



Lessons on Grace in a Valley of Grief

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Living a life of contentment depends in part upon one's expectations, and there's a disturbing trend among Christians to embrace expectations that are anything but biblical. Set foot in a Christian bookstore, and you'll see lots of titles about living a life of total enjoyment, staying young, and keeping healthy. One might even believe that with the proper advice from the right guru, you could lead a life *free* from trouble. But the Bible says nothing of an idyllic or carefree life this side of heaven. In fact, Jesus couldn't be any clearer in John 16:33 when he tells the disciples, "In this world you will have trouble" (NIV).

Yet we are masters at ignoring this simple truth. We continue to chase that rainbow of a life that was never intended for this world, and we're keenly disappointed when we run into heartache instead of a pot of gold. And wasn't this precisely the game plan of the demons in *The Screwtape Letters*? Screwtape explained to Wormwood, "We want a whole race perpetually in pursuit of the rainbow's end."¹

I ran into heartache several years ago. Before 1999, I had never really experienced true sorrow. I was happily married, and I enjoyed the added blessing of my husband, Will, a physician, blending into my family to an unusual degree. During our years of dating, my brother, Craig, and Will became the very best of friends. They loved spending time together, and kept each other laughing for hours on end. My dad and Will also shared an uncommon fondness and admiration for each other. Since God had blessed them both with incredible intellect, they enjoyed each other's insights, and they spent whole afternoons in deep conversation. Sometimes I even felt as though Will was more a part of my family than I was. We had many wonderful times

together, and I cherish all those memories.

But that season of life changed abruptly in the fall of 1999. One Saturday afternoon in November my parents boarded a plane in Florida to come see Will and me in Washington, D.C. Because they were using pass privileges from my sister's job with Northwest, they were making a connection in Detroit, which is where I grew up. About five minutes before I needed to leave for the airport, the phone rang.

My brother Craig had the unbearable job of telling me that our beloved father had had a heart attack on the airplane, and that he had died before they landed in Detroit. I remember hanging up the receiver, and just screaming and screaming and screaming. Will was on call at the hospital and we had just moved into the neighborhood the week before. Someone called the police in response to all the screaming and it was a surreal experience when they showed up at my door.

When I paged Will, he rushed home from the hospital and did his best to console me. He held me and read Scripture to me, but after many hours had passed, I still could not sleep. I went and sat on the bed where my parents were supposed to be. I was overwhelmed by how quickly my life had changed. And the only thing I could pray was, "God help her," because I didn't know how my mom could possibly survive the loss. In fact, I was worried from that very first night that it would be like losing both of my parents.



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Will and I took the first flight to Michigan the next morning, but standing at the curb in Detroit, I almost expected my dad to pick us up, apologizing for all the confusion. It's amazing how long it takes for reality to set in. Even after the funeral I could hardly grasp that my dad was truly gone. I wore the "invisible blanket" that C.S. Lewis talked about—no matter where I was or what I was doing, I felt isolated and separate. I felt there was an omnipresent fog around me, and something in me desperately wanted others to acknowledge it.

By God's grace and in spite of the fog, I graduated from law school six months later. I have never shed as many tears as I did that day. That my daddy wasn't there was enough, but my heartache was intensified by the fact that he had taken the highly unusual step of ordering my graduation gift the summer before. As I opened a rare and beautifully ornate copy of the United States Constitution, I thought I would die of grief. And it was in the weeks that followed, as I was studying for the bar exam, that I lived those first words of *A Grief Observed*, which so aptly state, "No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear." I started having panic attacks. I was afraid, although I didn't know what I was afraid of. I was emotionally and physically exhausted and yet I could not sleep. It was the undeniable hand of God that helped me pass the bar, and what a gift it was to have six weeks to rest before I had to start my new job.

Of course my mom was devastated by my father's sudden and unexpected death, but my fear of losing her in a sea of grief never materialized. Both of my brothers and my sister devoted lots of time to caring for her, and I bought a cell phone and talked to her during my commute every day. I was so proud of my mom because she clung to God's promises and her faith never wavered. As a family we coped fairly well. Sorrow brought us closer and we talked more often about our faith and things eternal. Life seemed to be returning to normal.

But two years later, in January 2002, I got another phone call from Craig. This time he was calling about my mom's brother, whom we all adored and lovingly called Uncle Butch. Uncle Butch had doted on all his nieces and nephews, teasing us unmercifully and loving us unconditionally. In his early fifties he had started to exhibit dramatic mood swings, and was diagnosed with bipolar disorder. Uncle Butch had visited Will and me in Washington in 2000 in the midst of a mild episode of mania. I remember him talking sixty miles an hour, and telling me all sorts

of hilarious stories. It was a bit like being around someone very gregarious, but it was over the top. You just knew something wasn't right. I remember answering the phone in the kitchen that evening when Craig told me that Uncle Butch had taken his own life. Again we traveled to Michigan for the funeral. But this funeral was different because even though mental illness is like any other illness in some respects, for those left behind after a suicide there is an element of grappling with feelings that their loved one chose to leave them.

In July that same year, my mom was visiting us, spending time bonding with our firstborn, when she got a call on her cell phone. I vividly remember hearing her cry out, and I remember running down the steps to see what was the matter. My sweet and wonderful brother, Craig, had been in a small airplane that went down that morning in the Atlantic Ocean. Although the Coast Guard had reported that there were no survivors, I tried to rationalize that Craig was a strong swimmer, that there might have been some mistake, that there had to be some mistake. I could not lose him too, and my mom couldn't lose him either. This would be too much.

I think probably all big brothers play the role of protector for their little sisters, but Craig, being seven years older than me, took this position very seriously. When as a child I was scared of storms or nightmares I didn't run to my parent's room. I think they would have sleepily told me I was being silly, but Craig was a fount of sympathy and never ran out of patience. And that was the story of our entire relationship. I always could, and always did, run to him in the storms of life.

The next morning we flew to Florida, where Craig had lived. We had a memorial service there, and then a few days later we went on to Michigan for the funeral. I remember sitting in a row on the airplane with my mom, Will, and our baby boy, and watching tears stream down Will's cheeks the entire flight. It was an odd comfort for me to have my husband grieve not just for me, but with me.

A couple of months later, in November 2002, my sister gave birth to a beautiful baby boy, named Brett. When Brett was just a couple of days old, the doctors told my sister and her husband that parts of Brett's brain were missing and that he could not process what his eyes were capable of seeing. Brett is now six years old and does not walk or talk. His blindness and other disabilities have made achieving even the simplest of baby milestones a challenge, and caring for him is tremendously taxing.

In December of 2004 I got yet another tragic and unexpected phone call. This time it was from my cousin Cassie, who is more like my sister than my cousin. It was Cassie's dad, Uncle Butch, who had committed suicide just a few years before. I remember Cassie's shock-induced calm as she told me that her three-month-old baby girl had inexplicably died that day at daycare.

Two days later we were once again traveling to Michigan, seeing the same friends and family. In some respects it was like reliving a terrible nightmare, but the tiny little casket and precious, perfect baby lying inside made this funeral especially heart-wrenching. Although Cassie and her husband, Michael, both seemed resigned to God's sovereignty despite their aching hearts, it was impossible not to wonder how could taking this little life, ripping this beautiful baby girl away from this loving family be part of God's plan? How could He use something like this for good? These are hard questions, and I don't have answers right now, maybe I never will. Will and I are blessed with three sons, and Cassie and Michael now have two daughters, but it often occurs to me, and probably to them, that they *should* have three.

Over the course of these difficult years, I've seen various biblical truths play out in my own life and in the lives of those around me. Specifically, these years have taught me that God never gives us more than we can handle. When I hear people say things like, "I couldn't take it if such and such happened," I cringe. 2 Corinthians 12:9 says, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (NIV). I am learning to rest in confidence that whatever comes my way, He will be there to sustain me. It's very freeing, not just to read this truth in Scripture, but to know it in the depths of my soul.

Another truth I've observed is that life is fleeting and the future unknowable. James reminds us that we cannot know what will happen tomorrow; he says, "You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes." (4:14, NIV). This I know intimately, so intimately, in fact, that unexpected phone calls at odd hours startle me. But the benefit of my experience is that I treasure the gifts I have in the present. My losses have instilled a profound gratitude for the here and now.

I've also learned that true love for God is not based on what He can do for us, as some "Christian" best-sellers suggest. Rather, love for God should be a response to who He is and His love for us. And that brings me to the most vital of the lessons that I have

learned. Simply put, it is all about believing God and His Word. Regardless of whether you are stuck in the valley or enjoying still waters, every day you face a choice of utmost importance. Are you going to believe God and His promises on this day, in this moment, or are you going to doubt Him? There are really only two options.

As I have sought to trust him in my sufferings, He has been correcting my expectations and centering me in the present so that I do not miss today's gifts. I am finding that there's something qualitatively different about lessons learned in times of trouble. While the still, small voice of our Heavenly Father is always there, somehow it is easier for me to discern in the valley of the shadow of death. Beside still waters there are often distractions for me, but in the hour of desperation, when there is nowhere to turn, I have found that God's grace is indeed sufficient. These times of brokenness have instilled contentment, gratitude, and empathy.

Some may question whether we could learn God's lessons another way, but I believe Job's plea for understanding is instructive. God answered him with a series of questions that highlight how little we, in our humanness, truly understand, and then He said, "Will the one who contends with the Almighty correct him?" So even though I do not understand the series of tragedies that have happened in my family, I cannot contend with the Almighty, much less presume to correct Him. Rather, I trust that because God is a good, wise, and loving Father, these hardships were necessary for my ultimate good.²

Through this experience, I desperately want to learn and apply all that God has for me, and I want to continue to reflect on these lessons and share with others God's faithfulness and love, even in the worst of times. As I do, the words of Isaiah are a great encouragement: "Those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint." (40:31, NIV).

Notes

1. C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, Letter xv, para. 4.

2. "The more we believe that God hurts only to heal, the less we can believe that there is any use in begging for tenderness. A cruel man might be bribed—might grow tired of his vile sport—might have a temporary fit of mercy, as alcoholics have fits of sobriety. But suppose that what you are up against is a surgeon whose intentions are wholly good. The kinder and more conscientious he is, the more inexorably he will go

on cutting. If he yielded to your entreaties, if he stopped before the operation was complete, all the pain up to that point would have been useless. But is it credible that such extremities of torture should be necessary for us? Well, take your choice. The tortures occur. If they are unnecessary, then there is no God or a bad one. If there is a good God, then these tortures are necessary. For no even moderately good Being could possibly inflict or permit them if they weren't." (C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, p. 43.)

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