

Finding Fresh Hope When Your Dreams Are Splintered

My son's desperate act changed our family's future. But God, in His mercy, brought redemption when our former dreams died.

I don't tell the story of my son in order to give anybody the impression that he is a hero—that is far from the truth, in the traditional sense anyway. He shot and killed a man in broad daylight. Instead, I tell it to share with others the painful, incredible passage of faith my family and I have trod for half a decade.

I tell this story because everything I believe about God has been tested by fire, and has withstood the flames. I tell it because my heart has been bruised and broken by sorrow, and then restored by grace.

Our journey began on Oct. 24, 1999. The telephone rang at 12:30 a.m. My husband answered, listened and informed me that our son Jason had been arrested for the murder of his wife's ex-husband. I stood to walk to the bathroom, then fell to the floor in shock.

We wanted to believe that for some reason the news was erroneous, but it wasn't. Our only son—who loved Christ, who was a model student, who lettered in sports, who was president of the National Honor Society, who graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy, who donated his time, his money, even his blood to help others—had become so obsessed with the man who had molested his two stepdaughters that he followed him to a busy restaurant and shot him in plain view of passersby.

Six days after we learned of Jason's arrest, I finally heard my son's voice. A digitized message told me the call was coming from a state institution and asked if I would accept the charges. Jason wept into the phone, "Mom, I've just been

beaten up by 10 guys here at the jail. They jumped me and started kicking me in the face. My two front teeth are broken off and these guys stole all my stuff. They took my deodorant, soap and toothpaste ... They just kept kicking me in the head."

My pain was too deep for words. We cried together, a mom and her boy, 1,100 miles apart, embarking on an odyssey of anguish, strife and prayer. When that first conversation with Jason was cut short by the institutional telephone system, I sat at my desk motionless as a deep, guttural wail rose from within. A shroud of grief and fear engulfed me.

Relinquishing the Dream

Maybe it was my training as a pastor's daughter, maybe it was my prayer life or the years I spent reading Scripture. Perhaps it was God's mercy—but through the darkness, I found a path to redemption in the story of Abraham and Isaac.

" ... God tested Abraham, and said to him, 'Abraham!' And he said, 'Here I am.' Then He said, 'Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you.'

"So Abraham rose up early in the morning and saddled his donkey ... Isaac spoke to Abraham his father and said, 'My father ... Here is the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?' Abraham said, 'My son, God will provide for Himself the lamb for a burnt offering.' So the two of them went together" (Gen. 22:1-8, MEV).

I know that my son is not a picture of Isaac, who was blameless. I do not excuse what he did; I know his actions would not have been God's plan for his life. Yet Jason is my personal "Isaac."

God enabled me to lay down my claim to him with complete trust and submission, even while my mother's heart recoiled at

letting go. In doing so, I recognized that what I sacrificed on the altar was actually my own desires: prideful ambition for my child, longings for family holidays and dreams of an idyllic future.

Abraham trusted God so completely that he was willing to surrender what he loved most deeply, even unto death. And through the blackest vale, I learned to trust like Abraham. Almost immediately after learning of Jason's devastating plight, I made a critical decision that the enemy would not win. I would choose hope. I would choose faith amid unthinkable circumstances.

I wrote a letter to my family proclaiming victory: *Included in this walk through the valley of what feels like death is an awareness of His presence I have never experienced before. I can almost hear the sound of angel wings.*

All of us have "Isaacs" that we need to leave on the altar—heart sacrifices that challenge us to the core. You probably haven't received a middle-of-the-night phone call informing you that your child has been arrested for murder, but I'm sure of one thing: You have had to let go of a cherished person, opportunity, position, habit or dream. True heart sacrifices involve identifying something precious to us (our Isaac), letting go of our control over it, embracing God's love in the process of the release and resting in the outcome—even if we do not understand the reason behind the sacrifice.

Making Peace With the Outcome

When I finally saw Jason, it was through the filter of a thick Plexiglas barrier. He was beaten and bruised, and two front teeth were jagged pieces. He was broken, hurt and sad; and so was I.

As I looked at my son behind the glass, I knew that there was

nothing I could do about the circumstances that brought Jason to that place. There was no way to bring the man he killed back to life. There was no way to fix things and make life as it was before.

Yet, God asked me to trust Him. I prayed and interceded for two and a half years before my son's trial eventually arrived. On seven different occasions, the court date was postponed.

When the trial finally took place, our family walked around the prison seven times in a Jericho-style prayer walk, petitioning God for His will. And when God's will, finally made plain, did not offer the results we had expected, it was Jason's faith that shielded us from despair.

We sat in the courtroom gallery and watched our only child, just 27 years old, face a verdict on his life. His dusty blonde hair was neatly combed, and his shirt was crisply pressed. He sat with his back straight and his clear blue eyes calm and intent.

The jury handed the judge their decision, and Jason stood with perfect composure. At that moment, I was more proud of him than I had ever been because he accepted his sentence with pure grace: life in prison, without the possibility of parole—ever.

He received the punishment with a demeanor of quietness, as if he had prayed much. He didn't break down. He didn't show anger. He was just at peace—much more at peace than any of the rest of us.

Then they put the cuffs on him and the waist chain, and they sent him out. As he left the courtroom, Jason glanced back at us and mouthed the words "I love you" and left.

When Jason returned to his cell in the faith-based area of the jail, a crowd of inmates gathered around him—murderers, child molesters, robbers, multiple offenders who had become

Christians—and wept, “If a man like you got a sentence like this, Jason, there’s no hope for us.” More than two years had passed since his original incarceration and Jason had become a leader in his cellblock.

He stood up and preached, “Men, whether we walk in freedom in this lifetime or the next, one day we will walk in freedom because we know Jesus, and this life is not all there is.” Shortly after he spoke, he was taken away to the Capital Life area, away from the men he knew.

Genesis 22 does not record any tears from Abraham. We do know that Abraham and Isaac traveled toward the place of sacrifice for three days, so I can’t help but wonder about the many emotions that must have filled this father’s heart as he made the most challenging journey of his life.

The Bible is full of stories of people like Abraham—like you and me—who were asked by God to be faithful in the midst of crushing circumstances. I find comfort in the fact that most of them did not get an answer to their “why” questions either. Heartache is a common denominator among human beings, and I draw strength from knowing I am not as alone as I sometimes feel.

The Power of Transcendent Joy

When my son was arrested and eventually convicted of first-degree murder, I was humiliated, embarrassed and ashamed. I believed I was a failure as a mother. Looking back, so much of my journey was about my pain, my hurt, my reputation, my devastation. Only when I began to look at my unthinkable circumstances through the lens of Jesus’ death and resurrection did I experience a joy that transcends my heartache.

There are still days when I slip into that deep valley of despair. But I continue to learn, day by day, that there is no situation that Christ’s resurrection doesn’t give me the power

to overcome. I'm discovering that writer Henri Nouwen was right: "The cup of sorrow, inconceivable as it seems, is also the cup of joy. Only when we discover this in our own life can we consider drinking it."

We spent Easter with Jason after his trial. We sat in the prison courtyard, and determined that we would not waste our sorrow. We would allow God to use our tragedy as a platform upon which to proclaim His goodness, and to declare that there is hope even in the most hopeless circumstances. A part of that declaration came through a book God enabled me to write chronicling our journey through this adversity.

After reading the manuscript, Jason wrote the following in a letter: "Dear Mom, I just finished reading *When I Lay My Isaac Down* this morning. Great job. It was a very painful read, but a good read. It taught my heart something. I know the truths of which you speak deep down inside, but I had never seen them elaborated on and explained and put into a coherent form as a guide or a map out of the nightmare. I felt God using it to minister to me and I know it's ministering to others too.

"You and Dad—your attempt to make something beautiful out of all of this destruction is amazing. Well done, Mom. I love you and am grateful to have you as mom. You and Dad keep loving each other, and don't be too tough on emotional expectations. Pick each other up and try to be encouraging. I think Satan's going to be ticked off again at our family in a whole new way, so be alert. Pray and love each other, whatever may come.

"I love you both a lot. You're great parents. J.P."

Beneath his initials, Jason added a smiley face with two teeth because his father and I were able to successfully negotiate the notoriously merciless penal system in order to get his teeth fixed. The book has been a real gift to our family, enabling us to use our pain as a catapult to reach other suffering pilgrims.

We have also become advocates for prisoners and their families through Speak Up for Hope, an organization that ministers to the families of those who are incarcerated. As Jason serves his penalty, I, too, live out a life sentence of hope deferred. But with the loss of former expectations comes the possibility of new dreams, dreams forged by fire, heartache and suffering that are made of strong metals. For I know that true redemption comes from our Father's hand.

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