

What I Learned Through Loss

THE DEATHS OF TWO OF OUR CHILDREN TAUGHT US HOW TO RUN TO GOD, NOT AWAY FROM HIM, WHEN WE FACE TRAGEDY.

How do you think about your suffering? Have you thought about it?

Is your first response when something difficult comes into your life to do everything you can to get rid of it? To call everyone you know to pray to ask God to take it away? For most of us, it is.

In the Bible, here is how Peter told us to think about suffering: "Since Jesus went through everything you're going through and more, learn to think like Him. Think of your sufferings as a weaning from that old sinful habit of always expecting to get your own way. Then you'll be able to live out your days free to pursue what God wants instead of being tyrannized by what you want" (1 Pet. 4:1-2, The Message).

Would you like to live out your days free to pursue what God wants instead of being tyrannized by what you want? Then you may need to change how you think about your suffering.

WHEN HOPE DIES The truth is, most of us don't think about suffering much until it invades our lives like it did mine four years ago when we gave birth to a daughter we named Hope. The doctors were immediately concerned by several "small" problems evident at birth. Hope had club feet, was very lethargic and unresponsive, had a flat chin and a large soft spot, and would not suck.

On Hope's second day of life, a geneticist who examined her came to our room. He told us that he suspected Hope had a rare metabolic disorder called "Zellweger Syndrome." He explained that because she was missing something in her cells called peroxisomes, which rid cells of toxins, her systems would

slowly shut down.

And then he dropped the bomb that most babies with this syndrome live less than six months. No treatment. No cure. No survivors. When he said that, I remember feeling as if the air had been sucked out of me, and I let out a low groan.

We had Hope for 199 days. We savored our days with her. We held her during her seizures. Then, we let her go.

To have a child with Zellweger Syndrome requires that both parents be carriers of the recessive gene trait for the syndrome. So after Hope was born, we made a difficult decision.

We knew that any child of ours would have a 25 percent chance of being born with the fatal syndrome. So we took surgical steps to prevent a future pregnancy. It didn't work, and about two years later we were shocked (to put it mildly) to discover that I was pregnant.

We were not only shocked but also afraid when we considered what might be ahead in having and then losing another child. But we also felt a cautious joy at the prospect of having another healthy child to raise alongside our son Matt.

However, after a series of prenatal tests, we discovered that we would indeed be welcoming another child with Zellweger Syndrome into our family. And we did.

Gabriel was born in July 2001. He was so beautiful and so easy to love. We packed a lifetime of love into the six months we had with him.

A SORROWFUL SUBMISSION When Hope was a month or so old, the secretary from our church called and told me we were on the prayer list that went out to church members. They were asking people to pray that God would work a miracle and heal Hope.

I told her, "That is not how we feel led to pray." We didn't

ask God for that. It didn't seem right. Or maybe we were afraid to pray that, to expect that, when the diagnosis seemed so sure and so grim.

In those early weeks, God seemed to speak to me clearly—though not in an audible voice. I've never heard that. He spoke to me the way He always does: through Scripture.

In my Bible study a couple of weeks after Hope was born, we looked at the story of Hagar, who had run away from Abram and Sarai due to Sarai's harsh treatment. She wanted to escape her difficult situation, but God spoke to her in the desert, telling her to return and submit (see Gen. 16:9).

My Bible study leader asked, "What is God calling you to submit to?" I knew God was calling me to submit to the journey we were facing with Hope—not to fight it or to cry out to Him to change it but to submit to His plan and His purposes.

For me, submission has meant a quiet, though sorrowful, acceptance of God's plan and God's timing. It has meant giving up the plans I had for my daughter and son, for my family, for my life, and bringing them all under submission to God.

I wish that it had been a one-time decision, a one-time sacrifice. But throughout Hope's life, as her condition slowly deteriorated, in the days of grief that have followed her death, and as we said "yes" to loving and then losing a second child, the call to submission hasn't changed, and it hasn't gotten easier.

Every day, as I let go of my dreams and desires, I'm once again called upon to submit. Some days I do better than others.

Submission frees us to embrace God's plan for our lives, a plan He has put together with our very best interests in His heart and mind. Because I believe God's plans for me are better than what I could plan for myself, rather than run away

from the path He has set before me, I want to run toward it. I want to submit.

What is God calling you to submit to today? Is it a difficult situation, a demanding person, an unfulfilled dream, a limitation, a loss? Are you willing to submit?

WE DON'T EXPECT TO SUFFER As we endeavor to think like Christ about the suffering in our lives, most of us would have to admit that we have spent most of our lives doing everything we can to avoid suffering. In today's modern world, we expect a cure for every illness, a replacement for every loss, a fix for every failure.

We are shocked and shaken when something hurtful invades our comfort zones. But look around. How many people do you know who have escaped experiencing profound difficulty at some point in their lives?

Look at the Scriptures. Can you find a person in the Bible—even the godliest of persons—who did not suffer greatly?

Why is it that we think we shouldn't have to suffer? That God's will for our lives could not include suffering?

Evidently the Bible's most significant sufferer—Job—didn't see it that way. Job wasn't looking for suffering, and yet it didn't seem to catch him off guard.

You know his story. Job was sitting at home one day when a series of messengers came and told him first, that all of his livestock had been slaughtered and second, that all of his children had perished when the building they were in collapsed. Then, as if losing everything he had and nearly everyone he loved was not enough, Job was stricken with painful sores all over his body.

When his wife tells him to completely give up on life and give up on God because of his suffering, Job says to her, "Should

we accept only good things from the hand of God and never anything bad?" (Job 2:10, NLT)

Job's acceptance and even expectation of both good and bad things from God is in sharp contrast to our expectation today, which is why we have such a hard time responding to suffering in a godly way as Job did. We have an unspoken expectation that a good God will bring only what we consider to be good things into our lives. We never expect Him to allow and perhaps even bring difficulty into our lives. But He does.

"But," you might say, "Lamentations says that 'God does not willingly afflict his children.'" That's true.

So what does this mean? If we're God's children, we'll never have to suffer? No.

It means we will experience no meaningless suffering. If God has allowed suffering to come into your life, it is for a purpose. A good purpose. A holy purpose.

EMBRACING SUFFERING Few of us would choose to suffer. Yet when we know that God has allowed suffering in our lives for a purpose, we can embrace it instead of running from it. Jesus said: "Don't run from suffering; embrace it. Follow Me and I'll show you how" (Luke 9:24, The Message).

Jesus is suggesting that we do more than simply endure suffering. He's inviting us to stop feeling sorry for ourselves and focus instead on what there is to learn in the suffering.

He's inviting us to draw closer to Him in the midst of our suffering because of our suffering. Not only does Jesus invite us to embrace suffering, but He also shows us what that looks like.

We see it described in Hebrews 5:7-9, where we read: "During the days of Jesus' life on earth, He offered up prayers and

petitions with loud cries and tears to the One who could save Him from death, and He was heard because of His reverent submission. Although He was a son, He learned obedience from what He suffered and, once made perfect, He became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey Him" (NIV).

Amazingly, God's plan to redeem the world and to make a way for you and me to spend eternity with Him included the suffering and death of His own Son. It helps me to know that Jesus wrestled with that plan even as He submitted to it.

Have you cried out to God in frustration, with questions about how He could have the power to heal and yet choose not to heal the one you love? Have you agonized in an effort to reconcile your understanding of a loving God with One who allowed the accident, the atrocity, the abuse? I have.

When you groan because there are no words for the hurt, when you cry out to God with hot tears, when you agonize over His plan that has caused you such pain, Jesus understands! He understands what it is like to cry out to the Father, who has the power to make another way, enact another chooses not to.

NO PAIN IS WASTED Bob Benson, former president of Benson Publishing Company, used to tell about how, whenever he was speaking at a retreat, he would ask the people there to take out a piece of paper and fold it in half. He told them to make a list on the top part of the paper of everything bad that had ever happened to them. Then he told them to make a list on the bottom part of the paper of the best things that had ever happened to them.

What people found was that there were many things from the top of the page that they also wanted to include in the list at the bottom of the page. Experiences they had labeled as the worst things that had ever happened to them had, over time, become some of the best things that had ever happened to them.

That's because God uses difficult experiences of life for our

ultimate good.

Early on in my journey, I said to God, “OK, if I have to go through this, then give me everything.

“Teach me everything you want to teach me through this. Don’t let this incredible pain be wasted in my life!”

I know that God has a purpose for allowing this pain in my life and that it is for my ultimate good. And I believe God has a purpose for the pain in your life that is for your ultimate good, even though everything about it looks and feels bad. As you learn to think like Jesus about your suffering, embrace the truth that there is no meaningless suffering for a child of God, and refuse to allow pain to be wasted in your life.

Read a companion devotional.

Nancy Guthrie is the author of *Holding On to Hope*, published by Tyndale House, from which this article is adapted.