

When Hope Died

A few years ago, Carl and Anna walked into my office at church.

A successful and attractive couple, they looked similar to many of the successful and attractive couples in our upper middle-class congregation. They had three young children, ran a thriving business and, I assumed, had similar goals and challenges as most young families in their life stage. I expected they wanted to talk about their marriage or a particular parenting issue. I was wrong.

In the previous few weeks, they had been given the opportunity to foster a special needs baby boy. Only 3 months old, doctors had determined that he would likely be dependent on others for his entire life. Even though they had never given much thought to fostering or adoption, Carl and Anna felt like God was putting this medically fragile child into their lives. We talked about how difficult it might be to care for such a child, especially with three other small kids in their home.

However, Carl and Anna kept on coming back to this truth: God cares deeply for this fatherless child, so they should, as well. They couldn't get around the fact that God was calling them to step into a difficult situation and play a small part in the redemption of this little life. Within a few weeks, Isaiah was in their home.

Fast forward a few months. Isaiah became a part of their forever family when Carl and Anna chose to adopt him. Little Isaiah moved from being someone they would care for to one that they were fully committed to parenting for life. In my mind, Carl and Anna were rock stars. Throughout their journey, they have given all credit to God (and downplayed their part), but their willingness to "do hard things" stuns

me. They were modeling Jesus' sacrifice and selflessness more radically than just about anybody I have ever known.

But Wait, There's More...

Some months later, Carl and Anna got a phone call about another special needs child. A baby girl had been born a few days before, essentially without a brain. She had enough of a brain stem to maintain life (basic respiration), but was without any sensory perception. The call was to ask Carl and Anna if they would be willing to foster this little girl. They said yes.

So picture this family: three small (but active) children, a recently adopted child with extreme medical care needs, and now an infant foster child who is both fully dependent on her caregivers and without the ability to give anything in return. A circumstance that most "normal" people would run from, Carl and Anna jumped headlong into it. *Rock. Stars.*

Wouldn't you know it, Carl and Anna fast-tracked the adoption of their daughter and "Hope" became an official part of their family. Why? Because every child is valuable to God and deserves to have a family; even those whose bodies don't work like we think they should. Also, because Carl and Anna chose to do something that few Christians ever consider doing: actively modeling Jesus' love. Most of us are a whole lot of talk and a lot less action.

When I would see this family in church, they had smiles on their faces and joy in their hearts. They would guide their little ones to class while pushing a couple of strollers decked out with medical gear. They were committed to caring for the lives that God had entrusted to them with faithfulness and sacrifice. I can't think of anybody I know who has modeled the unconditional and extravagant love of Jesus better than they have.

On Tuesday, Hope Went to Be With Jesus.

I could keep on going with more details of their story and lessons learned about the activity of God through Hope's brief life, but I want to let Carl and Anna do that. They both (bravely) spoke at Hope's memorial service yesterday. With their permission, I want to simply let these two parents share their perspective on the glory of God that they saw reflected in the life of their daughter.

Here's What Anna Shared:

Carl and I would just like to begin by saying how overwhelmed we are with the love and support we have received during this time and throughout Hope's life. To see so many of you coming together to celebrate her is incredibly humbling and we thank you for loving her and us so well.

We first learned about Hope in a very simple email from a social worker at Grady. Two days after Hope's birth she wrote me this ... "I remember last time we spoke you mentioning that you and your husband would like to adopt more special needs children. I may know of one that needs a wonderful mommy and daddy.

I said great! And Carl said he needed a Xanax.

If I could choose one word that has woven itself throughout Hope's life, it would be "faithfulness." God has been so faithful to this child. This daughter of the King whom He so graciously shared with us for a short time.

By all earthly standards, Hope was born with nothing—an orphan with a severe medical condition and very few options. When she was released from the hospital her only possessions were a few handmade blankets that had been donated to the hospital. There was no planning, no special outfits or announcements like many do anticipating their baby's arrival. But Hope was never

alone. And those of us who know Jesus do not subscribe to the worldly perspective of having nothing or no one. She is a child of God and He kept his promises to His child.

He was there when her birth mother unsuccessfully sought out an abortion. When the adoption agency denied her placement and she became a ward of the state. He was there when people told us she would not survive and that taking this on would be a mistake. He was also there when we brought her home and loved and adored and cherished her and He was there when she took her last breath on earth and her first breath in heaven. God knew exactly what he was doing when He created Hope—there are no mistakes there. Because He knew this little girl was going to impact more people for His kingdom in the 10 months she was on this earth than some people make in 100.

I desperately miss my Hope. I grieve the fact that instead of seeing that sweet face in the morning I have to face an empty crib. But this life is not supposed to be easy and obedience can be painful, but it can also be transforming. Even though I no longer have my Hope here on this earth, I have a hope of a different kind, one that only Christ can give. We are not designed for this place and, as Christians, we know this. But do we really know that? I think as a culture we are so often attracted to what is NOW, to live in the present and that can definitely be a good thing. But as Tim Keller so eloquently puts it, we should never let a good thing become an ultimate. We should never let the notion of the 'gift of the present' become sweeter to us than the hope of the future.

My heart will always be broken for Hope. I know over time the wound will not be as raw but it will never change the fact that I have had to bury one of my children. But as I yearn for my daughter, I will also yearn for the place that God ultimately created for His children, a place where we all can be redeemed and restored, just like Hope.

Here's What Carl Shared:

I kissed my daughter goodbye at 7:30 AM on Tuesday. She looked so beautiful. Two hours later I was walking down the hallway of the hospital as a young doctor asked me if I had heard the news. I told him my wife told me to come quickly to the hospital. He said "she passed."

I walked into the room and I kissed that little girl again. And wept.

It may not sound very uplifting to hear me talk about her death, but I also never thought I would stand in front of my family and friends at my daughter's funeral.

But that's life. And Hope's life, like her death, was anything but typical. From the time she was born she was given the name Hope, but that's where it stopped for most people. In the name.

But I promise you that's not where it stopped for her. She touched people's lives in her short time in a way that most people can't in a typical lifetime. She was my littlest girl. Hopey is what we all called her.

She was born without a brain, so the chances to walk or talk or see or hear or speak weren't on the radar screen.

But on Tuesday she closed her eyes in our bed and woke up looking into the eyes of Jesus. Her first words may be His name and her first steps may be on the streets of heaven. While I will never walk her down the aisle she will always know the love of the Jesus, the ultimate Father, and lover of her. While she will never celebrate a birthday party, she will know celebration like we can't imagine.

But that's where she is and we are still here.

Through her whole life she has depended on others to care for

her; to know her needs to speak for her.

But when her body is restored and she is in the presence of God she will have a voice.

So I wonder what my little girl would say if she were here today?

I know she would, like I am, be humbled by the love in this room. But she would tell us that this love is nothing compared to the love her heavenly Father shows her now.

I know she would hate to see her dad and mom and brothers and sisters crying, but would she remind me that her Heavenly Father also lost a son? Would she remind me that Jesus didn't die of a rare brain abnormality but died by choice for me and that God His father watched it happen and let it happen because he loves me and he loves you?

Would she show me the Scriptures that remind me that God will give me all I need. Will she read with her restored eyes the verse in Romans that says

"He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?" (Rom. 8:32, NIV).

Will she look out at friends and family and long to see you again?

Randy Alcorn in his book Heaven says, "In the day that we stand before our Master and Maker, it will not matter how many people on earth knew our name, how many called us great, and how many considered us fools. It will not matter whether schools and hospitals were named after us, whether our estate was large or small, whether our funeral drew 10,000 or no one. It will not matter what the newspapers or history books said or didn't say. What will matter is one thing and one thing only—what the Master thinks of us."

My Hope is that if you don't know what would happen to you if you died today, that you would honor my little girl by opening the Bible, talking to someone here or talking to us and finding the one true HOPE in Jesus.

There is a slideshow of pictures from the memorial service that you can see **here**.

In her short life on earth, Hope never knew how much she was loved. Carl and Anna laid down their lives for her, getting nothing in return. No smiles. No giggles. No simple feedback that most of us get from our babies that encourages us to keep going. Their story has fully illustrated the reality that Jesus gets nothing in return for the love He gives us. We bring absolutely nothing to the transaction, yet He loves us anyway. Amazing grace, indeed.

May we all remember that the value of a life is not in what we do, but in whose we are. As believers, we have all been adopted by the King. Just as we have been lavished with the Father's unmerited love and grace, we must now share His love and grace in clear and tangible ways with a world that so desperately needs Him. I thank God for a couple like Carl and Anna who have modeled this so beautifully for us.

Please join me in praying for their family during this time of incredible loss.

*Adapted from , a ministry founded by **Barrett and Jenifer Johnson**. After serving in the local church for 25 years, Barrett and Jenifer launched INFO for Families as a ministry designed to encourage people through speaking, personal coaching and resource development. Barrett served for 15 years in youth ministry before serving for 8 years as the Family Minister at Johnson Ferry Baptist Church in Atlanta, one of the largest churches in the South. He has degrees from Texas A&M University and Southwestern Seminary, but he and Jenifer have received their best education through the no-holds-barred*

nature of everyday family life.