

CATCHING YOUR BREATH

Grieving the Loss of a Spouse



Susan VandePol



introduction

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used to sit in the little blue over-stuffed chair in the corner of our room watching him breathe. He was trying to live and trying to die at the same time.

Scientists say married couples' breathing and heart rhythms begin to synchronize after a time. Others may not understand, but you and I know it's true. When the final pause between the inhale and exhale wasn't a pause any longer . . . when there weren't any more breaths to come and the waiting was over . . . your heart stopped, and you couldn't catch

your breath. Me either. Even if you weren't there; even if there were miles between you and your spouse . . . you felt it.

On a rainy afternoon in April, after the pauses had grown longer between each heaving effort to breathe, my husband of twenty-two years exhaled for the last time—and we said goodbye.

I'm holding my breath now, years later, as I write and remember, and I'm wondering what circumstances brought you here to this booklet, to this page. I can almost see you; it seems you are holding your breath too.

We're both here for the same reason. Your spouse has taken their last breath, and your breathing is labored.

Hold fast. The Spirit of the omnipresent God, the Maker of Heaven and Earth, reigns in these transactions of life, breath, death, and circumstance.

God's breath, the ever-flowing life of His Spirit, will continue to course into you. You will inhale and exhale again—without always catching your breath on the jagged edge of your pain. You will catch your breath, and you will live, because your God is the God of the living and the dead.

Susan VandePol

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EDITORS: J.R. Hudberg, Monica LaRose, Peggy Willison

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one

Why It Hurts So Much

When the sixth hour came, darkness fell over the whole land. . . . And Jesus uttered a loud cry and breathed His last. And the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. (MARK 15:33, 37-38 NASB)

Some people describe it as a tearing; a physical tearing. Some say they can't breathe, and some say it feels like the bleeding won't stop. You know what they mean, because your loved one is gone too. The bed that sometimes seemed too small for the both of you on a bad day, but never snug enough on a good one, now feels as vast as the sea and bottomless as its deepest chasm.

Your spouse is not here, and your heart is an arid wasteland. You never understood before, when others tried to explain it, but now . . . now you do. There is a "darkness" over the land for you too.

The last breath Jesus took was His purposeful, willing surrender to the mutinous experience of death. But—though you feel it mocking your best attempts to breathe at this moment—*death did not win*. The love spilled out that dark day is the same love that sealed the new covenant of salvation²¹ for you and me, even though the covenant bond between you and your spouse has been torn in two. Their death numbs your senses and inflames them all at the same time.

21 *The apostle Paul had this to say about the **new covenant**, “The law of Moses was unable to save us because of the weakness of our sinful nature. So God did what the law could not do. He sent His own Son in a body like the bodies we sinners have. And in that body, God declared an end to sin’s control over us by giving his Son as a sacrifice for our sins” (ROMANS 8:3 NLT).*

But the covenant love that cost everything truly regained what now seems forever lost, and grief’s barren fields *will* bear sacred fruit, though all you may see now is a lifeless horizon. Here’s why: marriage is temporal; the reality it symbolizes is *eternal*.

When you look into the mirror of your memory, what gazes back is the weight and glory of that which your marriage reflected. Your pain now is the temporal portion of “until death do us part,” but the eternal reality is one of victory over death. The truth of it begins to shed light on the depth of your pain: death violates God’s unalterable covenant. *But God violated death’s imagined victory in return*: “Unless a kernel of wheat is planted in the soil and dies, it remains alone. But its death will produce many new kernels—a

plentiful harvest of new lives” (JOHN 12:24 NLT).

Look back into the reflective mirror of your marriage. There, springing forth from what you thought was a lifeless horizon, is a plentiful harvest of new life, violating death’s assumed finality.

Marriage is a mutual submission to the invasive love of another. Invasive because it is bound by covenant promises, meaning an “exchange” must take place. And though it is a mystery, a sacrifice must be made too—one that requires sacrifice, blood. No wonder it’s called the marriage “altar.”

The covenant of marriage is the sealing of a relationship—a co-mingling of blood and hearts producing a supernatural oneness between the covenant partners. The two united into one depicts the very essence of this covenant (GENESIS 2:24). This is so because God is the One who seals the covenant, meaning it cannot be breached without the most devastating ramifications and pain. You see, God is the glue that joins two separate beings and mysteriously merges the sinews of their love into one. Earthly marriage is the image-bearer of the covenant between Christ and His bride, and death’s narcissistic disregard has plundered that reflection.

The depth of this covenant bond is one of the reasons your loss hurts so much now; what was unassailably and immutably one has now been torn into two.

Your grief is one of ineffable pain that requires a sacred response. The word *grief* cannot even begin to fully describe or contain it. In the same manner, Jesus’s sacrifice for us was one of ineffable pain, requiring a sacred response as well, though words

cannot describe or contain His pain either.

But death doesn't make the rules—God does.

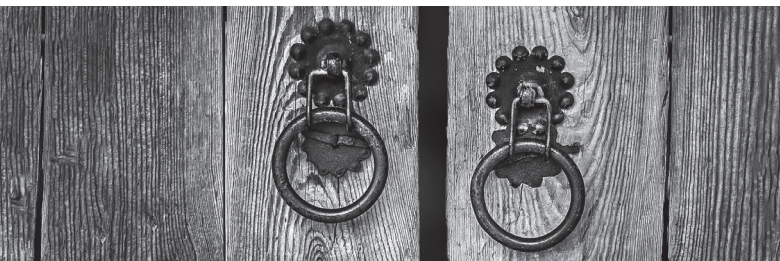
The torn temple veil that evoked terror, and was thought to be a sign of destruction, now speaks comfort to the grieving believer, because just like the torn veil of the temple, grief's gaping impoverishment will be filled by His plentitude. His heart was torn so that your torn heart could be healed. The same power that tore the veil, opened the tomb, and raised Jesus will also open the tomb that is your heart right now—and resurrect what seems so final.¹

Our King faced off with death, and there was no competition. The Lamb's slain body was resurrected in death's face and shut its mouth forever.

Jesus knows what it is to have love torn away. He shared the communion cup of His own blood and made an exchange, so that whatever you and I suffer, He has suffered too—and come out victorious. He asked His Father to make us one with Him (JOHN 17:21), and just like that day at your marriage altar, the bond was forged. But Jesus also rose from death's shadow so you could rise too.

Even now, there is a song somewhere in the distance. It's your song. You can't hear the melody yet, but you know the words: "Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?" (1 CORINTHIANS 15:54–55 NLT).

That changes everything.



two

Unknowns

Grief asks many questions. It longs for what it does not possess anymore: your beloved. If they were still here, but you couldn't find them, the search would be feverish until you held them again. The same applies in your grief. You need their warmth, and you need answers; you need to know *why*. That the answer is unknown doesn't feel like enough—because, as you know, grief is no ordinary language, and it cannot be satisfied with an ordinary answer.

Unknown doesn't cut it . . . or maybe it does.

The neurologist's stoicism as he droned my husband's fatal diagnosis unceremoniously dumped us into the unknown. It was a sudden blank in our lives, or maybe

more like the static that used to show up at midnight after the TV shows were done for the day, way-back-when. It was the screaming non-sound of deep loss. The unknown just stared back at me, and it seemed to have no manners. I wish I could have punched it. The word played over and over in my mind, through the night and into the next day. There was nothing else, just... *unknowns*.

The news spread quickly, and the next evening, a car pulled into our driveway, then another car, and then another. They lined the street. I don't know how many friends came that night, but we squeezed them all into our little home. The sweetness of it was indelible. Weeping did endure that night, and joy was a long way off, but we worshipped God with our grief and asked for His healing. Our son Samuel and a friend took out their guitars and led us to the throne of grace. I remember watching our son Benjamin lift his hands as he sang for mercy. He was ten.

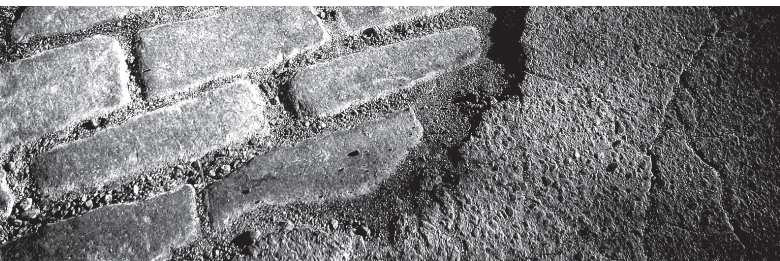
After all the "amens" were said, a heavy silence fell on the room, and I felt as though we were not done. The Lord was asking us to continue praying. The hour was late, and we were all exhausted, but we bowed low again. The voice of a dear friend said, "Susan, I think the Lord wanted us to pray again because there is something He wants to say. It's something He wants to say to you. He wants to tell you that He is there for you in the doorway of your *unknown*."

No one but the Lord had known that day about the word that had been taunting me. It seemed God had stopped His world for me, and spoke my world back into being. If God has a specialty, it's the unknown.

He was telling me whenever something looked unknown, He would be there, waving His banner as a reminder of the intimate knowledge He possessed about me. From then on, the unknown would be known because *He* was in it. He was there, inhabiting whatever it was I didn't see, understand, or know.

The unknown became a place to meet God and experience His love. It was love in a word, changing me then, continuing to this day.

For you, my grieving friend, let the unknown be a time to rest your mind and body from their striving and find your repose in the arms of the one who inhabits the *unknown*. You see, "To have faith is to be sure of the things we hope for, to be certain of the things we cannot see." (HEBREWS 11:1 GNT)



three

Settled

Maybe the gospel writers used few words to describe the moment Jesus gave up His life because there aren't any words equal to the task. What words would have sufficed? Three hours of otherworldly darkness escorted the King to His death. And when His time had come, He cried out with a scream so unusual, so transcendent, and so powerful that the temple veil was torn, and the Earth quaked and shuddered. The juncture at once declared history's preeminent triumph, and unrivaled grief.

Whether there were dark hours leading up to your spouse's last breath or not, you are familiar with the internal scream. Your world has quaked, and a seismic fault now runs through the foundation of your life. But amidst all the crumbling and dust and

silt, the same God who created it all is the Rock of our salvation and can set us on a firm foundation.

I grew up in California, so I know what it is to live through an earthquake. I know what it is to feel small and helpless and unable to stop the ground from quaking and the walls from closing in. When we built our first home, it was important to begin with a foundation that would stand the test. Our friend Roland is a contractor, and we enlisted him for the task. Because the build began in the middle of winter, he had to pay special attention to the condition of the soil before setting the foundation in place. To support a structure the soil must be settled, or the foundation will fail and the home would be compromised. If the solid ground is disturbed, great care must be taken to compact it again before building. Much depends on the magnitude of the disturbance and severity of weather patterns in the surrounding area. The greater the shifting of soil, the greater the time needed to level it and make it suitable for building.

Grief has shifted the soils under the foundation of your life, and there is so much to consider. The disturbance underneath you has been great and requires time to settle. Let it settle, griever, because the future stability of what you build depends on how well the ground around your life has come to rest. Rushing through this period of settling will be detrimental.

Just like the intentional planning for a foundation, take intentional time to grieve. Do not bury the debris of your grief below the surface; it will degrade

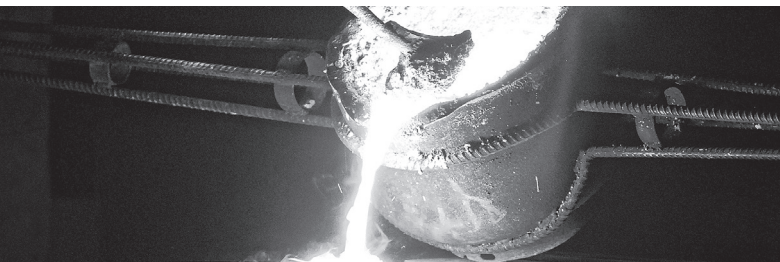
over time, and your house will shift and crack. Be patient; God will sift it for you. And while you wait, stay inside His love, where everything you need for healing is within reach.

Do not stand on the world's foundation, where the weather is inclement and seeks to draw you to compromise. Your physical health, relationships, emotions, and spiritual well-being must rest on the one, true foundation—Jesus Christ. He is the Balm of Gilead¹ who makes the wounded whole. Do not look elsewhere to false comforts where temporary relief is the counterfeit goal.

➤ **The Balm of Gilead**, referenced by the prophet Jeremiah (JEREMIAH 8:22) represents the healing found through Jesus. The “balm” or ointment comes from the balsam tree originally located in Gilead, a mountainous region east of the Jordan River. Gilead means “monument of testimony.” The balm flows from the tree when an incision is made, and is considered a priceless gift. In the same way, Jesus soothes, comforts, and heals our wounds through the priceless gift of His blood which flowed from His wounds for our healing, and testimony.

Let grief settle and you will not sink under its weight. God will press the earth firmly around your roots, and you *will* stand . . . but give it time.

“He will restore, support and strengthen you, and he will place you on a firm foundation” (1 PETER 5:10 NLT).



four

Dross

Our kids grew up deeply loved and loving deeply. It is their true heritage. For my son Ben, his love and life were still young when his dad died, and as life has grown bigger, sometimes, so has his grief. Grief requires tender and consistent care with each stage of life, and when Ben became a young man, new losses sometimes reopened the old.

Such is the loyalty of grief.

Though Ben didn't get as many years with his dad as Jennifer and Samuel, God's kindness (in hindsight) was expressed to him in a more subtle gift, because by the time Ben came along, Bob had gotten pretty comfortable being the dad of a fragile,

crying baby. He changed more diapers, cleaned up more barf, and many a night carried his baby boy up and down the hallway rhythmically singing, “Yaaah-yah . . . yaaaah-yah . . . yaaah-yah . . .” until Ben fell asleep—most of the time.

When Ben grew big enough to tackle the canyons and hills surrounding our home, the two of them would hike together and share the sights, sounds, smells, and conversation that make up the heavenly stuff of father-and-son memories. Above all, he remembers learning to play soccer, because it was his dad who first taught him how. The world refers to it as the “Beautiful Game,” but for Ben, its beauty is really his boyhood connection to his dad.

Passion for the game followed Ben through the years. His hopes to play soccer in college were realized, but injuries and circumstances beyond his control prevented the culmination of dreams that had begun in our backyard so many years before. He wanted to play for his dad. He wanted to be excellent and honor him and persevered through four years of some unbearable conditions and crises to do so, but it was not to be. The captain of the soccer team grieved the loss of his last year of college soccer and, with it, his dad. His heart told him that letting go of soccer meant letting go of his dad, and he couldn’t see how doing such a thing was possible.

One night we sat together with worn spirits and bowed for comfort and direction. God spoke to us that night, and the vision He gave is one for the ages. A borderless room appeared to me, and it shone with gold. A large crucible sat in the middle of the room

filled with liquid treasure. The one attending the gold's purification process was familiar; it was Jesus. He smiled and ceremoniously skimmed the dross off the top of the gold with His own hand and told me the gold was Ben's grief. Then He said, "He gets to keep it." What Jesus skimmed off the top was the part of Ben's grief that was serving no purpose anymore. The portion of grief that remained was Ben's to keep, but it was time to purify his treasure. The Lord assured us that He would take care of the task Himself; Ben wouldn't have to do it. He just needed to trust.

Refining metal with fire is one of the oldest methods known to humanity and is still in use today. Flames need to reach over 1,000 degrees Celsius for dross to rise to the top, but there is no loss in value to the remaining gold throughout the process, only increase in its worth and potential.

Dross is considered a contaminant and must be removed, or the value of the precious metal will be lost. To "refine" something literally means to free it and to improve it for the purpose of *excellence*. In Greek it translates "to be ignited." Fittingly, the symbol for gold (Au) comes from a Latin word meaning "shining or glowing dawn," because during the final stages of refining, the gold experiences what is called a "brightening." This phenomenon occurs when the last impurities vanish, and the pure metal emits a bright flash of light.

The vision from that evening's time of sorrow and prayer continues to teach. We don't miss the dross at all.■ It is made up of useless waste and keeps a

broken heart from healing. Leaving it behind has never seemed painful, nor does it induce more grief, because the Master's hand does the work of it and sees to its completion.

✎ *"I have held many things in my hands and I have lost them all. But whatever I have placed in God's hands, that I still possess." — MARTIN LUTHER*

My persevering friend, the only comfort you may have right now are the tears on your face; and when you look forward, the seeming endlessness of it all appears to hold no hope for the future. Passions and dreams may have ended in your backyard too, and memories may haunt instead of heal. But the compassionate flame of your Refiner will not leave you with riches that cannot be used. His love will not allow waste to tarnish your worth or potential. The treasure of your grief will remain to accomplish its purpose—but what is useless, what will not produce anything of value, what will contaminate your future, must be entrusted to the refining hand of Jesus.

You cannot separate the dross yourself; it is too difficult. But that's okay. Everything is difficult right now, so one less thing to handle is a respite, a kind of healing in itself. The refining will continue throughout the life of your grief, but when it has been tried, you will come forth as gold.

Ben wanted to play soccer to honor his dad because he wanted to be excellent for him. In God's providence, to be refined and live without the dross of grief means to be free, to be improved, and to be

excellent. It looks like Ben's dream did come true. No wonder Jesus was smiling.

“But He knows the way that I take. [and He pays attention to it.]. When He has tried me, I will come forth as [refined] gold [pure and luminous]” (JOB 23:10 AMP).



five

Remembering

One evening, near the end, I was lying next to Bob as he rested in bed. He turned and held me tightly with his gaze and said, “Remember, always remember, I love you all so much.” I gave him my word. The moment would be impossible to forget, as is his life. On his gravestone are the words, “We’ll remember.”

Theologian Victor Shepherd says to remember “is to bring up a past event into the present so that what happened back then continues to happen right now. What unfolded back then, altering forever those whom it touched, continues to be operative now, altering those who ‘remember’ it now.”

Think back to the marriage altar we noted before,

where a covenant was made through sacrificial love. There is another kind of altar, equally as sacred, but one that contradicts the well-meaning intentions of your loved ones who misunderstand and want you to “move on” and “have more faith.” It is the *altar of remembrance* and marks God’s faithfulness and unrivaled power that stops at nothing to make a way for His people.

This altar reminds us of when Jesus refused to save Himself so that He could save us from the unrelenting darkness. It invites us to trust when the path is covered in shadow and fear. This altar reminds us of when He brought us through the impossible and steadied us in the midst of present chaos and future unknowns. It tells others our story and leads the lost and weary home. This altar reminds us of His promise to always be with us. This altar has boundless possibilities and power to heal and transform our pain.

This altar *alters us forever; as it should.*

Grief must move and be expressed to be healthy, but we never simply “move on.” Life is too sacred for that. No matter what anyone may tell you, dear friend, *remembering* is an expression of faith when surrendered to God as an act of worship.

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted” (MATTHEW 5:4 NASB). Mourning is the intense experience and expression of grief. To get to the comfort, we mourn. It is here, at the altar of remembrance, that the blessing awaits, and that spiritual muscle is formed in faith and pain. This altar gives permission to grieve and remember.

Your loss is worthy of the effort by far, and—though it's hard to imagine—the comfort you receive will surpass the grievous night you inhabit now.

Think of this: when the Israelites crossed the Jordan, the very rocks under their feet became their altar of remembrance. The path through the unthinkable became their glory and signified a new beginning in a new land with a new sense of purpose, and it will be so for you.

Treasured friend, your altar must be built of stones from the middle of your Jordan too. Intentional remembering is sacred and is literally made up of the rugged path you have walked; just like Jesus. But the path He walked must become the Cornerstone of your altar and your grief for you to stand.

The privilege and gift of remembering didn't stop in the Old Testament. Our Christ called for the continuing, intentional practice of it when He instituted communion—far more than a one-time token act we perform before “moving on.” The quiet hours in the upper room marked the transformation of Passover, the central memorial of deliverance to the Jewish people. Jesus breathed new life into it with His own. He “fulfilled” its meaning, or . . . *filled it full*, and told us to continually drink Him in until we are reunited—and filled-full with the meaning of remembering.

There was a time when our daughter Jennifer was racked with the inconsolable thought that her Dad would be forgotten by others, though he was profoundly loved by all who knew him. The pain of it waned through the years but continued to

secretly pierce this daddy's girl as life carried on and she wondered if people had forgotten. We added many stones to her altar of remembrance over time, including a walk down the aisle without her dad, and the birth of two sweet girls. When a third was on the way, and a boy was the forecast, Jennifer's husband shared that God had always put the name "Zechariah" on his heart if they ever had a boy. The meaning? *Yahweh remembers.* 🏠

🏠 **"Remember** the former things long past, for I am God, and there is no one like Me..." (ISAIAH 46:9)

Dear grieving friend, you are free to remember your loved one, because God remembered you on the supreme altar of remembrance, and He asks us all to remember Him in return. He gets it.

Be intentional about it, face into it when others want to look away, honor both God and your beloved, and remember . . . He loves you so much.



six

Restoration

It's the middle of spring as I write, but it may not be spring for you, no matter what time of year it is. There is a certain chill that tarries with grief, despite the season. But there are other truths that accompany the ever-changing climate of grief, each as certain as the dawn and the shifting of the sun and rotation of the Earth. It is your God who changes the seasons, and it is He who can restore in the middle of your winter.

By His might alone are the heavens formed and sustained, and the clouds are the dust of His feet. The God to whom even death must bow satisfies the Earth with the fruit of His works, and He can satisfy the thirst of your barrenness too.

He restores all things—He will restore you. Even now, the process has begun. The Vine supplies what

is needed, and your pain will bear good fruit when the Vinedresser lays His sure and gentle shears to the task of pruning. But do you dare to let Him? Is it safe? Let's consider: *Cutting* in order to *restore* might seem an odd combination, but God's ways are higher and so are the results.

Listen to the famous words from the gospel of John:

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing" (JOHN 15:1-2, 4-5 ESV).

You see, for the Vinedresser it's personal, because His Son is the Vine, and you are the branches. His purpose is multifaceted, but *restoration* is the primary goal. The task is carried out in love, and incisions are made.

Pruning of grapevines is always done in the winter while the vine is dormant. The enterprise aims at selectively thinning any competing shoots or branches that show signs of disease or that may infect the surrounding branches. Left to their own, grapevines grow too dense with insufficient amounts of "fruiting wood." Circulation becomes stymied, and the vine cannot breathe.

You know the feeling.

The Vinedresser focuses on increasing fruiting

wood, but does not allow for too much fruit at the wrong time, which would cause the vine to lack the energy and nutrients needed to grow and fully ripen.

A secondary goal is to train the branches to grow on a structure conducive to harvesting and which conforms to the trellis on which it grows, thereby establishing its future. *Restoration pruning* focuses on *re-establishing* a vine, particularly after a storm, to assure its recovery and strong springtime growth. The Vinedresser is tender and strong at the same time; confident and decisive, and He knows the character and tendencies of each “member” of His vineyard. It is so with you and with your grief.

You see, *restoration* gives back more than has been taken. This is the victory! Like the man from the synagogue in Mark 3, we stretch out our withered, grieving existence, and Jesus *restores* us. It is the nature of God’s abundance. His *restorative* grace exceeds and runs over the boundaries of death—because His love cannot be contained. This is the “more” of Ephesians 3:20,¹ and it cannot be measured.

♪ “Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us” (EPHESIANS 3:20 NIV).

But first . . . there is pruning. No need to cower. Listen: His pruning is His embrace, and all that is required is your consent. This is the meaning of “abide” in John 15. To be pruned is to rest.

Some remnants, common to life and grief, have names you are familiar with, and they have stolen from

you. Thus far you have not been able to remove their hold on your own. This is because the Vinedresser has been waiting to do it for you, to *restore* you. I will give some of them a name, but you must be the one to present them to the Vinedresser for pruning.

Whether your finger is pointing at yourself or at someone else, these must undergo pruning: resentment, anger, unforgiveness, bitterness, blame, regret, unwise or hurtful relationships, worldly vices, and false comforters. You may immediately know when you read the words if their presence has afflicted your mind and heart. They are bitter to the taste, and defile your grief, the memory of your loved one, and your future. Yet you have made a counterfeit peace with them, maybe even embraced them as friends. If you hold them near, they will taunt you and dishonor the one you have lost. They will turn on you and your grief and demand that someone pay for your loss.

But that's the point—Someone did.

My friend, the overflowing grace of each season is yours, and the promise of The Vinedresser to *restore* you is sure—even if life feels permanently dormant now. The sacred fruit of your grief will thrive, and your roots will continue to grow deep and steady you. Because for the Vinedresser, remember, it's personal.

✞ *"Now the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ Jesus, will personally restore, establish, strengthen, and support you after you have suffered a little"*
(1 PETER 5:10 HCSB).



seven

The “Good” in Goodbye

No one knew, but I climbed in under the blanket on the side of the bed where Bob had taken his last breath and covered myself up so that the fabric of what had touched him last was touching me.

Certain goodbyes mark time forever, not because they ease the transition into the next thing, but because they feel like a perpetual film glitch.

Our word “goodbye” literally comes from “God be with you.” Other cultures have their own goodbye rituals. In Russia, they don’t clean the room where their guest stayed right away after their departure. In Turkey, after a gathering of family or friends, they throw a bucket of water on the road behind the

guests' car as they leave, symbolizing a river where the current escorts loved ones away on a smooth journey and back with a smooth return. After completing the study of the Torah, Jewish people recite a type of goodbye that says, "We will return to you," because goodbye is never final in God's story.

For most of us, saying goodbye seldom feels good, but when we put God into the picture . . . when we insert His inscrutable name into the goodbye and dare to believe . . . perspective changes. The truth is, Sin is the cause of all our goodbyes. It is the separator.

God hates sin because it separates Him from His Beloved. You and I know the intensity of that kind of separation. But God's hate for sin and the separation it imparts, derails death. God's solution is borne on the wings of compassion and conquers grief's accompanying hopelessness. God knows what it feels like to be severed from His Loved One, and did the unthinkable to get us back and put us back together. "The Son of man came to seek and to save that which was lost" (LUKE 19:10 ASV). No goodbye can separate us from the hope and promise of tomorrow.

Still, we ask "Why?" It is all still so unbearable, and our limited human nature leans into the microphone and asks the question, "If God is good . . . ?" We want someone to step up and give the explanation; as if an explanation would be enough. That's why Jesus gives more—*much more*—than an answer, because a simple answer to life's biggest "why" wouldn't be enough. And, my friend, would it matter? Your loved one would not return even if you knew the answer. That's why God gives more than an answer—because we

need more than an answer! He gives much more than our questions ask for.

Jesus's disciples asked the question too. They couldn't accept or understand why He had to leave them; why He had to say goodbye. In John 16:7 (KJV), Jesus told them, "I tell you the truth; It is expedient for you that I go away; for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send Him unto you."

The painful act of our Savior's goodbye turns out to be the very means by which Satan and death are thwarted forever. Now we live not only with the one true God beside us, but *in* us. This is the victory over "goodbye."

God not only reweaves what Satan incompetently intended for evil into good, but evil's attempts backfire, so that in God's hands a glorious harvest emerges from what Satan had left for dead. Because Jesus said goodbye, even in the midst of life's worst pain, we are empowered to live in the *more*. What a gift!

I slid out from under the blanket of the past; you will too. God will do more than heal your broken heart. Learn to live in the *more*. It is the good in your goodbye.



eight

Epilogue: The Commission

My friend, our visit has been short, but I pray you understand now that there can be good in your “goodbye.” Your grief will continue to teach and minister as you abide and uncover your treasure. You’ve already begun to discover the miracle of the horizon, and I’m honored to have walked across the river with you to begin building your altar.

And now, this to send you off: In Luke 9, the disciples, beyond exhaustion, begged Jesus to send the crowds away to find provision elsewhere. But Jesus knew the paradox of giving out of brokenness, though the disciples reasoned that they were in a “desolate place” and did not have anything left to give.

You and I know the feeling.

Instead, Jesus said, “*You feed them.*” Imagine.

Imagine Jesus saying that to you . . . right now in your desolate place. You think, *I've got nothing left. Nothing.* But what if your *burden* is your plenty? You've got an abundance of that! Remember, the provision that day came from the hand of Jesus, and Jesus kept providing—as He will for you. What comprised that day's leftovers were broken pieces “filling-full” of God's promise to always be with them and in them.

But it would take a miracle, you say. Yes. Exactly.

Paul said of the churches in Macedonia, “*In a great ordeal of affliction their abundance of joy and their deep poverty overflowed in the wealth of their liberality*” (2 CORINTHIANS. 8:2 NASB). Believer, the fragments of life you think are good for nothing are really food for giving. Your Master will surprise you and lovingly blend them with His healing joy, and grief will become your abundant wealth and overflow to others. Death does not have the last word after all, because death has been swallowed up in victory.

Hold fast, my friend. Look up. God is nigh. I'm praying you through.

“The people who walk in darkness will see a bright light. The light will shine on those who live in the land of death's shadow” (ISAIAH 9:2 GW).

EndNotes:

1. “Life After Breath” by Susan VandePol, Chapter 23. Morgan James Publishing 2015



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