the thrilling reality of *eternal life* that is obtained through Him alone, He is pushing forward a jewel of rare value and beauty. He says, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life."[81] Just as water quenches a desperate thirst in a hot, arid environment, so the prospect of *eternal life* satisfies the desperate pangs of a grieving soul. If you have lost someone you have dearly loved, the promise of *eternal life* suddenly means something. Even if you have been expecting the death of your loved-one over an extended period of time, their death still seems to come as a shock. It always feels too soon. You wish you had just had more time with them. Yet this longing for more time, more quality of life, is exactly what the Gospel promises. In Christ, who is *the life,*[82] is found a quality and duration of life that exceeds your wildest dreams. Jesus came so that His people could have life, and have it to the *full*![83]

[80] Romans 8:13
[81] John 4:13-14
[82] John 14:6
[83] John 10:10

Finally; the galling sensation of separation. How deeply I enjoyed the close relationship I shared with Charleen over the nineteen years we were married. It was because our relationship was so close that I have suffered the loss so intensely. Yet once again, I have considered Christ. If I, as a fallen sinner, whose love is a selfish failure compared to the love of Christ, have felt such a black chasm of separation; how gruelling was the separation between Christ and His Father at Golgotha after perfect, eternal, togetherness? This sensation is something Christ understands; He is able to feel the grief you and I experience.[84] He knows the crushing weight of this relentless burden. It was through the unspeakable separation that Christ endured, however, that He purchased everlasting, perfect togetherness for His people. If I found joy in my wife in this fallen state, how delightful I will find her when I see her glorified to a more excellent state. How thrilling will it be to relish a reunion with every single loved-one who has died in Christ before us? What will it be to meet and immediately recognize every last saint, through all time, for whom Christ personally suffered abandonment? Greater that all of these joys, however, will be the unparalleled privilege of looking directly into the face of the great husband, the passionate lover of our souls, the Lamb, the Lion, the Saviour, Jesus Christ! As I imagine first setting foot upon the majestic hallways of heavenly glory, seeing the beaming faces of those I love, and the wonderful face of Christ, I must ask myself what it was like for Christ, after His abandonment, to be reunited like this with His own Father. Full joy. Full adoration. Full satisfaction. Full appreciation. Praise God, all of those things already belong to every believer in Christ, but have now become the full experience of my dear wife Charleen. This will be my unspeakable experience too. Will this be true of you?

[84] Hebrews 4:15

11

Why Hasn't Anyone Said Anything About This?[85]

"In light of the fact that everyone dies, you would think that someone would have said something about this before." Sitting speaking to Jean, my sister, I was experiencing some very unusual medical symptoms that had begun to plague me at the onset of intense sorrow. Years before, I had done a study on the subject of grieving from a biblical perspective, yet even as I experienced grief again at the loss of my wife, I was still not prepared for this particular facet; the effects of grief on the body.

Before setting fingers to keyboard on this chapter, I have consulted with a selection of medical doctors and medical personnel, in addition to what I have read on the subject. It is not my intention, in this chapter, to create alarm. My intention is to simply show some of the ways in which

[85] Disclaimer: I am not a medical doctor, nor do I propose to function as a medical practitioner. This chapter does not constitute medical advice, nor an instruction on what you should do with your medical problems. Should you choose to consider this as medical advice and act upon it, you do so at your own risk and against the intentions of the author. The author will not be held responsible for any damage you incur as a result of actions taken on the basis of this chapter. This information is included as an example of medical knowledge I have gained through my own experience of grieving, whether it can be proved to be accurate or not. Please consult your own medical practitioner before coming to a conclusion on your own medical symptoms.

my health was impacted by intense grief. I am hoping that you will find the courage, through my experience, to live without fear in the face of strange medical symptoms, as you suffer heartache.

As blasé as an individual may have been about death before the impact of sorrow descended upon them, true love brings true sorrow that does have a powerful effect on your body. You need to be aware of this.

Five months before Charleen died, I began to experience problems with gastric reflux. It remained undiagnosed before the time of her death. Yet from the very day after she died, my condition intensified. A variety of symptoms descended upon me at the same time, making it very difficult to untangle them. The blackness of those first days, coupled with unusual sensations in my body began to drive me into a state of fear. The illusion of safety in life had vanished. I had just witnessed my perfectly healthy, young wife, being snatched away from my embrace by death. If she was not safe, how safe was I? Thoughts of sudden death began to occupy my mind. I could imagine all of the medical anomalies creeping up to steal away my life. Stories of men who had died shortly after their wives had died, returned with macabre shades to my memory. You must understand that I am a very calm, very stable, very unsensational person. But it suddenly felt as if I was living in the body of another person. It felt as if I had swapped bodies with a person who had an array of ailments with which I was unfamiliar. I didn't feel at home in my body anymore.

Before I had even made it through the first twenty-four hours, a tightness had developed in my chest. A tightness that was associated with a feeling similar to "butterflies in the stomach". Before nightfall on that first day, I asked my sister to take me to the hospital. With such pressure in my chest, and difficulty in drawing enough breath, I was quite convinced that it was my heart that had been unable to bear the strain of the sorrow. In addition to the pressure in my chest, was a burning spot at the lower tip of my sternum. I have described it as the sensation that you have swallowed a hot coal from a fire and it has lodged right there. The burning simply never went away.

In the emergency room, the staff ran an ECG (electrocardiograph), and drew blood as a standard procedure to filter out a cardiac event. After that, apart from a few images imprinted on my memory from the trip home, I don't remember much until I woke up in my own bed the next morning. They had given me a powerful dose of Ativan, a benzodiazepine. Drugs in this class are commonly prescribed to calm people down, to relieve intense anxiety, or to aid sleep. They are intended for short-term use due to the fact that the body quickly becomes accustomed to them with chronic use, and the desired effect is soon lost. At this stage, the patient must make a choice; either he must face the unpleasant withdrawal effects, or increase his dosage to maintain the same effect. Clearly, benzodiazepines are highly addictive.

I came to this crossroads after three weeks when I began to read the package inserts, still fuzzy through tears, on the medicines that had been prescribed at the hospital. The shock of losing my wife lay heavily upon me, yet the benzodiazepines gave me the impression that it was not as bad as it could have been, and that life was far more positive than it actually was. You need to be warned that while taking these drugs, you are in danger of acting outside of your normal character. With lowered inhibitions, you will freely act and speak in ways that you would not normally do. Looking back, I know I spoke too freely and said some things that I now regret. When I realised what was happening, I had to ask one particular person to forgive me for the way in which I had communicated, and how grateful I am for their understanding and continued friendship.

So after three weeks, I simply stopped taking the Ativan. That was the second mistake. I plunged into the agony of sorrow yet again, this time knowing that the pill prescribed to help me was no longer there to help me. Those first few days were very long and hard; it was as if I had rewound the time and gone back to the day after the tragedy.

The withdrawal effects of the benzodiazepines were so harsh and unpleasant that I wished I had never taken them. I write from the perspective of a person who understands the pain that drives you to take these pills, and it is not my intention to discourage you. I want to encourage

you in your decision not to start if you can possibly help it. The distress of grief is enough of a burden to bear without facing the depression, nausea, confusion, inability to sleep, sweating, and anxiety associated with withdrawal soon afterwards. Benzodiazepines require a period of tapering off your dosage in order to avoid the withdrawal symptoms. I have titled this chapter, "Why hasn't anyone said anything about this?" You may be wondering the same thing; that's why I have spoken.

Almost a month later, after fighting through the grief for days that felt like years, crying every single day, the pain in my chest returned. Knowing that my condition had been written off as the effects of anxiety on my first visit to the emergency room, I resisted the urge to receive medical attention for almost a week. The pain, on the fourteenth of November 2012 became so sharp, radiating into my neck, jaw and left arm, that I again suspected my heart. The same tests were run when my father took me back to the hospital, and again, the same diagnosis and the same pills. After sleeping for approximately eleven hours, feeling better, life continued. Yet there is a fear associated with the suspicion that your heart may fail you at any moment.

I went to a local clinic to undergo a stress ECG. This too, revealed no unusual cardiac activity. Relieved, I began to consider my digestive system. I had been consuming copious quantities of antacids for heartburn, and had found biochemic tissue salts to be significantly helpful. A specialist physician did a gastroscope for me, revealing a small sliding hiatus hernia and inflammation in the stomach and oesophagus. He prescribed a gastric pump suppressant pill (also called a Proton Pump Inhibitor, or PPI). From the first week after taking that medication, I experienced significant relief from the pain in my chest.

After eight months, I found myself suffering with the same chest pain again. I had completed the prescribed course of treatment on the gastric pump suppressants and my problem had vanished. With time, however, after I had stopped taking the prescribed pills, the problem had begun to return. I had followed all of the diet recommendations and other suggestions such as raising the head of my bed. For months I had not been able

to sleep lying down, I had to sleep in a seated position. This of course destroys your quality of sleep, which in turn has an effect on the way you function and deal with difficulties during the day. At that time, I lost out on a lot of sleep. I seldom slept for more than a single hour in one stretch for approximately three months. It was during one of these hour-long sleeps that a frightening event unfolded.

At almost three in the morning, I flashed from a state of sleep to a state of full alert in an instant. Severe pain stabbed through the centre of my chest cavity, radiating through my pectoral muscles in both directions, up into the left side of my face and down my left arm. The pain was so severe I found myself clenching my teeth and fists for approximately five seconds. As the immediate effects began to wear off, I became covered with a cold sweat. Reaching for my right wrist, I felt my radial pulse and found it significantly elevated, very weak and thin. I felt disorientated and dizzy, as if I was about to pass out. There was no doubt in my mind that this was what so many other people had felt the moment before they died from a "heart attack". I honestly thought that this was my moment, and I was ready to be received into glory.

This, I felt, was the full-stop at the end of my forty-two year life, shortly after the forty-year life of my dear wife. For a few minutes I sat in my bed, leaning against the headboard, expecting the next episode to strike at any moment. When nothing happened, I got out of the bed, went to the bedroom cupboard and found myself a cardiac aspirin. With that eaten, I returned to the bed to decide what to do. If I was really going to die, I thought, I needed to use this opportunity to at least say goodbye to my daughters. If I wasn't going to die, I should probably go to the hospital for an evaluation of what had just happened so that I would know how to take care of my health from this point forward. Unable to reach either of my daughters on their mobile phones as they lay sleeping, I called my sister next-door and told her that I may have had a "heart attack" and thought I should probably go to the hospital.

She came through immediately and was eager to drive me the sixty-kilometre distance to the hospital in Witbank, the hospital to which I had

attempted to rush Charleen eight months before. I spoke calmly to my daughters, telling them that I didn't know what would happen to me, but that I loved them very much. We spoke about a few other issues, much to all of our distress. This was goodbye; a very sad goodbye.

By breakfast time, I walked out of the hospital with my parents, my sister, my niece and nephew, and my two daughters, and carried on with the business of an ordinary day. Tests had shown once again that this was not a cardiac event, but something of another nature. Again, they had given me benzodiazepines and an antacid and sent me home.

I share these stories because of the major impact they have had on my life, especially in the days and months following the death of my wife. People who look in at you from the outside have no idea that you are convinced that you may die within any twelve-hour stretch, and how that conviction alters the way you think and act in every situation. It plays a part in the words you choose while you are speaking and the places where you place items in your home. It is with this life-and-death mentality that I went to bed at night, knowing that I may not survive the night. When you experience inexplicable medical symptoms such as the ones I have been describing, it is extremely unsettling. I smiled at the long-term plans I had formerly worked toward.

What I'm saying is that because of these unusual symptoms in the body after massive emotional trauma, people who are sorrowing can live in the fear of sudden death. This is a time when the framework of your faith is tested to its limits. Christians who do not have a firm grasp on the details of what the Bible teaches, will struggle and will need the help of more mature Christians in this area. I know, for me, my faith was pressed to extremes, probed in every detail, and it was proven to be robust enough to support me through these months of trial. The simple reason for that is that it is a faith from God.[86]

So why do grieving people experience such unusual medical symptoms? Why do they suddenly feel as if they may suddenly die? Why is it that they find the answerless process of diagnosis so frustrating? Here

[86] Ephesians 2:8

are some suggestions based on information I have gleaned through this experience.

One important design feature in the human body is the vagus nerve. The vagus nerve extends from deep in the brain (medulla) controlling critical functions of organs all the way to the anus. The vagus nerve is responsible for regulating heart rate, the proper functioning of the digestive system, sweating, a number of muscle movements in the mouth, speech, maintaining the airways, the functioning of nerves in the outer ear, and part of the meninges. Because the vagus nerve is responsible for such a wide variety of bodily functions, it can be expected that people can experience very unusual symptoms when that nerve is stimulated in different ways. For example, it sometimes happens that when tickling the ear, such as when removing ear wax with a cotton-wool swab the patient may begin to cough.[87] In discussion with a medical doctor, I also heard of other strange bodily responses. One of those is the case of a patient who receives a hard knock on the anus, and who becomes unconscious because of the stimulation delivered to the vagus nerve through the digestive system. This also explains why, when prolonged pressure is applied to the area of the abdomen just below the sternum, a patient can lose consciousness. It is also stimulation of the vagus nerve that causes some patients to pass out when a needle is inserted into a vein to draw blood.

Extensive studies of the vagus nerve are currently in progress. Interestingly, vagus nerve stimulation is even among treatments offered to patients with conditions as complex as supraventricular tachychardia or atrial fibrillation. In such a case, a patient is taught to stimulate their vagus nerve by holding their breath for a few seconds, dipping their face in cold water, coughing, or pressing down with the abdominal muscles as if to produce a bowel movement. This stimulation can slow down the heart rate, or lower blood pressure, or both.

Because the vagus nerve continually reports the condition of the organs it controls to the central nervous system, inflammatory conditions

[87] Much of what I have included in this section can be found at the following link: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vagus_nerve. See also: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vasovagal_syncope

in the digestive system also produce stimulation. These nervous responses are amplified by relative dehydration. There have even been suggestions that the symptoms of irritable bowel syndrome can cause vagus nerve stimulation to the point where the patient experiences disturbed vision, dizziness, or even temporary loss of consciousness. These symptoms are not considered serious or life-threatening.

During times of intense emotional stress, over-stimulation of the vagus nerve can cause a sudden drop in blood pressure and heart rate. This can result in fainting (vasovagal syncope), more common in young children and women than in other groups of people. An "attack" of this type, is sometimes accompanied by a temporary loss of bladder control.

So if these are some of the medical complications surrounding the initial moments or hours after an emotional trauma, how does the stress of prolonged grief affect the body?

Your body constantly works toward a normal state of function (homeostasis). Any influence on the body, such as the ingestion of a poisonous substance, will force the body into a stressed condition, causing it to consume energy to return to a state of normality (homeostasis). This is also true in the case of an emotional impact, such as the loss of a loved-one. Hormones (corticosteroids) secreted by the body in order to help you function in a stressed, emergency situation, may continue to be secreted as long as the stressed condition lasts. In grief, this could be an extended period, bringing about a condition of chronic stress in the body.

One of the immediate responses of the body to stress is increased gastrin secretion. Gastrin is a hormone that stimulates the secretion of gastric acid (stomach acid).[88] This in turn brings about the secretion of excess gastric acid. It is not uncommon for a person who has experienced emotional trauma to experience a burning sensation in the lower chest, near the tip of the sternum. This can be frightening, adding to stress, creating an unfortunate cycle. Excess gastric acid irritates the stomach, and can make its way through the lower oesophageal sphincter and into the oesophagus, causing significant pain. In extreme cases, this can cause

[88] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gastrin

the oesophagus to spasm, producing chest pain and symptoms that are indistinguishable from those of a cardiac event.

I was caught off-guard by these symptoms and would have appreciated a forewarning, but you needn't be. They are part of experiencing strong emotions over an extended period. Yet you need to be wise about these unpleasant sensations. Because they present in the same way as the symptoms of cardiac events, you need to have a proper medical examination that includes an ECG and the necessary blood tests to establish whether you have sustained damage to the heart. This will serve both as a necessary precaution and as a means of setting you at ease over the discomfort you are feeling as a result of emotional stress.

In my experience, the presence of heightened levels of corticosteroids led to symptoms such as upset stomach, difficulty sleeping, strong emotions, rashes on the body, loss of concentration, heightened confusion in mildly stressful situations, and difficulty in finishing tasks. Other symptoms could also include gingivitis, headache, backache, aggression, raised blood-pressure, haemorrhoids, varicose veins, suicidal thoughts, panic attacks, or cardiovascular disease.[89] It was through this time that I came to understand that grief includes not only sharp emotional pain, but actual physical pain too. During the first few days and weeks, there seems to be no relief from these symptoms; constant tension and jaw-clenching, the effects of losing out on sleep and when you do fall asleep, waking up to the trauma all over again.

In addition to this, eating became a chore rather than something I did because I enjoyed my food. Combined with strong gastric disturbances, I found eating something I dreaded rather than anticipated. These all contribute to significant weight-loss.

In my case, I have found help from this aggressive spiral in the following ways:

Having been married for nineteen years, I was accustomed to having my wife care for my nutritional needs. Needless to say, when she died, my diet changed sharply. Not only did I not feel like eating, but when I

[89] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chronic_stress

did, I ate a wide variety of different meals very kindly provided by my loving family and church members. As I worked on establishing a new normal for my daughters and me, I began to rebuild our regular diet from scratch. We have opted for, as far as possible, a gluten-free, low-fat diet. We avoid refined sugar and salt. Yes, as I develop my skills in the kitchen, our diet has become more varied and interesting, as we add one detail after the next, but normally it comes down to basic proteins (chicken, fish, and lean beef), carbohydrates (potatoes, rice), vegetables, fruits and a little dairy in the form of home-made-yoghurt and a little cheese. If we want to snack on something between meals, we snack on fruit. This simple whole-food, high-fibre diet, free from highly refined products, has gone a long way to help me begin to feel normal and healthy again.

In order to remedy the damage and ongoing effects of gastric reflux, I have settled on a few medical measures. I now find I have to use a Proton-Pump Inhibitor (PPI) on a regular basis. This controls the secretion of excess gastric acid, limiting the volume of acid in the stomach, and therefore the damage it can cause by exiting the lower oesophageal sphincter (LOS, or LES), burning the oesophagus. I also use digestive enzymes and intestinal flora as supplements to aid good digestion. As a measure to maintain a low level of acidity in the body, I eat a teaspoon of alkaline powder each day and I also use biochemic tissue salts (combination 12, which includes natrium phosphate to combat excess acidity).

In addition to a proper, simple diet, I have maintained an adequate physical exercise routine. Every morning, before the day begins, my daughters and I walk five kilometres. In order to raise the impact of the walk, we each carry a suitable dumbbell, with which we do different arm and core exercises while we walk and talk. In addition to the actual physical strength and endurance that physical exercise produces, it has indeed improved my feeling of well-being.

It is said that time is a healer. In my experience of grief, it is *time spent thinking in the correct way about loss* that has been a healer. Without a total and joyful commitment to the fact that God is good and that everything He does is good, and that you yourself will finally come to under-

stand His overwhelming goodness, you will not come to terms with loss. How often my mind has journeyed through Philippians 4:4-9, sometimes in fear and agony, sometimes in sad longing. In no situation has the truth of which those words speak, failed to sustain me. In addition to this, I have fought against a victim mentality and worked to serve other people. The Christian life is an others-focused life. If this was true before the death of my wife, it is certainly true after her death too. I am grateful for the privilege of having had an others-focused marriage, family, and church-life; a legacy which now continues in my new normal.

12

Hurting in Hope at Sixteen

In a world where it has become acceptable for adolescents to respond immaturely to the hard realities of life, it is a rare refreshment to encounter a teen heart that honours Christ in calamity. It is because of such a response that I asked my elder daughter, Chyreece, if she would like to write about her experience of the death of her mom, at the age of sixteen. What follows is her brief account for your encouragement.

My aunty Jean and I helped my mom, as she struggled to walk, to the waiting car at the front door of our house. As she sat down in her seat, she looked up into my eyes. I bent down, kissed her and hugged her. Sadly, that would be the last time I would see her alive.

My dad had left in a hurry, and hadn't been on the road for long when I received a call from him. I was shaking a lot; so much that I fumbled the buttons on my phone and cut his call off the first time. Somehow, when he called the second time, I had a dreaded suspicion of what he may say; mom had died.

Propped on the edge of my seat in aunty Jean's lounge, I found myself wringing my hands. Whether it was from cold or fear, I do not know, but I couldn't stop shaking or crying. The only words echoing through my mind were, "God, please help my mom!" While this may seem like a simplistic, ordinary plea, these words flowed with deep emotion.

Yet even then, I also found myself strangely clothed with a deep sense of peace and the ability to think clearly. Calming down, we huddled together as aunty Jean suggested we pray. Her words, I do not remember, but I their sincerity and love left a lasting impression upon me. This was *my* little family, crying out to God, trusting in Him, no matter what calamity loomed ahead.

Only by God's grace am I able to depend on Him, through the blackness and heartache. Without Him, I am alone and hopeless. It is only now, when I recall that dreadful evening that I can see how God answered my plea. He took away my mom's pain, He received her into His arms, where she is and will be, eternally perfect. My mom will no longer face the endless battle of sin, or the miserable effects of the fall. My mom is gazing at the very face of Christ, the one who bought her with His blood. God answered my prayer in a way that I could never have imagined.[90]

The first days that followed that night were the worst I have ever experienced; waking up again and again to that tragedy, eating by habit, making funeral arrangements. One day smudged coldly into the next.

It bothered me that I didn't cry much at my mom's funeral. In fact, I began to feel guilty that everyone around me was crying more than I was. In retrospect, it has become clear to me that the full impact of what happened that night was still sinking in. Approximately four months later, it all culminated in a devastating blow. Intense pain flooded my heart; pain that drove me to call out to God to mercifully take away an agony I felt unable to bear.

He, I discovered, had better intentions for me however. Rather than removing the pain, He helped me to understand that He was drawing my eyes to Christ. He will never simply inflict pain on us in order to be vindictive; no. I had been failing to come to Him in my pain, and that is exactly what I now did. Rather than trusting in people to take away my pain, I found rest in Christ, without whom I fear I may never have endured. I would have become depressed and withdrawn. I would have lost hope of

[90] Romans 8:26

ever seeing my mom again, especially in the joy she now has, face to face with Christ.

After this heart-changing time, I found new strength to persevere through this calamity. Do not misunderstand me, it still really hurts. Yet in spite of the pain, I have hope. I have become a person who is able to forgive others more freely; I have learned that life is too short to waste being angry with other people. I have become more grateful for my friends and family. The death of my mom has made me long for heaven and has made it more real to me. I have become more compassionate toward people who have experienced the death of someone they loved and am more able to comfort them. This experience has created within me a desire to live my life in a way that glorifies God; being a life that is lived for the glories to come rather than for the temporary glitter of this present world.

Yes, death is an enemy, yet death is not the end. With Christ, I can be confident of this; I have eternal hope beyond the curtain of death. Praise God for His salvation through Christ, and for the hope it brings, even as I face something as real as the death of my mom.

Conclusion

I stopped the car in the gateway to a place called *Hephzibah*. Beside me was my dead wife. *Hephzibah* means, "My delight is in her."[91] And I see our gracious Saviour bring my dear wife Charleen, of nineteen years, into glory that cannot be fathomed. She's in the direct presence of God. She's living in front of the face of God; corum deo. She's filled with the joy that cannot be taken away. She's filled with a delight in the Lord Jesus Christ at seeing His grace for the first time—a beautiful, beautiful thing. She does not long to be back with me, I long for her to be there with the Saviour, and I long to be with her.

In Ezekiel 24:16, the LORD says to Ezekiel, "Son of man, with one blow I am about to take away from you the delight of your eyes." God had a purpose with Ezekiel. God desired to honour His name through a process that involved taking away Ezekiel's wife. God has done such a work in my heart through this experience that I say, "Lord, as much as I love this dear woman, and as much as our children love her, if it is for your glory, God please take her. Please have her; we open our arms and release her to you and we thank you for those nineteen years. God we pray that you would do such great things through her death; greater things in her death than you did in her life. We pray Lord that you would be pleased to strengthen us, and grant us the ability, not only to give her up freely, but

[91] Isaiah 62:4

to continue to live in this world bringing great honour and glory to the Lord Jesus Christ in the way He enables us to live through this trial."

This story of grace closes like this; and I'm hoping that this is the way your story ends too. Charleen was born lost and hopelessly ruined in sin and deliberate rebellion. God chose, through real human relationships—unfinished people sharing the gospel with unfinished people—to bring the gospel of Jesus Christ to that dear woman. She came to understand that God had foreknown her dearly before the beginning of time. She came to understand that God had predestined her to eternal life. She came to understand that God had called her, by His grace, into fellowship with Himself. She came to understand that even though she was a wicked person—we have been saying great things about her; but those were not the features that endeared her to God—she was endeared to God because Jesus Christ lived as Charleen. God sees Jesus Christ in place of her messed-up life. Jesus Christ lived as her. Jesus Christ died as her. She found such joy in that and couldn't stop speaking about it. Now she has come to understand what it is to be glorified; to be made *like* Jesus Christ, because when we see Him, we will be like Him.[92] I want to thank God, not only for a wonderful wife, but even more, for His wonderful, everlasting, work of grace in her life. And I want to say, "Honey, if you were beautiful in this life, I can't wait to see you again!"[93]

[92] 1 John 3:2

[93] This conclusion is based on the conclusion to the words I spoke at Charleen's funeral service; which would account for the unusual grammar. Only ten days into sorrow, I spoke these words out of biblical principle; principles that have carried me through the past nine months, and will carry me beyond. At the time of writing, the footage of the funeral was still available at http://www.ustream.tv/channel/charleen-funeral The audio files are available at http://tinysa.com/106774

Another Book by This Author

Unending Hope for the Exhausted Addict

2008 www.winepressbooks.com

More information is available at www.graceunlimited.co.za