

LOSS & REDEMPTION: Learning to Live Again

In 2017 Troy and I were at a marriage conference at Bethel Church in Redding, California. I remember it vividly. By that point we had been through so much.

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We all process pain in our own way. I took to journaling and poured my heart out to God in prayer; Troy dealt with our losses very differently, and it was at that conference that I truly began to see how everything had played out in Troy's heart. He had suppressed his grief and needed to be set free. He needed to release the wound created from the loss of our sons and be revived.

At the conference, Troy and I participated in a workshop where we were led in a process of deep inner healing. The leaders weren't messing around. When they called Troy and me up for ministry, they didn't start with niceties to pass time. They went straight to the heart. It was as though they could see right through Troy and knew exactly what he needed. The workshop leaders started asking Troy questions, probing him to go deeper.

And then it happened.

Catharsis

In front of over 250 people, my husband let it all out. He curled up on the floor and cried out. He was finally releasing the intense pain he'd held for so long. He was letting go of the disappointment and anger that grabbed hold of his heart

following the loss of our boys. His emotions were real and raw. It was a beautiful moment; one God chose specifically to heal Troy.

There wasn't a dry eye in the room that day. Everyone was crying, both men and women. Most men look for anything to distract them from the pain they feel. Watching God minister to Troy in that way was incredible and likely set others free.

When we signed up for that conference, it was simply to grow in our marriage; instead, the event freed my husband to be the man he was created to be.

Our beautiful partnership and journey together came full circle in that moment. For so long Troy wanted to protect me and felt he had failed at doing so. He carried that guilt and anger, along with the devastation of losing two boys. God healed Troy's heart at that conference, and He was about to work another miracle in our marriage.

Creating a Legacy

I had prayed and hoped for a miracle following the loss of the boys. I thought the girls were that miracle, but God continued to pour into our lives. By staying the course and listening to the Lord, even when it seemed impossible, we were able to bring something else to life—a ministry that has touched the lives of children in our community and around the world.

None of that would have happened if Troy and I hadn't been together. If we hadn't gotten married, we wouldn't have had the boys or girls or built the orphanages. There would have been no vision, no seeds, no plans.

God used our marriage partnership and losing the boys to create a legacy for them here on earth. We honor them in everything the Lord has allowed us to do, and they live on through the work we do—each child we help, each mouth we feed, each broken heart we meet with compassion. We are led by His

Spirit to complete the mission God planted in our hearts—and it is all a testament to our boys.

Although Jonathon and Joseph were here on earth less than 24 hours, they are changing lives across the globe because of the impact they had on our hearts. God used them to break us and show us the world as He needed us to see it. He wanted to direct us to the places He needed us to be. He needed us to walk into the unknown and uncertain places by faith. He carried us through the hardest times in our lives and ultimately breathed life back into our marriage.

God used our pain for a greater purpose, inspiring the work we do with Giving Hope. The boys aren't gone; they are simply being held by the Father until we are all reunited in heaven.

I miss my boys. I sometimes sit in the stillness of morning and wonder what they would be interested in. Would they look more like me or Troy? How would they interact with their brother and sisters? Would they be athletic? Would they be smart? Where would their hearts lead them in this world?

Unable to touch them, I see and feel them through the work we are doing and the lives we continue to reach. Giving Hope has become the answer to all the questions. It is their legacy, and it is anchored in love—a mother's love.

I still don't know medically why we had two sons diagnosed with Potter syndrome, but our experience is a constant reminder that God is always in charge. The COVID pandemic was another reminder of that. While it brought some people closer, it did the opposite for many others. So many people were struggling all over the world.

In the midst of lockdowns and uncertainty, beautiful spaces were created for deep reflection. My family was home with me. We were together. During that time, I found myself thinking of the boys more and more.

I knew I needed to do something for myself, for my heart and my healing process. I poured all my thoughts and emotions onto paper. I knew the boys would never physically receive these letters, but just writing them put a piece of my heart back together. The letters made me feel as if the boys were with us in those times when we were all together as a family.

Headwaters of Our Journey

There are two things I always knew with absolute certainty: I love God, and I wanted to be a mother.

For as long as I could remember, to become a mother was my greatest hope. Long before I ever set foot in a delivery room—even before I got married—I dreamed of how it would feel to hold my precious babies, how my life would change when they arrived. I saw it as such a beautiful miracle, the gift of motherhood.

I never could have prepared myself for the dark, painful path God would lead me down to realize my heart's desire. My journey was marked by heartbreaking loss and sorrow, but I came out on the other side with a greater sense of purpose and a deeper awareness that God's plan is better than my own, even when it includes suffering.

I lay there, staring at those four sterile walls that felt like an emotional prison. It was the second time I'd found myself in this place. I had just carried another baby to term and delivered him in the presence of family, doctors and nurses. This was a moment most mothers dream of and cherish long after their delivery experience, but there was no joy for me. I knew I had a limited amount of time with my son and would have to say goodbye—again.

I would leave the hospital empty-handed, no beautiful newborn in my arms to bring home to meet his siblings for the first time. There would be no diapers, no feedings, no milestone moments to record. For the second time in less than three

years, I would leave that hospital with only the memory of my son's short life—the fleeting smell of his head, the touch of his fingers, the feel of his skin.

I had buried one son already. I didn't think I could bear having to do so again. The pain in my heart was so excruciating I felt numb. I knew I was being called to trust my Abba Father, but it was so hard. My heart was so broken. I didn't understand why God would allow this to happen to us not once but twice.

Where had I gone so wrong in my life? Where had we gone wrong? Why would God allow this to happen? I started to question everything—every decision and choice I had ever made leading up to that moment.

As a mother, I can't imagine any greater pain than losing a child. I was angry and felt a huge hole in my heart. The physical scars of giving birth would heal. The tear stains on my cheeks would eventually fade. But there would always be a missing piece. Our boys were not with us on earth. I could only look to heaven and know they were there as part of God's bigger plan.

In my darkest moments I did the only thing I knew to do—I turned to God and His Word. I chose to trust Him, even when I was full of questions, pain and anger. The only thing that kept me going was believing that one day God would give me the family I always wanted and write my story just as I had envisioned it.

I would soon learn God had a plan already in motion that was much greater than my own. It wasn't until He helped me crawl out of the darkness and brokenness that I was able to begin to see it and realize I didn't get to control my story. I was simply called to trust the Lord with my whole heart.

Step by step and day by day life began to take shape. The pain of losing our boys didn't go away, but I began to see that

while our children were not with us here on earth, their memory would live on through the mosaic God was crafting from all the broken pieces of our hearts.

Allowing God to work in my life created a space for Him to turn my greatest pain into my life's greatest purpose. I noticed the injustices happening around me. I began to see hurting people, and I wanted to meet them exactly where they were in their moment of need. I learned how to love extravagantly and give in a way I didn't know I was capable of until I had gone through my own suffering. Only God could have birthed that kind of love in me. After the pain I had experienced, I began to see the world through God's eyes rather than my own.

I thought losing my boys would be the end of life as I knew it. It was, in a way. My dream of motherhood took a very different form, but I came to know the joy and beauty of being able to change the lives of children, my own and so many others. I would get my miracle.

Forward, By God's Path

Life has many roads and brings many challenges. We all go through them. I never could have imagined what my challenges would look like or what I would have to walk through.

God is the master storyteller, and this is the story He wrote for me. It is my family's story and the story of Giving Hope, the ministry born from our experience. But this is also your story. I hope you look beyond your own pain, stop running from mistakes and realize God loves you and can use you through any situation. When you truly learn to embrace our heavenly Father's unconditional love, you can change your heart, your life and the world.

When my world fell apart, I realized life isn't promised to be perfect. God took the broken pieces and put them back together. From the depths of darkness came light. From the

place of hurt came hope.

God changed me, constantly pushing me toward the person He wanted me to be—the mother, woman and wife He wanted me to be. Because of Him alone I can finish strong. I can do the work.

And there is still work to be done.

Tracy Duhon managed to turn her pain into purpose when she and her husband, Troy, formed the nonprofit Giving Hope, including the Food Pantry of New Orleans, Hope House Orphanages, Hope Against Trafficking and Hope for a Home. She also founded the Women of Hope Unite program, a faith-based women's organization. She and Troy, an executive producer of the record-breaking film *God's Not Dead*, have seven children—four on earth (Josh, Abigail, Avah and Annastasia) and three in heaven—and live in New Orleans. Her new book, *When Hope Is All You Have*, released July 2nd, and is available to purchase now on .