

God on Trial



The Book of Job
S E R I E S G U I D E



Bethany

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WEEK 1

PART 1

Why do the Righteous Worship?

Job 1–2

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Notes

Week 1

Scripture Highlights

Job 1:9-11: ⁹Then Satan answered the Lord and said, “Does Job fear God for no reason? ¹⁰ Have you not put a hedge around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. ¹¹ But stretch out your hand and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face.”

Job 1:20-22: ²⁰Then Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head and fell on the ground and worshiped. ²¹And he said, “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.” ²² In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong.

Job 2:4-5: ⁴Then Satan answered the Lord and said, “Skin for skin! All that a man has he will give for his life. ⁵ But stretch out your hand and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse you to your face.”

Job 2:9-10: ⁹ Then his wife said to him, “Do you still hold fast your integrity? Curse God and die.” ¹⁰ But he said to her, “You speak as one of the foolish women would speak. Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?” In all this Job did not sin with his lips.

Week 1: Discussion Questions

ICEBREAKER QUESTION

What misconceptions have you held in the past regarding the book of Job?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Where have you seen the hidden spiritual nature in the sufferings you personally have experienced? (See Ephesians 6:10-20)

Recall Job’s Two Tests (1:9-10, 2:4-5). How do they reflect what’s commonly believed about God and about how the world works?

How do the friends provide a positive example at the beginning of this book?

APPLICATION QUESTIONS

Recall Job’s responses in 1:5, 1:20-22, and 2:9-11. In what ways does Job’s responses to his suffering challenge your faith?

How do Job’s responses affect how you view God’s gifts and how you view yourself?

Why do the Righteous Suffer?

Job 3-31

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Week 2

Scripture Highlights

Job 7:12: Am I the sea, or a sea monster, that you set a guard over me?

Job 9:32-33: ³²For he is not a man, as I am, that I might answer him, that we should come to trial together.

³³ There is no arbiter between us, who might lay his hand on us both.

Job 19:25-26: ²⁵For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth.

²⁶ And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God,

Week 2: Discussion Questions

ICEBREAKER QUESTION

What first impressions or assumptions have people made about you that were totally wrong?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

What were the 3 main reasons for why Job's friends think he's suffering? Why do you think they turn to these as their main reasons?

How do Job's friends provide counsel on what not to do when you live life with other sufferers? What about the Disciples? (See John 9:1-3)

Does Job's view of God from chapters 3-31 change at all? Why or why not? (Note Job 30:19-23, 31:33-35)

APPLICATION QUESTIONS

Do you ever jump to conclusions when you see others suffering? if so, where are you most tempted to assume like Job's friends?

What are the most honest thoughts you've directed to God in your suffering? What does that show you about what you think of him?

How did Jesus wrestle with accusations made against him? (See Luke 4:16-30, John 6:60-69, John 7:40-52)

Where is God when the Righteous Suffer?

Job 32-37

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Week 3

Scripture Highlights

Job 31:35-37: ³⁵Oh, that I had one to hear me!
(Here is my signature! Let the Almighty answer me!)
Oh, that I had the indictment written by my adversary!
³⁶ Surely I would carry it on my shoulder;
I would bind it on me as a crown;
³⁷ I would give him an account of all my steps;
like a prince I would approach him.

Job 32:1-5: ¹So these three men ceased to answer Job, because he was righteous in his own eyes. ²Then Elihu the son of Barachel the Buzite, of the family of Ram, burned with anger. He burned with anger at Job because he justified himself rather than God. ³ He burned with anger also at Job's three friends because they had found no answer, although they had declared Job to be in the wrong. ⁴ Now Elihu had waited to speak to Job because they were older than he. ⁵ And when Elihu saw that there was no answer in the mouth of these three men, he burned with anger.

Job 34:10-12: ¹⁰ "Therefore, hear me, you men of understanding: far be it from God that he should do wickedness, and from the Almighty that he should do wrong.
¹¹ For according to the work of a man he will repay him, and according to his ways he will make it befall him.
¹² Of a truth, God will not do wickedly, and the Almighty will not pervert justice.

Job 36:21-23: ²¹ Take care; do not turn to iniquity, for this you have chosen rather than affliction.
²² Behold, God is exalted in his power; who is a teacher like him?
²³ Who has prescribed for him his way, or who can say, 'You have done wrong'?

Week 3: Discussion Questions

ICEBREAKER QUESTION

Have you been in a conversation where no one knew what they were talking about? How did you respond?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Do you think Elihu's rebuke of Job is fair? Would God approve? Why or why not?

Does Elihu more accurately present truth about God than Job's 3 friends? If so, how?

Do you think it was a surprise to Elihu that God answers Job in the following chapters? What does this show about God's character?

APPLICATION QUESTIONS

What's your posture toward spiritual instruction and spiritual examples from people younger in age than you?

When have you made similar claims about God that Job did and what does it reveal about yourself? (See Job 33:9-11, 34:5-6, 35:2-3 for reference)

Week 4

PART 2

Why do the Righteous Worship?

Job 38–42

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Notes

Week 4

Scripture Highlights

Job 38:1-3: ¹Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind and said: ² “Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? ³ Dress for action like a man; I will question you, and you make it known to me.

Job 40:2,6-8: ²“Shall a faultfinder contend with the Almighty? He who argues with God, let him answer it.” ⁶Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind and said: ⁷ “Dress for action like a man; I will question you, and you make it known to me. ⁸Will you even put me in the wrong? Will you condemn me that you may be in the right?

Job 40:15: ¹⁵“Behold, Behemoth, which I made as I made you; he eats grass like an ox.

Job 41:1: ¹“Can you draw out Leviathan with a fishhook or press down his tongue with a cord?

Job 42:1-6: ¹Then Job answered the Lord and said: ² “I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted. ³ ‘Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?’ Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. ⁴ ‘Hear, and I will speak; I will question you, and you make it known to me.’ ⁵ I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; ⁶ therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes.”

Job 42:10-12: ¹⁰And the Lord restored the fortunes of Job, when he had prayed for his friends. And the Lord gave Job twice as much as he had before. ¹¹Then came to him all his brothers and sisters and all who had known him before, and ate bread with him in his house. And they showed him sympathy and comforted him for all the evil that the Lord had brought upon him. And each of them gave him a piece of money and a ring of gold. ¹²And the Lord blessed the latter days of Job more than his beginning. And he had 14,000 sheep, 6,000 camels, 1,000 yoke of oxen, and 1,000 female donkeys.

Week 4: Discussion Questions

ICEBREAKER QUESTION

If you could do a helicopter tour anywhere in the world where would you choose and why?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

What would God’s tour of the universe in Job 38-39 answer for Job? What answers are still lacking?

What does God’s control over Behemoth and Leviathan have to do with Job and his suffering?

Read Job’s Responses in Job 40:3-5 and 42:1-6. How are they similar and how are they different? What do you think made the difference?

APPLICATION QUESTIONS

How has your understanding of the sufferings of Christ been enriched by seeing Job’s sufferings?

How is God calling you to more faithfully endure through your trials and suffering in light of Job? (Read James 5:7-11)

What is God teaching you about Himself and about your faith in light of this present suffering? (Romans 8:28)

Stories of Suffering

To accompany this series, we've asked brothers and sisters in our church family to share their stories testifying to the goodness of God in the midst of great suffering. It is our hope that their lives might encourage you to trust God more. This is an opportunity for you to hear testimonies from other sufferers in your church family to learn how God has been faithful and is worthy of worship even in the deepest times of suffering.

This is a way for our church family to hear and give God glory for things that He has done in very sensitive situations that may not otherwise be known. A way for sufferers to redemptively share their story and lessons learned through suffering in a worshipful and edifying way. And for sufferers in our church family to gain perspective that there are many others in their midst going through very difficult things, and that God is still at work.

For the purposes of this project, we've asked the storytellers to write generally and anonymously, but we hope that their lives remind you of what people standing right next to you are going through even as they sing praise to the same God.

May they inspire you to worship with greater zeal, and encourage you to be bold in both offering and seeking comfort. If any of these or other topics prompt you to realize a need for counsel or comfort in your life, please do not hesitate to reach out to a trusted brother or sister in the church family to get you connected to someone who can help.

It is these voices of our fellow sufferers that testify with credibility that God speaks truth when He declares, "...the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us." (Rom 8:18).

Facing Cancer

I opened the MyChart portal and saw the dreaded words — invasive carcinoma. I had cancer. So, I cried out to God, called my loved ones, and ordered some potato chips and dip. (You need chips in a crisis!) Little did I know that my next year would be filled with the trauma of tests, surgery, chemotherapy, radiation, and physical therapy. I had joined one of those clubs no one wants to join—the cancer club!

Cancer is often likened to a ruthless enemy, and for good reason. It is surprisingly resilient, insidious, and relentless. I was fighting a war. But thankfully, I wasn't alone. Jesus was and is my firm foundation in a time of storm. He said, "Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock." (Matthew 7:24-25) The storm of cancer had come upon me and what Jesus said is true. I was secure.

Grief and heartache are burdens we all share in common if we live long enough. Suffering is inevitable. I haven't experienced the full spectrum of loss, but having had cancer has given me a precious gift. That's right, a gift. How else would I know firsthand that the hope of heaven sustains us? How would I have experienced the sweet comfort fellow believers can offer? And how would I have learned how to come alongside other sufferers? Cancer is a good teacher. I learned more about friendship. Sweet friends prayed for me, sent me cards, texted me Bible promises, delivered apples and potato chips, brought food and blankets, gave me gift cards, dropped off sushi and pecans — I could go on and on. I thank God for the Body of Christ.

Are you suffering? Lean on Jesus. He loves you and wants to hear your prayers. Cry out to Him. Philippians 4 says, "The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

Praise God for His promises!

The Loss of a Parent

I will never forget the day. I was singing in the kitchen and unloading the dishwasher at eighteen. My mom walked in the door and I turned, ready to serenade her. She had tears in her eyes; I stopped. Then she said three dreaded words, “I have cancer.”

The following seven months, the church surrounded my family. People didn’t say, “Let me know if you need anything.” Instead, they jumped in. Meals were brought, women showed up to clean, laundry was picked up and brought back folded. At the hospital, we were rarely alone as people took shifts to pray over us, sing with us, and laugh with us. I have never seen the hands and feet of Jesus work in such tangible ways. People would ask me how I was; I would say, “God is so good.”

I watched over those months as my mom’s prayers were continually met with “No.” I questioned why God would allow her to hurt and allow her body to dwindle to nothing. I struggled as well-meaning people said hurtful and trite comments. I was angry with them for not seeing how hard this was and how empty their words felt. People would ask how I was; I would say, “God is good,” but I wasn’t sure I believed it.

God was gracious and allowed me to be there for her last breath. The day before she sang a hymn that had become an anchor, “Great is Thy Faithfulness.” As we sang other worship songs she clapped her weak hands while singing the words, “When I stand in that place, free at last, meeting face to face, I am Yours, Jesus you are mine. Endless joy and perfect peace, earthly pain finally will cease, celebrate, Jesus is alive.” She meant those words, and she met her Savior the very next day. God was so good to us on that day.

Then I was speaking at her memorial service. Over a thousand people, standing room only, a testament of a woman who was faithful and intentional during her fifty-two years on this earth.

We wore bright colors and worshiped because it was a day to celebrate God’s faithfulness. People hugged me and gave their condolences. I reminded them, “God is good,” but I didn’t believe it.

The next several years were very hard. Sometimes I would cry so much there were no tears left and just sounds would come out. I grieved the loss of my mom and the pain of watching her die. I grieved the future losses – she would not get to watch me graduate college or walk down the aisle, know my future husband or my future kids. I grieved that they would not know her. So many times I would go to call her, remembering she wouldn’t pick up, but listen to her voicemail anyway because I wanted to hear her voice. I quickly found people at my church were uncomfortable with the amount of time I had been grieving. Anger towards God brewed in my heart. How could a good God take her from me?

Three years after her death, I began to be discipled by a woman who took me to Job and introduced me to lamenting. Through her patience in walking me through Scripture, God convicted me that I had been living in an entitled way. I thought God owed me. She taught me to pray like the psalmists, being brutally honest with God because He can take it, but always coming back to the truth of who He is. He is a loving God who cares so much for me, He let His Son die for me. A God who sympathizes with me in my pain and meets me with compassion, catching my tears in a bottle. A sovereign God, who can control all things down to the molecule. A wise God, who knows better than I, so I can trust His way is better than mine even if I don’t understand it. A faithful God, who never changes. A good God who is truly working all things for my good according to His purpose. I miss my mom, but I don’t wish her back. God has deemed it is better that she be with Him and I trust He knows better than I do. He is truly good.

Trouble in the Workplace

I have a tendency to be a worshiper of Christ on Sunday and then become a Monday morning atheist at work. I have several patterns at work that I have to actively pray about almost every week.

There are people at work who I know cause increased stress. Sometimes it's an attitude (mine or theirs) or often the person is the bearer of bad news, like someone called in sick. Not to mention unexpected difficult procedures that weren't previously on the schedule.

For many years, and sometimes still, I would start playing Linda Ronstadt's Poor, Poor Pitiful Me in my head, immediately making the situation all about me!

I now diligently pray with purpose. I pray for the person who was unable to come to work, then I pray that I will be thankful that I am able to pick up the procedures as the Lord has gifted me. I'm certainly intellectually and physically able to accomplish these new challenges through His blessings. I ask that the Lord would let me be a light for Him with people whom I otherwise wasn't going to see on my path that day, and He puts us there together. This has really helped my heart to be in a better place as I seek to be more Christ-like.

I seek to live out Ephesians 4:1-3, "Walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." Going to the word during these times of internal challenges has truly helped guide my acts as well as my heart.

These three truly create a perfect storm to develop frustration and, at times, a lack of purpose.

I have a type-A personality. While this has definitely helped my career from a secular perspective, my attitude of "I can do it all, do it better, and do it for longer" was a blessing and a curse. The blessing was to my employer, whose attitude was, "Let him work as long as he will, as hard as he will, for as little as he will!" The curse was to my family and even more so to the Lord.

God has used health issues, my church, and, most importantly, my beloved wife to help me turn away from the sin of chasing the secular world and turning to the one and only God. My developing mantra has changed from "Show me the pile so I can start hacking at it" to "Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ" (Colossians 3:23-24).

I am still the most productive worker in my group, but my attitude is right. I am no longer frustrated, but blessed by the ability and strength the Lord gives me, not by what I have earned or done myself.

Finally, I seek out one person whom I think is suffering or quiet each day as I move through the many hallways I traverse. I try to make a connection even if it's somewhat superficial, and attempt to enter conversations which can sometimes go deeper through the Holy Spirit's prodding.

A recurring thought I read is the idea that Satan doesn't want us to hate God. He wants us to forget God. And I think about how many times in my life that has happened. I fearfully and eagerly pray every day that I keep a God-centered focus in all my comings and goings!

A very effective ritual for my wife and I has been to read and pray in the mornings before work. Then we try to connect over lunchtime – even if only briefly by phone – to see how the other person's day is going. We know much of what the other was concerned about by having prayed earlier that day!

The Death of a Child

“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.” – Psalm 23:4

I never understood this scripture more until my wife and I descended the mountaintop of hearing our daughter’s first heartbeat and the first sonogram of her namesake. The descent into the valley began with the sharp, succinct, blunt-edged words that shredded mine and my wife’s heart as the cold maternal fetal specialist shared the first news of our daughter’s fate: Trisomy 18 – incompatible with life. Each follow-up visit we were told all the wrong things about our beautiful daughter. Deeper into the valley, we learned of fluid in her skull, her malformed heart, defective kidneys, and cranial pressure. We plunged downward as we hid sorrow behind typical birth announcement joy and the development of our precious girl inside my beautiful, glowing wife.

“For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well. – Psalm” - 139:13-14.

Nothing could prepare us for God’s overarching beauty in our daughter. We couldn’t get over how beautiful our daughter was. We were fearful of our daughter being stillborn. We were fearful that upon delivery our daughter might look disfigured. Despite this fear, God gave us a daughter with a cute, precious face. She had big feet and long arms. Her heart beat strong, and she fought for breath with lungs that sustained her for 25 hours.

How did we get to the floor of the valley – the valley of death? We were haunted by the early decision of a “Care Plan” – to ease/comfort but not save our daughter. For 25 hours witnesses saw our paternal instinct kick in to love; yet all we could do is hold, cuddle, console and “be” with her. After her last breath, I held her lifeless body in my lap with my hand caressing the rear opening of

her malformed head. I never felt so dark and empty. The darkness continued as we moved to a special floor where no baby’s cry could be heard, only the outward and inward crying of grieving mothers and fathers echoed in silence. God carried us across the floor of the valley of death as we walked out of the hospital only two, after walking in as three.

“I will sing of your strength in the morning, and I will sing of your love for you are my fortress and refuge in times of trouble.” – Psalm 59:16

The rise out of the valley might have been the miracle of a day instead of the miracle of a life numbered in days. Our daughter experienced no more pain on this earth. My wife and I loved her until she went to Heaven. What more could a parent do?

I vividly remember the sunny, bright blue sky overhead as I picked out an infant burial plot. This was a task that I wish no other father would have to endure. I came to grips with the reality of my daughter’s earthly body residing in a 20” x 12” x 10” wooden box before she could dream and then pursue those dreams.

“When you go through deep waters, I will be with you. When you go through rivers of difficulty, you will not drown. When you walk through the fire of oppression, you will not be burned up; the flames will not consume you.” – Isaiah 43:2

Looking back, we find comfort and strength in the Lord to endure the joy and sorrow of parenthood summed up in 37+ weeks of pregnancy followed by 25 hours of holding our breath while our daughter fought to breathe. No other explanation exists for a mother to beautifully carry her daughter who is sure not to live and still deliver. No author tells of a father calmly speaking his daughter’s name in love at each heart stopping breath. In the same breath we praise God and ask, “How can anyone endure our circumstance without God?” He is a Great God who supernaturally and graciously allows parents like us to have peace, comfort, and rest amongst a sorrowful valley that neither drowns us nor consumes us.

Being a Caretaker

Thankful for this day! Thankful for believing parents and siblings! Thankful for grace and mercy in all joys and sorrows! Thankful for our amazingly created bodies and minds!

I was told once to think of our brain as one BIG library. We collect our memories and experiences in books and put them on our shelves, mostly in order. When we are challenged to remember a certain time or place we can retrieve it because we know where it is and we know where we put it. Unexpectedly, there is an earthquake in your brain that throws all the books off the shelves and on the floor. It is disorganized, nothing where it should be. The information is still there but you can't seem to locate it it's all so jumbled up. Dementia seems to work like this. Some days the words and memories can be found and put back on the shelf. Other days are a constant search to find the right book. For those who have loved ones like this, it is challenging. I will never understand all that our minds hold or how our minds work but I know a mind can be taken away slowly or very quickly. To know that our loved ones don't remember what they said 10 minutes ago is hard for us I cannot imagine how they must feel! The realization that they can't remember beloved memories, can't remember the right words, can't remember how to read, not sure where they sleep ... the list goes on. Dementia can rob both the patient and caretaker of so much; however, there are many blessings also.

Throughout my loved one's struggle with dementia, God provided His blessings in hard circumstances. Often, consumed by the moment, we forget to see God's small miracles. Like our loved one's smile, their laughter, the touch of their hands, their remembrance of a hymn. There are also frustrations, like lack of sleep. But for us, there was never a day His presence was not felt. Philippians 4:6-7 says "do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God that surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus."

He gives peace in your heart and mind! My loved one knew this too. Even though they couldn't remember many events or people, they remembered when they came to know Christ. I was blessed to bear witness to it.

Some days are overwhelmingly hard, to watch a loved one suffer and not feel useful to them. Other days you feel like giving up. But God gives strength at the moment we are in need. He is beside you at all times. Psalm 94:19 "When the cares of my heart are many, your consolations cheer my soul!"

Dementia can take away the person we have known all our lives. However, everything is still there, it is just misplaced. Their suffering through times of uncertainty and their frustration in not being able to do all they used to can be overwhelming for them and you. But God gives grace for each day. There can be joy, peace, comfort, and rest in knowing He is walking this road with you. Hope in God's promise of our heavenly home and knowing that we will be restored with Him carried both of us through each day.

Hebrews 13:5 "I will never leave you nor forsake you." Even when our minds leave us, He will not.

Fostering & Adoption Challenges

We had reached a “sweet spot” in parenting our children when the Lord laid foster care on our hearts. We had family members who had fostered and adopted, and we witnessed some of the intense struggles that went along with it. But we weren’t fully prepared for what awaited us.

Our foster journey began with a precious newborn baby. We were so excited that God gave us the opportunity to foster an infant. However, we quickly came face-to-face with the uncertainties and unknowns foster care can present. As we experienced the typical roller coaster of emotions during those first couple years of fostering, I often found myself fearing the unknown and longing for more consistency and control in my life.

Yet, we had fallen in love with that sweet baby and were grateful to become his forever family when he was almost three. Bright, charming, and extremely energetic, he brought us so much joy! But soon after the adoption, his behaviors escalated, and life with our son grew increasingly challenging. Because of his extensive needs, our family life was altered and we were all forced to adjust to a new normal. Every day seemed to hold new challenges, heartache, and chaos, but looking back, we can see that God was using this child to refine all of us!

We have learned that the best way to confidently trust God in uncertainty is to consider His faithfulness from the past. Reflecting back, the Lord walked beside us with every step. He opened a door for post-adoption therapy. He provided a brilliant therapist whose diagnosis proved accurate and brought further clarity to the struggles we had been facing. God provided other adoptive parents who shared godly wisdom and supported us on this journey, an amazing school district that provided for our son’s needs, and supportive friends and family who did not judge our parenting and were always willing to offer respite. We were

blessed with a youth group leader who took an interest in making our son feel special, and another adult leader who cared for our son during Sunday School each week. As Pastor Ritch recently said, “Our suffering for Christ presents a deeper opportunity to experience His mercies.” Through all this and more, we can truly proclaim, “His mercies are new every morning, great is your faithfulness!”

About a year ago, we found ourselves in deep, uncharted waters with our son. I was also involved in an accident that left me unable to care for him. My first response was to question how God could let this happen during such a difficult time, but I soon began to understand. Because of the heavy burden we were carrying, we had begun to isolate ourselves. Now, because of the accident, we suddenly found ourselves surrounded by caring people. Once overwhelmed by the situation, we became overwhelmed by God’s loving care and provision for us in ways we never imagined.

As I write this, the road continues uphill, but we continue trusting God to help us one day at a time. Years ago I wrote this quote from John Piper in the front of my Bible: “Jesus said true religion is visiting or caring for the orphans. Results are God’s business; obedience is ours.” Even in all our failures and weakness, we are doing our best to follow God’s calling. He asked us to do something hard and He has provided for our every need on this journey. What a comfort to know He is in control and sovereign over it all! 2 Cor 12:9 assures us, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” This is a truth I have learned firsthand. This past year has proven to be such a faith-building experience despite being the most difficult year of my life!

It’s a good thing that God didn’t share the unknowns of our journey in the beginning because we may have run the other way. If we had done that, we would have missed out on so much. Caring for our son has taught us so many things, especially the steadfast love and faithfulness of a God who graciously adopted us into His family. And for this, we are eternally grateful.

A Child with Special Needs

Why did God give me a child with a disability? Why couldn't my child be "normal," just like every other baby born at the same time? The best and worst advice I received from a Christian friend was to grieve the loss of the child I thought I was going to have. Good advice in that it helped me to immediately change some expectations for my child's future, but bad advice in that it stopped me from immediately letting God show me what He had in store for my family with the inclusion of this unique individual. When my child spent the first 5 weeks of life in the NICU, God used my time there, learning how to care for his needs to teach me that this child was still to be raised and taught to be HIS child.

Raising a child with disabilities is a unique experience, but then so is raising any child. God has always given me strength to face the challenges that have arisen with each of my children. He has blessed me with children who each in their own way love the Lord and seek to serve Him to the best of their individual abilities.

I have never been one to question God for long. I may say, "Why me?" but I learned as a child that there is always an eternal reason for why God places certain challenges in our paths. "But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me" (2 Corinthians 12:9, NIV). There have been struggles with a special needs child.

I never had to consider where to place my other children in school. But a disability requires specialized school personnel or equipment. My other children didn't require me to choose what programs to enroll them in, or bring comments from perfect strangers on their appearance, their ability, or inquiries about their age. My other children didn't come with a lengthy list of medical specialists I would have to take them to in the first six

months of their lives, to have some drop off and others continue for potentially the rest of their life. When a pediatrician we like leaves a particular office, I have to inquire after the new doctor's experience with these disabilities; I can't just assume that since the new doctor is a pediatrician that he or she will be able to effectively manage my child's health. Even church presents unique options and decisions when it comes to a child with disabilities.

That child can't go to Cubbies at three years old because he is still years away from being potty trained; or an exception can be made, but he needs to have someone with him because he doesn't follow directions or a group very well. What grade level should he attend for Sunday School? What age is appropriate to take him to church service with us? His disability places him in very different categories concerning cognitive, social, and emotional development.

God has greatly blessed me with a child who has significant disabilities who still is able to demonstrate his love for Jesus, and to share that love for Jesus with others. Be sure that God does NOT make mistakes. "'For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways,' declares the Lord. 'As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways'" (Isaiah 55:8-9, NIV).

We may not see His way as anything other than a mistake, and the world may tell me I should have aborted my child, but this child has blessed my heart, my family, and many, many people who interact with him, and that is all because God placed him in my family, and gave me the courage to raise him to the best of my abilities in the Lord, and to allow us to attend a church that helps us to train him up in the way he should go (Proverbs 22:16). Through seeking God in this trial versus fighting God about it, I have been truly blessed; frustrated, scared, exasperated, and disheartened, of course, but nonetheless, blessed.

Embryo Adoption

I was in high school when I first learned that children in the earliest stages of development were kept in long-term cold storage. God moved me to compassion, then He fueled that compassion with stories of families that redeemed these little ones through adoption. My husband came to share this passionate compassion for embryo adoption. After adding several children to our family more conventionally, God prompted us to act on this desire.

We started with stacks of paperwork and months of medical and financial investment. The hardest part of this preparation was helping our pre-teens understand the complicated and often heartbreaking process. Statistically, 50% of embryo transfers end in miscarriage. We were all afraid of that grief. Finally, we were ready for our first transfer cycle. Cycles are complex, with various checkpoints to make sure the womb is as hospitable as possible. I passed the checkpoints but not with flying colors, intensifying our prayers.

On a mild March morning, two precious tiny children were carefully placed in my womb. We drove home to our other kids and waited. Ten days later, we learned our two babies had died. We had braced ourselves for the disappointment of not getting to hold our children in the first cycle, but we still grieved. Our children grieved. And we prepared for another try.

Complications and confusion abounded through our next cycle. Again gateways were barely passed. Driving to our next transfer, my husband and I meditated on God's character as the Overcomer. The Audio Adrenaline song King of the Comebacks was our theme.

"All over the world, we wait for the miracle and it's coming, you know it's a matter of fact, you're the King of the Comebacks." Two more tiny image bearers were placed in me for shelter and a chance to live. We waited. I felt a subtle shift of hormones.

I felt like a walking graveyard. I had been faithful and I had failed. Four of my children died within three months. Because of the complications, my decades-long dream had died as well. God had gotten me into this situation and disappointed me.

My husband and I felt so alone. Few people knew, and it was a hard thing to explain. Embryo adoption is complicated. Even more complicated was the way some people responded to our passion for these little children. Still, it was the path God asked us to choose. We followed God into ministry and what did we have to show for it? An empty womb and a hidden grief.

Yet, even in that fresh grief and physical weakness, God got me out of bed each day. He gave me my husband's arms. He let me endure my children's raw grief. He sent a few friends. One brought flowers.

In my heart, He made the hope of heaven so much more real. I could picture hiking and swimming and eating with my perfect children. Four little ones, unrelated before they became part of our family, now belonged! They were experiencing perfect peace and joy with our Father and Savior. They were no longer frozen. They were home!

Our Redeemer taught me about redemption by using us to redeem children. He helped us pay the financial, physical, and emotional price for them to live. Through this, I experienced a bit more of His extravagant, lavish, and unbounded love for me! He looks at me and says, "My child! You are mine!" And I can wait for the Ultimate Comeback because I know that my Redeemer lives!

A Child with Special Needs

“I have a special needs child.” I often wonder if that will ever be a phrase that feels natural to me. Will I eventually say it enough times that my voice no longer catches, and I don’t immediately feel the need to explain? Lord, let it be so.

In April of 2022, our youngest son was born with a rare neuromuscular syndrome that impacts his whole body, including his feeding, his speech, his limbs, his fine and gross motor development, his vision, and his facial movement. In the weeks that followed his birth, we dealt with severe feeding and swallowing issues, and met with many doctors, nurses, therapists, genetic counselors, and surgeons. It was two long, scary, exhausting months to receive his diagnosis. His condition is not degenerative, and some of his current weaknesses will likely improve with time and therapies, but his life experiences will always be different and more difficult than mine. Along with his diagnosis, there was, of course, relief, but there was also a new heaviness: this wasn’t something my husband or I could “fix” for our child. This was life now. This is life now, for us and for him.

“Father, please.” That was all I had the energy to pray for most of that first year. Between managing appointments, learning new feeding methods, being on high alert for respiratory illnesses, and learning how to juggle the day-to-day demands of four kids six years and under, those two words ran through my brain on a loop. I am so grateful for the truth found in Romans 8:26: “Likewise, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.” Most days, I felt like I was only minutes away from drowning. Some days still feel that way. But God always hears, and as it says in Psalm 116:2, “because he bends down to listen, I will pray as long as I have breath!” I trusted that my Savior knew my heart and my circumstances, and would fill in the silence for me: “Father, please (heal him;

make him strong; give me rest; provide answers; make me gentle; give me patience; be near; don’t forget me; send help).” And God showed up, just like He always does.

He provided my family with a new home that continues to meet the changing needs of our family – needs we definitely didn’t anticipate when we purchased it.

Many in our church family continue to come alongside us and carry some of our practical burdens by providing meals, medical connections, nursery accommodations, and even doing our four kids’ laundry!

My husband and I privately prayed for a new small group that would meet incredibly specific needs of ours, and just like that, a new Bethany family moved to our neighborhood and established a group that met every single one of our prayer requests!

One of our deepest prayers for our son was answered when he smiled and laughed for the first time at three months old. Due to his facial paralysis, my son’s smile will never look like mine, but I can see it now! And his laugh is perfection! They are now daily reminders of God’s love for us.

There are more examples I could give, but they all come down to this: God is good and this is hard. Both are true.

I have used the phrase, “This season of life...” so much lately. Usually, it is in an attempt to sum up all that has happened and is happening – to package up this suffering as neatly as possible. But “seasons” begin and end, and I’m not sure that this one will ever truly end for us on this side of Heaven. Thankfully, by His grace, I am learning that suffering doesn’t have to have an end, or even an identifiable reason, to prove God’s faithfulness. After all, our hope isn’t in the reason for the suffering; our hope is in the God who has the reason. We can trust our God, for he is the Good Shepherd, and he will walk with us every step of the way (Psalm 23). Praise be to God.

A Wayward Child

STORY 1

The call came. I couldn't breathe. I spent the previous 18 years trying to keep everything under control and suddenly I realized I was controlling nothing. My wayward child found herself in legal trouble and was now an adult outside the legal protection of a parent. This was one of the many potential nightmares I worried about as she approached adulthood. Although it was something I worried about often, I had no idea that leading up to that moment I was not spiritually mature enough to handle what would become the darkest hours, days, weeks, and months. I thought if the call ever came I would know how I could get through it, what I would need to do, how I would need to act, how I would need to pray ...I was wrong, so completely wrong. In the moment of utter heartbreak all I could do was cry. I was broken.

I soon found myself falling on my face pleading with God to give me the strength to get through the next minute, through the next decision, through the next phone call from jail. I was completely and utterly unable to take my next breath without the reassurance of knowing He would be the one to help me do it.

This event was not a surprise to God, nor was it a surprise to God that I needed to completely submit to Him, more so than I ever had before. I would either submit and believe He is God and has purpose in all things, including the difficult years that led up to this one event, the years full of trials and storms, or I would reject the belief that He is God and perfect in all His ways.

I began to seek His face, minute by minute, deeper than I ever had before. I was in complete dependence upon Him for my very next breath. I found myself on my knees pleading with God to rescue, restore, and redeem! By the power of the Holy Spirit, I was reminded of who my God is! My God is all-knowing! My God is righteous! My God is holy! My God is loving!

My God is compassionate! My God is my rescue! My God is her

rescuer! My God is my redeemer! My God is breath-giver! My God is my ever present help! My God is my perfect Father! My God is my best friend! My God is healer of the mother's broken heart! My God has me and her in the palm of His hand ... at all times, not just on the easy days, but in the deepest, darkest days!

The years leading up to this event were hard, very hard ... parenting a wayward child who loves the world and the things of the world is so incredibly difficult. The daily challenges were all-consuming most days. I was so completely wrapped up in survival mode and trying to control every piece of anything I possibly could that I missed the most important piece ...I wasn't controlling any of it. I'm still not controlling any of it. He has the whole world in His hands.

That includes my daughter! I am still waiting for Him to get ahold of her heart, to snatch her from the snare of the devil, to rescue, restore, and redeem. He is my Miracle Worker, my ever-present help ... my ever-present help ... and in His perfect timing I believe He will rescue her from the pit. And what a glorious day that will be!

All glory and honor and praise belongs to My God!

Facing Infertility

Nahum 1:7 “The LORD is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble; he knows those who take refuge in him.”

My journey through infertility has been, and will be, a lifetime struggle. Like other long-term trials, the emotional difficulties associated with it show themselves in unique facets at various stages in life.

I was told I would never have kids when I was in upper elementary school. At that time, the concept of infertility was a cold, distant, yet hard fact. In high school it was an embarrassing secret. In college it was a painful truth I tried to suppress. When dating, it was a frustrating logistic to navigate. When do I tell? Too soon lacks discretion, and too late lacks integrity. During engagement, it was a burden I passed to the man I loved. In marriage, it was an obstacle I dared to hope God would overcome.

Through the years, I’ve run from one end of the feeling spectrum to the other as friends, siblings, and family members bore precious children. And I expect this pattern to continue throughout the rest of my life.

As Hannah did, I’ve poured out my heart like a drunk woman in tears asking God to perform a miracle in my body — to give me a baby. Like the persistent widow I’ve knocked over and over and over again. I’ve gazed in awe as the Lord has performed the same miracle for many others. Do I dare presume He would do it for me too? His answer? My grace is sufficient for you.

Then, fiery darts from the enemy assault my vulnerable spots. I am not enough. I am a bad mom. I am a disappointment to my husband. I must have done something that God is punishing me for. But God, who is rich in mercy, because of the great love with which He loved me, covers me under His wings and hides me in the shelter and refuge of His TRUTH.

He gently reminds me, My daughter, no one is enough, but I am. No one is good, not even one, but I am perfect and holy. You are the bride of Christ. In Me, you are spotless and blameless, without blemish. I give you ALL that is good, all that you need. In fact, my love for you is so lavish, that I gave my only Son. It pleased Me to crush Him for your salvation. To satisfy My wrath, and the punishment you deserve, He silently, willingly, gave up His life for you. He comforts me. He sings songs over me.

My emotions are as unstable as the waves of the sea, but God’s Word is the cornerstone for the foundation of my life.

My circumstances haven’t changed. I still don’t have answers. Like arthritis, pain flares up at the most inopportune of times. My fervent prayers wax and wane. My faith and trust in the Lord’s plan is exemplary one day, and embarrassing the next. The wrestling is intense at times, forgotten in others. The journey of walking by faith and preaching TRUTH to myself is a daily discipline that will only end with my final breath.

But when TRUTH washes over me again, I remember that the pain and unfulfilled desires of this world are nothing compared to the eternal inheritance that awaits me in glory. I am encouraged to long for the day when every tear will be wiped away and our broken bodies will be made whole.

When I commune with Him, He gives me a new song. He turns my moan of lament into a chorus of expectant, joyful, thankful, praise. In those spirit-filled moments, I’m compelled to join the throng of precious saints of old singing:

**Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine!
Oh, what a foretaste of glory divine!
Heir of salvation, purchase of God
Born of his Spirit, washed in His blood. Perfect
submission, perfect delight,
Visions of rapture now burst on my sight. Angels
descending bring from above
Echoes of mercy, whispers of love.
This is my story, this is my song
Praising my Savior all the day long.**

Facing Post-partum Depression

I've been reflecting a lot lately on God's goodness and faithfulness to me as I occasionally pause and watch our four kids. Growing, learning, playing together. Oh the wonders of His undeserved grace!

It was almost 10 years ago that my husband, newborn baby, and I went through the darkest valley of our lives. The months and days leading up to our baby's birth felt like some of the best, happiest times together, anticipating what was to come as a family of three. Baby showers, decorating the nursery, maternity photos. We were on cloud nine. We would've never imagined that a storm would hit very unexpectedly in the weeks following our son's birth ... even starting with a literal storm. He came the day before the Washington tornado, 12 days early.

Even though we were not expecting his early arrival, there were so many joy-filled memories at the start. Lots of firsts and figuring things out together. However, after a few weeks, the newborn fog was thick, the sleep tank was nearly empty, and feelings of being overwhelmed and defeated started to creep in. I passed it all off as the "baby blues" and tried to deal with it on my own. This was supposed to be a blissful time, enjoying every moment with my newborn. What was wrong with me? I felt ashamed that I wasn't loving this time with my baby as I should.

Things started downward spiraling. I battled terrible thoughts and torment, and I found myself in the mental health unit of a hospital 1½ hours away because the hospital in Peoria was full. My husband was left alone with our newborn baby 5 weeks after he was born.

Nevertheless, he still came almost daily to visit and care for me, and both of our parents helped tremendously with our baby. I felt so trapped and like I wasn't fully awake. It was a nightmare.

It wasn't just a few days of being in the hospital, it was a couple months (on and off) at two different hospitals full of trial-and-error meds and treatments. My husband and I both knew that the mental health unit was not the place for a postpartum woman, but I needed help. I never thought I would fully recover and feel like myself again.

Adding more children to our family felt out of the picture. Impossible. But, God! Months after I was released from the hospital and on the road to healing at home, we found out I was pregnant again. It was totally unexpected and scary to say the least after just starting to recover from all that had happened. But, miraculously, the numbness and fog that I was continuing to feel from my medications started to lift. My progesterone levels were rising and I was starting to feel like myself again.

God was at work in wild and amazing ways doing the unexpected like only He can do! We weren't ready, but God was using it to heal us. "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Isaiah 55:9). He used community and the wonderful counseling ministry at Bethany to point us to Christ in our healing journey. We are forever thankful for the various ways that God picked up our pieces and put them back together again. We still don't understand all the reasons why we had to endure this suffering, but we DO know that He KEPT us and didn't abandon us in this dark trial.

I've been able to share my story with some other women suffering from postpartum depression and I think that that is an amazing blessing to get to comfort other believers with the comfort that I have received. "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God" (2 Corinthians 1:3-4). Take heart that God is at work even in the dark. He'll make a way! And we can praise the Lord that for those who love God all things work together for good!

Doctrinal Differences with Loved Ones

Growing up for me included regular Bible reading and teaching at home and church each Sunday. My life was saturated with Christian influence. I was taught gospel basics regarding sin and what Jesus did to pay for them by his death on the cross. I was taught of my need for repentance of my sin to be saved from hell. In all of the teaching I received, there lacked an emphasis on what God has done and does in the life of a rebel sinner.

Instead the emphasis was placed on what I needed to do so God would not punish me and be pleased with me. There were some big questions unanswered. Was I saved because I made the right choice? Did I make the choice because I was raised in the right family or went to the right church? How many good things should I do to earn God's favor? Could I lose my salvation? Due to a lack of sound biblical teaching, I was floundering. As I floundered, I drifted.

Due to a lack of understanding of who God really is, I lacked an understanding of real gospel power in my everyday life. Thankfully, by God's grace, He opened my eyes to see the beauty of who He really is through His Word. For the first time, I understood that my salvation was not something I decided by my own will or understanding, but the Holy Spirit had caused me to be born-again. He granted me faith in Christ, who not only died and was raised for me, but also lived for me. I had never understood the incredible exchange that happens in being justified by faith.

Christ's perfect righteousness became mine through faith! I have a righteousness that cannot be added to or taken from and Jesus, in exchange, takes my guilt. Why would He do this? John 6:38-39 tells us that Jesus did not come to do his own will but the will of

the Father and this is the will of the Father, that He loses none that the Father gives to Him but raises them up on the last day.

The difficulty with this newfound understanding was that I knew it would create some doctrinal differences between me and my family. I was right. The disagreements came fast and emotions could run hot at times. Some claimed I was tearing the family apart. Others said I was creating different categories of Christians, among whom I was the "enlightened" one. In the midst of all of the disagreements, God's Word continued to speak truth into my life and proved itself to be a solid foundation for me, even as some of my closest relationships broke down.

My love for sound teaching brought me to Bethany. This meant not only did I have doctrinal differences with family, but I had left the only church I had ever known, a church the rest of my family still attended. Family gatherings were tough for a while. As much as I wanted to talk about all I was learning, it was not welcomed, and I did not want to upset anyone. Sometimes I spoke anyway, which never went well and resulted in me later apologizing.

Over the years, I have come to understand that those closest to us are often the hardest to talk to regarding our theological differences. Thankfully, God's word gives us clear instruction on how to share our hope.

1 Peter 3:15 tells us to honor Christ and always be ready to give a defense of our hope, yet do it with gentleness and kindness. Our job is not to change hearts – only God does that. Our instructions are clear: rejoice always, pray continually, and give thanks. Thank the Lord for these simple yet profound instructions when dealing with trials of any kind.

Facing Addiction

I was coasting. Things were going well in my life. I was fourth – soon to be third – in seniority at my job. A job I was good at, having worked in my field for over 35 years. Troubleshooting and repairing complicated machines engaged both mind and body.

My hobby was exercise. It began when I was 22. It consumed a great deal of my time, energy, and focus. Six days a week was the norm. Weights, calisthenics, cycling, and elliptical. I loved it.

Then everything changed. I developed pain in my right arm: tendonitis from overuse. I tried physical therapy, but it was no help. So I went for a cortisone injection. I'd had one before, years ago, and it worked great. Two days after the shot my arm was really sore. By the fourth day the pain was excruciating. I couldn't move my arm more than a few inches in any direction. On the pain scale of 0-10 I was at a constant 8.

Oh how I prayed during those weeks but no answers seemed to come. I had my first surgery 5 weeks in. I finally had a second opinion at 9 weeks. They discovered that an infection had ravaged my shoulder during those weeks. It destroyed all the cartilage, infiltrated the bone, and radically weakened the rotator tendons. The next three surgeries were attempts to stop the infection. They were successful, but the damage was permanent. I had limited mobility, chronic pain, lack of sleep, and a 20-pound lift restriction on my right arm.

I can't even think of words that could describe how I felt. Two major parts of my identity were gone. Sad doesn't cover it. Depressed? Angry? Yes, but I prayed. And I prayed. And I struggled. And I prayed. Then I remembered. About a year before all of this I had prayed to God a prayer of recommitment. I had done this before; it is a prayer of total surrender. It is a prayer that is always accompanied with fear and trembling. I have a great fear of not being in control. God was showing me that He allowed this change into my life.

I began to pray that God would show me what He wanted me to do with all of this. I began to look for opportunities within Bethany and outside of Bethany. I tried different things, trying to find what God had designed me for in my life's journey. In my Bible study I began to dig deeper and God showed me wonderful, amazing things that I had never seen before. Things that I couldn't wait to share. He gave me a new friend, a true brother in Christ. He led me to a discipleship ministry that I didn't even know existed. This ministry sets Christians free from the strongholds in their lives by the power of Christ. I've become a group leader there.

Do I struggle with it all? Oh, yes. Do I stumble? Sadly, I do. But God can use me if I let Him. If I submit. If I surrender.

"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 15:5).

When our Lord says: "Abide in me," He is talking about the will, about the choices, the decisions we make. We must decide to do things which expose ourselves to him and keep ourselves in contact with him. This is what it means to abide in him." (Boice)

Facing the Death of a Parent

I was 8 years old when my father passed away from lung cancer, and as hard as this was, God used this trial to show me His faithfulness and to bring me to Himself.

When my father was first diagnosed with lung cancer back in 2009, I didn't quite know what that meant at the time, but I knew something was about to change. All of a sudden, we began to experience uncertainty. Normal routines were abandoned, doctor's appointments became a daily occurrence, and a solemn undertone replaced the energetic atmosphere that filled my young life at the time. I remember having conversations with my father and suddenly bursting into tears, not knowing how much longer he would be in my life.

But through all of the pain, uncertainty, and change, there was one constant in my life: my parent's faith. Through every difficult appointment, relapse, discouragement, and pain, my parents never stopped praying and seeking God. As a young child, this quickly began to rub off on me. Though I didn't quite know what it all meant, I regularly prayed for God to heal my father.

A year and a half later, my father's condition had only gotten worse when he had a sudden heart attack in December of 2010. He was still alive, but was left very weak as the cancer continued to spread. My mother stayed with him in the hospital for the next 11 days, until he was sent home on hospice. Throughout the next two weeks, it was excruciating to watch as my light-hearted and loving father slowly slipped farther and farther away from himself. But we weren't alone.

In the midst of our suffering, our church family came alongside us. They brought us meals, gave me and my sister a place to stay, brought us Christmas gifts, sang hymns, and prayed with us as a family. Every step of the way, the Lord provided brothers and sisters in Christ to walk through this trial with us.

In early January, after two weeks home on hospice, my father passed away. I was shocked. I had known for a while that it was going to happen, but I was still confused and hurt. Pain and loss began to wash over me. I remember sitting in my parents' room, holding back tears and trying to wrap my head around what had just happened. I thought about all of the hospital visits. I thought of the pain my father had endured for years.

I thought about how we spent years praying for God to heal my father. But He didn't. I couldn't understand why God would let this happen. I thought that if God could heal my father, then He would have. But that's when the Lord started to work in my heart.

I don't remember how the Lord brought it to me. Maybe it was something I read, or a verse shared to me by a friend, or something I heard on the radio. But regardless of the source, the Lord pointed me to Romans 8:28. This verse reads "For God works all things together for the good of those who love God. To those who are called according to His purpose." Slowly, things started to make sense. I knew that my father loved God, and thus that God was working everything out for his good.

Even my father passing away was for his good. He was no longer suffering, no longer in pain, and now in the presence of his Savior. And even more than that, I started to realize that if I loved God, then He was working all things for my good too. This doesn't mean that things always go the way I want. Rather, it means that through everything that happens, God has a plan and I can trust it. And His plan is good.

It was through this suffering that the Lord opened my eyes. He showed me His Grace and faithfulness and now I am His child. I don't always know what is going to come next, but I know that no matter what happens, I can trust God's plan in it.

A Child with Cancer

A shocking diagnosis came one week shy of Christmas Day. Suddenly life was filled with questions and we wondered how cancer could have invaded the body of one so healthy. And... it was Christmas! A time for festive rejoicing. But what had we celebrated all those previous Christmases if not the Light of the World entering the domain of our darkness? Could we now live out that truth and welcome Jesus, our Hope Incarnate, into our confusion and crippling fear of disease and death through His glorious Word and hymns of our faith? Believing that He would walk with us through the mire, we affirmed Colossians 1:27, “Christ in you the hope of glory,” and absorbed its truth into the depths of our souls.

There were times, however, when I felt like a spiritual imposter as anxiety and fear tried to thwart my childlike trust in God’s merciful compassion and unwavering faithfulness. The admonition to rejoice in affliction seemed counter intuitive. A mother’s role was to protect, but helplessness was now my imposed posture. Did I pray? Yes. But my prayers took on a new dimension. As I began to practice Biblical lament and identify with David’s brutally honest confessions in the Psalms, I did not feel brave, but my soul was becoming unshackled. I found a sense of relief in acknowledging that God was my child’s true parent, the One ultimately and eternally responsible for protection and care. Although I knew that only He, not I, could save my child, I still pleaded for healing. I also began memorizing Isaiah 53 with deep gratitude for Jesus our Messiah, a Man of Sorrows who was acquainted with all the despicable darkness of our sin-infected world.

One day in the waiting room at the cancer center, an elderly woman said, “Young lady, God has given you an assignment. Live it well.” Had we just been visited by an angel in disguise, sent by God to set the trajectory of this journey into the unknown and remind us of God’s supreme sovereignty? If Paul could say that he was in chains for Christ, could we also say that our daughter

was enchained for Christ? The circumstances were different but each had the privilege of proclaiming the goodness of God in the gospel through an unexpected, unwanted trial (Philippians 1:12-14).

Through months of grueling treatments, our reliance on God’s sovereign purpose in this affliction increased. For if God, the Author of life, is not in control, then hope and peace are an illusive mirage and, therefore, beyond our grasp. Trusting that He knows what we live to find out brought comfort; leaning on our own understanding was a waste (Proverbs 3:5-6). By acknowledging God’s sovereign glory over His creation reminded us that all our days are His to determine (Psalm 139:16) and that His ways and thoughts are supreme (Isaiah 55:8-9).

When our daughter was anointed with oil and prayer by the elders of the church, (James 5:16) this sacred ritual displayed power and authority over the enemy’s attempts to discourage us and discredit God’s sovereignty over this disease. Symbolically this also exemplified a beautiful truth: The church is family and our joys and our sorrows are a shared reality (Romans 12:15).

As our daughter listened daily to The Power of the Cross sung by Kristyn Getty, we were reminded: Grief is the price we pay for loving someone and its greatest redeeming message was displayed by Christ’s suffering on the cross, “Death is crushed to death; life is mine to live.” Focusing on the cross also helped us grapple with the question: Is physical healing the epitome of God’s goodness? Although that was our plea, we were able to sing with conviction, “...when sorrows like sea billows roll; whatever my lot, Thou has taught me to say, It is well, it is well with my soul” (It Is Well With My Soul – Horatio Spafford).

Throughout this appointed journey, as we experienced hope in the hymns of our faith, release in lament, resiliency in focusing on the cross and strength in trusting His Word, we were able to believe and say, “My God turns my darkness into light” (Psalm 18:28b). For the cross of Christ proves that darkness was stripped of its power when Eternal Light died in our place. Thank You, Lord Jesus!

Growing Up Adopted

I may have wondered what she looks like. I knew she was a believer, and I felt perfectly content. The family God designed for me was a “God story” from the start! God gave me a not-perfect family, but a perfect gift to me! At least ... that was until my adoptive Mom suddenly died. Oh the pain! I was an adult; I’d had her for 40 years, but never imagined the pain of this. What kind of “God” story is it now? Not the kind I wanted.

His plan was never only about me. (How selfish was that thought?)

“Naked I came from my mother’s womb and naked shall I return. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord” (Job 1:21).

I called to my husband, “Does this lady look like me?” A Facebook message friend request. Wow. This is so strange. After some minor Facebook stalking we had it figured out. It was her: the one who gave me up for adoption. I told my Mom. She said in tears, “Oh, I’ve been praying for her your entire life!” And then added, “I sure don’t want to share!” Life went on, no need to interact, I thought. Closed door, that’s how I like it.

A few months later and a thyroid lump required my family medical history. For the first time ever I knew how to get that! I began the conversation and because of the information was able to avoid an unnecessary surgery. I was still not praising God for any of this (because He took my mother). I couldn’t see that any story He would write now would ever be “good.” I guess I am not capable of really knowing what “good” is.

A conversation and a friendship developed. She was kind enough to want to know about my adoptive mother, and never downplayed the God story, or spoke with regret. This was healing to me. God was bringing me into more dependence on Him and teaching me how life can be “well with my soul.”

Within a few years, my birth mother got the diagnosis of terminal cancer and has been fighting it now for some time. I have struggled with understanding why God would have me go through this again. I never wanted it. I never wanted her. I wanted MY mom.

For some reason He has allowed me to see the beautiful story of God’s work in her life and ours, and to minister to her in her last days on earth. I have had to come to accept that this is what God is asking of me right now. I can fully obey Him in this and love her as a friend and keep my commitment to my mother that she would never share that place in my heart. Heaven will be amazing, to see and hear the whole picture of the beautiful things God has done.

There is so much we don’t see.

While there has been pain, confusion, and discomfort, I don’t feel like I’m suffering currently because God has given me the perspective of focusing on obeying and serving Him where I am. His purpose is much higher than I can see or make sense of. Why did He allow this? Why has this been placed in my lap? I had to ask myself what does God want me to do with this? He is just gently leading me to take the next step.

I am attempting everyday to trust Him and give him the glory for the great things He has done. I am thankful for getting to piece together the story of how God worked in her life and how He fulfilled my parents’ deep desire to have children, despite infertility. He matched us up together into a beautiful situation, and made good where the evil one planned harm.

“You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good” (Genesis 50:20).

Dealing with Divorce

STORY 1

My story is one of God's grace, lovingkindness, and redemption when my spouse chose to walk away from both their faith and our marriage.

Though outwardly fine, our marriage wasn't perfect by any means, and I'd be the first to tell you my pursuit at the time was focused on self and not loving God or my spouse. For months we lived as roommates and things progressively got more distant. The night my spouse told me they were considering separation and divorce, I realized all the control I thought I'd had was an illusion. I knew I could not handle this situation on my own. The following night I told my spouse we needed help from our church family. Sadly, that decision seemed to convince them they needed to separate immediately. God graciously used that moment in my life to break the pride and selfishness I had been holding onto and cause me to surrender to Him. He opened my eyes to my sin and how it had not brought the happiness it promised, but rather sorrow and death.

Over the next few months God put me through what I call a spiritual bootcamp. My recommitment to following God, my faith in God's goodness, and my pursuit of casting off every hindrance and sin were immediately put to the test. God gave me a heart to love my spouse unconditionally no matter the outcome and a desire for my spouse to come back to the Lord (and later for their salvation when they recanted their faith entirely).

I found hope and strength in God's Word. I craved biblical truth, God's promises, and reminders of His goodness. I constantly found myself in the Psalms and Job because they revealed people in times of great sorrow who placed their trust in the Lord.

Psalms 27:13-14 "I believe that I shall look upon the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living! Wait for the LORD; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the LORD! Job 2:10 "Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?"

The pain was worth it if God was good. Because if God was all-powerful and all-good, then the pain and suffering He allowed in my life was actually good for me. And if God decided a period of pain and suffering was good for me (even the best thing!), then I didn't want it any other way.

Romans 8:26-28 "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose."

Though I desired a reconciled marriage, my prayers were equally focused on asking God to use the trial to bring Him glory and to give me perseverance as He grew me through it. I didn't know how the trial would end, but I knew I didn't want it to be wasted. In James 1, God calls us to count it all joy when we face trials of various kinds. And though my trial was at least partially self-induced, God still allowed me to experience joy in Him during this tough time and have a peace that surpassed all my understanding.

Over the next year and a half of separation, I saw God constantly working. And though sadly my spouse decided to get a divorce, it did not change God's goodness or His worthiness to be worshiped and trusted. There is no promise that life will go the way we plan or desire. Instead, we are promised so much more: salvation and freedom from sin, being made children of God, eternal life with our Savior and Lord, an imperishable inheritance, and the list goes on!

John 10:10 "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.

An Abusive Relationship

It was the words of a friend that finally gave me a name for the situation I was experiencing – abuse. Exhausted, I had just finished recounting to her how I'd been up till dawn with my husband. He'd had a bad day at work. I quickly excused away the emotional pain caused from hours of name calling and belittling. The relationship had become so distorted that I didn't initially recognize how those behaviors were profoundly inappropriate and harmful.

I'd been in an abusive relationship with him for many years by that point. The way I considered that evening as acceptable stood in sharp contrast to the truth. Like a slow and steady drip, all sorts of lies had entered into that relationship and eventually created an immensely false reality.

That evening was far from an uncommon interaction between us. Our relationship and life was a cruel universe in which everything had to orbit around him and his desires. I had come to believe that this was the way things were supposed to be.

It is outside of God's good design for humans to live in relationship with one another in this way. It's an impossible and false structure. I failed often to keep my husband's high and ever-changing standards. He responded to his dissatisfaction with immense anger towards me. In an attempt to keep me living under his rule, he would use acts of physical intimidation, humiliation, and aggression.

After that revelatory day, I began to walk with the Lord in my sorrow as I lamented the emotional and physical pain I continued to experience. God was faithfully present and also gracious to send godly women to be with me during that long season. He started to orient my universe back to Him, chipping away at the false reality in which I lived.

When someone harms your body or even threatens to harm your body, they are making a statement: "You are mine to do with as I please." There is a distorted sense of possession and utility in abusive relationships. Something about you is being exploited for the benefit of another, often to your detriment. Everything about an abusive relationship is distorted with lies. Specifically about your identity and about whom you should fear most in this world. This false reality was created through the words and actions of my abuser.

You shall fear me. Certainly, the man in front of me could create sensations of intense fear. He had the power to inflict great harm to my person, both physically and emotionally. However, in light of God's immense power, of whom shall I have a greater fear and reverence? My husband communicated with his words and actions that I was made for his comfort and convenience. God says that I was fearfully made in His image for His glory. God began to grow in me a greater reverence for Him and for His words over that of another human.

You are unworthy. The dynamics of an abusive relationship are a direct assault on the gospel. God loves us so much that He made a way for us to be reconciled to Him through Christ's perfect life, death, and resurrection. There is that saying that something is only worth what someone else is willing to pay for it. God bought me with His son's life. He gives me value because of what He did. We have God-given value. It's beyond our utility or what God can get from us. His love is the opposite of the perversion of the so-called love in an abusive relationship.

Marriage involves two people and his continued unrepentant pursuit of sin brought that relationship eventually to an end. God, however, was faithful and never left my side. In the tenderest of ways He has continually been infusing truth through His word into the lies I used to believe. God gave me Himself and sent His church to aid in the healing. They were there to comfort, mourn, and eventually worship with thanksgiving as I grew to see reality more clearly. My life in early adulthood had been chained to fear. In God's kindness, I came to experience that growing in the fear of the Lord was the beginning to the path of freedom.

Facing Anxiety

In spring 2014, a work project was not going as planned. Things that I thought were under control started unraveling, and I started to worry. As the days and weeks passed, my worry turned into deep anxiety. Fear of what might happen gripped me in a way that I had never experienced. Several times a day and most nights I had full-blown panic attacks and could not overcome them. I asked the Lord for strength to not be anxious and for wisdom for the problems at work.

I repeated to myself the truth of Philippians 4:6-7 “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” I knew this to be true. I did not doubt it, and yet I was still paralyzed by anxiety. I was so afraid of how the work project was going to end and what others would think that I couldn’t think or do anything else.

I became extremely overwhelmed and frustrated. Even though I knew it was a sin to be anxious and I believed that God was in control of everything, my body and mind could not get out of this spiral of anxious thoughts.

The few people I talked to would remind me of these truths and pray with me, but nothing was changing. I wasn’t sleeping, I wasn’t eating well, and I was completely consumed by fear and anxiety. My body and mind were trapped. I felt like I needed medical attention but was ashamed to consider that option because to me this was something I needed God’s help with, not a doctor’s.

I became desperate and started to share my struggles with more people, and the Lord quickly revealed two things to me. 1) Others had struggled with anxiety, and 2) I shouldn’t be ashamed to get some medicine to help control the physical symptoms I was experiencing. God, in His mercy, has allowed His creation to

create something that can be helpful to those struggling. I was able to get some anti-anxiety medicine which took the edge off the panic attacks and fear that were controlling me.

Then, with extensive help from Christian counselors, friends, and the Bible, I was able to work through what was really going on in my mind. The Lord was gracious to me and began to reveal that the sin of anxiety was just the outcome of a deeper-rooted sin: I feared man more than I feared God. I cared more about what others thought of me than what He thought. My biggest worry was what my coworkers and boss would think if the project failed.

Even after the Lord revealed to me that the root of my sin was not fully trusting in His goodness and plan, things didn’t change overnight. It became a battle with crippling anxiety versus trusting and fearing God.

I wanted to have victory immediately once He revealed to me why I was so anxious. However, His ways are not my ways and His thoughts are not my thoughts (Isa 55:8-9). God is patient and kind and He wanted to teach me to trust Him more day-by-day, to dig deep into His Word and commune with Him. I had to learn to say no to thoughts that were not from God and replace those thoughts with things that were true, honorable, pure, lovely, commendable, excellent, and praiseworthy (Phil 4:8).

I had to learn to think about these things regularly so that my mind wouldn’t turn to fearing man. God wanted me to practice these things so they would be part of who I was and then His peace would be with me (Phil 4:9b). In His great wisdom and mercy God allowed me to suffer with anxiety for almost a year but through that time He taught me a lifestyle of trusting Him and fearing Him and how to fill my mind with truth and good things. It isn’t a one-and-done thing. It is a way of life. I praise God for this trial to teach me in a vivid way how to trust in Him.

Facing Divorce

Divorce is a hurt that I wish no one would ever have to experience. Yet it is because of my wounds and God's redemptive work that I have a humbling story that I love to share.

When the children were very young we experienced the brokenness of divorce. As I navigated those waters, we moved back home and I surrounded us with family and quickly got plugged back into the church where I grew up. As I struggled with sadness and doubt that any good could come of this, God quickly began to whisper to my heart, and remind me of his faithfulness. That summer, both of my children accepted Christ! As we drove home after a week at VBS, they both were asking so many questions that we ended up pulling over to the side of the interstate to talk. There in that moment they both accepted Christ. It was such a beautiful blessing amidst days that seemed so dark. It was pivotal, and strengthened my faith in knowing that no matter what happened in our future as a family, we are all in God's family.

Over the next few years as a single parent, God graciously placed two very dear pastors in my life who spoke deeply and honestly with me, getting me through many tough trials. After five years of being a single parent, God blessed me with a godly man who has been such a source of biblical encouragement, patience and understanding. He adores my children as if they were his own. God graciously has and continues to place such dear people in our lives who minister to and come alongside us. Through these loving moments of discipleship, God has grown my desire to help others come and know the grace and mercy God offers if we seek Him.

It has become a passion of mine to share my story because it displays the beautiful redemptive work God graciously allows to bloom after such suffering has taken place. A special passage that God laid on my heart as encouragement early on through my hardships was Proverbs 24:3-6 "By wisdom a house is built, and by understanding it is established; by knowledge, the rooms are filled with all precious and pleasant riches. A wise man is full of strength, and a man of knowledge enhances his might, for by wise guidance you can wage your war, and in abundance of counselors there is victory." It is my prayer that if you are struggling, you will seek out discipleship, wise counsel, and ultimately wisdom and truth from the one true God.

A Wayward Child

I never thought I would ever feel afraid of one of my adult children, but I have. I never thought I would have to set boundaries with an adult child that could potentially result in my child being homeless, but I have. Some of my worst days involved waking up in the morning with my first thought being, "Is my child hungry?" As a couple, we are grateful for the wise counsel by Pastor Josh who walked with us through these days. A Bethany mom with similar experiences walked this path with me. Our Adult Bible Class and many Bethany members prayed and prayed.

As parents, we all have a front row seat in the theater of our child's struggles, and it can be brutal. I have always been amazed at Job's statements in Job 1, "The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised." It applies to everything we have and it applies to our role as parents. It reminds me that EVERYTHING about my child belongs to the Lord. According to His will, He sometimes allows our children to be taken away or maybe takes a part of them, like their mental health or physical health.

Through Job's story, God shows us we can still praise Him as He is always worthy of our praise. Another Bethany mom who has experienced the loss of a child shared Psalm 103:1 with me. It says, "Praise the Lord, O my soul..." This is not just our privilege as God's people, it is also a command, even in the midst of trials. In several Psalms, David proclaims praise to the Lord, as if he is urging himself to praise God because he cannot do it on his own. In Job 2:10, Job asks his wife, "...should we accept good from God, and not trouble?"

When we have an adult child struggling in any way and it's clear we are powerless in many ways, we can pray and know God is working in a thousand ways, ways we cannot see. We hope during the wait. In full disclosure, waiting and praising and hoping are the last things I feel like I can or want to do. And in His great mercy, He shows me I cannot do it on my own. It's not the end of the story, but our adult child is doing much better and making healthy decisions, by the grace of God and the power of prayer. Although church and salvation are not currently a part of this process, we continue to pray and hope and wait. We marvel at God's faithfulness and we acknowledge we (and our children) remain a work in progress.

Facing Miscarriage

One in four. That's how many pregnancies end in miscarriage. Twenty-five percent. Likely more than that, since some miscarriages are mistaken for a normal period. Though, having found myself in that statistic, I can't see how that would be possible. The two are very different experiences.

The circumstances regarding our miscarriage don't really matter. What does matter is the common experience. I have the ability to look in a bereaved mother's eyes and say, "I miss my little one, too." And that is a gift that I've come to love and adore beyond my wildest dreams. Because I get to share the very real hope that Jesus gave me when we walked through those dark days. This hope is two-fold:

1.) Jesus loves you. And Jesus is compassionate. When He went to raise Lazarus from the dead in John 11, He didn't go right away to heal Lazarus when He heard Lazarus was sick. Instead He waited until Lazarus had died. He knew that He was going to raise Lazarus from the dead. Then He arrived at Bethany and everyone was weeping. Martha, Lazarus's sister, even came out and accused Jesus for not coming when He was called (11:21). Stop and think about this for a minute.

Jesus knew what He was going to do. He was going to do the impossible and raise Lazarus. He had every right to burst in there and say, "Stop crying! I'm here now. It will be all right!" But He didn't. Instead, John 11:35 happens. Jesus wept. Why? Not because Lazarus is dead. Jesus knows that death doesn't win, in this scenario or ever.

It has to be because the people He loves are weeping. Now look at Hebrews 4:14-16. Hebrews tells us that Jesus is our compassionate high priest. He sympathizes with our weaknesses. Jesus weeps with us. So on the days when you feel like you can't move, or when other people get back to life and you struggle to find a new normal, or the days when you are so angry or confused

you don't know what to do, Jesus is right there with you. You will never, ever mourn alone.

2.) Grief has a purpose. Paul opens 2 Corinthians talking about comfort. He praises God as the God of Compassion and Father of all Comfort, who comforts us in all of our affliction. Why? So that we can comfort others. It's called the fellowship of suffering. Grief of any kind gives us a special perspective on suffering.

It allows us to know how to help others in a similar situation. Take note of what helps you in your grief and do it for others when they are grieving. This glorifies God and gives your grief a purpose. I miss our baby every day but sharing what I've learned with grief gives that loss purpose, and that's part of the healing that will continue to happen the rest of my life. Helping others through their grief gives our lost baby a voice. It gives purpose to his or her short little life when we share our story.

Jesus is near to the broken-hearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit (Psalm 34:18). So even on those days when it feels everyone but you has forgotten, and you just need to cry, He's crying with you. He takes each of our tears and holds them in a bottle (Psalm 56:8). We look forward to meeting our little one in Heaven one day, but until then, we're sure they are playing in the sun, and one day when we get there they'll take our hands and show us everything.



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