

When You're Trapped in Grief

When I was 21 years old, my world shifted. I placed my feet on foreign soil and threw myself into the unfamiliar. As a college student, I packed my bags over summer break and joined a month-long internship in Russia where I'd be immersed in the orphan's world—looking into their faces, eating their food, living in their orphanages, and listening to their stories. I left the states with some interest and natural sentiment over the orphan. I came back gripped with a burden that would impact the rest of my life.

The very first day I stepped into an orphanage, a skinny, dark-haired little girl came and sat on my lap. She made her way right into my arms, leaned in close, and held on tightly to my hands, as if to say, "Don't let go." And as it is, her memory has never let go of me. It was her nine-year-old life that was one of the first to grip me. I returned the next three summers to Russia, each time looking for her face among the crowds of children. But I never saw her. She, among a number of others, left a lasting mark on my heart.

My fourth consecutive trip was my last. And though I didn't return to Russia again in that season, God had planted a burden in me for the orphan that encompassed more than one nation's children. Since those trips overseas, I've continued to get into the orphan's world, even right here in my city.

Just weeks ago, I sat down with another nine-year-old orphaned girl who lived in a nearby children's home. She reminded me a little of that Russian girl I'd met so many years ago. Same age. Same dark hair and eyes. Same pained countenance. I'd visited her three times, and each time I'd come, she'd walked into the room with a tear-stained face. I saw feelings of hopelessness press down on her little heart, and her sagging shoulders and downcast eyes bore the heavy weight.

She liked to color, to bring beauty into the bleak black-and-white. She liked to listen to good stories, ones that were different from her own. She ached for an escape—from her group home into family, from her bleak into beauty, from her pain into joy, from her hopelessness into hope, from her fatherlessness into a father's embrace. I never saw her smile, not once. But I witnessed her tears every time I visited her.

And when I left her, I let my own tears fall, feeling the fresh weight of my own fatherlessness.

She felt trapped in her grief. And I felt trapped in mine.

That's the perplexing, brawling ache that grief brings—you *feel utterly stuck*. Because it *feels like* the only thing that can take the pain away is to get back what was lost.

But I won't get my dad back. At least not in this age.

And that nine-year-old girl won't get the years back that were spent without a family and stuck in a system. She's lost both father and mother and has been bereaved of a portion of her childhood that she can never regain.

So what is the way out when loss brings a grief that seems to shut and lock the door?

The day after my last visit with this little girl, I paced back and forth in prayer, throbbing inside—over the hurt in my own heart, and over the hurt I saw in hers. And as my feet shuffled their path along the carpet, I heard the Father whisper.

"I'm going to bring you out with singing."

As I continued to pace, my prayers for my own heart mingled with my prayers for that little girl.

"I'm going to bring you out with singing... I'm going to bring you out with singing..."

He was saying it over her.

He was saying it over me.

His hand was reaching down—down through the cracks of my brokenness, down into my gaping ache, down into grief's window—and He whispered into a deep, deep place: *"I'm going to bring you out with singing..."*

I felt His zeal to convince me, to tangibly, personally prove **that He can**. He can bring my heart out of the sorrow of fatherlessness. He can heal me. He can cause hope to shine in my soul.

He can break through grief's closed, seemingly impenetrable door.

He can bring me out with singing— and He can do it for that little girl, too.

He can do it for any and every heart that grieves. *Because no grief could ever reach so deep that His infinite, outstretched hand couldn't reach it.*

Desperation and hope meet together in a mourning heart that believes. We're desperate because *only He can*. And we have hope because ... **He can**. He can heal the broken heart and bring the soul out of despair.

He's healing me, and I'm taking my baby steps, day-by-day. My heart still bleeds, and my tears still fall. But He's infusing hope. He's fathering. He's working into the deep of me right now—so that I can, with assurance and authority and intimate conviction, declare—*He can!*

In just a few days, Jon and I are stepping back into the nation where my burden for the fatherless was first planted in my heart. Over a decade has passed since my first trip to Russia, since I first held that little nine-year-old Russian girl whose life gripped me.

This trip had originally been scheduled for early May, but to my initial disappointment, it had to be pushed back two months.

But as it turns out, had the trip not been rescheduled, I would've been overseas when my dad received his grievous diagnosis. I would have missed some of those last days with him.

I lost much, and my heart has had to wrestle with saying goodbye to this man who raised me, and whom I longed for my children to one day know. But God has woven his presence through my dark night. I got to sit on the edge of his bed during his last days and talk to him and pray for him and listen to his silly punch lines that he was so famous for, and that he mustered enough strength to deliver, even in his weakest time. He was always able to make people smile.

My family is walking through a crisis together, having to say goodbye to him many years, even decades, earlier than we thought we would. None of us could have anticipated that we would lose him so soon.

And I would never have anticipated that I'd return to the place where my heart for the fatherless found its starting point, as one who'd recently become fatherless herself.

The timing of this trip feels very difficult. But, somehow, the Lord moves in especially close during our heart's most broken moments and does mysterious things. He sets us in places we wouldn't have expected to go, takes us through circumstances we wouldn't have predicted, puts us in front of people whom we wouldn't have imagined meeting—and He, *in the way He alone can*, reaches down through the cracks of our brokenness, down into our gaping, throbbing places, down into that vulnerable window that sorrow has opened, and He does a deep, deep work.

With my own fatherless wounds still fresh and bleeding, I'm going to look out on the landscape of the nation where my heart was first pierced for the fatherless. And I'm carrying a message in my heart for them (and for myself)—*"He can bring you out with singing."*

God can heal. He can infuse hope. He can father.

For them, for me, for you. For the one who's lost that one you love, or those years waiting for that dream, or whatever *that thing* is for you—whatever our loss, grief, or trial—He is able, *more than able*, to bring us out, and to put a new song in our mouths. One of those songs that can only be forged in trial's fire. A song that He writes *in us* as we lean our broken hearts into His hand. A song of His faithfulness. A song of praise.

Yes, desperation and hope meet here. And this hope will not disappoint.

"I waited patiently for the Lord, and He turned to me, and heard my cry. He also brought me up out of a horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and set my feet on a rock, and established my steps. He has put a new song in my mouth, even praise to our God" (Psalm 40:1-3).

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