

# Surprised by Grief

**Four years later, Steven Curtis Chapman can't shake his daughter's death. That's not a bad thing.**

Biblical principles sometimes read more like clichés or fortune-cookie messages rather than life-affirming truths. Take Romans 8:28, for example: “And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose” (NKJV).

Those words penned by the apostle Paul sound good on paper. They provide comfort and hope to people dealing with sickness, a job loss or any number of challenging circumstances. It's when the severest storms of life come blowing through that the decision must be made to believe it or not, to stand firm on God's Word or let despair take control.

Such was the case with Steven Curtis and Mary Beth Chapman when they were suddenly thrust into the most devastating tragedy of their married lives—the death of their child.

## **‘Let Her Go’**

May 21, 2008, was an otherwise normal afternoon at the Chapman house. Sure, there was a recent wedding engagement in the family to celebrate and a graduation to attend in a few days, but when you have six children ranging from preschool age to young adult, “normal” means there's really no such thing as down time.

It was during such a usual afternoon that the unthinkable happened. At about 5 p.m., the Chapmans' teenage son Will accidentally struck his 5-year-old sister, Maria, with his SUV while parking in the driveway.

LifeFlight transported her to the nearby Vanderbilt University children's hospital in Nashville, Tenn., but rescue attempts

proved futile. Maria was gone.

“When they told me that our daughter hadn’t made it, I had already determined in my mind that I was going to pray until God breathed life back into her,” Steven Curtis recalls. “I was going to bar the doors and make them carry me out. I wasn’t giving up. But it was my wife who spoke to me, and the Spirit through her, to say, ‘Let her go.’”

It took a long time before Chapman, a platinum-selling and multiple-award winning recording artist, was able to share his grief with the world. Even after he reluctantly resumed performing, he remained silent on the topic of Maria’s death for almost three months.

After he and Mary Beth found the strength to tell their story, the invitations for them to share it were mind-boggling. Everyone wanted to know how this high-profile family had survived such a horrendous tragedy.

They appeared on *Larry King Live*, *Good Morning America* and *The 700 Club*, and granted an interview to *People* magazine.

Chapman suddenly was caught up in a perplexing dichotomy. He was grieving immense loss while also attempting to accept, even embrace, these opportunities to reveal God’s love and grace to a world that wanted to hear from him.

Chapman also knew he couldn’t give people pat responses laden with Christianese. There was nothing he could do but lay his heart on the line and convey uninhibited honesty in the process.

“We couldn’t give all the answers,” Chapman says. “I think that’s part of the way God has used it.

“People who would normally be very skeptical and cynical now might go: ‘OK, I don’t care to hear about your religion and your faith and all your God talk, but if you’re surviving this

and you're making it through this, I want to hear about that. Because that isn't religion as I know it. That's something different.'

"Almost not having the answers, in and of itself, was in a way a pretty profound answer," Chapman adds.

The interviews were especially tough on his wife, Chapman says. He admits there are still occasions when his desire to help others cope with loss is overtaken by a streak of selfishness.

"All of these wonderful things, and us getting to share our hope and comfort with others who are hurting, we're thankful for that, and we see God using that," Chapman says.

"But in my humanity and in my flesh, I'd do anything to turn the hands of time back and say: 'As good as all that is, I don't care. I want my daughter back.'"

## **Unanswered Questions**

The journey that led Chapman to becoming Maria's father is well-documented. Ten years ago, when the adoption bug hit him and Mary Beth, he was best known as the face of contemporary Christian music. Over his 23-year career he has amassed more than 10 million album sales, 45 No. 1 radio singles, five Grammy Awards and an astounding 56 Dove Awards.

First came adopted daughter Shaohannah (pronounced sho-HAN-uh). Three years later, the Chapmans adopted Stevey Joy. Then in 2004, after performing at an Easter service in Beijing, a missionary couple introduced him to a 1-year-old orphan named Maria. Chapman instinctively knew he had possibly just met his newest daughter.

By then, Chapman was already more than the most awarded Christian artist of all time. He was unofficially acting in a new role as the face of international adoption. The Chapmans

became a tailor-made illustration for others of how God adopts believers into His family.

And perhaps it was the unique nature of the Chapman family makeup, coupled with the artist's very public persona that made the inexplicable tragedy so much more difficult to comprehend.

"There's a very large part of us as a family that really doesn't understand and wouldn't begin to say that anybody understands the theology of why God allows these kinds of things," Chapman admits. "The closest we'll ever get is to read Job. That's about as close as we'll get to understanding how God uses suffering and ... why He allows it.

"I've heard some amazing messages and done some pretty incredible studies of Job over this last year and a half, and I've come to understand, I think, a lot more about what God is revealing about His heart and His character through that."

### **Entrusted With a Story**

Chapman believes that God has, for whatever reason, entrusted this tragic story to him and his family. Despite his understandable reluctance at times, he will tell it "over and over again" and "in a public way," he says.

But first Chapman had to ask God some intense questions. And the best way he knew how to convey his feelings was through music. The songs that came out of his grief eventually turned into an album, *Beauty Will Rise*—although, according to Chapman, it is still "really weird" to refer to the processing of his emotions that way.

"I didn't set out to make a new record or a new album based on a theme I thought God was giving me," he says. "I call these my psalms. It's just me crying out to God with many of the same questions David had.

“Now I know what he meant when he was saying, ‘How long, O Lord?’ or ‘How long is the enemy going to beat the tar out of me?’ or ‘How long am I going to feel so separated from You?’”

Music has long been the way Chapman has processed his life. “It’s a real natural thing,” he says. Some of the songs on the new record, such as “Questions,” were literal examples of his dealing with the unknown and grappling with the unthinkable.

“God, are You serious?” he recalls asking. “My own son driving a car and not seeing his sister, and then my daughters in the yard watching it happen and running up? There’s just too many wrongs to make any sense.

“But through those kinds of questions, I think God has given me not so much answers but places of resolve to say I don’t have to have the answer to that, but I really need to have Your presence and a sense that You’re walking through this with us.”

Eventually it became apparent that Chapman needed to share these musical stories with the world, and the CD released. Even without the music, his fans and supporters felt the need to reach out to him—many with similar stories of tragedy and loss. The outpouring was strangely both a comfort and a burden.

“People feel that need to connect,” he says. “There’s a fellowship of suffering that you become a part of, and there’s a connection there and a family of sorts. But it’s also the reason why I’ve done a limited number of interviews and meet-and-greets—because one of my real concerns, in my humanness and in my flesh, [is] there’s only so much that I know I can hear and even tell.”

### **‘Cinderella’ Reborn**

One of Chapman’s most popular songs is “Cinderella,” inspired by his oldest daughter, Emily. Ultimately it became just as

much about his three adopted girls and imagining the bittersweet moments of seeing them grow up and eventually start their own lives. After Maria's death, Chapman resolved never to sing "Cinderella" at his concerts.

"I just thought it would be too painful," he says. "But with time, I began to realize that if I believe God's Word, and if I believe that there is a resurrection from the dead that Christ led the way into and that He's overcome death and the grave, and that to be absent from the body is to be present with Christ, then I'm going to be with Him and Maria's with Him; therefore, we're going to be together. I'm going to see my little girl again. I'm going to dance with her again.

"So what would be unthinkably sad all of a sudden has become this hopeful declaration."

Chapman says that epiphany led to an "insatiable hunger" to learn as much as he could about heaven. It also inspired a new song, titled "Heaven Is the Face," which came out of a moment in which the songwriter—even though he'd been taught that heaven is about being with God—confessed: "Right now, heaven is about being with my little girl."

"And then God led me to the thought that it's not just that," Chapman adds. "Every nook and cranny of heaven is full of His glory and His goodness and His perfection. There are no more orphans. There are no more goodbyes. There's no more loneliness. That's heaven."

## **Living Hope**

As Chapman has gingerly navigated through his family's new normal, one of his biggest fears has been any appearance of embracing opportunism spun from his family's tragedy. With management companies, publicity firms and record labels involved, he is ever aware of that possibility taking root.

"You could so easily throw the baby out with the bath water,"

Chapman says. “There have been moments when I’ve just said: ‘I can’t do this. I can’t let this get turned into an iTunes cover shot, or whatever.’”

But inevitably he is always brought back to the concept of purpose—whether fully understood or not. Since that tragic May 21 afternoon in 2008, purpose has been an ongoing process that has led him to live in the moment and faithfully follow the path that has stretched out ahead.

“We just have to remember that this is the story God has entrusted to us,” Chapman concludes about the family’s loss. “We’ll go wherever we can to tell it to His glory and to honor our daughter’s memory and more importantly to honor the God who’s given us the hope that’s just kept us alive to this point.”

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Learn more about the Chapmans’ organization created in memory of Maria at