

A Father Carries on Through Tragedy and Pain

On May 8, 2014, the impossible happened. Jeannie's and my eldest child—our precious Rebecca— was taken from us in a tragic accident at the age of 32.

It was an unseasonably warm spring day, with temperatures in the 80s. Rebecca was out for a run along Lake Michigan, and we believe she was trying to cool off from her exertion. She slipped from a rock wall and fell into the lake. Unable to climb back up onto the rocks, she was overcome by the frigid water. Hypothermia set in, and she drowned.

When we heard the news, it crashed over us, consuming us with an indescribable pain that was both sickening and familiar. Just 9 years ago, we experienced the loss of our youngest son, Alex, at the age of 17.

Surely, it can't be true? In just a moment, another child was gone.

Rebecca was a two-time London champion for running 800 meters, a scholarship to Loyola University for MBA, track runner and record breaker for Loyola, grade-A student. But for all of her achievements, the thing we miss the most, of course, is her person—her just being with us.

Humble, gentle, passionate, genuinely caring, filled with love and unseen acts of kindness, always reaching out to build people up, to bless them, to take care of them, she was beautiful both inside and out.

Oh how we miss Rebecca, especially me on this Father's Day. And yet, as Jeannie said, 'we must now 'labor' to ensure her amazing legacy is passed on to encourage and inspire others to live a selfless life in service to the King of Kings.

Why, God, why?



When we go through pain like this—unbelievable pain—it’s okay, as David said, to ask the question, “Why?” Rebecca was so excited by this new season ahead, she was having huge impact for the Kingdom of God, and the doors were opening to launch the Alpha Youth Film Series across America. There was so much to look forward to. But as David indicated in the Psalms, it comes back to a trust we have in the Creator of the Universe.

In the week after Rebecca’s death, we were in agony—an agony that only increases as reality sets in. But one of the verses that came to Jeannie’s mind in these early days helps to give us hope:

“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 and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isaiah 55:8-9).

All we can do is be authentic, and when the grief comes, we weep. But, through the pain and the grief, we have great hope for the future. It’s a hope that brings great joy because, in trusting in Jesus Christ, we know this is not the end!

Through the pain and the tears, I keep whispering to Jeannie, “Look ahead.” We are going to be together again.

Jesus came from the comfort of heaven to this broken earth and lived amongst us, enduring terrible suffering. He came to show us what God is like, to show us love, to deal with the great barrier between us and God. And He himself took the punishment that we all deserve. Throughout His life, through His death, through His resurrection, He’s given us great hope.

That’s why we can look up. We are going to be together again.

I have a great memory of Rebecca coming downstairs each morning and saying, 'It's a new day.' Rebecca lived with a deep love for Jesus and a passion to share it with others. For her, each day was a new day.

As I think about my role as executive director at Alpha USA, as a father and a friend, I am increasingly aware that I desperately need the grace and comfort of our God to restore my soul. Jeannie, Ben and I have already journeyed through the valley of Baca (weeping) with the passing of Alex and now Rebecca.

Grief brings a multitude of emotions—moments of quiet and peace can suddenly be swamped by the searing pain of loss triggered, maybe, by a passing thought. Nothing is the same anymore. In the low moments, I find that God's promises, quickened by the Holy Spirit, are a great comfort to my weary soul.

Yes, I hold on to these truths:

- God is good all the time – even though we may not understand what He is doing.
- He is in ultimate control.
- He is working out His external purposes through us (and all his people).

Seeing things in the context of eternity makes a huge difference.

Through our sadness, we are clinging to Rebecca's words— it's a new day. In this, I pray for God to strengthen us by the power of the Holy Spirit in our inner being, so that we hold onto Jesus Christ by faith (Eph 3:14-17). We know that our adversary is ever knocking on the door with anger and bitterness, but we believe that God's love and light is powerful enough to victoriously crush any attacks that may come.

One day (hopefully very soon!), we will see Rebecca, Alex and all our loved ones in Christ again, and we will understand and give glory to God for His good, pleasing and perfect plan. For now, although we don't understand why, we chose to trust Him and want to do all we can to ensure God is glorified, using Rebecca's amazing legacy to encourage young and old people alike to follow her incredible example of living a selfless life for Jesus Christ, the extension of His Kingdom, and the saving of many young people.

We know that today is a new day, and because of that, we can trust God to nudge us a step forward.

Find me on Twitter @Gerard_Long and see how God is taking me and my family through this difficult time.

Gerard Long is the executive director of Alpha USA.