

Either Way I Win

By

Damian McCrink

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Prologue

This is a story full of the elements that make a story great: love, humor, faith, victory, and triumph over challenges. But it's also a story of pain, loss, tears, death, and grief. No one wants these parts to show up in their story, yet they arrive uninvited and unannounced, catching people unprepared to handle the ways these moments shape and change the course of their narrative. This is the life we live—a story each one of us is living with unexpected surprises along the way.

We spend our time planning, dreaming, and even praying for the best possible story, hoping that one day we can tell our grandchildren, and perhaps even our great-grandchildren, of our commitment and God's faithfulness. Yet the unexpected happens. Sometimes it comes as a surprise or a blessing we never saw coming. Other times, it's a tragedy we never imagined would appear in our story.

Just like me, you have a story to tell. Just like me, you have a story that is still being written. Let me be the first to tell you that your story matters, your experiences matter, and your story is worth telling.

There are moments when you feel as if you are the one writing your story—calling the shots, making the decisions, and directing the path toward the outcome you long for and pray for: Happily Ever After. Then there are moments, even seasons, when the story seems to write itself. It feels as if someone or something else has taken the pen from your hand, guiding the plot and the crisis while you rise to the challenge of resolving the conflict. You have the opportunity to bring resolution to a story not of your own making, discovering your strength even when control over the outcome seems elusive.

When life does not go as expected, when the impossible happens, and you are left disoriented, you question what you thought you knew about love, life, God, and the promises of Scripture. Many of us build our theology with the help of our favorite preacher or the faith we grew up in. Then, our own life experiences challenge what we thought we knew. In moments when everything is shaken, our life experiences trump the soundbites we remember from a well-formulated sermon. This is when all the clichés and phrases that elicit shouts of “amen” fail,

and we must reconcile our life experiences with the truth of God and this ancient text—the Word of God.

So, what do you do? What do you do when your feelings are raw and honest, yet you know deep inside that you must trust what you know more than what you feel? This is where what you truly believe is put to the test, and you must wrestle with what you feel and what you know.

Again, I want you to know that your story and experiences matter because they shape you and form how you see the world and what you truly believe in the midst of crises and tragedy. This is why I am telling my story: because I can look back and see that God is weaving His redemption through it, even when I don't see it, feel it, or when it makes no sense in the natural. As I tell my story, which is actually my wife Nancy's story, my hope and prayer is that it helps you look at your story and see the silent hand of God in your life.

When it comes to Nancy's and my story, I often wonder where I should start. At the beginning? Or at the moment that changed everything? On December 8, 2022, the love of my life, my partner, and my best friend went to be with Jesus, the one she loved the

most. So quickly and unexpectedly, her life here on earth ended. I had not even begun to comprehend that Nancy had cancer. I didn't even know how to pronounce *Glioblastoma Multiforme* when this unknown intruder took her life and forever changed the story I thought my life was writing.

When I first started writing our story, I didn't intend for it to be a book. I was in the early days of grief when a few close friends and a therapist encouraged me to write. I was told to write my feelings, my questions, and even our story. As I dove into writing, I found it helped me remember what I had and what I truly believed about God and Scripture. At best, I thought this would be a book for my children. I wanted them to know the love their mom and I shared and how it started. I also believed it would help them in later days to know how I was processing the greatest tragedy in our family. As you read this, know that most of the moments I write about were not intended for you, the reader, but for me and those close to me. As time passed, I started speaking and preaching about grief, suffering, and unanswered prayers. Almost every time I spoke as a guest speaker in churches, someone would

approach me in the lobby and ask, “So, when is the book coming out?” I took that as a nudge that this might be for more than just me. Perhaps the world needs to hear how one questions God, prayer, and life when grieving after the unexpected happens.

This is my story so far. It is not done yet, even though there have been days when I’ve felt as though it was. I don’t know what the next chapter of my life looks like. I have yet to see how God is taking what the enemy meant for evil and turning it for good. But I have hope. Right now, I hold to what I know about God and the story of my life with Nancy, the girl of my dreams.

Nancy’s life and story are not just about the diagnosis and the untimely end. No, there is so much more than that. This memorial is more than just a reflection on her life between birth and death; it highlights someone who did not waste her time. She spent her life, words, and actions with an awareness of eternity.

James 4:14 says, “What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.”

I know we tend to make saints of those who die, especially those who die young. My goal is not to make Nancy a saint. In fact, I know she would not like all the attention and praise already given to her. This book is not just about Nancy but about the God of the Bible, how He works and shows up in each of our stories, and how mysterious His ways truly are.

If you are reading this, perhaps you have experienced pain, loss, grief, or suffering in your story. As Jesus said:

“I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.” (John 16:33)

My prayer for this book is that as you walk through whatever difficulties in your life—through hurt, pain, and suffering—somewhere along the way, you will see Christ as bigger and greater than ever before.

I love how C.S. Lewis presents this in the fourth book of *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Lucy has grown older, yet she views Aslan, who represents Jesus, as bigger.

“Aslan,” said Lucy, “you’re bigger.”

“That is because you are older, little one,” answered he.

“Not because you are?” Lucy replied.

“I am not. But every year you grow, you will find me bigger.”

— **C.S. Lewis, *Prince Caspian***

That is my heart’s cry for my children. As they grow up with the tragedy of losing their mom, it will forever be part of their story. My heart’s cry is that whatever trouble they may experience, they will see Jesus as bigger than ever. My desire is that you, I, and my children will see Jesus as the one who overcame the world.

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CHAPTER 1: MOUNTAIN HIGH

Tuesday, November 22, 2022

“Are you guys excited?” Nancy asked the kids as we walked into the cabin-like store for the zip line adventure awaiting us.

“Yeah!” they replied with nervous excitement—or, as we called it, “ner-cited,” that mix of nerves and thrill.

It was the Tuesday before Thanksgiving 2022, and we were spending a few days in Gatlinburg, Tennessee, before returning to our new home in Georgia. The past two years had been a whirlwind of unexpected twists. We’d moved to Panama City, Florida, only to find it wasn’t the right fit. After just nine months, we moved to Georgia, where I had grown up. It had been 22 years since I’d left the area, and now I was back with my beloved wife and three children. Eight months in, we were finally finding some peace. All the moves had been challenging for each of our kids in different ways, but here we were in the Smoky Mountains, together as a family, starting to feel settled.

We had always been a close family. Despite the changes and challenges, there was a sense of safety and security in our bond. This trip was a bit of a fluke. When we first moved to Georgia, we visited the Atlanta car show, where Nancy got roped into a conversation with a timeshare salesman. I rolled my eyes at first, thinking, *What are you doing? We don't even know where we're going to live.* We were staying with my mom until we found our own place. But the salesman was persuasive, piling on perks, and the deal was only \$200. With Nancy's excitement for the mountains and the kids' pleading eyes saying, "Come on, Dad, let's do it," I caved.

Eight months later, our unraveled life was coming together. We had found a house to rent in a great location, in a neighborhood we loved. The kids were at a nearby Christian school, making friends, and it was quickly feeling like home. I had started a men's group with old and new friends. Nancy joined a Bible study called "Father's House" and loved it, often saying, "I've always loved Jesus, but I'm falling more in love with Him through this study." We were finding community and discovering what God had next for us. We had met with church plant directors and were

approved to start a new church in the town I'd left 22 years ago. Our painting and handyman business was off to a great start. One night in early November, we looked at each other and said, "Wow, I think we're going to make it; everything's going really well."

Nancy loved fall in Georgia—the proximity to Florida's beaches, the mountains just north of us, and the endless exploration in Atlanta's north suburbs. She declared, "We've found our forever home." Everything was falling into place beautifully.

With the holidays approaching, we debated what to do for Thanksgiving and Christmas. For years, we'd hosted Thanksgiving and driven to northeast Ohio for Christmas with Nancy's family. But her family had started going to Florida for Christmas, and the long drive for a short visit felt impractical. After some back-and-forth, we decided to stay in Georgia for both holidays, hosting my side of the family. Nancy wanted to keep the kids off screens during the break, so she suggested a mountain getaway. Budget-conscious as always, I remembered Gatlinburg was an option with our timeshare deal. I called on the way home from a

paint job and, amazingly, found open dates for Thanksgiving week with just 10 days' notice.

Four days before the trip, Nancy insisted we make it fun for the kids and plan our activities. This was our style—last-minute planners, frugal, but always making it an adventure. We scoured Groupon and other sites for deals, booking a mountain coaster, old-time photos, and the zip line adventure. We were gearing up for the zip line, which we thought was the next exciting chapter of our lives.

That morning, as we prepared for the zip line tour, Nancy woke with a terrible headache. For days, she'd felt off, battling headaches. The day before the trip, she left work early to rest. I suggested postponing, but Nancy, always thinking of others, didn't want to disappoint the kids. She said she'd be fine with some ibuprofen. That Tuesday, the headache was severe. We chalked it up to a cold or flu going around, plus a bad night's sleep.

Did I mention all five of us were crammed into one hotel room? That was the fine print I missed in the timeshare deal—I thought we'd get a two-bedroom condo. Also, we're caffeine-dependent; without

coffee within a few hours of waking, headaches hit hard. Looking back at photos from the zip line, I see Nancy's radiant smile, but also the pain she hid in that joyful moment. That was Nancy—always putting others first, living with the mindset of “Less of me and more of You.” She wasn't perfect, but she was pretty darn close.

After the zip line tour, Nancy said she couldn't handle another night in that hotel room and felt it best to head home that afternoon since she wasn't feeling well. We'd done everything planned in Gatlinburg, leaving us a day to prepare for Thanksgiving guests. The drive home felt endless, but we arrived feeling accomplished as parents who'd made great memories with the kids, with a few days of school break left to relax together. Little did I know that everything we thought lay ahead was about to change.

I had no idea that would be the last night I'd make love to my wife, or that we were heading into the longest two weeks of our lives. I couldn't fathom that the next chapter we'd planned together would be torn apart before it began. In moments like these, you wonder why we even plan beyond tomorrow.

CHAPTER 2: MANY ARE THE PLANS

Proverbs 19:20-21

Listen to counsel and accept discipline, that you may be wise the rest of your days. Many plans are in a man's heart, but the purpose of the LORD will prevail.

James 4:13-16 ESV

Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit"—yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that." As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil.

We all make plans and dream about what our preferred future will look like, yet I don't know many people who have reached a certain age and said everything has gone as they planned and foresaw.

Many are the plans... As we plan and dream, our emotions get involved. We start to envision what it will be like to live in that reality. When we apply for a

job, put an offer on a house, or plan a date, our emotions run ahead, and we can see ourselves working in that job, living in that house, or marrying that person we haven't even had dinner with yet. We set our hope. We can see how it could all be as we dream. And when it does not go as we foresaw, we are left with disappointment and confusion.

As Christ's followers, we add another element to the plans, dreams, and opportunities before us. We pray for God to make His will known. We pray for God to lead our steps. We pray, "God, close doors You don't want me to walk through, and open doors only You can open." These prayers sound great until you're the one dreaming and planning for your future, and it feels like every door is being shut.

As Americans, we are encouraged to dream big and chase our dreams, believing we can do anything we set our minds to accomplish. But is that true? Can we do and become anything we want?

Another layer of complexity is that we want it fast. We don't always have the perseverance to push through, to be developed in the process, or to take the time to achieve our dreams. We see advertisements online:

3 easy steps to a successful life. “Sign up for my webinar to be successful with other people’s money.”

I’m not sure there are linear steps transferable from one person’s experience to another. Yes, there are best practices and principles we should apply in marriage, parenting, and jobs, but even with the same practices, we don’t end up with the same results.

As a visionary leader, I have kept my plans flexible, unlike many young church planters, pioneers, and entrepreneurs. My approach has been to hold my plans and expectations loosely. This could be connected to my insecurities, lack of assurance, and early ministry development on the mission field, where the day’s plans rarely go as planned, combined with my desire to be a humble, teachable leader who does not believe I have all the answers.

I learned early on that you should not be too rigid with your plans or what others think you should do. God does not want you to follow others’ paths to success but to trust that He has a unique story He is telling through your life. If I had not been flexible in

my planning and what others thought I should do, I would not have met Nancy in the first place. If I had not met her, I would have married someone else, had different children, and lived a very different life and story. I know that can make your brain hurt when you think about God's will and the decisions we make. In the end, it could leave us paralyzed in fear.

Yet, looking back at my own story, it reminds me that God is doing something unique in each of our lives if we step back and become aware.

We all have an origin story: a family that has shaped the way we are wired and how we respond to life's challenges. For men, much comes from our relationship with our father. This is a reminder as I am now a single dad, learning how to father three very different children through not only the loss of their mom but also the challenges and difficulties of life.

Part of who I am is who my dad was. My dad, Dennis, grew up with a father I didn't know much about. My grandfather passed away before I met him, and in all my time with my dad, I never heard heartwarming stories about him. He was just the man who went to work, came home, went to work,

and came home. I don't believe he shared much affection or emotion. I could see that my dad and grandfather had a breakdown in their relationship, which led my dad to leave home as soon as he could. My dad was a full-on, late-1960s hippie—not a poser hippie, but the real deal. He was an artist, working with wood, doing wood carving and wood burning. He would load up his Volkswagen bus and travel from art show to art show across the US. That's how he made it: living out of his van, selling what he could, and being a free bird. Like every good hippie, he made his way to California, where he met my mom and fell in love with her. Shortly after, they moved to Long Island, New York, where my mom was from. They were married for about four or five years, and then my older brother was born, followed by me.

When I was six months old, my mom came to know Jesus Christ as her personal Lord and Savior through the Jesus Movement, a time when many hippies were coming to Christ. It was a radical salvation that led to a radical life change, which didn't settle well with my dad because he wasn't into it. He wondered what happened to his wife. Once,

he told her, “We used to drink together, smoke weed together, go to concerts together, and now you’re just not any fun. You don’t want to do that stuff anymore.” She would say things like, “Well, there’s no high like the Most High.” My dad was like, “What are you talking about? I don’t know what that means.”

He wasn’t interested in this faith thing. He thought it took his wife, his party person, away. Over time, he saw the change in my mom and became more interested in Jesus, coming around church more and more. At this point, these two wandering hippies had two kids and were trying to live a more everyday life with normal jobs, no longer in the hippie party scene.

Yet something sunk its hooks deeply into my dad: alcohol. It would continue to be a hang-up in his life. The dream of being a traveling artist and even having a store proved more difficult with two kids and a third on the way. After going bankrupt while living in Long Island, New York, and having a third child, our family moved to Georgia, where my aunts and uncles had migrated. Fast forward a few years, my dad was the father of five children—four boys and one girl. We were the family in church every Sunday,

very involved, and attended the Christian private school at the church. Church was our social life.

My dad was one of the hardest-working men I've known, but he never seemed to get a break. We were always scraping by. When I say we grew up poor, that's an understatement. I don't know how we made it. Over time, he started his own remodeling business. For us four boys, it wasn't an option whether we wanted to work with Dad. If you lived in his house, you worked for him. From about ten or eleven years old, I was helping on the construction site. I'm thankful for the hard-working mindset and skills my dad taught me, so today, I can fix most things around the house myself.

Through the years, my dad's alcoholism had its spikes and lows. It would go away for a while and then take him over again. I remember, as a child, hearing arguments and fights between my parents about drinking. When I was twelve years old, I had just gone from homeschooling to public school in the middle of my sixth-grade year. If that wasn't enough of a significant life change, shortly after, my dad went to rehab because of his drinking problem. The strange thing about my father's drinking was that I

never saw him with a bottle in his hand or even take a sip of alcohol. I don't know why there was such shame with it. He would hide it, drinking in secret in the backyard or by the lake, away from everyone else.

His drinking led to a place where friends from church intervened and helped him go to rehab. It was during this time of uncertainty that I came to know God as a Loving Heavenly Father. Though I clearly remember responding to an altar call at a Sunday evening service to make Jesus my Savior at six years old, six years later, at twelve, it became real. I remember climbing into the top bunk of my bunk bed in the middle of the afternoon. At the time, all four of us boys shared one room. It was amazing that I had the room to myself. There, I cried out to God for the first time, telling Him my fears, worries, and pain. It's hard to describe, but I remember the tangible presence of God in that room and a great peace coming over me. At that moment, my faith became my own, no longer my parents' faith or what I heard in church. I knew God was real and that He saw and heard what I was going through.

After my dad returned from rehab, it seemed like a breakthrough in his life. He was clear-minded, sober for a while, and his business began to grow and succeed. He was more engaging, and we had conversations about music, God, and life in the front seat of his truck on the way to work.

In 1997, I felt a call to ministry while involved in my local church and attending a university near my parents' home in Georgia. I had plans to attend Lee University for Biblical Studies in the fall of 1998. I recall taking the two-hour drive to visit, but on my way home, I didn't feel the peace of God. I shared with my mom that I wasn't sure I could spend that much money and didn't feel right about going. My mom said, "The Lord guides the steps of the righteous."

That was when I felt it was time to do what I believed God wanted me to do and not worry about what others thought.

So, what did I do? I did nothing. I don't think that's the right response in many situations of indecision. Indecision is a decision. I took that summer and fall semester off and worked across Florida with a company that outfitted a large department store with

racks for hanging clothes. During that time, I kept hearing about the Brownsville Revival, also known as the Pensacola Outpouring, a revival at Brownsville Assembly of God church in Pensacola, Florida. It began on Father's Day, June 18, 1995, and continued for several years, attracting thousands worldwide. The revival was characterized by powerful worship, passionate preaching, and intense prayer, with many experiencing spiritual renewal, healing, and salvation.

As a result of the revival, the Brownsville School of Ministry (BRSM) was established in 1996 to train and equip leaders for ministry. BRSM was not a typical Bible school; it focused on developing students' spiritual lives and ministry skills through academic study, practical experience, and personal mentoring. The Brownsville Revival and School of Ministry were significant movements in the renewal of the Christian church in the 1990s, inspiring a new generation of believers to seek a deeper relationship with God and a greater commitment to ministry.

I visited the revival and school, and I felt like I could do this. I could see myself there, and the fact

that it was close to the beach greatly influenced my decision.

The revival and school had a mixed reputation. Many viewed it as a great move of God and an opportunity to be part of church history. Others were more critical, believing it was hype and focused on physical manifestations. I put all that aside and decided it was the right place for me. I told my friends I wasn't going to come back as one of those "weird Christians"; I was going there to learn and experience it firsthand.

The same week I decided on and sent in my application, some friends of my parents visited the revival and school. They came back sensing they were supposed to sponsor a student to attend the Bible college there. They called my mom, shared their experience, and expressed their desire to help someone attend. My mom replied, "Well, Damian just applied to attend school there." They were excited to help by paying my tuition. I didn't feel at peace with the cost of one school, so I waited. As a result, someone paid for me to attend the school where I finally felt at peace.

So, does God open and close doors in our lives? Is God going to give you the job you're praying for and prevent you from getting the job you think you want, but He knows will make you miserable? Is God involved in which house you buy or don't buy?

Does God really care about who I marry, or just that I'm a good husband? Or is He not interested or involved in such things?

These questions didn't take up much space in my mind until the unthinkable happened in my story. When the unexpected shows up, you're left wondering, where is God? Many struggle with, "Why did God do this?"

I didn't struggle with thinking God did this, but I did ask why the all-powerful God allowed this to happen. And if God allowed it, why?

Is there a purpose to the pain, loss, and tragedy, or is it all just random fate, leaving us to hold on to what little faith we have? The truth is, I don't know if God is in every detail of my life. I'm not convinced that God is working to fulfill every good desire I have. To be clear, my goal in this book is not to debate the sovereignty of God. That debate between Calvinists

arguing for meticulous sovereignty—the ordering of God in all things—and Arminians, who include human will in the working out of God’s plan, is not what I aim to resolve. That debate has been argued by people much smarter than me and may continue until the return of Jesus.

My hope in writing this is to tell my story and experiences, hopefully helping us see that God is more mysterious than we like Him to be and much closer to the pain we assume He is distant from in our everyday lives.

CHAPTER 3: DID NOT SEE THAT COMING

Wednesday, November 23.

As we unpacked our bags from our trip, Nancy was really not feeling well. She kept saying she felt off, unbalanced, and not like herself. The week before our trip to the Smoky Mountains, I had a short bout of the flu. I stayed home for two days, lying on the couch, so I thought she must have had what I had, or perhaps something worse. Nancy was convinced she had Lyme disease. Two Facebook friends had recently been diagnosed with Lyme disease and were sharing their symptoms online. Lyme disease is so random and strange in how it makes you feel; Nancy kept thinking she must have something like that because this was not a typical sickness.

We decided to visit the local urgent care. It was uncommon for either of us to go to the doctor. Outside of having babies, I could count on one hand the times Nancy went to the doctor for not feeling well. I accompanied her to the urgent care, where she shared all her symptoms. They gave her a flu test, even though she kept asking if it could be Lyme

disease, as she didn't think it was the flu. The test returned positive, which we later discovered was a false positive.

We informed family members who were planning to come to our house for Thanksgiving, letting them know Nancy was unwell but past the contagious stage. I reassured her that I would help get the house ready and even assist with preparing some of the food, along with my mom and sister-in-law.

Before you get the wrong impression that I'm a perfect husband who eagerly jumps at every opportunity to help with Thanksgiving dinner, you must understand that Nancy was my only love. Our love grew stronger over the years as we became more united through each challenge and difficulty we faced together. As pastors, we were often invited to counsel couples in their marriage conflicts. After each meeting, we would look at each other, hold hands, and say, "Wow, we really do have an easy marriage." I often joked that I did all the hard work at the beginning of our relationship, which made the marriage easy.

To truly understand our love, it's best to start at the beginning. Our love story took time to develop

and ended far too soon. I think we had a Nicholas Sparks kind of love story; the only difference is that Jesus was involved.

I remember the first time I saw her as if it were yesterday. It was August 17, 1999. The fall semester had just started at Brownsville Revival School of Ministry.

I had returned about a week before the new semester began. The school was connected to Brownsville Assembly, and every Tuesday night, the church held a powerful, well-attended prayer meeting. The night typically included prayer for missions, the church, government, schools, families, and more. There was worship, congregational prayer, and individual prayer.

There I was, focused on prayer, when I looked over and saw this adorable, blonde-haired girl praying for missions. Something about her drew my attention—yes, her beauty, but something much deeper. I was distracted for the rest of the prayer meeting. The only prayer I managed that night was, “God, help me meet her!”

I wanted to know if she was a new student for the fall semester. Maybe she was like me, arriving early to enjoy the beach and settle in before school started.

On my way home from the prayer meeting, I stopped at Walmart to get groceries. As I headed toward the checkout, there she was—the cute blonde-haired girl. God does answer prayers. But then I noticed she was with another guy I vaguely knew from the previous semester. Seizing the opportunity, I greeted Eric as if we were close friends to ensure he'd introduce me to her. I also wanted to find out if they were a couple or just friends. To my relief, I learned he knew her from a church camp in Ohio and was helping her get settled. As far as I could tell, they were not a couple.

Nancy's upbringing was very different from mine. She was one of four children and the second youngest. Born in Rochester, Minnesota, her parents were dairy farmers who had just been radically saved when she was born. Nancy's dad, Mark, was a rough, mean man working through his own father's wounds in an unhealthy way. He and her mom, Pam, grew up on farms; it was the life they

knew. One evening, they attended a special Sunday evening service at First Assembly of God in Rochester. The preaching was powerful and convicting. At the close of the service, the pastor invited people to make Jesus their Savior. Mark and Pam looked at each other and ran to the altar together. It was a radical salvation. Mark transformed from a cussing, drinking, mean man into one of the kindest, most affectionate men I've ever met.

After that evening, they were mentored by the pastor and soon felt a call to ministry. This led Mark to sell the farm and move his pageant-wife and three children to Lakeland, Florida, to attend Southeastern Bible College. Those were challenging times with little money, but they had great faith. God provided in incredible ways, and they still testify to those times today.

After graduating, Mark became the lead pastor of a church in Ruskin, Florida, which he led with great energy and excitement. The church grew under his leadership, and after seven years, he accepted an invitation to pastor a church in Kinsman, Ohio, in a farming community surrounded by cornfields. Nancy

grew up in a pastor's home and, after hearing about missions all her life, felt called to attend Bible school to prepare for a life in missions.

Back in Pensacola in 1999, the night after the prayer meeting was youth night, and a few of my friends were volunteers in the youth ministry. I stopped by the youth group late to see friends I hadn't seen since before the summer break and to check if anyone was hanging out afterward. A girl I vaguely knew from the first semester said, "Oh, hey, I want to invite some people over tonight to meet my new roommates." She pointed across the room to Nancy and her brunette roommate, Nikki. Trying not to seem overly eager, I asked, "Yeah, what's the plan? What are you guys doing tonight?" She said to come by their apartment, and we'd figure it out from there.

I'm not sure if I was early or just too eager, but I arrived at the apartment before anyone else. I knocked, and Nancy answered, wearing gray sweatpants and a white T-shirt. She was incredibly hospitable, even though she was confused about why I was there since the roommate who invited me wasn't home yet. I took advantage of this second

encounter with Nancy. We had a lengthy conversation where I learned more about her, and I fell more in love with her every moment. She was excited to offer me some of her groceries—Triscuits and juice. Nancy always showed hospitality right away. She was so easy to talk to, sharing her excitement about this new adventure of living on her own, close to the beach and school.

Later, I returned to my apartment, where guys were hanging out and playing video games. I sat on the couch and said aloud, “I think I met the girl I’m going to marry tonight.” They were as shocked as I was that those words came out of my mouth. This was very unlike me; I wasn’t one to share my feelings openly. But I was like Buddy the Elf: “I am in love, and I don’t care who knows!” Also, this was a small Bible school, and I had to let these guys know I was interested before they noticed this new, cute blonde-haired girl. By the time school started, I think everyone had heard about or noticed her.

Nancy didn’t doll herself up with stylish clothes or lots of makeup. She had a cute innocence that drew many young Christian guys to notice her.

This Bible school was conservative with strict rules, including one that prohibited dating during the first semester to focus on Jesus. Many people come to Christian colleges looking for a spouse from day one. This was my predicament: I was in my second semester, free to date, but this new freshman who captured my heart was not. So, I found ways to be in the same friend group with her as often as possible that first semester. I worked hard to organize group activities—sand volleyball, beach bonfires, outings to restaurants and coffee shops downtown—anything to invite Nancy and her roommate without it seeming like more than friendship.

I organized so many group activities that I gained a reputation as the social calendar planner. People would ask, “Hey, Damian, what are we doing this weekend?” My plan worked that whole first semester; I got to know Nancy well. She seemed comfortable around me, and my friends encouraged me, saying she looked at me differently. I think everyone at school knew I was in love with her. Some guys still tease me about my ridiculous flirting or pick-up lines. I had no game; I was just crazy

about her. One line my friends still tease me about was when Nancy talked about her love for her family, and I said, “I hope I can meet your family someday.” It was a cheesy pick-up line, but I think it worked over time.

I thought everything was going well. I’ll admit I was a little confused and jealous when other guys talked to her. But I felt I knew her better than most guys at school, and she was comfortable around me. At the end of that semester, they announced the next semester’s mission trips. We had both signed up for a mission trip to India over spring break. I had considered going to Scotland until I heard Nancy was going to India, so I changed my plans. I couldn’t let her go to another country with other guys without me there.

Fast forward to early spring 2000, we were both raising funds for the India trip and attending mission trip meetings together. She was now in her second semester and eligible to date. One night after a meeting, I found the boldness to share how I felt about her. I’m sure she already knew, though. As soon as I started the conversation, she must have known where it was going. I put my heart on the

table, vulnerable, only to receive the worst response ever. She said kindly but painfully, “Oh, Damian, I’m sorry. I see you as a friend, and I don’t want to ruin our friendship.” I had fallen headfirst into the friend zone. I thought, “I have enough friends; I’m looking for more than friendship.” I tried to explain that friendship is a great foundation for a relationship. She replied, “I can’t foresee it. You’re so nice, and I enjoy being friends, but I just can’t see it.”

Ouch! I was heartbroken because I could completely foresee it. It didn’t take much for me to imagine our future together. I would have married her the next month. I don’t know what she couldn’t see; I could foresee it.

How many things in our lives can we not foresee?

Today, twenty-three years later, there are many things I didn’t foresee. My neighbor and friend recently bought a DeLorean, like the time machine in *Back to the Future*. He took me for a ride shortly after Nancy passed. As I lay in bed that night, I wondered if it was a time machine and I could go back to 2000 to warn my younger self, would I do it? If forty-four-year-old Damian could tell twenty-one-year-old Damian, “She will love you, but it will end in

great pain. You'll have nineteen amazing years but end up a single dad trying to put the pieces back together because she left too early," would I still pursue Nancy? Would I still say yes if I knew the pain that would come? If I knew, would I still choose her? The years together were incredible, but if I knew I'd be in this moment of pain and disorientation, would I say yes to the joy and pain? Is the pain worth the reward?

That evening, and in the early months after Nancy's death, I didn't think it was worth it. The pain was so deep, I honestly didn't think I'd survive.

Now, with some healing and clarity, I would still say yes—a thousand times yes—even with the pain I've endured. Many question if love is worth it. Yes, it is. Even an imperfect love is worth it.

Jesus is better. This is why Jesus is better. He knew the pain and suffering to come but chose the cross anyway. Hebrews 12:2 says that Jesus, for the joy set before Him, endured the cross, despising its shame.

The "joy set before Him" refers to you and me. Despite knowing the suffering He'd face, Jesus was

driven by the joy of bringing salvation and reconciling us with God. That joy was far greater than any temporary pain. His willingness to endure the ultimate shame and humiliation to pay for our sins and offer forgiveness and eternal life reveals His humility and love.

Jesus' example challenges us to look beyond our present circumstances and focus on the ultimate goal of our faith: being with Him in eternity.

Our lives may have challenges and difficulties. When faced with pain, grief, and frustration, it feels like it will last forever. But we must remind ourselves that this life is temporary, and the pain is temporary. The frustration we can't see a solution to is temporary. It will fade in light of eternity. By keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus and the joy of being with Him forever, we can find the strength to persevere through trials.

Even as I write this truth I know to be true, it doesn't ease the pain I'm in right now. The journey seems so long; I want to be done now. I want to step into eternity with Jesus and Nancy now.

I've learned so much about grief in myself and how my kids process it differently. I've heard statements like:

"Grief doesn't ever go away; your grief muscle just grows stronger."

"The rest of your life, you keep circling grief, and you never really get away from it."

"A great love leaves a great loss."

These seem counterintuitive to everything I've believed as a Christian. I've preached statements like, "No matter the depth of our pain or weight of our suffering, Jesus has the power to heal with just one touch." How can that be true if grief stays with us? I can see how these statements are true, but it makes the journey seem endless. Yes, there's an eternity to look forward to, but what about the here and now? Will there be moments of full joy without the mixture of pain? Will there be times when I have new experiences or visit new places without thinking how much Nancy would have loved them?

Now I'm the one who "can't foresee it."

Many things happen that we cannot foresee. Nancy couldn't foresee me as her husband, but that

changed. I never foresaw leaving Georgia, yet we moved to different states and countries. Nancy couldn't imagine it when I sensed we were to plant a church, but we did it and loved it. There are many things we can't foresee because we're stuck in the moment—sometimes due to fear, sometimes because it seems impossible. Fear also prevents us from foreseeing a hopeful future. That's what I've experienced as a husband who lost his one and only love.

I was very fearful in my younger years—afraid to speak in front of others, play team sports, talk to girls, and more. But by my senior year of high school, I had outgrown some of those fears. As I grew, with Nancy by my side cheering me on, I felt more confident to face whatever was ahead. There's something about walking into a room with the one you believe is the prettiest girl, knowing she's with you and going home with you, that makes a man braver and more confident. Weeks after Nancy died, I felt something I hadn't felt in years: fear. Afraid of the future, afraid I'd be alone forever, afraid to move on because it meant leaving Nancy behind. The future was unknown and dark.

C.S. Lewis articulated this well in *A Grief Observed*: “No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear.”

We often want to know what the future holds. For many, thinking about the future brings anxious thoughts and worry. These feelings were foreign to me as an eternal optimist, a glass-half-full, silver-lining kind of guy.

Now, for the first time, the future felt intimidating and dark. I had been a dreamer and visionary, and now all my energy was used just to make it through the day. I had always envisioned Nancy being with me until the end. She would tell the kids they’d better live close when they married because she was going to be the best grandma. She loved talking about the future with me and the kids. We dreamed together, and now my dream partner was gone.

CHAPTER 4: A LOVE UNFORESEEN

Pensacola, FL – 1999

Let's go back to the days when Nancy could not foresee our future and our relationship. Nancy had broken my heart when I shared my feelings with her. We somehow worked through the awkwardness. We both still went to India together on the mission trip that spring of 2000. In preparation for that trip, Nancy had been fasting leading up to the trip. When we arrived in India, I had never seen someone so broken over poverty, hurting people, and people in need of Jesus. The tears she shed on that trip were something only the Holy Spirit could do in someone. We stayed in an orphanage while there and were part of tent services every evening. As we interacted with people and prayed with people after the church services, Nancy's heart would break. On the long bus rides, as we looked out the window at the mass of humanity in need, Nancy would pray and cry. She cried so much that she would laugh at herself, just wanting it to stop. On that trip, I fell even more in love with her, and everyone on that trip saw the call of missions on her life.

Somehow, I managed not to share my feelings on that trip. I even stayed strong during the months that followed. When I hid my feelings, Nancy would come closer. We would be in a group of friends and somehow end up having our own conversation. It felt like her perspective of me was changing, and maybe she did see something in us being together.

During our time in Bible school, Nancy worked at a bagel shop in the early morning before school started. The manager had invited many of the employees to a local hockey game, and they had an extra ticket. Nancy invited me to the game, and I was on top of the world that she had asked me. At the game, we were sitting with a group of employees, and half of them attended our Bible school, so I knew most of them. By half-time, Nancy said she was done and asked if I wanted to leave early. This was one of the first times we were alone, just the two of us. We ended up walking along the bay in downtown Pensacola. It was such a comfortable and easy conversation as we admired the beautiful old houses in downtown. I think I should have just gone in for a kiss that night, but I was too afraid to mess up what

was happening. I know she had to see that I was crazy about her.

We finished the semester, and summer break was coming. I decided to stay in Pensacola for the summer with some of my friends who were working there over the summer. I had started a handyman business, and my main clients were elderly people and retired military who lived in the area around my apartment. I did odd jobs such as cleaning gutters, painting, gardening, and installing a sprinkler system. That summer, I experienced something I did not see coming.

I had felt that Nancy was just not ready for a relationship and that, over time, I would win her over. I felt okay with waiting because I often prayed to God about it. I would beg God, if she is not the one for me, please take away these feelings I have for her, but if she is the one, God help her to see it. I prayed this prayer often and passionately because I could not stand being crazy in love with her and her not feeling the same about me. As I prayed, I felt like God had to have a plan.

Nancy was this very pretty girl who had turned down some other guys who had asked her out.

There were a few guys who fasted and prayed for a week to discern if Nancy was the one for them. The other guys would get a “no” and back away, but I remained close. I was someone she felt comfortable with. But what I did not expect was for one of my own roommates to make a move right at the end of the semester. A day before Nancy was leaving to go home for the summer, my friend and roommate asked if he could court her. Yes, court her! This school was very much influenced by the book and teaching of *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*. The idea was that you don’t date for fun. You court from day one with marriage in mind. It was not until Nancy had left town that I heard that Nancy had said yes to Lance. Oh, my heart breaks again just writing this.

That summer was difficult. The other guys in the apartment did not discuss it much because they knew how much it hurt me. To add to the weight of it, this was before we had cell phones, and Nancy would call Lance at the apartment, and I would answer the phone. Even a few times when Lance was on the phone with Nancy, he asked me if I wanted to say hello, and he would hand me the phone. Somehow, I managed to have a comfortable

conversation with her. Later, she told me that she was much more comfortable talking with me than in those conversations with Lance. The hardest part of that summer was about halfway through the summer break. Lance was planning a trip to visit Nancy in Chicago. She stayed with her sister Jessie and brother-in-law, Jim, that summer and worked as a nanny there. I could not believe that Lance had the audacity to ask me for a ride to the airport for him to go visit Nancy.

I remember listening to way too much emo music that summer. While Lance was gone, I remember my friend Patrick just sitting with me and asking, "How is your heart?" He had a true care and concern, as if he knew it was not right. I continued to ask God to take away my feelings for Nancy. I would try to hang out with other girls, but it would not go away, and I was in agony.

Summer was coming to a close, and school was starting soon as students were about to return, but I decided to take a trip to Georgia to visit my family. I made some excuses but really wanted to put off seeing Nancy and Lance together in person. Over the summer, it had been a long-distance

relationship, and I could not bear to see it in person. I made it a short weekend trip home and remember pulling back into my apartment complex in Florida. I had to pass by Nancy's apartment in order to get to my apartment, and after not seeing her car there all summer, there it was. She was back, and I was excited and disappointed at the same time.

I got settled in my place, and Ben, another roommate who had stayed over the summer, pulled me aside and said, "Dude, did you hear?" I was oblivious to what felt like everyone else had already known. Ben said, "As soon as Nancy got in town, she ended it with Lance."

"What?!" I exclaimed, trying not to show too much excitement. Talk about another awkward moment. Lance was in the next room heartbroken and, I could imagine, a little embarrassed that the word had spread quickly in this small Bible school, and Nancy broke it off as soon as she got back in town. I was relieved I did not have to see them together, and my hope rose again.

Love is a crazy thing. Like many rom-coms that we love to watch, there seems to be a character we are cheering against and one we are cheering for

and hoping ends up with the girl. The writing of these movies usually directs our bias, but still, what about the one that gets dumped? Do they find their happily ever after? We say all is fair in love and war, but what about when it's our friend?

At that moment, I was more concerned about my relief from the pain of seeing Nancy with someone else than I was about my friend's hurt and pain.

Is that wrong?

Is that right?

Is it selfish, or is it self-preservation?

It is one thing to watch a romance movie, read a book, or even counsel a friend in this area; it is another to feel love for someone else, to put yourself in those vulnerable moments and share your heart at the risk of rejection.

After taking some time with the guys at the apartment and after Lance had stepped out, I made my way to Nancy's apartment to welcome her back and reestablish that I still wanted to be in her life. There was a courtyard of about one hundred feet between Nancy's apartment and mine. As I made my way across that space between us that evening, I felt

I was making a decision. Even if I was not to share my undying love with her that night, I was putting myself in a place of vulnerability. I did not know it at the moment, but as I was allowing myself to be close to her again, I was choosing to allow her to hurt me again. I was setting myself up for failure because of how I believed this would go.

On January 11, 2023, it was just over a month since Nancy's death. The kids were back in school, and I was finally alone for the first time. I had also committed to preaching at the 10-year anniversary of the church we had planted in Chicago, and I was trying to dig deep to have something of meaning to share. In the quiet came a flood of all the disappointments in my life, all the challenges that were seemingly unanswered prayer—the diagnosis of Autism, Crohn's disease, removal from a ministry position, and of course, the loss of my wife. All the thoughts, regrets, and confusion flooded my mind. I sank deep into despair. When grief, loss, and disappointment in a God I have trusted all hit at the same time, it got ugly.

At that moment, I did not feel that God was for me. I felt as though He was against me. Beyond that, I was so deep in despair that I truly believed at that moment that if Nancy had not married me, she would be alive today. I actually called my father-in-law and said, "I am sorry your daughter married me. If she had not, she would be alive today."

That is a terrible place to be when the God you have gone to for comfort from the storms of life feels like the one causing the storms. That day, I yelled at God, asking Him why He wanted to smoosh me like a bug.

I yelled, "What do You want from me? I have served You and been willing to do what You put before me, and this is what You do!!! You take my wife, the mother of my children, and leave me here?

You somehow expect me to turn around and praise you?

How? How is this good?"

For those few hours that day, I wanted to be an atheist, but I could not deny creation. So, I went with agnostic. I wanted to believe that God was distant,

uncaring, and unconcerned. But even for two hours, that did not bring peace. I wanted to forget the blessing of God, but I could not. That left me knowing and longing for the God I had known that could bring peace. But at that moment, I did not trust Him; I had difficulty believing He was for me and had my best interest in mind.

If I were to come close to God or even acknowledge that He was close all of the time, that would mean I would have to place myself in that vulnerable place again. I would have to believe that He is God, but I am not; I only see in part, and He sees it all.

There I was, not a 20-year-old walking to Nancy's apartment driven by young love, insecurity, fear of rejection, and yet holding on to a hope that seemed irrational—staying close and willing to pursue her again. At that moment, I was taking steps toward the God of the universe. Steps towards the one that had the power to heal Nancy with one word, and yet, from my limited perspective, He did not act, did not speak, or do as I willed Him to do.

Stepping across what felt like a great chasm between God and me was a scary place to be, yet

deep within me, I knew that was the only way I could find peace and start to heal.

A God Who Grieves?

That week, as the heaviness of grief weighed down on me, I went for a walk one evening to yell at God... to blame Him for my pain. As I started to express my heart, it started to rain on me... I got even angrier in that moment... “Really, God, that is how you are going to respond... by raining on me?” The next day, I told some friends, and one said, “Maybe God was not raining on you; maybe He was grieving with you. Maybe He was crying with you.”

Does our God grieve? In one of the most famous Sunday School stories—Noah and the Ark—that we read in Genesis, we are introduced to a God who grieves.

We are told that sin and suffering have grown, and man is doing evil, terribly sinful things. What does God feel? Let’s read it.

Genesis 6:5-6

The Lord saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that

every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time. The Lord regretted that he had made human beings on the earth, and his heart was deeply troubled.

So, God looks down at the consequences of sin—how people treat each other, their thoughts, their manipulation, and selfish intentions—all the suffering, all the pain and hurt—and He regretted creation in the first place.

In Genesis 1, God looks at His creations and declares them good, celebrating creation. In Genesis 6, He has the opposite emotion. His heart is deeply troubled; He grieves.

The original Hebrew indicates that God is pained, that pain is inflicted on Him by what His eyes are seeing, and that it hurts Him to look.

So, how does God feel about suffering? It grieves His heart in the same way that it grieves mine or yours. In the depths of my pain and grief, I needed to hear that.

Months later, I received this message from a friend who was also grieving a marriage that ended in divorce:

“I wanted to respond to your post yesterday but felt any words would be hollow and unhelpful. But the Lord met me last night in my grief, and my mindset shifted. I have always known and believed that God is with us in our grief, and that has been a strength to me. However, I think I had that wrong. He never wanted there to be death, disease, despair, or discouragement. That was obviously never His will or His plan. I wonder how hard it was for Him not to heal Lazarus when He found out he was sick and then when he died, and instead, He modeled for us how to mourn. Jesus wept...

Just last night, I realized that He's not joining me in my grief at all; moreover, I am joining Him in His. I'm experiencing the pain that He feels over death, disease, sin, and suffering. We weep because it should have never happened. God never wanted it this way, but it did happen. Somehow, it brings me comfort to know that I'm joining Him instead of just being in it... it gives a sense of action when there is nothing that we can do.”

CHAPTER 5: THANKSGIVING

Thursday, November 24

Thanksgiving Day was familiar in many ways, yet distinctly different. We slept in, and after enjoying breakfast together, we began preparations for the meal. The Thanksgiving Parade played on the TV in the background as Nancy came downstairs. This was what set this day apart: I was in the kitchen helping my mom prepare the meal, while Nancy, who had slept in, was lounging on the couch. This was highly unusual.

Thanksgiving with Nancy over the years had been wonderful. Still, one of my favorite memories was our first Thanksgiving together as a newly married couple. We had just married on October 4, 2003, and decided to stay home to savor our first holiday together. We were living in a parsonage of the church where I served on staff, and we were making the place our own. Nancy always transformed our house into a home, whether it was a church parsonage, a small townhouse in Portugal, or our house in Africa; our home always felt like a

warm, inviting place you wanted to return to at the end of the day.

That first Thanksgiving, Nancy prepared the meal entirely on her own, and she was so proud of her accomplishment. She called my mom to get the recipe for the sweet potato casserole I had grown up with, blending our traditions. She loved the sweet potato casserole so much that, from that year forward, she looked forward to it even more than I did. While she cooked, I hung Christmas lights outside, we had the parade on in the background in the morning, and that evening, we went to an old downtown movie theater to watch *It's a Wonderful Life*.

I couldn't believe Nancy had never seen the movie. While we were in the theater, it started to snow—my first real Midwest snow since I had grown up in Georgia. As we left the theater, the air was crisp, and the fresh snow crunched under our feet as we walked back to our car. It truly felt like a wonderful life in that moment. I was married to the girl of my dreams, we had our whole life ahead of us, we were at a church that loved us, and I was serving as the college young adult pastor, a role that paid

me to build community with people our age. Life was good; worries and concerns didn't exist in that season. Oh, how I miss those days and wish I could go back to relive the beauty of it all.

**The Beauty Between Song by Kings
Kaleidoscope**

"If it all fell apart, would I trust in God?" "And if it's all good, would I need Him at all?" That's when I found that beauty in between If you know that you don't know that much You know just what I mean When the sky is falling, when life is a dream I, fortunately, fall into the beauty between Only God above me, painting my scene I, fortunately, fall into the beauty between

Continued Pursuit I realize I fast-forwarded to our first Thanksgiving together and didn't share how we fell in love... well, I mean, how Nancy finally fell in love with me, because clearly, I was already in love with her.

As we continued in Bible School, I wrestled with confusing feelings of being head-over-heels in love with Nancy. I was also tormented because she didn't

return those feelings at the time, and I didn't know how much more my heart could endure.

The smallest bit of attention she gave me was a dopamine hit that fueled my hope, and I would dream of our possible future. Even as tortured as I was, I stayed close. There were moments of deep conversation and connection, but they never blossomed into anything during our time there. I even stayed at school for the third-year internship, claiming it was because I was unsure of my next steps, but honestly, it was because I knew Nancy would be there for one more semester, and I didn't want to give up.

I remember her graduation day. At one point, I stopped by her apartment, where her parents were helping her pack up her things, as they would be leaving after the ceremony. I had a gift for her, which I gave her in front of her parents: a globe with a note saying that God had given her a heart for the nations and to use it as she prayed about where God would send her. She loved the gift and was surprised by my creativity and boldness in front of her parents.

I later learned that her dad liked me long before Nancy did. He even told me he was grateful I was

there watching over his daughter while she was in school. I hugged her goodbye that day, thinking I might never see her again. At this point, I had known Nancy for two years. In all that time, I had never dated her, never held her hand, and never kissed her.

I left confused, sad, and nervous that I was leaving Bible School without a spouse. I told myself I might never find a wife and would always be alone. That was how it worked, right? You go to Bible School, find your spouse, and serve in a ministry position. That was the story many of my friends' lives were telling. But God's will and God's timing go hand in hand, yet I struggled to wait on His timing.

After graduation, I had plans to spend the summer in Mexico City as a missions intern with Operation Serve, hosting medical mission trips. If that experience went well, I would commit to serving for a year in Kingston, Jamaica, helping a wonderful couple named Steve and Kim Puffpaff start a new children's home called the City of Refuge. Nancy was heading to Chicago to live with her older sister until she figured out her next steps.

Mexico was a great experience as I helped host churches that came every week, but I looked forward to occasional email exchanges with Nancy. She even called me once while I was there. This was before cell phones, WhatsApp, or FaceTime were common. I later found out that phone call cost her nearly \$100, but for me, it was worth every penny. I told her I had decided to commit to a year in Jamaica. She shared that she had applied to work with Assemblies of God World Missions, the same organization I would be working with in Jamaica.

After returning from Mexico in late September, Nancy called me. She said she had heard back from the missions organization, and they had asked if she would go to the City of Refuge in Kingston, Jamaica. I was thrilled and felt like God had heard my prayers. I later learned that when they called her with this offer, she initially told them she couldn't go. She said, "A boy who likes me is going there, and he would think this was God's will." The woman on the phone replied, "I think you're overreacting." Nancy responded, "You don't know this boy. I've repeatedly turned him down, and he keeps coming back."

The woman said, “Well, if you want to work with us, this is where we’re sending you.” Nancy agreed. I didn’t know this backstory at the time, but when she called me, I could tell she was excited, not only about the mission but also that she wouldn’t be going alone and had someone to share this adventure with.

In October, we attended a missions orientation in Springfield, Missouri, for about two weeks. As soon as we arrived, gossip and rumors spread quickly about us. Here we were, two single people who drove together to the training, heading to the same country, yet claiming we weren’t dating. There were rumors that we were secretly dating during Bible School. I even got called into one of the director’s offices, where he asked me point-blank if anything was going on or if we were in a relationship, as the policy was that young Missionary Associates weren’t supposed to date. I told him I had been interested in Nancy, but she didn’t feel the same way.

During our time there, Nancy was concerned for my heart and emotions and wanted to ensure I had no preconceived notions about what could happen in Jamaica. If I did, she would request a transfer. I

assured her I would be okay and that she shouldn't ask to go somewhere else.

I know this makes Nancy seem coldhearted, but it was actually out of concern for my heart and feelings. She knew her rejection had hurt me, yet I kept showing up, and she kept letting herself get close. Nancy wasn't afraid of love, but she was terrified of marrying the wrong person. I don't know if it was from growing up in a pastor's home, hearing about marriages, or seeing things that made her so worried about making the wrong choice, but something triggered that fear in her. She often said it was the second most important decision you make: first, deciding to follow Jesus as your Lord and Savior, and then choosing who you marry, because they set the course of your life. And that's true.

After the orientation in October, we both got busy raising funds and waiting for the right timeline to arrive in Jamaica to help open the new children's home. I arrived in April 2002, and Nancy arrived in May. When she arrived, I was very standoffish to guard my heart. I had also read *Wild at Heart* by John Eldredge and was determined to be my own man. I would no longer be a puppy dog following her

around, hoping for her attention. Instead, it took immense discipline to be confident and settled as friends. Being a male on the mission field gave me more freedom, and having been there for a month, I had a vehicle to come and go from the property. Nancy didn't have as much freedom and was drawn to my confidence, needing me in many ways to go to stores.

It didn't take long for our friendship to pick up where it left off and grow even stronger. Many of the missionaries on the property went to bed early, and here we were in our early 20s, hanging out in the evenings, just the two of us. At this time, we were still preparing the property for the children to arrive. We worked side by side, painting, preparing rooms, cleaning, and even building bunk beds.

I remember one day after painting together in the kitchen, I hugged her after our conversation. She lingered a bit longer in that hug. Without thinking, she said aloud, "Wow, it's been so long since I've been touched." At that moment, I realized the power of her love language. Touch was a strong love language for Nancy. Her family had been very loving and affectionate, and she had missed that.

Over time, we started spending more time together, with longer hugs and back massages.

From Nancy's journal, August 11, 2002:

Damian tried—really tried—to kiss me tonight. This was his first real attempt to make a move. But I resisted. Thank you, Jesus, for strength. I don't want to kiss anyone until I know he's the one for me. I love you, Lord. You are so good to me. You satisfy my desires with good things. I trust you. I put all my hope in you because you're the One who is real. All things will pass away, but you will remain.

I didn't know this was her desire, and I kept pursuing her. One day, I decided to go for it. I took her for a walk down the property and asked if she had seen an old barn away from the other buildings. I took her by the hand, walked her inside, swept her off her feet, and kissed her. This kiss had been three years in the making. She was shocked yet amazed that I was so forward. Soon after, it felt like we were sneaking behind every corner to make out whenever we could.

I was on top of the world. I was living in Jamaica with the girl of my dreams on the same property, and

she finally liked me. Everything was perfect until an interruption slowed our relationship. Before we started dating, Nancy received an email from Kevin, a man a little older than me from the church she attended while living with her sister in the Chicago suburbs. He was finishing medical school and had found a residency program in Kingston, Jamaica, about 35 minutes from the City of Refuge. He asked if he could rent a room on the property during his month there. I had met him once before and knew it wasn't a coincidence that he found a residency in Jamaica. He had plans to try to win Nancy just as our relationship was beginning to bloom, though we hadn't gone public yet because we weren't supposed to date as Missionary Associates on a one-year assignment. By the way, what's with all these Christian organizations discouraging dating and finding love in the place you should be looking for a spouse?

The senior missionaries were thrilled to have someone rent a room, especially a doctor who could help with checkups for the kids. He might have been great for everyone else, but he slowed things down

for Nancy and me. Not that Nancy liked him; she was just kind and wanted to ensure he felt welcomed.

The daytime at the Children's Home was busy once the children arrived. Nancy was surrounded by kids all the time. She would get up every morning with them, help with breakfast, and get them ready for their day. School-age children attended school on the property, and Nancy spent her day with the little ones who weren't yet in school. There was lunch prep, serving, after-school playtime with all the kids, dinner, and finally, bedtime. After bedtime, Nancy and I had time together after the long day. We would hang out, talk, or watch a movie. Now, this limited time was interrupted by Kevin's presence. Yes, in my head, I hear the voice of Kevin McCallister's older cousin from *Home Alone*: "Kevin, you are such a disease!" Truthfully, he wasn't a bad guy; I was just insecure in our budding relationship and intimidated by a young doctor with a bright future.

He was always in the way, yet I had to be nice. He would eat dinner with Nancy and the kids while I was still finishing my assignments. He was there from the moment the kids went to bed until it was

time for us to call it a night. After about a week of this routine, we devised a plan. Nancy would say she was tired from the long day and announce she was going to bed. Since she stayed in the house with the kids in a third-world country, there were bars on the windows and doors. This meant she locked the bars on the door as we left. What Kevin and the senior missionaries (sorry, Steve and Kim) didn't know until they read this is that I had rigged the bars on Nancy's window to come off easily and quietly. After acting as though I was heading to my room, I would sneak down a trail that led to the back of Nancy's room. She would remove the bars, and I would sneak back into the house I had just left.

Finally, the day came for Kevin to go home. I don't know if I could have been more excited. But Mother Nature seemed to have other plans. A storm was barreling toward the island, threatening to ground him. We weren't even sure his flight would leave, but Nancy and I thought it was worth a try, so we took him to the airport early to get ahead of the storm. As soon as we had him safely at the airport and were alone again without interruption, we picked up where we had left off. Our young love continued to grow.

We made one or two stops on our way back up the long, twisting mountain road, and the storm was in full force. Rain rolled down the windows like a romantic music video. We were still about a twenty-minute drive up the mountain to the Children's Home when a landslide blocked the road. We couldn't believe it. The road back home was blocked, and cell phones and landlines were down, so we couldn't contact the missionaries. I turned the little Toyota truck around on the narrow mountain road, and we made our way back to Kingston, unsure of what to do. As it was getting late, we decided we needed a place to stay. Being frugal and on a missionary budget, we somehow, without considering appearances or temptation, got one room with two beds. I secretly hoped they only had rooms with one bed available. Yes, there was great temptation that night, but by the grace of God, we overcame it. Well, if I'm honest, Nancy overcame it, as her willpower was stronger than mine.

The next day, the road was still blocked, but the phones were working, and we were able to call the senior missionaries to let them know what happened. "You shared a hotel room?" Steve

exclaimed, followed by a questioning laugh. “There were two beds!” I clarified, but my heart raced at the implications. With the road still blocked, we volunteered to haul groceries back to the home and park the truck on the side of the road at the mudslide. So there we were, hiking up the Blue Mountains of Jamaica with multiple bags of groceries, making our way back to the property, but this time without Kevin, so I was thrilled. Some of the kids met us and took groceries out of our hands. “Look who’s back!” they cheered as we entered the home, a whirlwind of chaos and laughter. As the missionaries caught up with us, I braced myself for awkward questions about our hotel night, but thankfully, they didn’t ask too many.

A few weeks after Kevin left, I finally had to meet with the senior missionaries to ask for permission to date Nancy. They were thrilled, as they loved watching us fall in love and enjoyed playing matchmakers. I also called Nancy’s father to ask for his permission. He gave his blessing and expressed gratitude that I was in Jamaica with his daughter, giving him peace of mind knowing I was watching

out for her and protecting her. In the end, both gave their full blessings.

God's Will and God's Timing

Looking back at our love story and all that transpired, I've come to believe that God's will and God's timing go hand in hand. Yet, I still struggle to trust His timing.

This is how God works. He sees the beginning to the end, and He has His perfect timing. We see numerous examples in the Bible of individuals who experienced God's will and timing:

- **Abraham and Sarah:** God promised Abraham a son, but it took many years for the promise to be fulfilled (Genesis 17–21). I can't imagine waiting as long as they did, yet we see God's promise of a son ultimately fulfilled.
- **Joseph:** Given a dream but sold into slavery and imprisoned, Joseph waited years before seeing God's plan to save his family and Egypt (Genesis 37–50). Joseph's story reminds me that when it seems God isn't around or interested, He is leading us to

significant purposes beyond our immediate understanding.

- Even **Jesus** emphasized God's timing in His earthly ministry. In John 7:6, He said, "My time has not yet come," showing He was aware of God's perfect timing for His mission and sacrifice.

In moments of waiting, I'm still like that young kid in Bible School who wanted to marry Nancy three months after meeting her. But looking back, I see that God had a better plan. He wanted our relationship built on stepping out in faith and trusting Him to lead us. Through this waiting, He gave us a heart for orphans and the hurting, along with an adventurous faith. Sometimes, I wonder if Nancy and I had fallen in love and married during Bible School, would we have stepped out to serve as missionaries right away? Would we have made excuses as newlyweds to focus on our relationship, get a job, and build for our future? Yet from the start, God led us to be a couple willing and excited for the adventure of following Him wherever He leads.

Thanksgiving 2022

After years of wonderful holidays together, it seemed unfair that our last one was so odd. As the day went on, Nancy mostly relaxed on the couch but remained friendly and talkative with everyone. My mom received a FaceTime call from my sister, who was estranged from us at the time. Despite the tension, Nancy tried to persuade her to come over and play games, as it was still early enough to join us for dessert. I realize now how much Nancy helped maintain peaceful, loving relationships with my family and always encouraged us to do the same.

As the day progressed, Nancy was very wobbly and even fell once for no apparent reason we could understand at the time. When my brother and his family left, and we were getting ready for bed, I still wasn't feeling 100%, so I took some NyQuil to ensure a good night's rest. As I walked into the room, Nancy said, "I don't feel right, and this doesn't seem like the flu. I should go to the ER." It was highly unusual for her to suggest going to the ER, and I was unsure what was happening. I said, "Okay, let me make an espresso because I just took NyQuil. I'm not sure what that will do to me, but I'll try." Without

hesitation, she said it was fine, and we could go in the morning.

CHAPTER 6: I JUST CAN'T BELIEVE THIS. I DON'T GET SICK

Friday, November 25, 2022

That morning, Nancy woke up still feeling unwell, and now her left side was numb. It was the strangest thing and didn't make any sense. They said this flu strain had some unusual symptoms, but nothing about one side of the body being numb. This confirmed even more that it was time to go to the ER, hoping to get answers. I remember watching her get ready in the bathroom, and as I checked her out, I said, "Wow, I am a blessed man... look how good you look," and I held her in my arms. We told the kids we were taking Mom to the doctor to find out what was going on with her. I think the older ones were still sleeping or being lazy the day after Thanksgiving.

Northside Cherokee Hospital is a beautiful, newly built facility just ten minutes from our house. That Friday morning was relatively quiet, which was a good thing, considering it was a holiday weekend. We were called back to a room much more quickly than expected, and the nurses were very attentive.

After some waiting, they administered a flu test. We told them she had tested positive on Wednesday, but they wanted to confirm. The test results came back negative, leading them to believe the Wednesday test was a false positive. This prompted more questions, and they grew concerned that Nancy might have had a minor stroke and wanted to run additional tests. It was going to take time to schedule the tests, as they were short-staffed for the Thanksgiving weekend. Nancy, being the mom she was, insisted I go home to check on the kids. She didn't want them to worry and asked me to get her some food after ensuring the kids had eaten.

I returned home, fed the kids, and did what anyone with internet access does: I Googled minor strokes. The results weren't alarming, suggesting it wasn't something to be overly worried about. I checked in with the kids and followed up on some work matters since we had been away that week. Just as I was heading out to return to Nancy, she called and said, "Now they want to do an MRI. I think I'm making a big deal out of this; should I leave? How much is this going to cost?"

I told her not to worry, assuring her that the tests were covered under the ER visit. I said I was on my way and asked if she needed anything. She mentioned she was cold and wanted a blanket, and soup sounded good. I had just walked into her hospital room, handed her the blanket, and opened the chicken tortilla soup I'd picked up from Chick-fil-A when a nurse practitioner entered. She seemed surprised I was there with food and said, "Oh, you can't eat. We're having you admitted and moved upstairs."

"Why? What's going on?"

She explained they had found a mass on Nancy's brain and some swelling. Her abruptness and poor bedside manner left us both shocked and speechless. I don't know if you've experienced a moment when doctors or nurses deliver shocking, unexpected news and then ask, "Do you have any questions?"

Have any questions? I didn't even know what questions to ask. As I looked at Nancy, tears filled her eyes. She asked where the tumor was, how big it was, and if it could be removed.

The nurse practitioner was cautious with her words, as this wasn't her area of expertise. Between my shock and her careful responses, I don't fully remember what I heard. I either heard or thought I heard that the tumor was small, located in the front, and should be removable. Honestly, I'm not sure if that's what was said. I was in such shock, and as someone who clings to hope and seeks positive outcomes, I believe I misheard and filled in the blanks with optimism. More on that later.

The nurse left, and I held Nancy as she cried. She kept saying, "I just can't believe this. I don't get sick." I reassured her that everything would be alright and that she would get through this. I even joked that when they removed the tumor, maybe they'd smooth out any wrinkles she was worried about on her forehead. After a few moments together, I said we needed to call her family, as they knew she was in the hospital and would want an update. She said she couldn't talk to them right now and asked me to make the call. I stepped into the hallway to call Nancy's parents and share the shocking news that a mass had been found in her brain. Nancy's dad, a pastor for years and trained in crisis intervention,

went into pastor/chaplain mode. He leaned on faith, trusting that God was with us. He encouraged me to be strong for Nancy and prayed that God would give me strength.

It seemed like no time before we were moved to the 8th floor of Northside Hospital. We didn't have much time to talk, as there were constant interruptions from nurses checking vitals, administering an IV, and starting a steroid for her headache, which was also meant to reduce the swelling around the tumor. They performed a CT scan to check for other masses or abnormalities in her body. We were told the swelling was affecting the nerves on the right side of her brain, which explained the numbness on her left side.

Amid the interruptions, Nancy insisted I go home to be with the kids and tell them what was happening. Even after receiving earth-shattering news, she was more concerned about their well-being and emotions. She was especially worried about our youngest, Jude. At 11 years old, Jude had been diagnosed with Crohn's disease less than a year earlier. He was on Humira, a medication injected into his thigh twice a month. To add

complexity to this moment, we had learned at the end of October that our kids had been unexpectedly dropped from their state insurance in Georgia without warning. Jude was overdue for his Humira dose, and Nancy had been on the phone for days trying to find out why we were dropped. We prioritized getting insurance for Jude first, as the medication cost \$1,700 per dose without coverage. Nancy was already worried about Jude because he wasn't feeling well and needed his medication. Jude was also our worrier. Unlike Nancy and me, who rarely worried and faced life's challenges with simple faith and trust that God would make a way, Jude was wired differently. He often had anxious thoughts, and we had been helping him renew his mind daily. Nancy had bought a sign for his room that read, "It's a Good Day for a Good Day," and she continually encouraged him to speak life.

Nancy asked me to go home, gather some items for her, and talk to the kids in person. How do you tell your kids that doctors found a mass on their mom's brain when you don't even know what you're facing?

I received conflicting advice on how to approach this. Some suggested saying they were still investigating the cause of Mom's headache and keeping her for more tests and pain medication. That approach didn't feel right. Kids are smarter than we think, and it's better to share what you know so they don't feel deceived. I called a mature believer who loved Nancy and had experienced a significant tragedy. She advised me to use a good news, bad news, good news approach.

I arrived home around 6 p.m. The kids had already eaten, thanks to Grandma being there. I sat them down on the couch and said I needed to talk. This is what I remember saying: "I have some good news: they found out why Mom has been having bad headaches and why she was dizzy yesterday. The bad news is they found a mass on her brain, which is causing the pain. The good news is Mom is in a hospital that can help with the pain and figure out how to remove this mass."

Each child responded differently. Levi trusted everything would be okay.

Jade was quiet, and I could tell she was deep in thought.

Jude, the youngest, started to cry and asked a question I hadn't even voiced yet: "Is it cancer?" In shock, I replied, "We don't know yet, but what made you think that?"

He said, "That's what happened to Brice." This boy's mind amazes me. Brice was a teenage boy who had just started attending the youth group at the church we pastored in Illinois when, a few months later, they found a cancerous brain tumor after he blacked out one morning while getting ready for school. Our church rallied around Brice and his family. Jude was nine years old at the time, and I didn't realize he was so aware of the situation. We had prayed for Brice as a family and church, but I didn't expect Jude to make that connection in that moment.

I wrapped up the conversation by saying that for the next few days, I'd be busy going back and forth to the hospital, but I'd do my best to be there for them. I told them they could ask me any questions or share concerns, and I'd be honest and tell them what I knew. I reassured them I would always tell the truth.

We got up and went about our evening. I went to our bedroom to gather the items Nancy had requested. As I was collecting things, I stopped by Jade's room to ask her something and found her in her bedroom with the lights off, crying in bed. I sat with her, rubbed her back, and we talked briefly. I asked if she wanted to go to the hospital with me. I texted Nancy, told her about Jade, and asked if I could bring her to see her. Nancy said yes and invited the boys, too.

Soon, I was back in the car, heading to the hospital for the third time that day, which felt like the longest day ever but was just the beginning of the longest days and weeks of my life.

When we arrived at the hospital, it was quiet, as it was around 7 p.m. the day after Thanksgiving. We approached the desk to check in, and it felt surreal. How did we get here? Nancy had never had health issues. As a pastor, I'd visited many people in hospitals, but this was an entirely different feeling. The attendant informed us that only one guest was allowed at a time, and they had to be at least 16 years old. I was shocked they wouldn't let my kids see their mother. Levi, my oldest, had just turned 16,

so he was allowed to go. He was proud to be able to visit because of his age but shocked to see his mom in a hospital bed. Still, I gave him the same reassurance I gave myself: she's going to be okay.

Fortunately, while Levi was with Nancy, I spoke with the lead nurse on the 8th floor. She was kind and understanding, saying, "This momma just found out she has a mass on her brain; what she needs most is to see her babies." They had to visit one by one, which allowed each child individual time with her.

Jade went second, and as soon as she saw her mom, she burst into tears and fell into Nancy's arms, burying her head. They spent time crying together as Nancy rubbed her head and reassured her everything would be okay. Last was Jude, our youngest and the one who worried most, who needed his mom the most. Just a year and a half earlier, he had been the one in a hospital bed with Nancy by his side as they ran tests, leading to his Crohn's disease diagnosis at age nine. The two of them talked, and again, Nancy, despite just learning about the mass in her brain, assured each child that she would be okay.

“Everything is going to be okay.”

Is this true? Why do we say this in moments when we don't know the outcome?

Are we lying to ourselves?

Are we foolishly wishful thinking?

I reflect on how often I've told people in distress, “Everything will be okay.” It's a phrase that offers comfort and hope, but why do we say it when we don't know what will happen?

Saying “Everything will be okay” is a way of reminding ourselves and others of God's sovereignty and faithfulness. It's a statement of faith that, even though we don't know the outcome, we trust God is in control and working according to His will.

We see examples throughout Scripture. Joseph was sold into slavery, falsely accused, and imprisoned for years before being elevated to second-in-command in Egypt. Through it all, he trusted God had a plan, and everything turned out okay in the end (Genesis 50:20).

Likewise, the apostle Paul faced numerous trials yet said he had learned to be content in any circumstance because he knew God was in control (Philippians 4:11–13).

As Christians, we know we'll face trials, but we also know we have a Savior who has overcome the world (John 16:33). We can find peace amid uncertainty because we trust everything will be okay—not because of our circumstances, but because of our faith in a loving, sovereign God who keeps His promises.

As Christians, we say, “Everything will be okay,” when we don't know, because we trust in God's sovereignty and faithfulness. It's a statement of faith that reminds us to cast our cares on Him and trust His plans for our lives are good. We find peace in uncertainty because God is always with us, working all things together for our good.

That's good theology, and it's true. But how do I tell my kids next time that everything will be okay when, in their hearts and minds, it didn't turn out okay this time? Kids have memories, and they recall when I said it would be okay, but to them, it wasn't.

Truthfully, it's not okay that their mother died from cancer. There's nothing okay about that.

How do I know it will be okay in a not-okay world?

Many turn to Romans 8:28, trusting that even when we don't know what will happen, God is working all things for the good of those who love Him.

But we must step back and remember that God is working good through a broken world not designed as He intended. If we're not careful, we might imply God caused Nancy's cancer to do good in our lives or to shape us. That's wrong; God isn't throwing trials at us. James says to consider it pure joy when we face trials of many kinds. We must be clear that God isn't dishing out trials.

As believers, we often pray for God to reveal His will. Paul speaks of "His good and perfect will" in Romans 12:2. Doesn't that sound like the place we all want to be? In God's perfect will? When I think of God's perfect will, I imagine myself happy, healthy, and wealthy, with purpose and making a difference in others' lives. But can't I make a difference while being perfectly happy, healthy, and wealthy?

I'm not saying God doesn't want these things for you, but is that what He has in mind for His will for your life?

Let's lay a biblical foundation for God's will. First, God didn't create a world of pain and suffering but a place He called good at every step and very good when completed.

Adam and Eve lived in the paradise of the Garden of Eden, meaning abode or paradise—a state of perfect happiness or bliss. On page one of our story, there was no death, grief, sadness, or pain. Yes, “our story,” because the Genesis creation story is ours.

In the creation story, Adam and Eve in the garden reflect God's design. There was no strife between them. They were naked and unashamed, signifying more than a lack of clothes—it speaks to the confidence they had as male and female created by God. They weren't jealous or envious; they were fully known and fully knew each other, a picture of a happy marriage. They were healthy. Before the fall, they were sinless, and without sin, there was no sickness, disease, mental health issues, or death.

Then, in Genesis 3, God's very good creation is corrupted by the evil one.

What happened?

God told one story, the serpent told another, and humanity believed the serpent. The world we know today is the product of believing that lie. Each day, we decide which story to believe.

Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit from the one forbidden tree, and the consequences were catastrophic. They began to distrust the God they knew as a loving father, felt insecure and distant from each other, and creation itself was cursed.

After explaining the consequences of sin to the serpent, the woman, and the man, God says in Genesis 3:17, "Cursed is the ground because of you."

The consequences of sin haven't just infected people; they've infected every square inch of creation. The world we live in is under a curse, which we experience daily. Nothing in creation is untouched by sin. The consequence is that they left Eden—a place of no death, grief, sadness, or pain—for a world of suffering, where death, grief, sadness,

and pain exist. This is the world you and I are born into, the only world we've known, not one where God's perfect design is in motion. Sin brought separation, sickness, death, and all its companions.

God's will for mankind was not just happiness but joy, contentment, and full health, with no sickness or death. But you and I live in a world where His perfect will isn't played out every day, everywhere.

This is why Jesus prayed, "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

We find relief in Jesus' words, acknowledging that what we experience on earth isn't heaven. Most of what we encounter daily isn't His will. He tells us there's a place where His will is done—heaven.

As believers, we long for heaven because we long for His will to be done. We know that where His will is enacted, it's good because He is good. A miracle is when heaven breaks into earth. I believe in miracles, yet, from my experience, they're rare. That's why they're miracles. If they happened daily to everyone, that would be life. But I hold onto hope that heaven can break through at any moment, and

I long for the New Heaven and Earth where God's perfect will is done every day in every way.

How do we live in His perfect will on this side of eternity?

How do we trust we can know His will?

How do we move forward when we've done all we can in the natural and spiritual, yet the outcome doesn't look like His will at all?

These are the questions of those whose stories haven't gone as planned, whose minds are filled with doubts after great pain, yet who desperately hold onto faith they know is true, even when it doesn't align with their human experience or what they thought they believed.

CHAPTER 7: OK, I NEED YOU TO STUFF THAT RIGHT NOW

Sunday, Nov. 27, 2022

At this time, we were oblivious to the reality of the moment, so I kept my kids' lives as normal as possible. We went to church where my good friend Cheno is the pastor. My youngest son, Jude, was not feeling well and wasn't up for attending church that day, so he stayed home with Grandma. During the service, after worship, Cheno called me up to the front of the church and invited the congregation to pray for Nancy. As I stood on the stage and the entire church prayed for us, I looked out and saw both Jade and Levi standing there, and I believe in that moment the reality of what we could be facing started to hit each one of us. My kids had been around enough church services to know this was different. I could see the reality of the situation register with them as they realized the entire church was praying for their mom. As soon as I returned to my seat, my daughter Jade burst into tears and laid her head on my shoulder for the remainder of the service.

That Sunday afternoon, Jade, Jude, and I headed to the hospital. At this point, we still did not feel the full weight of what we were facing. Levi had a friend come over, so he decided to stay home with him. We walked into the hospital carrying chocolate chip cookies Jade had just baked and some nail polish Nancy had requested. I also had another hot cappuccino for her. On Friday, we had been granted permission for the kids to come upstairs, so we thought we could all go again. When we went to check in, however, we were told the kids could not come up to see their mother. Disappointment fell across all our faces. I had the kids sit in the waiting room while I went upstairs to see Nancy and find someone in charge who could allow them to come up.

When I arrived in her room, she seemed happy to see me but annoyed that they weren't allowing the kids to come upstairs. I told her I would talk to whomever I could to make it happen. I had only been in the room a few minutes when the neurosurgeon walked in and introduced himself for the first time. This doctor was well experienced—as we had looked him up online the day before and discovered

he had performed many surgeries. He came in and explained the plan for the upcoming days. He told us that on Tuesday, they would perform a biopsy. They would make a small slit in the back of Nancy's head, behind her ear, and use a needle to remove a piece of the tumor for testing. He assured us he would not cut more hair than necessary.

He went on to say that Tuesday night Nancy would spend the night in the ICU to recover from the biopsy and would most likely be going home by Wednesday while we waited for the results. He told us that shortly after the surgery on Tuesday, we would know whether it was benign or cancerous, though they would still send it off for further study to determine the exact type of cancer so the best treatment could be planned. At that point, we learned the tumor was not in the front of her brain, as we had originally thought or heard, but was lodged quite deep into the back of her brain. From his perspective, surgery was not possible. But with a combination of chemotherapy and radiation, there was a chance it could shrink.

This was shocking news, as we had still been hoping for the best. Nancy, bold as ever, asked the

doctor point blank, “In all that you have seen and in your experience, do you believe this is cancer?”

Without much hesitation, the doctor replied, “Yes, it does look to be cancer.”

The shock hit both Nancy and me as tears welled up in our eyes. The doctor, being professional, seemed somewhat distant and excused himself shortly after sharing such a heavy statement. There I was, alone with Nancy, processing everything we had just heard, still holding on to hope while bracing ourselves for a long journey ahead of six to eight weeks of chemo and radiation. We both cried together, and in that moment, we were thankful that the kids had not been allowed upstairs and were not in the room when we heard such terrible news.

We cried for only a few minutes, barely beginning to process the weight of it all, when the kids called from the waiting room asking if they could come up. Nancy quickly said, “OK, I need you to stuff that right now and get the kids and bring them up here.”

“Stuff it.” How could I possibly stuff the news we had just heard?

But I did as she asked. I spoke to the head nurse and got permission to bring the kids upstairs. When they entered the room, Nancy stuffed it so well—she was cheerful, joyful, and full of life. She was genuinely happy to be with them. Jade shared her cookies, and they sat together painting Nancy's nails. They used the whiteboard, which the nurses and doctors normally used for notes, to play Pictionary. I was amazed at her strength to set aside the devastating news and be fully present with her kids. I couldn't do the same. I sat in the corner of the room, looking out the window or distracting myself with my phone. I knew if I looked at Nancy, I would start to cry, so I avoided eye contact.

The bravery Nancy showed in that moment was truly supernatural. Only by God's strength could a mother who loved her children as deeply as Nancy did be able to set aside her fear of the future and make the most of that time. I'm not saying Nancy was perfect—she had her flaws, like all of us—but in that last year of her life, it seemed she carried a special grace. Looking back, she truly did make the most of every moment, just as the apostle Paul instructs us to do.

When we moved to Georgia, she grew bolder in sharing her faith, more loving in her words, and more intentional in her affirmations. I want to be careful in how I say this, because I don't want you to think Nancy had a death wish or somehow knew what was ahead. But the Spirit within her stirred her to live more boldly. For the first time, she wasn't leading a church or a ministry. She wasn't inviting people to Jesus so they could attend our church or join her women's Bible study. She was simply telling people about Jesus, without obligation or agenda. She also didn't hold back from speaking life and love into our family, even in the complexities of that year.

She seemed even more affectionate in both her words and her deeds during that last year. Looking back on our nine short months in Georgia, I can recall three specific times when she told me in the most unique way that she loved me and was happy.

One of those times was when we had just moved into my mom's house after leaving Santa Rosa Beach. Life felt disorienting. It was the first time we weren't in full-time ministry. It was the first time we attended church with no obligations, no roles to fill,

no concerns about whether there were enough greeters or nursery workers.

One Sunday afternoon, after attending church, we reflected on how different it felt to simply attend rather than lead. We were also questioning why the church does certain things and whether there was a different way to make disciples. But in the middle of that conversation, Nancy looked at me and said, “If I died today, I would die a happy woman. You have given me a good life.”

In May, some friends offered us their home in Charleston, SC, so we could get away. We spent that time together praying about what God had next for us and exploring the city. On that trip, we reconnected without the kids and reflected on our life of following God’s call. It was then she repeated those same words: “If I died today, I would die a happy woman. You have given me a good life.”

Then again, in early November 2022, a friend sent me to an Airbnb in the Blue Ridge Mountains for a two-and-a-half-day retreat. It was a chance for God to heal my heart and speak clearly to me. That fall was stunning, and I remember thinking I wished Nancy were there to enjoy it. When I returned, I told

her we needed to go up before the leaves were gone. That Sunday, after an early church service, we drove to the mountains and spent the day hiking, exploring, and taking in the beauty of the fall colors. At one point, as she gazed out the window, holding my hand, she said again, “I want you to know that if I died today, you have given me a good life, and I would die a happy woman.”

Who says that?

At the time, I received it simply as her way of expressing love and appreciation. She often used words of affirmation with me, the kids, and others. I assumed she meant she loved our adventurous life and had no regrets about how we had lived. This reassured me because, as a husband, I often felt like we should be further along—more established financially, more secure in our future. I was 44, and she was 41. We sometimes looked at our lives and felt behind in retirement savings, career building, and having a clear plan.

Living in the Atlanta area didn’t help with those insecurities. Surrounded by wealth, big houses, fancy restaurants, and upscale shopping, we sometimes felt out of place, like we didn’t belong.

Since we had often talked about these feelings, I took her words as reassurance that she preferred our adventurous life to the accumulation of stuff.

I am forever thankful for those words of love and encouragement.

For the last three years of her life, Nancy's life verse was Proverbs 18:21:

“Life and death are in the power of the tongue.”

That was the theme of the one and only sermon I convinced her to preach—on Mother's Day in 2021 at River City Church. It was a beautiful message filled with conviction, fun stories, and practical application. Nancy was known for speaking encouragement and life to others, so the message she preached that day was really her life message. A major influence in her ability to speak life came from her dad's example—so different from my own father.

My dad had many great attributes, but words of affirmation were not one of them. If I'm honest, the negative came out more easily than the positive. When you're growing up, you don't really recognize dysfunction because you assume your family is

normal. The truth is, all families have dysfunctions, and some patterns are passed down from generation to generation. Even now, as a single dad of three teenagers, I have to check my words carefully on stressful days, because words matter.

I remember Nancy sharing a story that highlighted the difference in how we grew up.

When we were in college, Nancy came with a friend to visit my family in Georgia. At the time, we were just friends, though I wanted it to be more. That evening, we found out my younger sister Katie had caused some problems at school. In typical teenage drama fashion, she got into an argument with my dad. In his frustration, he said to her, “Katie, you’re nothing but a screw-up. You’ve always been a screw-up, and you’ll always be a screw-up.” My sister brushed it off with sarcasm: “Oh gee, thanks, Dad.” That kind of talk was so common in my house that I didn’t even think twice about it.

Nancy, however, was stunned. She later told me she thought, “What kind of dad talks to his daughter like that?” Because Nancy’s dad was the complete opposite—compliments poured out of him constantly. He would greet her with, “Oh, babe,

you're so beautiful. I'm so blessed to have you as my daughter." When Nancy cooked for him, he would rave: "Oh, Nancy, this is amazing. You must give this recipe to your mom—it's better than a restaurant. I'm just amazed."

That difference became a challenge in the early years of our marriage. Nancy was used to constant affirmation, and it didn't come naturally to me. She would cook incredible meals, and I would eat them silently. I'd even go back for seconds without saying a word. Eventually, she asked, "Hey, did you like it?" I'd respond, "Well, I ate it, didn't I? I even had seconds. Doesn't that mean I liked it?" She'd reply, "You know, you could just compliment me." Over time, I learned to intentionally speak the good things I was already thinking.

Words matter. We need to speak them—before it's too late and the opportunity is gone.

Use Your Words Wisely

Say what needs to be said. Say "I love you." Let your wants and needs be known.

Experts say the average person speaks about 15,000 words per day. Add to that nonverbal communication. In fact, studies estimate that only 30% of our communication is words. That leaves 70% conveyed through tone, body language, and facial expressions.

This is why so much drama, hurt, and miscommunication happen in today's world of text messages, emails, and social media posts. Tone and body language are absent, and so much can be lost—or misunderstood.

We've been given the incredible power and responsibility of communication. If you consider the words, tone, body language, facial expressions, and the way we present ourselves, we say far more than we realize.

How we use our daily allotment of 15,000 words impacts others.

Proverbs 18:21 (The Message) says: "Words kill, words give life; they're either poison or fruit—you choose."

You choose. You don't have to let others choose for you. You don't have to let circumstances dictate

your words. You get to decide—will your words spit venom, or will they be a gift that gives life?

Maybe you're like me and words of love don't come easily. Maybe it feels awkward to say them. Maybe you grew up in a family where "I love you" wasn't spoken, it was just understood.

Like the old joke about the husband who said, "I told you I loved you on our wedding day, and if anything changes, I'll let you know."

When Nancy and I married, I had to work on speaking my thoughts aloud, and it's something I still remind myself to do. I tend to live in my head, so I must remember not just to think it, but to say it.

Any men relate to this? She would walk in, dressed beautifully for a night out, and in my head, I'd think, *Wow, I am a blessed man. She's stunning. I'm thankful.* But in that moment, the babysitter would be arriving, the kids would be asking questions, and I would never say it out loud. A few times, I even thought I had said it, only to realize later I hadn't. At the end of the day, I'd ask, "Did I tell you how nice you looked today?"

But we can't just think it—we need to say it.

Some of us may need to course-correct how we speak to those we love. You may have fallen into the habit of not complimenting, not saying “I love you.”

Your words are a gift. Don’t miss the chance to give that gift. Nancy never missed it—she used her words as a gift.

End of a Long Day

After leaving the hospital that evening, I faced the new reality of what I thought would be a six to eight-week journey ahead. I knew I would need help caring for Nancy and the kids. I told Nancy I would call her family and share the update, and also ask for help.

That Sunday evening, I sent a family text to her siblings and parents, telling them we needed to talk. I escaped to our bedroom for privacy so the kids wouldn’t overhear, and I explained the latest situation. I was open and vulnerable, letting them know we had a long road ahead. As we prepared for chemo and radiation, we needed a plan for family members to come at different times. We also needed to figure out what Christmas would look like. I

mentioned that Nancy's close friends also wanted to come and help.

During the conversation, however, some family members began talking about work and responsibilities and how things could fit around vacation plans. My frustration started to rise. I told them to work it out amongst themselves and let me know. I stepped out of the conversation, and they continued planning without me.

Grace Upon Grace

I called Nancy and vented my frustration that asking for help felt like I was inconveniencing people. But Nancy—whose very name means “grace”—extended grace. She said, “They don’t mean anything by it; they’re just trying to figure it out.”

It was then I realized how close I was to breaking. After just three days of navigating my emotions, fears, and concerns for the kids, while communicating with so many people and trying to appear strong for Nancy, I felt the weight crushing in.

Later, I discovered her family was actually debating about who would come first, because they all wanted to be with Nancy. It reminded me how easily we can misread hearts and intentions when we're tired, stressed, and afraid.

That night, I fell asleep quickly from sheer emotional exhaustion. When people asked me later how I was sleeping, I surprised both them and myself by saying, "Actually, well." The verse that came to mind was: *God grants sleep to those He loves*. I felt God's grace carrying me through those days.

As I drifted off, I received one last text from Nancy:

"Hey babe, I'm just checking to make sure Jude had a breathing treatment."

There she was—lying in a hospital bed after just hearing she most likely had an inoperable, cancerous brain tumor—and her heart was still fixed on her children.

CHAPTER 8: IF THIS IS THE END

Monday, November 28, 2022

The alarm went off that morning, but I was already awake—waiting for the day and overwhelmed before it even began. Nancy had been in the hospital for three days at this point. That morning, her older sister Jessie flew in from Ohio early. I had not told Nancy she was coming; instead, I let it be a surprise for her.

My mom helped me prepare the kids for school and get them out the door. The first day back after a week off for Thanksgiving break was always complicated, but this morning carried an even heavier weight as I tried to keep peace in the house. I shared the news of Aunt Jessie's visit as a piece of good news, not a reason to worry.

Levi walked to school, as he had been doing for the past few weeks since transferring from the Christian school to public school. My mom took Jade to school, while Jude stayed home with me. He hadn't been feeling well and was a few days behind on his Humira medication, which was another concern for both Nancy and me.

First thing that morning, Nancy began calling Children's Healthcare of Atlanta. She was able to set an appointment for Jude to receive a dose of Humira, buying us two more weeks to work out the insurance issues.

So now the plan was for my mom to go to the hospital to be with Nancy until Jessie arrived as a surprise, while I drove Jude 50 minutes to the doctor.

On the way, Jude and I had a good conversation. He asked about Mom. He wanted to know if she would lose her hair. I told him it was possible and explained that she would be weak, so we would need to take care of her for a while. I told him the latest plan was that she would have an operation to find out if it was cancer. He worried about what Christmas would be like if Mom was still sick. I reassured him that we would be together and maybe some other family would join us, so it would be different—but still good.

As he talked about Christmas, it gave me the idea of going all out to prepare a great homecoming for Nancy on Wednesday. My men's group had been asking what they could do to help, so I texted them and asked them to come over to hang Christmas

lights, finish decorating the house, and help me clean up. Nancy was coming home on Wednesday—or so I thought.

After Jude's appointment, we grabbed lunch, and he fell asleep on the way home. I was running on adrenaline and used that time to make a few phone calls to friends and pastors. It was a beautiful late-November day, so I texted Nancy to see if she would like to go outside when I got to the hospital. She said she would.

I picked up Jade from school, dropped her off at home, made sure the kids were settled, and then headed to be with Nancy. Her sister Jessie had been there all day. I coordinated with my mom to pick Jessie up later and bring her back to the house so she could rest for the long week ahead.

I asked the nurse for a wheelchair so I could take Nancy outside. On Friday, she had walked into the hospital. Now, on Monday, she was completely paralyzed on her left side and needed a wheelchair. It was a beautiful, sunny day as I pushed her along the sidewalks outside the hospital.

We sat and talked, struggling to believe that this was our reality. Nancy said, *“I think it is cancer.”* I tried to encourage her not to think negatively, reminding her to speak life. She asked, *“Do you think this would have happened if we hadn’t left Illinois?”*

Why do we ask questions like that? When life unravels, even those of us rooted in the Father’s love can wonder if He is upset with us—if He is throwing trials at us because, like Jonah, we’ve run from Him and now must endure the belly of a whale. (I will share more on this later.)

I told her God was not punishing her or us for anything we had done.

Then Nancy spoke words that carried me through the week ahead—through difficult questions, conversations, and ultimately, the hardest decision of my life.

Sitting outside in the sun, nervous yet brave, she said softly but with conviction:

“I never imagined having cancer. If this is the end, let it be the end. I don’t want to fall apart for six months to a year and die in the end. I want my kids to remember me for who I am.”

Nancy was small and petite, but tough. She wasn't afraid of the work or the pain—she simply had courage and trust in the truth that this life is not all there is. Eternity awaits.

At the time, I almost dismissed her words, convinced this wasn't the end. I reminded her of the many challenges we had faced together, how God had always provided a way when there seemed to be none. I wish now that I had slowed down, listened more, and been present with what she was truly sensing.

Her words have replayed in my mind countless times since that day. They weren't said in fear, nor with tears. I don't know if she knew in her spirit what was ahead, but those words gave me the strength to face the hardest decisions to come.

“If this is the end, let it be the end. I don't want to fall apart for six months to two years in front of my kids. I would rather them remember me for who I was and not sick in a bed.”

She spoke with clarity, conviction, and peace.

Later, I pushed Nancy back to her room, and we talked about the days ahead. The next morning,

doctors would perform a biopsy—a small incision behind her ear to insert a needle and remove part of the tumor to determine if it was cancer. The surgeon was confident and spoke as if this would be the simplest step of a long journey ahead.

Even with everything looming, Nancy carried a sense of peace—or at least that's what I perceived. I asked if she wanted me to stay overnight, but she said, *"No, you need a good night's rest for all that is ahead, and the kids need you."*

The plan was for her to come home Wednesday. That evening, I joined my men's group at our house to hang lights and decorate, determined to make it a Christmas wonderland for Nancy's return. Christmas was her favorite time of year. I imagined setting her up in the downstairs bedroom, by the Christmas tree, surrounded by decorations as she went through treatment.

I never imagined she would never come home again, never see the tree we decorated, never see the lights we hung for her.

If I had known that was the last night Nancy would be fully cognitive, I would never have left. But

because I did, she used that time to respond to messages. Her replies were consistent: *"I have peace, but please pray for Damian and the kids."*

Months later, a friend told me his wife had offered to come help, and Nancy replied, *"No, wait. In a few weeks, they will need you."* She was clear: *they will need you, not we will need you.*

That night, she even recorded a video for Facebook—something she never did unless I encouraged her for church promotions.

Nancy's Facebook video:

"Hey everybody, I just wanted to jump on here real quick and just say thank you so much for all the love and concern and care and help that you've shown our family. I feel so loved and I am so thankful to have so many people that care about us. We love you and will keep you updated. Bye."

Did she know the end was near? Did she sense it but not say it?

When I got home, friends had filled the house—bringing lights, food, and willing hands. Nancy's

friend Amanda arrived with a meal and asked if she could visit Nancy. Amanda White was a longtime friend of mine from youth group. Since moving back to Georgia, she and her husband Les had reconnected with us. That evening, while my men's group decorated, Amanda went to see Nancy.

I asked Amanda to write her memories of that night since she was the last person to speak with Nancy while she was fully alert.

Amanda's Experience

I walked into the McCrink house and saw Nancy's sister inside. For a moment, it was startling—they looked so similar. I handed Damian the poinsettia I had brought, and he told me I could go see Nancy. I had been wanting to take communion with her.

They were decorating the tree and FaceTiming Nancy. I peeked in and asked, "What are you doing?" She laughed and said, "I'm just living my best life!" She looked beautiful and lively, as always.

I told her I was coming up immediately. I had prepared prayers to speak over her, things I believed the Lord had given me.

When I arrived at her room, a nurse had just left. Nancy was coming out of the bathroom in sweatpants and a tank top—looking cute as always. She used a walker to get from the bathroom to the bed. It was strange to see her unable to walk, but I helped her get settled under the covers.

I sat on the bed to hug her. At first she was fine, then she began to cry—really cry. I didn't know what to do. I had come ready to pray boldly, not cry. I said something clumsy like, "It's okay, don't cry."

We talked about the kids. I asked, "I know what's going on, but as a mom, what do you want me to do?" She said, "If you go somewhere fun, take the kids."

We spoke briefly about the biopsy and the diagnosis. I asked if I could read my notes and pray. She said, "I'm just going to close my eyes." I held her hand, read, and prayed.

The nurse came back to give Nancy strong IV medication for pain. At first, I didn't think she was in pain, but as the medicine hit her, she almost melted into the bed. She grew heavier, weaker, more sedated.

Afterward, we took communion. It was simple but holy. When it came time for the juice, she whispered, “I think you’re going to have to do it for me,” and I held the cup to her lips.

She grew increasingly tired. I cleaned her room, straightened things up, tucked her in, and prayed again with my hand over her head where the biopsy would be. She leaned into it.

When I left, I said the usual—“We’re praying, we love you.” And she replied, *“Either way, I win.”*

It wasn’t false cheer. It wasn’t resignation. She was too calm and too medicated for pretense. It was simply truth.

“Either way, I win.”

That phrase encapsulates Nancy’s profound hope and resilience. In her final fully conscious moments, her faith in God and the promise of eternity gave her peace in circumstances where most would be overcome by fear.

CHAPTER 9: A TURN FOR THE WORSE

Tuesday, November 29, 2022

When I arrived at the hospital after getting the kids off to school, in plenty of time before the biopsy that was scheduled for 10:30 AM, I found out Nancy had been in intense pain all night and had finally fallen asleep at 5 AM. We felt terrible waking Nancy after such a restless, long night, but it was time to go for the operation. When she woke, I could tell she was different. At the time, I did not know what it was and just assumed she was worried about the surgery and overtired. Her eyes seemed glazed over, and the only thing she kept asking was, "What time is it? What time is it?"

We assumed it was because she knew the surgery was at 10:30 AM and was concerned about that. But there was something different with her at that time that I did not realize in the moment.

The room filled with nurses and physician assistants going over the details of the surgery and confirming her name, birth date, and any previous medical history. The nurse looked at me in shock when I said, "She has no medical history." Nothing—no allergies, each of our babies was born naturally, and no miscarriages. Nancy did not even have one

stretch mark from having three children. She was perfectly healthy at 41 years old.

They gave Nancy medication to help with the anxiety, and she calmed down quickly. We said a prayer together, and they wheeled her off to surgery.

Jessie and I made our way down to the cafeteria to grab something to eat, trying to distract ourselves from the long wait for the surgery. Jessie had been up all night with Nancy and hadn't eaten anything.

As we sat together in the crowded cafeteria, it felt like we finally slowed down enough to start feeling the reality of what we were facing, and it hit us just for a moment. Words came out of my mouth that my mind had not even processed, and I said, "This does not look good; I don't think she is going to make it." This was the first time I spoke aloud the fear I had suppressed for the last few days. Jessie agreed, and we both cried together as we tried to finish our meal. We seemed to walk back up to the waiting room in a daze as we waited for Nancy to come out of surgery.

Finally, they said Nancy was out of surgery, everything had gone as planned, and she was now in ICU to stay overnight for recovery. They only

allowed one of us in ICU, so Jessie went home to shower and rest after two very long days, while I went to be with Nancy.

The anesthesia had taken a toll on Nancy's small body. She was wiped out and very disoriented, yet she still gave me a smile, a look of love, and asked again, "What time is it?" But this time, she was unable to talk, so she kept grasping for my wrist and pointing at it. I knew she was asking what time it was.

I told her she had already had the surgery and that everything went well. I joked that the doctor even did a good job cutting her hair. After a few moments awake, she couldn't keep her eyes open any longer and fell asleep. Moments later, the physician's assistant called me to tell me that it was malignant (cancerous) and that they were sending it off to different labs to determine the makeup of the cells so they could make the best plan of attack with both chemo and radiation.

It was true—Nancy had a cancerous brain tumor. She had said on Monday night that she believed it was cancer, and here we were, 24 hours later, with the confirmation that it was not an "if" or "might be" but a fact. The day before, I had been talking with

her about the possibility of this being true, and now I was receiving this information alone while she was in recovery. I stayed with Nancy a little longer, trying to wrap my head around the information I had just received. Nancy couldn't keep her eyes open, so I helped the nurse make her comfortable. Then I slipped out to go home and share the news with the kids.

On the drive home, my mind raced with how to tell the kids, who loved their mom dearly, that she had cancer. My confidence in saying everything would be OK was not as strong as it had been on Friday night.

I arrived home, where my mom and Nancy's sister Jessie were waiting. I called the kids down to sit on the couch so we could talk. I said, "The good news is Mom had the surgery today, and everything went well, just as the doctor had planned. The bad news is that they did find out it is cancer, but the good news is that now we know why Mom has not been feeling good, and they can start the treatment to get her better." I told the kids I would always tell them the truth and that if they had any questions, I would answer them.

We all had dinner together. At this time, meals were being delivered every day from people in our lives, which made one part of our lives simpler. I said goodnight to the kids, planning to stay in the hospital that night by Nancy's side. I headed back up to my second home—the hospital. By then, my older brother Jesse was driving down from North Carolina, and Nancy's parents, her sister Emily, and her brother Jordan were driving down from Ohio to be with us.

When I returned to the hospital a little over an hour later, there seemed to be a sense of panic in the room. Before I had left earlier, I helped the nurses move Nancy to a reclining chair. Now she was back in bed, and I could see the nurses were concerned. They were trying to wake Nancy up and get her to talk. Shortly after I arrived, a meal was delivered to her room, and that's when it hit me—something wasn't right. Why would they plan for her to eat a meal when she couldn't even open her eyes?

I helped the nurses wake her up, and every 40 minutes, they would do a cognitive test—the same one they had done since discovering her tumor.

These tests were so simple that, through the weekend and on Monday, Nancy would laugh at them. We both thought it was strange they kept doing these easy tests. Now, she was struggling to tell the difference between a hammock and a flower. Because she was so out of it, they ordered an EKG to determine if she was having a seizure.

I was breaking down, thinking I had made a terrible choice in allowing the biopsy. It appeared the woman I loved now had brain damage, and I would have to care for her for the rest of her life. The fear of the unknown future can be devastating.

FEAR STEALS YOUR FUTURE HOPE

This was not the first time my fear of the unknown tried to steal my hope for the future. In 2005, we had been married for two years and were serving as young adult pastors at a church that had a strong missions focus. Often, missionaries would come and share, and the church's generosity in giving above and beyond to missions was incredible. We were in this place of tension—feeling ourselves settle into life and enjoying it while also sensing a call to

missions. After much prayer and conversation, we could not escape the call.

Nancy imagined raising our children on the mission field and helping serve the most vulnerable—orphans and abandoned children. So, in August 2005, we resigned from our position at the church to become missionaries to Mozambique, Africa.

I remember people thinking we were reckless, as we resigned before even being approved by the missions board. For those who are unaware, the process of becoming a missionary is a long one. First, you must be approved by the mission-sending agency. Then, you must raise funds, acquire visas, and, in our case, spend a year learning the language. This was the journey ahead of us in our mid-twenties. It was an adventure, and Nancy was so excited. She was set on the mission, even when people tried to talk us out of it and questioned our decision.

While raising funds, which included speaking at 130 churches in 15 months, Nancy became pregnant and gave birth to Levi. She was one of the happiest, most proud moms in the world. When Levi

was around five months old, we moved to Portugal to learn the language, and we absolutely loved it there. A few months later, Nancy became pregnant with Jade. What an adventure—and what a story—that Jade was born in Portugal.

After 15 months of preparation in the U.S. with training and fundraising, and 14 months in Portugal learning the language, we were finally on our way to Mozambique. We arrived there for the first time—not to visit, but to live. I still remember the looks we got as we deboarded the plane with a 24-month-old and a 2-month-old baby. It felt as though people were thinking, *Are you sure this is your flight?*

When most people visit Africa for the first time, they are heartbroken by the poverty and moved to compassion and care like they have never experienced before. As for me, I did not feel that way. Here I was with my young family in Mozambique, not to visit but to live. I went into survival mode and kept thinking:

How are we going to do this?

How are we going to live here?

How are we going to survive?

It is incredible how much we can focus on self-preservation and comfort, even when surrounded by so many in great need. The truth was, I had a missions budget that allowed me to rent a safe, clean house for my family. I had money to buy food. And, if things got bad enough, I could fly us back home to safety. Our missions experience was very different from that of the missionaries of the early modern mission movement in the 1800s. Many of them packed all their belongings in a coffin as they boarded a ship. There was no return plan, no guarantee of safety. They were going to give their lives for the sake of the Gospel.

I am thankful for strong mission agencies that care for their missionary families. I am grateful we were missionaries with a healthy budget, but even with all of that in place, I was shocked at my selfish desire for comfort and protection. After about six weeks, we finally found a clean and safe place to call home, and our container, which had been shipped across the Atlantic, arrived. Oh, the joy of that day—familiar things arriving in a foreign land. The excitement Nancy had that day is one I will never forget.

Moving to a foreign country takes time to learn and adjust. Much of what you thought it would be like turns out very different. We imagined Nancy going with the kids to sit under a mango tree, conversing with the local women about Jesus. But perception and reality were not the same. We had enough language skills to get by in conversation, but building deep, meaningful relationships required the next level of fluency. And even as we improved, Mozambique's heart language was not Portuguese but Tsonga, a regional African dialect.

Just as in grief—there is a language you cannot know until you experience it and immerse yourself in it. As a pastor, I had been called to hospitals late at night when someone's loved one was dying. I officiated funerals. But until you are immersed in loss and grief, you are like a foreigner trying your best to speak a language you studied in a book but are not fluent in yourself.

As I reflected on my pastoral moments before experiencing the full weight of grief, I questioned the words I used. I wondered how I truly held grief with those walking through the shadow of death in those moments.

During those first months in Africa, as we adjusted to our new life, Nancy was fully occupied with raising Levi and Jade. She spent hours every day playing with them—getting down on the floor right beside them. Years later, we would comment that our kids weren't very good at playing by themselves and always wanted one of us to play with them. Nancy would joke, "I think I broke them when they were little by playing with them too much."

Nancy's life there was far more isolated than mine—and more than either of us expected. Most days, I was out in the bustling life of urban Africa, helping complete construction on an extension Bible school, meeting with local pastors, and connecting with other missionaries. By the weekend, I wanted to relax at home, but Nancy was eager to get out of the house she felt trapped in all week.

Because of this isolation, we were oblivious to Levi's delays in developmental milestones. We noticed he had stopped speaking, but in our naivety, we thought it was due to culture shock or because we were constantly speaking Portuguese with him and with the helpers around the house. It wasn't until Nancy's parents visited and had the boldness to

point out what they saw that we realized something significant was going on.

After Nancy's parents returned to the States, we sought help for Levi. It was difficult. At the time, Mozambique was the third poorest country in Africa, and resources for children with developmental delays were nearly nonexistent. We found the only speech and occupational therapist in the city and met with her once or twice a week until she recommended that we schedule an appointment with a pediatric neurologist in Cape Town, South Africa.

We reached out to the doctor in February, and the first available date was in May. Leading up to that appointment, I struggled to stay present in our work, knowing what was ahead for Levi. On one of our visits to South Africa for doctors, dentists, and groceries, we met a missionary couple who lived north of us in Xai Xai. In April, a month before the appointment, we traveled to attend a baptism service with one of the churches we were working with and then visited this new missionary family. They had a little boy close to Levi's age. Over those

24 hours with them, Levi's delays became undeniable to me.

On the two-hour drive home, Nancy and I talked and prayed as the kids slept in the backseat. In that moment, I knew change was coming. I just had a knowing that what we had planned and just begun working toward was about to change. I grabbed Nancy's hand and said, "We are returning home to the States." Nancy was shocked at my statement and resolve. Until then, I don't believe she had allowed herself to acknowledge the severity of what we were facing. In shock, she said, "Really! Are you sure?" Nancy squeezed my hand and said, "This is so unlike you, but I trust you." We both shed tears and agreed it was best to move forward with the plan to see the pediatric neurologist in Cape Town.

If you ever have the opportunity to visit Cape Town, South Africa, do it. It is one of the most beautiful places we have ever seen. Our purpose was not sightseeing but answers. Missionaries met us at the airport, showed us around, and gave us pointers for our time there. We settled into a rental on the mountainside, overlooking the ocean. From

our window, we could see waves crashing against the shore—it was breathtaking.

The next day, we had our hospital appointments. Levi was hooked to an EKG to test brain activity. The day was a blur, and before we knew it, we were sitting with the pediatric neurologist. She was kind but very direct. After just a five-minute evaluation, she looked at us and said, “Your son has autism. You need to go home and give him the help he needs. If you don’t, he will withdraw further into himself, and you will lose your son.”

Her honesty and bluntness were exactly what we needed.

As missionaries, we felt a pressure to push through, have faith, and believe God would heal Levi so we could continue our work. We also felt obligated to the many churches and individuals who had supported us for nearly three years. Yet, those words—*If you don’t, you will lose your son*—rang louder than anything else.

Leaving that appointment, the strongest emotion I remember was fear of the future. You imagine what your family will be and dream of what the future looks

like. At that moment, I couldn't see the future with Levi. I feared he would never talk. I feared what our relationship as father and son would look like. Fear of the unknown robbed me of hope. We were two young parents on the other side of the world, and everything we knew was shaken.

I was angry with God. I reminded Him that we were in Africa to spread His Good News. I felt let down. *Wasn't He obligated to take care of His missionaries?*

After a few days, we returned to Mozambique. On the way home, the anger and frustration faded. Even though the road ahead was unknown, we had each other. God had given Levi the most attentive mother anyone could ask for. Nancy prayed faithfully but also worked fearlessly to help Levi communicate.

As we began preparing to return to the States, the verse that kept coming to mind was James 2:14: *"What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works?"*

I kept hearing in my heart, *Faith without works is dead*. Yes, we had faith to see Levi healed in a moment, but we also had work to do until that day.

To update you—after returning to the States, Levi started early education and intervention. Combined with prayer and the influence of living near cousins, this helped pull him out. Levi began speaking about six months into intervention. Today, he is fully verbal, mainstreamed into all his classes in high school, and even holds a job at a fast-food restaurant.

Now, here in another hospital in 2022, I once again faced a moment where I couldn't see the future. I couldn't imagine life without Nancy. I couldn't imagine her not being fully alive and active as she always had been. Fear was overwhelming me in that hospital room.

I called Nancy's friend Kim, a nurse, to update her. She reassured me that Nancy had been through a lot that day and was on heavy medication. She reminded me that Nancy only ever took the occasional ibuprofen and was a petite little thing. That helped me calm down. It also helped that Nancy was sleeping peacefully, even with the EKG machine hooked up. I remember taking a photo of her because—even after brain surgery—she still looked beautiful.

After a couple of hours, my older brother Jesse arrived at the hospital. Something about seeing family in a moment of great distress allows you to finally break down. And I did—right there in the ICU waiting room with my brother. I told him I thought Nancy might be brain-dead. The words barely left my mouth before I broke down crying. After a few moments of release, I brought Jesse back to see Nancy. He was kind and encouraging, exactly what I needed at that moment.

Later, Jesse left to stay at a friend's house, and I remained with Nancy overnight. After a few hours, Nancy stirred and wanted something to drink. That simple act gave me hope again that all was not lost.

It was well past visiting hours when, to my shock, Nancy's parents, brother, and sister arrived. Somehow, they had convinced hospital staff to let all four of them into the ICU.

They entered with courage, trying to suppress their emotions while encouraging Nancy. Both her father and brother had been pastors for years and were no strangers to hospital visits, yet when it's your own daughter lying there, it's different. Each one took time to hold her hand and encourage her

with soft, loving words. With every family member who came, the reality of what we were facing sank deeper.

Nancy's family did not stay long, as it was late and the staff had already shown grace by allowing them in. They were also exhausted from their 12-hour drive from Ohio. Jessie was waiting at our house to welcome them and make sleeping arrangements.

I stayed the night in the ICU, somehow falling asleep to the beeping machines and flashing lights. Exhaustion from the long day, the tears, and the emotions finally overcame me, and I managed to get a few hours of sleep on the pull-out hospital bed.

CHAPTER 10: LIFE DOES NOT GO AS WE BELIEVE IT WILL

Wednesday, November 30, 2022

It was a long night of recovery. All of the meds that Nancy was on really knocked her out, along with the trauma of the biopsy and the inflammation. They ran an EEG overnight to detect any signs of seizure activity. Thankfully, no seizures were detected. They also ran an MRI and CT post-surgery. The neurologist came in that morning and said the scans looked good and there were no complications from the brain biopsy. Nancy had started to awake a little more, but it was a fight to keep her eyes open. At this point, her left side had very little feeling, and she could not move any of that side. Before long, we were transferred out of the ICU and back to the eighth floor, where she had been prior to the surgery.

After the move upstairs, I had some time alone with Nancy as the rest of the family was busy doing other things. I sat next to her and held her hand. I told her that the biopsy went well, and the doctor did as he promised and did not cut too much of her hair.

And I said it without warning. “The tumor is cancerous.”

Nancy responded almost as a child, “I have cancer?” Even though she had suspected that it was cancer, the reality of that news must have been a shock. Yet she just said, “Wow, I can’t believe it.” I told her that people had been responding to the GoFundMe page that our friends set up for us. I tried to assure myself and her that God had this and that He had prepared us for it. I told her I would focus on caring for her. I reminded her and myself that somehow God ordained our steps to be in Georgia after we had just sold a home and we had a decent savings account for the first time in our lives. The fact that my mom was currently living with us was going to be a blessing. At that moment, it seemed as though we were equipped to walk through this with a victory.

Yet victory does not always look like we think it will here on earth, but as believers, we are guaranteed victory one day.

Remember, I was telling you about my dad and his victory and defeat with alcohol? For years, he would seem to be walking in freedom. For a season,

alcohol did not have control over his life. Yet, over time, because of the stress of life, he would hit a low point and turn to drink in solitude. I look back and think what shame he must have carried. I believe the pressure of running his own business and having money problems brought added shame and disappointment. Instead of turning to others for help and strength, he turned to alcohol again and again. Each time it got worse and worse. The gaps between falling off the wagon got closer and closer until it hit a breaking point.

It was in the first year of our marriage that it all came to a place where it could no longer be ignored. All of my family had planned a vacation together in Orlando. It was all scheduled and planned well in advance, and at the last minute, my dad said that he couldn't go because of work and that he needed to finish a project. The reality was that he didn't make this choice because of work; he chose not to go on the family vacation to stay home and drink by himself.

This was the breaking point for my mom, and after 36 years of marriage, my mom couldn't take it anymore. She separated from him soon after she

returned from that trip. Over the next few years, things went from bad to worse. He soon lost his business and went bankrupt for the second time in his life. He lost the house that we grew up in. He was left with absolutely no options, and when he was at that lowest point, I reached out to him. We flew him up to Chicago to stay with us so we could get him into a rehabilitation program, a Christ-centered one called Teen Challenge.

I will never forget the day I took him to enter the program. It was as though the roles of father and son were reversed. He was trying to convince me that he was ok, that he did not need to go, and that he could be helpful to us as we had just had our first baby. I might have given in to the pressure of that moment if I had not had Nancy telling me there was no way he could stay there and help with Levi. In fact, just a few nights before, Levi had woken up in the night because he was still nursing in the night. Nancy heard him cry and stop. After some time, she could not sleep and went to check on him. In the middle of the night, she found my dad holding him, bouncing him up and down with the TV, and Levi facing the TV. For those who know anything about sleep

training, this is not the middle-of-the-night stimulation you want for a baby.

Here I was, dropping my dad off at a rehabilitation center with him trying to convince me the whole drive that it was not necessary. During his time at Teen Challenge, I would start to see these glimpses of life change in him. I really believed he was going to make it and that change was possible.

After graduating from the program and living in Chicago for a while before he returned to Georgia to live close to family, it was about the same time Nancy and I had returned to Chicago area from living in Mozambique, Africa. Unfortunately, it did not take long when he returned to Georgia that the addiction came back in full force. Over time, even though he just lived a few miles away from my siblings, the relationships with Dad were almost nonexistent because none of us could take the rollercoaster anymore.

In October 2010, I was on staff at a church serving as the youth pastor, and the lead pastor invited me to join him in Atlanta for a pastor's conference. I skipped out on one of the evening sessions to visit family, and after I left my brother's

house, I stopped by to see my dad. I drove up to the apartment complex, but I didn't go in. I said to myself, "You know what? It's just not worth it. I can't do this again." I drove away, and it was one of the biggest mistakes in my life because three weeks later, my brother called me and said, "Dad died. He drank himself to death as he passed out and died from asphyxiation." They believe he was dead in the apartment for three days before anyone knew.

When I got the call, we loaded up the minivan and drove from Illinois to Georgia that day. As we prepared for the funeral, my brothers and I had to do the chore of cleaning out his apartment. There, we found his journals, where he cried out to God to set him free. It was hard to read about his struggle to want to be free from the power of addiction in his life. It was heartbreaking to read about his feelings of disappointment in himself. He even shared that he struggled with being a burden to me.

There is something about the death of a loved one that causes you to evaluate your life, your purpose, and what you are living for. As a pastor who has officiated more than a few funerals, I have always leaned into encouraging those there to see

life as a gift and not to waste it. Often, people make new resolutions in those moments following a funeral, but honestly, I don't know how many of them really follow through with it a few months later. I understand that life keeps moving forward, and change is difficult.

As for me, my father's struggle and death from addiction caused me to see people's addictions and hang-ups more through the lens of grace. Soon after his death, I started wrestling with what was next for me and Nancy in ministry. I enjoyed the role at the church but felt myself dreaming about speaking to adults and stepping out in faith to lead a church. Occasionally, I would bring it up to Nancy, but she, in many ways, was just getting settled into the area we had been living in. The school was great at helping Levi with his delays, and he was making so much progress that we decided it was time to have another baby. Nancy loved living close to her two sisters, and the cousins were a great help in pulling Levi out of his world and into playing with them. I kept putting it off and just learning and enjoying the season we were in, which was difficult for a

“visionary faith junky,” as Nancy would call me when I would share my visions of what we could do.

By the end of September 2011, it was clear that God was calling us out to something new. I believe that at times when we are reluctant to step out into what is next, God seems to give us a push and make us uncomfortable where we are so we cannot stay there any longer. That was the case for me. Jude was just about three weeks old when I came home from a conference I had attended with the pastors of the church I was on staff with, and I told Nancy I thought a change was coming. Without going into too many details from that trip, it was clear that the church was heading in a direction I was uncomfortable with. The lead pastor even picked up on my sense of reservation and had a one-on-one meeting with me. After an intense conversation, he said very plainly, “If you don’t like where we are today, you won’t like where we are going,” which was very accurate. When I shared with Nancy that I couldn’t work there anymore, she asked if I could make it work a little longer as she was overwhelmed with the thought of change with now three kids under the age of six. My response was if I stayed, it would

change who I was and what my convictions were. So, there we were again, praying and trying to discover what God had next for us. I started applying for lead pastor roles at churches in Illinois so we could stay at least driving distance of Nancy's sisters.

Two of the churches I applied to reached out for an interview with the board. It was such a weird feeling, but I could not shake the sense that I was looking for a job, for comfort, but not following a calling. So that is what I told the board members and turned down the interviews. We were coming down to the end of our transition time at the current church I was working at, and I was turning down interviews. Crazy, right? One night, after we got the kids in bed, we talked and prayed together when Nancy turned one of my sermons on me. Just a few months before, I preached at a church in the area, and my message was in Hebrews 11:1, "Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see."

In the message, I posed the question: What would you do if you truly believed God was with you? If money was not an issue, if your current

circumstances were not an issue, if your education or lack of experience was not an issue, what would you do?

So that night, Nancy asked me, “What would you do if you truly believed God was with you?”

Without hesitation, I said, “I would plant a church here in this community that has welcomed us and helped Levi so much.” The words even shocked me as they came out of my mouth. Nancy, who at that time had her own doubts about how we would do it, said, “Ok, let’s do it.”

That was Nancy. She would wrestle with God in prayer about what to do, just as she did with choosing me, but once she had her answer and clarity, she did not waver. She was all in. That started one of the most faith-filled seasons of our lives. I had been reading about church planting, but I still did not know how we would do it.

How would we raise the money?

How would we make it ourselves financially?

As missionaries and as staff pastors, we always had just enough. Sorry, Dave Ramsey, but on our budget, it was impossible to have six months of living

expenses in savings. When my dad died, we inherited \$5,000, which we put into savings, believing it would help us to buy a house one day. We were now using those funds to help us launch the new church.

After leaving the staff position, I started painting houses again, a skill my dad had taught me. I started asking churches to support our vision of planting a new church. We started having interest meetings in our house and attended church plant training.

God provided in so many ways during that season. At one point, we were tight on money, and our rent was coming up when a young teenage girl who was in our youth group sent us a card with a check for the exact amount of our rent. She told us that she had an inheritance and felt God tell her to give to us. As we were planning our public launch for Sunday gatherings, a local businessman offered to pay the rent of our facility at the local high school for the entire first year. God connected us with our city so we could serve with them. He connected us with amazing people who served on the team to help get the church going. During this time, I saw Nancy grow so much in her gifting of hospitality and loving people

where they were. Not that it was not hard and stretching for her.

Here is something she wrote in her journal, November 2013, 11 months into the church launch.

Hello Father. Tonight, I am sitting alone in my bed at 8:45pm while Damian is hosting a guy's football night. My sheets are clean, the house is in order, and my kids are all asleep. Sigh. It feels good to have some alone time. This is great, but it wears on me socially. I've talked more in the last year than in my 32 years of existence. Lord, would you help me to balance? Balance myself, us, my kids, my husband, my friends but also this role of Pastor's wife. We had a hard time last week with a family. It made me want to run away. I hated how the situation consumed my thoughts and our conversations for a week or two. Lord, we are so young I feel to carry such a responsibility. Would you help me to view this as "fun" again? I want and desire to be attractive to the world full of love and passion. Not a life where I am looking for an out.

Reading her journal makes me wonder how and when I will ever be able to step out in big faith steps again without her by my side.

CHAPTER 11: WALKING DOWN THREE ROADS

Thursday, Dec. 1, 2022

Waiting in the space between what has been, and the unknown future is one of the most frustrating experiences. Combined with the shock and emotion of the diagnosis, your mind spins, and you feel as though you are stuck in a bad dream you can't wake up from.

As one day slowly became another, we did not see much progress with Nancy's alertness. I comforted myself with the idea that it was a result of all the medication she was on because she was rarely ever sick and only took Ibuprofen occasionally. Nancy was a petite girl and was on a steroid to manage inflammation in the brain that the tumor was causing. She was also on an anti-seizure medication even though the EEG showed that she had not had any seizure activity. This is standard medical protocol after a brain biopsy to prevent any seizures. Plus, she was on strong pain medication. I kept believing and even asking if they would slowly wean her off them and her alertness would improve

so we could talk again. How I longed to hear her speak to me and to the kids, but things did not progress as I had hoped. Instead, they seemed to be getting worse and worse.

This was the first day I heard the word I had never heard before and one I would never forget—Glioblastoma Multiforme. Glioblastoma Multiforme (GBM) is a fast-growing and aggressive cancerous brain tumor.

Or as Dr. Lee Warren calls it in his book, “I Have Seen the End of You.”

Glioblastoma multiforme. Grade IV astrocytoma, malignant glioma (GBM). This tumor goes by a lot of names, but they're just aliases, a.k.a.s for what ought to be called the brain assassin. A stone-cold killer. Takes your mind long before it takes you. GBM is pretty much the most malignant, mutated, destructive form of human cancer.

I was unaware of the severity of this diagnosis or the fact not many make it past 18 months with this assassin inside of them. When they told me it was GBM, I honestly don't remember if they told me the seriousness of what we were facing or if I was

blinded by my hopeful, positive perspective. Never did I think this killer would work so quickly.

They sent in an oncologist to discuss an aggressive treatment regimen involving chemotherapy and radiation. They told us they could start making plans, but they had to wait for molecular testing to be done on the biopsy first so they could make a chemotherapy cocktail that would be most effective for taking this tumor out.

I kept asking if there was any way to take this nasty thing out of her. They told me that the possibility of "resection" (brain surgery to remove the tumor) was not possible. The tumor was located in the middle of the brain and crossed the midline—meaning it involved both the left and right sides of the brain. Surgery risks damaging the communication between the right and left sides of the brain. And I just could not imagine putting chemo into Nancy's body as she was already so weak from all that she had already gone through. I wanted to get a second opinion.

Emory University Hospital in Atlanta has much more experience with brain surgery and has a comprehensive brain tumor program, so I reached

out to transfer Nancy there. My cousin, who works at Emory, made an introduction for us to one of the top brain surgeons in the Southeast.

Later that afternoon, after I had been at the hospital all day talking with the neurologist, radiologist, and oncologist, I headed home to rest a little and talk with the kids. I know the kids were very confused and worried about what was happening. I called them all up to our bedroom to talk, as our house felt like a hotel with all the family in town. We sat on my bed, and I told them again that I would always be honest with them about what I knew was going on. Jude said, "Why are you always gone all day at the hospital? I feel like no one is taking care of us." I told him, "You know when you go to the doctor's office and have to wait a long time for the doctor to come in because he is seeing other people?" He shook his head, "Yes." I said, "Well, I have to wait on many different doctors, and they only want to talk to me about how to help Mom. And I am trying to do all I can do to help Mom and get her home." I said, "Right now, it is like we are walking down three roads simultaneously. The first road is that we are praying for God to remove this tumor.

The second road is a doctor cuts it out and throws it in the garage. The third road is mom has chemotherapy and radiation, which means she will be sick and maybe lose her hair, and we will take care of her.” We all agreed that we wanted Road 1 or 2 the most.

Waiting on God, waiting on what is next, is a lot like walking down three roads at the same time. One road is that God will show up and do something miraculous in your situation. It could be the healing you are waiting for, a dream job that comes out of nowhere, or the relationship you have been praying for finally becomes a reality. This road is where the God of the universe steps in and makes a way that is clear; as if we hear, “This is the way to walk in it.”

Road two is that maybe you are trusting God, but you are working hard on your connections and networking. You know that God can show up at any moment, but you also know that many times, He works in and through other people around you. The first pastor I ever worked for said, “On the door of opportunity is the word push.” Sometimes, you must push some doors open in the area of jobs, relationships, and, yes, even healing.

The third road is the one most of us don't like to take. It is the road of hard, painful work. This one takes and builds both character and resilience. Sometimes, this looks like not finding a job but starting a business for yourself, doing the hard work, and learning the skills needed to reach the goals you want to reach. It could mean changing your eating habits and adding an exercise routine to your life. In the area of relationships, it could look like doing the work so you like who you are before you find someone else to like you.

Whatever road you are on, or if you are like I was walking down all three roads simultaneously, it takes waiting and trusting that what you are facing today will not be forever. The struggle today is not going to last forever; it is temporary. I am not talking about when we go to heaven or when Jesus returns; I am talking about here on this side of eternity, change will come, healing will happen, and an opportunity will present itself.

The challenge is staying hopeful in the everyday struggle and finding the strength to keep trusting and believing that God has good plans for your life. For those who have suffered greatly, I know how hard it

can be to keep holding on to hope when it feels like each day has a new challenge or the waves of grief don't stop coming. Even as I write this, I am torn between what I am feeling and experiencing in this season of renewed grief and heaviness of being a single parent compared to what I know is true. The truth is this life is just a vapor, that what I am facing today will pass, that God's grace is sufficient for me and that His mercies are new every morning. I know these promises and many more are true even when I don't feel it. Even when I have felt like the waiting season has been more than I can handle.

Thursday, December 1, 2022 ended with an email correspondence from one of the Southeast's best neurosurgeons at Emory Hospital. My cousin's connection had come through.

We were walking all three roads, and this one was leading us to hope and answers.

CHAPTER 12: WAITING

Friday, December 2, 2022

Nancy had been at Northside Hospital for a week now. By mid-morning that Friday, I received an email from the neurosurgeon at Emory University Hospital—the one we had been put in contact with—saying he agreed to take Nancy’s case! We believed this was an answer to prayer and thanked God for making this connection and giving us His favor. We started the transfer process with Northside Hospital and were told they were waiting for a bed at Emory to become available. At this time, Nancy was a tiny bit more alert than the day before but still very sleepy and remained on a great deal of medication. While she had short moments of being awake, she was still sleeping much of the time because of the severe inflammation surrounding the tumor.

The next few days seemed like a blur, similar to those years of married life when there is not a lot of change. You know that time when you can hardly differentiate one year from the next in your memory. Over our ten years at River City Church, we built some of our greatest and strongest friendships; we

truly had a community of believers. We were not a big church, but we were big in heart. We served our local towns, and people often assumed River City was a larger church because of how many would show up to serve and the impact we made with a modest budget. As a church, we saw many come to Christ and many others find genuine Christian community for the first time. We baptized many (including my kids). I officiated weddings and funerals, and we walked with couples through some of the most challenging seasons of their lives. It was a wonderful time in our lives, except for the cold—we were not made for those long, frigid winters.

Those years of living in the same place with the same annual rhythms became rich memory-building years for my kids. Yet Nancy and I both carried a deep sense of adventure and often wondered what else there was to experience or what might be next for us. I know many pastors and church planters who can put their heads down and work for ten-plus years without looking left or right or even considering other opportunities. Not us. We were content, thankful, and fully enjoyed our time in the Chicago suburbs, but we still carried an unsettling sense that this was

not all we were meant to do. I often said this was not the last chapter of our book. Much of that came from the missionary calling on our lives—a calling that leaves you feeling like you are never truly home anywhere. When you're on the field, you miss home, but when you're home, you feel unsettled and out of place.

Throughout our ten years at River City Church, we wrestled with whether we were still supposed to be there. This was especially true in 2017, when I had the opportunity to return to Mozambique, Africa, for two weeks. I was shocked at how quickly the language returned to me and how naturally my heart reconnected to the needs of the ministry there. Since leaving in 2009, Maputo—the capital city—had developed immensely, and I could envision my family adapting to life there far more comfortably.

Within months of that trip, we had missionaries visit the church. Because I had just returned from Africa, I went all out and tried to give the congregation a true African church experience that Sunday. At River City Church, whenever missionaries visited, we would invite them to our home or to one of our elders' homes. We shared

meals, listened to their challenges, and concluded with significant time in prayer. These were remarkable moments—Holy Spirit-filled gatherings where prophetic words frequently flowed. There were times when missionaries were wrestling with whether they should return to the field, and through prayer, they found clarity and confirmation.

One of my favorite memories was when Tom and Jenni visited and shared at church. After service, we gathered for a meal at one of our elder's homes—Marc and Kim. Tom and Jenni had previously served a term in North Africa and were now reconnecting with churches. They were in their thirties and did not have children because Jenni had battled leukemia when she was younger, and they believed children were not in the plans for them. About a month before their visit, I spoke with Tom, who told me that nearly every church they visited asked them when they would have children. He laughed it off, saying they were used to the question, but I sensed it was uncomfortable for them.

That Sunday, as soon as we stepped into Marc and Kim's house, Marc pulled me aside and said he kept sensing "birth, baby, new life" over them. Trying

to be sensitive—and honestly not very full of faith—I cautioned him, saying, “Don’t mention anything about a baby. That’s a sensitive topic. They can’t have kids, and every church they visit asks them about it.” Marc replied, “Okay, maybe it’s symbolic—like birthing a new ministry.” We moved on with lunch, but during the prayer time, Marc and others couldn’t hold back. They continued praying and sensing that God would give them a child. They even joked about how I told them not to say anything, yet they felt compelled anyway.

Less than a month later, Jenni went to the doctor because she wasn’t feeling well. The doctor asked if she had taken a pregnancy test. She laughed—she had been told she couldn’t become pregnant. But she took the test there in the office and discovered that God had indeed spoken during that prayer meeting. She was pregnant, and most likely had already been pregnant the day we prayed. This gives you a glimpse of how extraordinary and joy-filled those moments were.

Another Sunday, Matt and Andrea—missionaries to Mozambique—were with us for what we called Africa Sunday. We hosted them at our home

afterward along with the elders. While praying for them, Kim (Nancy's best friend) suddenly said, "Damian, I sense you still have a call and desire to return to Africa." Unexpectedly, I burst into tears. I was shocked at my own reaction. It was a strange moment—standing there among the elders and staff of the church we planted, yet sensing God might be calling us out. And it wasn't something revealed privately to Nancy and me; others were sensing it too.

Later that night, after everyone had left and the kids were in bed, we talked with the missionaries staying with us about what all of this might mean. They told us they had planned to ask us if we would consider moving back to Maputo to plant a Western-style church in the heart of the fast-growing capital. It felt like, "God, is this what You are doing? Did You bring us back to the U.S. to learn how to plant a Western-style church so we could return and do the same in Africa?" It seemed to place a beautiful bow of redemption on our story. Isn't that what we all long for? A sense of redemption—purpose woven into our pain and disappointments.

We spent the next month praying, talking, and making calls with missionaries in Mozambique about the what, when, and how. Yet, even after all the conversations, we did not feel the peace needed to move forward. What it did do, however, was force us to acknowledge that one day we would be leaving the church we started. And if that were true, we needed to prepare for a healthy transition. From that point on, we focused on the work already in front of us but held loosely the knowing that someday God would move us to what came next. For that moment, we were simply to wait. Waiting on the unknown is difficult because you don't know what you're waiting for. You sense something coming but have no idea what it will look like.

Just as we were waiting again on November 30, 2022—we had been told the tumor was, in fact, cancer—but now we had to wait as the biopsy was sent off to determine the exact form, which would determine the best strategy to fight it.

CHAPTER 13: LIVING WITH ETERNITY IN MIND

Saturday, Dec. 3, 2022

Today was a frustrating day. At this point, with the stress of having a house full of people and everyone feeling worn down by the lack of progress with Nancy, the whole family felt the need to advocate for her. But as her husband, that responsibility ultimately rested on me. It was difficult to get any updates on how to help her, and we were simply waiting for the many medications she needed. Nancy had barely eaten anything other than a few bites of Jell-O and a few sips of broth since the biopsy on Tuesday morning. She couldn't stay awake. She was a petite woman, and we felt she was on too much medication. We certainly did not want her to be in pain, but we wanted them to limit the narcotics unless she expressed pain that was not managed by Tylenol.

After advocating for her, they placed a temporary feeding tube in her nose to administer food while we waited for her to be awake for longer stretches of time. She continued to have visits from Physical

Therapy and Occupational Therapy to prevent bed sores and help her keep her muscles active. She had been so sleepy that those visits seemed almost pointless.

Along with the hospital frustration, I constantly felt torn between staying by Nancy's side and being with my kids, who were worried and confused by everything unfolding. Little did I know the focus of my life and ministry was about to change, as I was on my way to becoming a single parent—something I never imagined.

After Nancy passed, I laid down the pastor hat. My focus became smaller than ever, yet possibly the most significant it has ever been. My calling is to do everything I can to aim my three arrows—just as Psalm 127 calls them—toward Heaven. Chances are I will arrive there before they do, but I must do everything I can in this life to help them trust God again.

Psalm 127:3–5 (NKJV)

Children are a heritage from the Lord,
offspring a reward from Him.

Like arrows in the hands of a warrior

are children born in one's youth.

Blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them.

They will not be put to shame when they contend with their opponents in court.

If you have a child, you have been rewarded.

Verse 3: Children are a heritage from the Lord, offspring a reward from Him.

It says kids are like arrows. Have you ever thought of your kids like arrows? Have you ever thought of yourself as an archer?

Come on—you know you have. Why else do we have so many archer heroes? Robin Hood, Green Arrow, Katniss, Merida, Legolas, and Hawkeye.

The way Solomon uses this imagery is incredible. He makes every home the home of a warrior; every home has an archer—yet we are the ones who choose where to set our aim.

I remember the first time I ever shot an arrow. I was about ten years old, overflowing with confidence. Our neighbors had set up an archery range in their front yard, and we were all taking turns. When my turn came, I felt like the next Robin Hood—

minus the green tights. I noticed a little girl standing near the target. She wasn't moving, and I thought I was much better than I actually was.

Well, let's just say I should have aimed a bit more carefully. I pulled back, released, and my arrow took a detour—right into the side of that unsuspecting little girl. She was fine, but I'm pretty sure she never stood near an archery target again. I learned a valuable lesson: Always check for moving targets... and maybe put a little distance between them and your practice session.

Just because you have a bow and arrow doesn't mean you know how to use it. Parents, just because we have children doesn't mean we automatically know what to do with them.

When Nancy and I decided to have a baby, it sounded wonderful. "Let's have a baby!" Right? But we didn't think about the fact that babies don't stay babies. They grow—every single day. We didn't think about the temper tantrums, the fighting, the schoolwork... and the homework. Oh, the homework. We didn't think about evenings spent solving math problems we barely remembered ourselves, or driving one child to a playdate and

another to practice, or constantly buying clothes they outgrew in five minutes.

We just wanted a baby, and honestly, we had no idea what we were getting into.

We carry so much more responsibility with children, yet life becomes so much richer because of them. Kids are a blessing, even though parenting can feel overwhelming at times—especially for those doing it alone. The weight is heavier in every way.

And the literal weight is no joke. Anyone with little ones knows what I mean. Have you ever looked at the Target parking lot and noticed how many minivans and SUVs there are? When you have a baby, you carry everything: the car seat, the car seat base, the stroller, the pack-and-play, the diaper bag, the food, the drinks, and toys that make the most annoying sounds imaginable. If you're still in the diaper stage, hear me—it will end. One day they'll use the bathroom... and then they will want to visit every single public restroom known to mankind. Sometimes I think my kids have the smallest bladders in the world.

But I shouldn't complain too much about diapers, because I have a confession. When our first son was born, Nancy assumed that only women's restrooms had changing stations. And I didn't correct her. I didn't lie—I just didn't correct her assumption.

So every time we were in a public place—a mall, a restaurant—she would take Levi to change him. This went on until he was about nine months old. We were about to move to Portugal in a week, and a “friend” (I use that word loosely) ratted me out. We were hanging out, and Nancy had already changed Levi twice and was on her way for round three. My friend asked, “Why don't you ever ask Damian to change him?” Nancy said, “Well, there aren't changing stations in the men's rooms, and I don't want him changing the baby on a dirty floor.” Long story short, I ended up changing that third diaper of the day.

As parents, so much responsibility falls on us. When we are grieving ourselves while helping our children through their grief, we carry a weight that feels like being back in the baby stage—carrying all the extra load while caring for a child who needs us.

In those moments, here is your life verse:

2 Corinthians 4:18 (NKJV)

While we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal.

With the death of a wife and mother comes the overwhelming reality that there is more to life than the day-to-day obligations. We are reminded that eternity with Jesus waits ahead, and we hold the hope that we will see our loved ones again.

Nancy spoke about Heaven—and the New Heaven and New Earth—more than anyone I've ever known. She longed for the end of this world's pain and suffering. I found this in her journal, written as she read *Heaven* by Randy Alcorn:

Nancy's Journal

Why do we have such a vague, negative, and uninspired view of Heaven? The work of Satan.

"No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love Him—but God has revealed it to us by His Spirit." (1 Cor. 2:9)

The context makes it clear that this revelation is God's Word, which tells us what God has prepared for us. He wants us to understand and anticipate what awaits us.

You cannot anticipate or desire what you cannot imagine. As long as the resurrected universe remains either undesirable or unimaginable, Satan succeeds in sabotaging our love for Heaven.

Everything pleasurable we know about life on earth we have experienced through our senses. You simply have to look around you and imagine what this would be like without sin and death and suffering and corruption.

That was just a glimpse of how excited she was—and still is—about the New Heaven and New Earth. We are called to live with eternity in mind. Though we establish ourselves here on earth, we are not meant to become attached to this place. We have somewhere far better ahead. We become so fixated on the here and now—so overwhelmed by the day's to-do list—that we forget all of this is temporary.

When God gives you a child, He gives you a platform unmatched by anything else. Many of us

are driven to achieve great things and build influence in our careers. You might be reading *How to Win Friends and Influence People* while your kids tug on your sleeve saying, “Pay attention to me. Teach me.”

We can overlook the influence that sits right in our own homes.

I love how Mark Batterson says his goal is “to be famous in his own home.”

And yet we often say, “Not now. I’m doing important work. I’m influencing people.”

You want to influence people? Parenting is the most influential role you’ll ever have.

One day your child will read in Scripture that God is a Father, and that God also has the heart of a mother. Jesus said in Matthew 23:37:

“How often I have longed to gather your children together as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings.”

This is the image God gives us when revealing His nature—the heart of a mother, the love and sacrifice of a father. Your children will either learn who God is with ease and confidence because of

you—or with great struggle and confusion despite you.

That's weighty. It's something we must take seriously. This isn't meant to condemn or discourage—it's simply the truth of our calling as parents. I feel this deeply as a father and a pastor, knowing my children's view of the church is shaped by who I am. And now I carry this alone as I grieve while helping them grieve.

I remember meeting with a friend and explaining the trips we took as a family to heal, the counseling we were receiving, and the intentional conversations I was having with each child. His honest response was, "Even with all you're doing, one day they will sit on a couch and tell a therapist, spouse, or friend how you disappointed them during this time."

Ouch. I was trying so hard to help them, but the truth is I couldn't do everything perfectly. I couldn't be perfectly attuned to every feeling or need. Each of them is unique. And I am only one man.

But oh, the grace of God.

Psalm 127:5 tells us, "Blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them."

Isn't that a beautiful picture of parenthood? A house filled with noise, messes, crying, and laughter is a house filled with blessings.

Imagine standing in Bass Pro Shops or browsing online for arrows. There are over 180 different kinds. Each is designed for a unique purpose—just like our children. Some are built for precision, others for strength or distance. No matter how different they are, every arrow has one purpose: to hit the target.

Our children are the same. Each one has distinct strengths, weaknesses, personalities, passions, and needs. But as parents, we are called to guide them toward the same target. Just like those arrows, each child is different, but their purpose is unified: we aim them toward Heaven.

It's easy to get caught in the daily chaos—different attitudes, emotions, love languages, and personalities. But the target remains the same. We want them to grow into a relationship with Jesus that anchors them through everything life brings.

Of course, we can't control every twist and turn of their journey. Our job is to set direction and create opportunities for them to know Christ. We aim

toward Heaven. We can't force them to follow, but we can show them the way.

C.S. Lewis wrote, "Aim at Heaven and you will get earth thrown in; aim at earth and you will get neither."

Life has a way of forcing us to reassess our priorities. As I focus on guiding my kids, I see more clearly how fleeting everything else is. Psalm 39:4 reminds us:

"O Lord, make me know my end and what is the measure of my days; let me know how fleeting I am!"

Parents, keep aiming high. Your children are your arrows. The target is Heaven. The journey will hold its challenges and joys, but the goal is worth every effort. Keep showing up. Keep pointing them toward Christ. Every bit of effort is shaping their eternity.

Psalm 39:4 (ESV)

"O Lord, make me know my end and what is the measure of my days; let me know how fleeting I am!"

CHAPTER 14: WHAT IS NEXT?

Sunday, Dec. 4, 2022

I went up to the hospital alone this Sunday morning to be with Nancy. I played some worship music, built my faith, and really believed that we were going to make it through this situation. I even talked with Nancy about how people had been contributing to the GoFundMe account and that, since we had money in our savings from the sale of our house, we were going to be okay. I was going to turn my full-time focus to taking care of her and the kids. I even thought this was why we ended up in Georgia, with my mom living with us for this season. God knew this was coming and was giving us the best support system that we needed at this time.

So often, we want to know why things happen. We look for and want to see the invisible hand of God in our stories and circumstances. We can have faith that God sees it all, knows it all, and holds the future in His hands, but it is really nice when we see it in real time in our lives. Our hearts long to see God turn what the enemy meant for evil into good. We long to see our pain, hurt, loss, and everything else

the world and enemy throws at us redeemed in a way we can clearly see it in our individual lives.

Yet, there is often this long, painful, and confusing walk of faith, believing God is leading us.

Psalms 37:23-25 NLT; The LORD directs the steps of the godly. He delights in every detail of their lives.

This was a verse that Nancy had wrestled with in the early months of 2022 when our thoughts and plans did not go as we envisioned them in our minds.

After working at building a local church for ten years in one area, Nancy and I felt like a change was coming. We were praying for clarity on what God had next for us in ministry. In 2019, we found ourselves longing for something different while being faithful to the work we had started in Illinois. We loved our church and the people there, and after years of laying the groundwork, I was finally leading at the best and had hit a new stride. Yet, we felt something new was on the horizon and wanted to finish well. It was hard to imagine leaving a church we had planted. We never intended to build the church ministry on us as a couple, but since we set the

culture and values of the church, it was an extension of who we were. We felt it was time to start making steps to pass the church we had planted on to a pastor who could build it and take River City Church to the next level of ministry impact. We had been starters throughout our ministry, and at this point, River City Church was started. The church was established with local leadership and was no longer portable but in a building that we had remodeled and had a welcoming feel to those who came to visit and those who called it their church home. The timing was interesting, as this shift in our hearts was shortly after we sent out the Family Ministry Pastor and his wife (very good friends, Dan & Abigail) to plant a new church just north of us. The new church plant was off to a great start, and I was envious, as I wanted to be part of something new. That pioneer spirit in me is always looking for something new and something that takes faith.

In early 2020, we started prayerfully searching for what could be next, hoping and praying that it would be in the southwest, close to my family and, if possible, near the beach. We both loved warm weather and were quite tired of the long, cold winters

of Illinois. Just as we were starting to investigate what could be next, there was talk of this Coronavirus coming to the USA, and before we even knew how big a deal this was, we found ourselves in the COVID-19 shutdown. Overnight, how we did church ministry changed. Leading a church in Illinois was not an easy task. There we were, a church in what I call a purple county. To the east of us was Chicago, a blue county, and to the west of us was Illinois farmland, a red county. As much as COVID was about its disease, it quickly became political. Pastoring a local church and making decisions was not an easy task.

During the shutdown and pandemic, many people really evaluated what they valued in life and what they wanted for themselves and their families. On the other side of the lockdowns, racial divide, and political divisions of 2020, we felt stronger than ever that we wanted to have more of an outdoor lifestyle and be closer to my family in the south.

After leading through nine months of COVID in a local church and reopening the church, a pastor friend of mine invited us to pray about coming to the Panhandle of Florida to start a second location of

their young church plant. It seemed like a dream come true, right? Leave cold, expensive Chicago and go to the Florida coast to start a new church. We took time to pray and really think about it. We went back and forth on what was right for us to do, and finally, by mid-January 2021, we agreed to leave River City Church and go to Santa Rosa Beach to plant a second location of this church. Nancy had some reservations about me being able to serve someone else's vision and leadership, but I told her I had peace, and we even had a few confirmations that this was what God was calling us to do. The process of setting River City Church up for success and moving to Florida took longer than we had first thought it would, but we arrived at a welcoming and loving church community by late May 2021.

We were so excited about the new adventure in the Panhandle of Florida. It was exciting to see the newness of the church there. We jumped right into the beach culture by purchasing a Jeep Wrangler, stand-up paddleboards, longboard skateboards, and even electric bikes. We loved going to the beach for the evening sunsets, and Nancy and I even made Saturday morning paddleboarding a regular date.

Even with all this excitement for Nancy and me, the kids were not adjusting well. They had been well established in Illinois—at church, in school, and with friends—so this was a lot of change. Seeing our kids struggle so much was difficult. Along with the family adjustment challenges, I was facing my own dilemma. I had been the lead pastor for ten years and was accustomed to my influence, voice, and opinion being the strongest in staff meetings, with board members, and with people in the congregation. Now I was in this place where I was not the one leading, but I was to follow someone else's visions and plans.

It did not take long until we came to the harsh reality that our move to this part of Florida was not a good fit for us. It was messy because I had made mistakes, and God revealed that He still was doing work in me and my heart. With broken hearts and confused minds, we decided it was best to go our own way. Up until this point, this was one of the most painful things we had walked through. It was painful because there are times when life happens to you, things outside of your control, and there are times when you make a decision—or multiple decisions—

and the results of those decisions have led to the current reality of your situation. That is a hard pill to swallow because you think by your early forties, you know what decisions to make and how to respond no matter the circumstances, but then you see the reality that you are human, and you don't always get it right. Even us pastors make mistakes.

Depending on your view of God, when you make mistakes and are left to live with the consequences of your decisions, you can feel as though God is judging you. As though you made a mistake and now have to pay your penance to God and do good to earn favor with Him again. This kind of thinking can mess you up.

It was just a week ago (Nov. 28, 2022) that I pushed Nancy outside in the parking lot of the hospital, and we sat and talked. We both could not believe this was happening, and she said, "Do you think this would have happened if we did not leave Illinois?"

Why do we think things like that? When things go bad, when life throws difficulties at us—even those of us who have a foundation in the Father's love for us—question if He is upset with us. We wonder if He

is throwing trials at us because we are like Jonah running from God, and thus, we're going to end up in the belly of a whale.

I told her that God was not punishing her or us for doing anything wrong. Now, here I was in the hospital room with Nancy, and she was barely responding, and I was questioning myself and if I had caused this somehow.

In the middle of those overwhelming feelings, I received a text from Grant and Kaylee Diamond. Grant had become a pastor of a small Baptist church in our community while I was starting River City Church. Because of Grant's continuation of reaching out to me, we became great friends, and our churches partnered for a few events. In 2017, Grant and Kaylee were preparing to move and plant a church in Texas, and we met together as a couple a few times to discuss the process.

Here's Kaylee's text: "In church today, the Lord reminded me of a memory. Before we planted the church, I asked Nancy if you were nervous when you planted River City.

I remember her saying she wasn't nervous because she knew you and your work ethic and that you would always do whatever it took to provide for her.

I know she has trusted in you for what you have already done for your family, and that she trusts you for what decisions you will make in the future. She had and still has full trust and confidence in you to lead her and your family to what is very best.

I am praying that her story will be a miracle of life story, an incredible miracle story that will bring many people to know Christ. We are continuing to pray for you and for her healing!"

What more does a husband want than a wife who trusts and respects him? This is what so many want in a marriage. Yet, it does not mean that the husband makes the right decision every time. We are not perfect. We will get it wrong sometimes, but it's important that when we do, we own it, we learn from it, and we work hard to make it right.

When we announced to River City Church that we were going to be transitioning to plant a campus in Florida, we had planned what we would say

together. Yet Nancy went way off script, as she normally did, and shared from her heart. Nancy said again on the stage that Sunday at River City Church that she trusted me in my decision-making, even when she could not see it. She trusted that I would lead our family well.

Yet, in that moment, that decision felt like a mistake. I felt like I missed it. I had walked away from leading the church that I had planted in the community that we had built along with others to only be in the position God called us to for a very, very short season.

Psalms 37:23-25 NLT “The LORD directs the steps of the godly. He delights in every detail of their lives.”

I have often quoted this verse and heard others encourage one another with it, but I do not hear the rest of the verse quoted very often. It goes on:

“Though they stumble, they will never fall, for the LORD holds them by the hand. Once I was young, and now I am old. Yet I have never seen the godly abandoned or their children begging for bread.”

We like the idea of God being involved in the details of our lives, but what about that—"Though they stumble"? I don't like that part. God, if you are directing my path, how and why am I stumbling? Is it my doing? Did I miss Your leading? I mean, You, God, can't be leading me to stumble, right?

I know myself well enough to know that it is actually me who does the stumbling. Yes, I am continually learning to follow God's will and direction, but it is more like stumbling from one step to the next than it is a perfect step. When we look at other people's faith walk from a distance, they look like those competitors in a speed-walking race. It looks so awkward, yet they seem so focused on each and every step they take, and they do not trip or fall. They just seem to consistently make progress. I wish that is what my walk and following of the Spirit of God looked like. More often, my walk looks more like a nervous competitor on the TV show *Wipe Out*—one moment holding on for dear life and another moment taking an awkward leap to an unstable, huge bouncy ball.

Either way, if we have learned the rhythm of following the Spirit so that we look like those speed

walkers, or if we are bouncing from one obstacle to the next, we can be confident that God's grace is sustaining us and leading us to His desired outcome as we keep our ears listening and our eyes open to what the Holy Spirit is calling us into today.

My thoughts of possible shortcomings were interrupted when the neurologist stopped. He said Nancy's brain activity looked very good on the EEG. They were hopeful that swelling would begin to come down with the help of the steroid, and we would see more alertness in the days to come.

CHAPTER 15: AVOIDING WHAT IS RIGHT IN FRONT OF YOU

Monday, Dec. 5, 2022

Looking back over our time in the hospital, I only remember a few moments when the reality of what Nancy was battling connected. It is not that I was trying to ignore it; I believe it was a combination of being in shock and not even being able to fully process the severity of the cancerous brain tumor. Combine that with the fact that the medical staff was not as clear as I would now want them to be. In his book *I Have Seen The End of You*, Dr. Lee Warren talks candidly about how doctors can shift the responsibility of sharing difficult news from the neurosurgeon to the oncologist to the neurologist.

This was one of those days. We were continuing to have changes with the transfer from Northside to Emory because of insurance reasons or no beds being available. It was now coming up on a week since the biopsy, and the plan was for her to come home six days earlier, yet we had not seen any progress. After pushing to talk with someone, a very kind neurologist came by and asked if anyone had

explained what we were facing and talked to us about Glioblastoma. He took time to open the scans and show us what was happening.

I feel as though it was the first time someone told us that it was deep in the brain's structure, a region through which many critical functions pass. Because of the size and location of the tumor, three-quarters of one side of her brain was experiencing swelling. He went on to say that the swelling had spread to the left side of the brain and into the thalamus, which is where consciousness resides. He explained that this is why she was having such a hard time waking up. The only way they were treating the swelling was with a steroid. He repeated that the tumor was not in a favorable location, and as long as it was there, it would cause problems. If it continued to grow, it could destroy the thalamus, and there would be no waking up.

He explained that Glioblastoma is not a curable cancer; it is very aggressive. He told us that all the chemo and radiation in the world would not kill the tumor—it would only prolong her life. He could not promise how long that might be. He did note that those who survive five years are only 5%.

As the conversation continued, we told the neurologist that we were pursuing a neurosurgeon who had the strategy of removing as much of the tumor as possible first and then starting chemo and radiation. That was true, but I know now that we did not want to face the fact that Nancy was, in fact, going to die. Like any loving husband and family would do, we were willing to spend any and every resource for the chance of more time with her.

When people hear the worst possible outcome, they respond in two ways. One is to resign to the fact that this is real, that this is going to happen, and that their loved one is going to die. They accept it and prepare for that outcome.

Even as I write this, my Uncle John and his family have come to accept that after nearly a year-long battle with bladder cancer, it has spread. They have sent him home to be comfortable, to be with family, and to prepare to die. He just called me and asked me to officiate his funeral. Friends and family are praying for peace and strength, and that he will transition from this life to the next with the least amount of pain possible. I know these situations and the speed of cancers are not the same. Yes, he has

lived a good, full life, leaving behind a wife, kids, and grandkids.

The other response was mine. Why, when we were given the worst possible outcome, did I fail to realize or acknowledge that this was really going to be the end of Nancy's life on earth?

Was I avoiding the pain and reality of this moment?

Was I blinded by the shock and speed of this whole thing?

Or was I blinded by my own faith?

I know that can seem extreme and strange to even say, but it is worth exploring.

The truth is, even though I questioned my faith and God's motives—even expressing them in this book—I can't deny that God has been good to us and has provided for us. He has done what seems impossible.

Bike Story

I remember when we were living in the Chicago suburbs, and each summer we had taken a day date to enjoy the beautiful city. Summer in Chicago is great. December is nice to celebrate Christmas with

the beautifully decorated downtown and ice skating in Millennium Park. Winter, however, not so much. Those are the long, dark, cold months.

On this particular summer day date, we brought our bikes with us, as you could see so much of the city on a bike. We were having a great day. We rode along the beachfront, had lunch at our favorite pizza place, and then went into some stores off State Street. We locked the bikes up as we went to each store on that block. We came out of a store to see Nancy's bike still locked up, but the chain that was on my bike was cut—and my bike was gone.

I don't know if you have ever been robbed, but for the first few moments, it doesn't seem real. You are standing in shock, thinking they didn't steal it. They are just borrowing it. They will bring it back. We started asking people around if they had seen anyone take my bike. We asked the security guard in front of the store if he had seen anything. No one had. I asked a police officer walking by what to do, and he asked if I had registered my bike. Register my bike? I live in the suburbs; I don't know what he meant. Reality kicked in, and I said we should go get

something to eat, and I would walk or take the bus to the car. Our day date looked cut short.

Nancy had some incredible faith rise up in her. She said, “No, God knows where your bike is. That is your bike; you paid good money for it. It’s a nice bike, and God knows where it is.” She started praying, “God, you know where that bike is. Can you show us where to look?” She was convinced that somewhere out there, my bike was just waiting for us to find it. As she was praying, her eyes scanned the streets. I, on the other hand, was more skeptical—after all, do you know how far you can go in 30 minutes, especially when it involves a stolen bike?

Yet Nancy was undeterred. As we trudged up State Street, we spotted a guy riding in circles under the iconic Chicago Theater sign. Nancy squinted and said, “Hey, isn’t that your bike?” I did a casual jog over, trying not to spook him, and, yep, it was my bike!

Now, facing a potential bike thief, I decided to play it cool. “Hey, man, nice bike!” I said, trying to sound nonchalant. The guy casually mentioned he’d just bought it for \$50. I replied, “Uh, no, that’s

actually my bike!” At that moment, Nancy, who must have had an adrenaline boost, sped up and confronted him with the intensity of a superhero. “That’s his bike! You stole it! Give it back!” she declared.

The thief, clearly caught off guard, admitted he’d stolen it and handed it back. Then, in a move that was nothing short of audacious, he asked if we could give him money for the bus. I couldn’t help but admire his nerve. If I’d had cash on me, I might have given it to him just for the sheer audacity of the request.

In the end, we got the bike back and learned that even on a date, a little faith and a lot of boldness can turn a day around.

That was how we lived our lives: walking in faith, believing that God would be our provider. We saw God answer prayer and provide in amazing ways as missionaries to Mozambique, Africa, and as church planters in the Chicago suburbs.

We would pray for seemingly small things, like when we needed a new desk. On our way to IKEA, we prayed for a deal, and in the AS-IS area, there

was a desk and a chair for half the price. Nancy would pray for an item she wanted, and somehow, it would be given to her, or she would find it at Goodwill.

There was even one time when the kids wanted a dog. I was not keen on the idea of a dog, but they were relentless. Nancy had the kids pray that God would change Dad's heart about having a dog and that we would get a free, non-shedding, and house-trained dog. After about two weeks of praying this prayer, someone from church called and said they worked part-time at a pet store, and they had a dog they could sell. They wanted to know if we wanted it. We went to the pet store, and it was a Golden Doodle. We could not believe it. When we checked out, our receipt said $\$2,800 - \$2,800 = \$0$.

From little things to really big things, I could look back on life and say God has been faithful, and He has been good.

So, of course, I would have faith that God would do the impossible in Nancy's life. But this was a much bigger request than a dog or a stolen bike... this was BRAIN CANCER.

I have been around the Christian faith my whole life; I have heard of God doing great things, but how many firsthand miracles have I seen? How many people did I know for whom cancer disappeared from their bodies without medical help, because of prayer alone? I am not saying it has not happened or that I don't believe it can happen, but if I am honest with myself, the odds of that prayer being answered are not in my favor.

After hearing this difficult update from the neurologist, I walked away and cried. I remember looking out a large window in the hospital, which overlooked the beginning of the North Georgia Mountains, feeling completely overwhelmed and as though I was stuck in some bad dream. My thoughts were interrupted by my men's group text asking if they could host a prayer meeting in the Hospital Chapel that night. There I was in a crisis, wondering if prayers would make a difference, but I was desperate and wanted all the prayer and support I could get.

Soon after that text, we finally heard that Nancy's transfer to Emory Hospital had been cleared and would happen that evening. This was timely, as the

Tumor Board would meet on Tuesday morning to review all of Nancy's MRIs and CT scans to decide the best approach. We were going to arrive just in time for her to be at Emory Hospital to take any next steps for what they would decide could possibly be done.

After hearing devastating news, hope was rising. The prayer meeting that night in the chapel with friends and family was encouraging, helping to build my faith and hope even more. I had a renewed hope that there was going to be a way around this terrible tumor.

I headed home after the prayer meeting. Nancy's parents and siblings stayed at the hospital until Nancy's best friend, Kim, arrived. I did not even reach my bed. I fell asleep for a few hours on the couch, my phone in hand. I closed my eyes for two hours before my phone rang, and I was told the transfer was happening now.

CHAPTER 16: DISAPPOINTED BY HOPE

Tuesday, Dec. 6, 2022

The ambulance came at about 1 a.m. to transfer Nancy to Emory Hospital. We had requested this transfer since Friday, but it had been delayed for five days. Nancy's sister Emily and brother Jordan said goodbye as they were returning to Ohio in the morning. Her mom went back to the house to sleep for a little while.

Nancy's best friend Kim had arrived after having to wait two hours for a rental car following a long flight from California. She went straight to the hospital and was able to ride to Emory in the ambulance with Nancy. I would drive myself to be there before she arrived.

It was raining, cool, and dark. The ambulance driver and attendant in the back were exceptionally kind. Nancy was so restless she would not keep the blanket on and kept trying to take off her hospital robe. The attendant kept apologizing. Kim laughed and said, "Just never speak of this. She is beyond

modest!" But also, Kim giggled inside because she knew Nancy preferred to sleep naked, so she was probably just unaware of where she was and trying to get comfortable. Full of faith and hope like the rest of us, Kim thought, *"How long does one have to wait to tell her about this so she finds it funny instead of mortifying?"*

We arrived at Emory at 1:55 a.m. in Room 336. She was all over the bed, seeming so uncomfortable. The resident was examining her and used a sternal rub to wake her up. She said, "OW!" and hit at him. She then responded when we asked if she had pain, and when asked to rate it, she said her pain level was 15 out of 10. She clung to me, and it was so difficult to be strong for her, the love of my life, seeing her in pain and being powerless to help.

In the midst of the late-night transfer, somehow Nancy's latest scans were not sent with us. The neurosurgery resident seemed very shocked at her condition and asked how long she had been in this state. He sent for her CT scans right away and moved her to the ICU within two hours. Kim and I both felt relief that she was getting attention. I looked

at Kim and said, “This is the care I have been begging for all week.” We felt hopeful.

After they did labs and a CT scan, the resident doctor explained that she had swelling on her brain and that they would like to do a shunt to her abdomen to drain it. He felt hopeful, saying she would be awake by evening. He explained that her lethargy was due to the tumor preventing fluid from circulating normally. He was so hopeful that he said I could plan to have the kids there to talk to her that evening.

The morning hours seemed to go by quickly, and before long, Nancy’s parents arrived. We shared the good news about how they planned to drain the swelling and were hopeful that she would be talking with us again. In no time, they were taking her back to prep for surgery, and I was the only one who could go back with her. As I was in pre-operation, the nurse checking everything asked about her health history and was shocked to hear that she had no health history at all. As she looked at the file, she said, “You have the President’s surgeon.” I said, “The President’s surgeon?” She said, “Yes, he performed surgery on Beau Biden; that is as close

as you get to the President's surgeon." Hope was rising. I asked Nancy if she heard that and held her hand, encouraging her that she was going to be okay.

Within a few moments, the resident we had been talking with walked in with Dr. Nduom. It was the first time I had met him in person. This was the doctor we had pursued from the recommendation of a few different people, the one who helped make the transfer happen, and the highly respected brain surgeon. He was very kind and said, "Wow, you must know some people, as I received a few messages about helping your wife." He explained the surgery he was planning and asked if I had any questions. I said I didn't, and that I trusted him.

Then, the conversation turned from hopeful to the worst possibility in a moment. He said, "I am confident that I can do this surgery, but I cannot help your wife. I am known for doing surgeries that others won't, and I even asked my colleagues about how to possibly remove this tumor, and I can't."

Dr. Nduom explained that when he compared the new CT to the one done previously, he saw **rapid growth** in the tumor itself. He said this tumor grew

so quickly that even two months prior, a headache would not have indicated this was a tumor. He said they could put in a shunt, but the best-case scenario was that her condition would be the same as it was the day after the biopsy—already lethargic, hard to keep awake, and completely paralyzed on the left side.

He could not guarantee that she would actually wake up at all. He said there might be some improvement in her sleep-wake cycles but no improvement in weakness or pain. The tumor itself was inoperable. It was in the thalamus, which relays sensory and motor functions. Memory and vision are also affected by the thalamus. There was no way to remove it and preserve those functions. He also told me, “In the weeks to come, you might question if you waited too long. I want you to know that even if you brought her here to our ER two weeks ago, we would still be in this position.”

It was clear the prognosis was about as bad as it could get regarding location, and glioblastoma prognosis is already poor. I was in shock, going from hopeful to utter disappointment. I knew what the answer was... I knew we were to forgo the surgery,

as Nancy's words rang in my ear: *"If it is the end, let it be the end."*

I told Dr. Nduom that Nancy's parents were in the waiting room and that I would like to talk with them before making the final decision. He was so kind and asked, "Would you like me to come with you?" I was so thankful that this busy doctor would take the time to re-explain what he had already told me. I agreed, and as we walked to the lobby, I saw Kim's face light up because she recognized Dr. Nduom; she had done all the research she could on him leading up to this moment. He sat down and shared with them what he had told me. Even though I did not fully understand all the medical terms, when he said the tumor had grown across the midline and into the thalamus, I saw Kim's face drop. It was clear confirmation that no surgery was going to help.

Nancy had made her wishes clear. She did not want her kids to see her lose herself and die slowly. The doctor said her prognosis was at most six to eight months with chemo and radiation, and it would not be a pleasant six to eight months. He could not even guarantee a good month until Christmas. He said if we did nothing and let nature take its course,

it would be maybe ten days. The decision was clear. Nancy's parents saw it too. There was 100% unity. We all loved her too much to prolong her suffering.

We all cried together for a few moments and then made the first phone calls that needed to be made. I called my mom and said they couldn't remove the tumor—she was dying. My mom cried with me and kept saying, “I am so sorry, Damian, I am so sorry.”

We went back to her room and prayed and worshiped. I cried out in tears for God to do the impossible and heal her—not for my sake, not even for Nancy's sake, but for the sake of my kids. I pleaded with God, as I could not see how their faith would survive such tragedy.

Saying Goodbye

Nancy seemed barely conscious, but somehow, she pulled out her feeding tube before the nurses could remove it. Nancy was sweet, but she also had a determined side about certain things. She was not going to accept that tube. After a few moments of quiet, I knew I had to make a plan for my kids to say goodbye to their mom. I called my brother and said,

“I need you and Mom to pick the kids up from school and bring them to the hospital. You can’t say anything; I need to be the one to tell them. Buy them ice cream on the way because the drive is long, and Jude is not going to want to come. If Mom can’t hold it together, she can’t come with you.”

I wanted to get this moment right because I knew it would live in their memory for the rest of their lives. I told the staff that the kids were coming to say goodbye to their mother and asked if there was a private room where I could talk to them first. They offered a small conference room right by the ICU. The plan was for me to bring the kids into the room with me while my mom went back with Kim to say her goodbyes and to put clothes on Nancy so their last memory was not of her in a hospital robe. They made Nancy look like herself by fixing her hair, dressing her, and even putting on a little lipstick.

This was by far the hardest thing I have ever done. I met them at the hospital entry, and my brother Jesse came with us into the conference room where I had bottles of water for each of them. I reminded them how we had been walking down three different roads: one road was that Jesus would

heal her, another was that the doctors could remove the tumor, and the third was chemo and radiation. With tears in my eyes, I said, "We found out today that two of those roads have closed. They cannot remove the tumor, and chemo/radiation will not help. The only option we have is a miracle... without a miracle, Mom is dying."

Jade and Jude started to cry instantly. Levi grabbed his now-empty water bottle and crushed it in anger, which quickly turned to tears. They understood. I told them we would all see her and say goodbye. We walked out of that room down the hall through the ICU toward her room. I can remember the sounds and the smells, and I will never forget the look in the eyes of the staff as they saw us walking down the hall. A few nurses' eyes watered just seeing us; others quickly looked away.

Grandma and Grandpa were there when we came into the room, along with my mom and Kim. I brought them to the side of her bed, one by one, to say their goodbyes. I have never seen Levi break like that in his fifteen years; the tears and emotional heartache he displayed were both devastating and yet good at the same time. They came to her and

said what they could as we encouraged them that she could hear, even though she was unable to respond with more than a slight squeeze of their hand. They each told her they loved her, but Jude had a hard time saying anything because it was overwhelming for an eleven-year-old mom's boy to process all that had happened so quickly. I know she knew he was there, and Nancy **KNEW** how much her kids loved her. No words were needed. We all took time when we needed it in the little side family room attached to her room.

Uncle Jesse and Grandpa held each of them at different times. The room was heavy with emotion and sadness. I had thought through how to do this except for the exit... after about thirty minutes, they could not take it anymore and asked if we could leave. Without any plan, I said yes, and we grabbed our coats and headed out. As we were leaving, Nancy gave the slightest wave.

As we walked over the skyway to the parking deck, Jude said, "This is going to be our family now? Just the four of us? Or are you going to get us another mom?" He was not looking to replace her; he could not imagine our family without a mom. I just

let him talk and said, “I don’t know, but we are still a family.”

We made our drive home, and everyone was quiet, unsure what to say. As we approached home, they said they were hungry, and each of us had a headache from the emotional strain. We grabbed some dinner, and I asked my brother to pick up ibuprofen for us. After such a long emotional day, I felt numb and so exhausted that I fell asleep quickly as Jude slept in the bed with me that night.

CHAPTER 17: WHEN ALL YOU CAN DO IS PRAY

Wednesday, December 7, 2022

Twelve days after Nancy was admitted to the hospital, we were told the only way forward was a miracle.

We had pursued every opportunity in the natural realm, and we were desperately in need of God to show up and do what only He could do.

That morning, I woke up in a daze. I had the hardest conversation and the longest drive home with my kids ever. Afterward, I went to my office to collect my thoughts and plead with God again to do a miracle.

Our only option was prayer. The only way Nancy would make it would be a miracle.

We had seen God answer prayer in the past, so I fully believed He would respond the way I wanted Him to this time.

So we spread the word. Without much thought, I made a video that I posted on Facebook and

Instagram, pleading with everyone to pray for a miracle. I called on everyone in our world to pray. That night, six churches called for special prayer meetings just for Nancy.

The church we had planted and pastored was one of those, so we played the livestream in the hospital room. During those prayer meetings, they transferred Nancy out of the ICU to hospice. I followed behind the ambulance, praying, believing, and asking God for what was impossible with man.

I was full of faith, believing that God would use this for His glory.

I prayed, “Lord, You know we’ll give You glory. God, what could be a better demonstration of Your power than to heal Nancy? We will give You all the praise. We’ll give You all the glory; many are going to come to Jesus through this.”

And so I kept praying, quoting Scripture after Scripture.

I was trying to win the miracle with God.

I was telling Him, “Lord, come on. You know this would be great—look at all these people praying.”

I was so engaged in praying and pleading with God that I passed the exit on the highway and had to drive to the next one to turn around.

Have you ever prayed to God with such desperation?

Maybe you were facing something that was impossible for you to walk through. Maybe a diagnosis—the doctor walked in and said, “I have some bad news.” Maybe it was the day your boss said, “I’m sorry, we have to let you go.” Maybe your spouse said, “I’m sorry, I can’t do this anymore.” Maybe loneliness, depression, anxiety, bills stacking up, pressures from school, sports, or jobs...

Whatever it is in your life, have you hit the wall? A situation too big for you to handle—trouble, suffering, pain. In response, you prayed to God with such desperation that you were pleading, “God, I cannot do this! God, You have to fix this! God, You have to intervene somehow! You have to take this away!”

If you have, you are not alone. Once you have experienced pain and suffering, you read the Scriptures through different lenses. You see not just

stories but real people with real emotions. Look at the emotion of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane the night before His crucifixion.

Matthew 26:36-39 Then Jesus went with them to the olive grove called Gethsemane, and He said, “Sit here while I go over there to pray.” He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, James and John, and He became anguished and distressed. He told them, “My soul is crushed with grief to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with Me.”

He went on a little farther and bowed with His face to the ground, praying, “My Father! If it is possible, let this cup of suffering be taken away from Me. Yet I want Your will to be done, not Mine.”

Here we see Jesus at His breaking point. Jesus was 100% God and 100% man. Here we see His humanity on raw display. He uses the language of a panic attack: “My soul is crushed with grief to the point of death. I feel like I’m going to die. What’s going on inside me—my emotions, my head and my heart—is overwhelming my body, and I feel like I can’t take it.”

What's interesting about this text is that Jesus goes through this intense heartbreak and invites His disciples to watch. He says, "Come with Me and keep watch with Me."

Jesus seemed to be using His last hours with His disciples to teach them this greatest lesson. He is showing them what it looks like to have your own will and your own wants but to be willing to bend them to the will of God. He is equipping them—and equipping us.

Jesus knows there will be moments in your life when your spirit is willing but your flesh is weak. There will be moments when you know exactly what you're supposed to do. You know what a courageous person does. You know what a faithful person does. But your flesh can't get you there.

Jesus was in that very moment and said, "Come watch Me, so that when you get in your situation, you'll know what to do."

We see Jesus begin His prayer by asking for God's power to remove the problem: "God, if You can, if You're willing, use Your power to take this cup of suffering away. Solve this problem. Take it away."

But as Jesus went back to praying and wrestling it through with God, His prayer shifted. He moved from “take the cup of suffering away” to “give me the power to endure it. Give me the power to persevere.”

This is what I have come to believe as a Christian who believes in healing and miracles: There are some things God will save you *from*, and there are other things God will bring you *through*. Yet either way, He is faithful. Either way, He is powerful.

Jesus asked God to remove it, but it wasn’t supposed to be removed. He was supposed to walk through it. That was His assignment. It was part of His mission—to save us from our sins.

You and I wake up every day to the reminder that we do not live in the Garden of Eden. We live in a fallen world. There is free will. There is our flesh. There is the devil. And even those of us who are saved still live on a planet that is infected and impacted by sin. There is suffering.

In this world, there will be trouble. We live in a world that suffers. I believe there is some trouble and suffering God will remove from your life, and there is some trouble you are *supposed* to walk through.

So yes—make your requests known to God. “God, would You take this thing away?” Ask. Seek. Knock. Fast. Pray.

Sometimes God will respond exactly as we want, and the problem is solved. Healing comes. Yet God doesn’t always take it away. He didn’t take it away for Jesus, and He hasn’t taken it away for many, many other faithful Christians.

In the garden, Jesus began pivoting His prayer from “God, take this cup” to “God, give me the strength to walk through it and endure.”

Watch this progression. What you see in Gethsemane is that ultimately Jesus got exactly what He needed to be able to endure, to be able to take on what He needed to do. Look at this:

Matthew 26:44-46 So He went to pray a third time, saying the same things again. Then He came to the disciples and said, “Go ahead and sleep. Have your rest. But look—the time has come. The Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Up, let’s be going. Look, My betrayer is here!”

Notice: in verse 38 He says, “My soul is crushed with grief to the point of death. I can’t do this.”

By verse 46 He says, “My betrayer is here. Up, let’s go.”

Do you see it? What started as a prayer to take this away eventually became the strength and power He needed to say, “Bring it on.”

If you keep reading, He’s going to see Judas—His friend who has become His betrayer. Instead of walking up to Judas and hurling insults at him, He allows Judas to betray Him with a kiss—a gesture of friendship while stabbing Him in the back.

And Jesus, fresh off the power of prayer, fresh off the power of Gethsemane, walks up to Judas and says, “Do what you’ve got to do. Whatever you need to do, go ahead and do it. I’m ready.”

We see Jesus, the great Teacher, show us how to walk through the struggle and trouble of this world—even when it leads us to our breaking point.

We pray for God to remove the cup of suffering, but the result isn’t always the removal of the cup of sorrow, suffering, and grief. Sometimes the result is the power to walk through it.

As I walked into the hospice center, it felt eerie and surreal. What was my young, beautiful wife

doing in this place? It felt like a nursing home. As I made my way to her room, I saw that every other room held elderly patients. All you could hear was the sound of breathing machines or the deep, labored breaths of the other patients. My faith was diminishing with every step toward her room. Just moments before, I had fully believed Nancy would be awake and talking when I saw her again. I went from great hope to total devastation as nothing was getting better. It was getting worse.

I was alone with her for the first time in forty-eight hours. I fell next to her bed and cried out, “I am so sorry, Nancy. I did everything I could! I used the D-Factor.”

(The D-Factor was a phrase that came about in our first year of marriage. Friends would point out how easily God connected me with people and opened doors for me.)

I told her I had used every influence and connection I had to get her help. We had looked at every option there was. I had asked everyone to pray, and so many people had been praying. I kept saying, “I am so sorry. I am sorry. I am sorry.”

As a husband, you are to care for and protect your wife. There is nothing worse than the feeling that you have failed or that you are helpless to fix it. Men are fixers. "Let me fix it." But I could not fix it. What had happened was out of my control, but as a husband, when you cannot fix it, you feel as though you have failed. My covenant was to love, cherish, and protect her. Yet I could not protect her from the silent killer in her brain.

I did not have much time until others arrived at the hospice center, and I was no longer alone with her.

The head nurse told me my wife was beautiful and completely healthy except for this thing in her brain. She told me to go home and get some sleep because it was going to take a while for her to pass. They believed it would be about ten days.

I went home while her best friend stayed with her. Somehow, from sheer exhaustion, I fell asleep.

CHAPTER 18: IT IS WELL WITH MY SOUL

Thursday, December 8, 2022

As I woke up the next morning, the first thing that came to mind was one of Nancy's favorite songs—"It Is Well with My Soul." My prayer that morning slowly shifted from "God, do... God, act... my will... my wants..." to "Not my will, but Yours be done."

I whispered, "Jesus, Nancy is Yours. I place her completely in Your arms. Whatever You do, it is well with my soul."

I wasn't even thinking about school that day, but my daughter Jade said she wanted to go because she didn't want to fall behind. I knew she also needed a distraction from sitting at home listening to family talk about her mom and the situation. The morning started with tears from Nancy's parents, and they offered to take Jade to school on their way to the hospice center. After getting her out the door and talking with the boys, I texted Kim, who had stayed with Nancy all night. I told her Nancy's parents were on their way and asked her to make

sure they had some private time with Nancy, even though other great friends and prayer warriors were there.

Kim let me know that Nancy was resting peacefully and that they had been praying and worshiping in her room. She also said God was faithful and was ministering to her now. I didn't know until later what Kim had endured that night.

Shortly after that, I texted her: "I don't know if this is just emotion or the Holy Spirit, but I feel like we need to let her go into the hands of Jesus. And if He gives her back (resurrects her), He will. I just keep hearing one of her favorite songs—'It Is Well with My Soul.'"

Kim's Experience That Night (In Her Own Words):

When we walked into Nancy's room at the hospice, it felt different almost immediately. Quiet. Sad. Her dad called me into the hallway and said, "That is the death rattle, isn't it? I've heard it before." I said, "No!" I didn't think so, but I realize now I wasn't ready or couldn't grasp it. I had heard it before too,

but it didn't make sense in my head. I knew the atmosphere felt like death, so I walked back in and said, "We need to pray." Steve said, "Yes, there is a spirit of death here." Not surprising, I guess, since it was a hospice. We prayed and worshiped. The atmosphere did feel like it had changed.

Damian and her parents went home to sleep. Steve and Risa stayed a bit longer. We prayed. When it was just the three of us, the inhibitions were gone. I laid on top of Nancy like Elijah in the Old Testament—careful not to squish her—but begging God to breathe life into her and heal her. I wonder if she was laughing at me or wanted to tell me it was okay to let go. What I know is that I knew God was able to do it, and I was desperate for that miracle, even if it looked undignified.

Steve and Risa found a hotel nearby to sleep in. I was alone with her from 11:30 p.m. I could not sleep. I kept holding her hand. I wanted her to know she was not alone, though it was so quiet.

The night nurse was a large, tough woman. I imagine she was ex-military. She told me I had to "buck up" and that the journey ahead would be long. She said I needed to sleep. I thought she was a little

rude. I tried to sleep in the chair next to Nancy. I prayed. I was undone. I tried to move to the couch to lie down, and she began moaning. It was hard to hear. I asked for pain meds. I began to realize it was fluid in her lungs. I grabbed my stethoscope to confirm. Indeed, her lungs were filling with fluid. She was restless. I would pray and sing over her in worship, and she would calm. I'd lay down, and she would loudly moan, so I would get up again and pray and sing—again, she would calm.

There were moments I was scared. I was alone, and I began to realize the task ahead, and it felt too great. Jesus was there. Yet it may have been the hardest night of my life. I wouldn't trade it for the world. It was hard, and I am thankful it was me there instead of Damian or her kids. She was never alone, but they did not have to endure those moments that were truly scary and hard. They were also holy. I don't have words. That night cost my heart a lot; I felt poured out before the Lord. It was profound, and He gave me strength.

Sometime in the early morning hours, I decided her hair needed to be touched up. That week, we made sure to keep her moisturized and applied her

lip balm as she would have wanted. Her sister had braided her hair earlier, but it was in desperate need of a wash and brush. I couldn't wash it, and it was too snarled, so I wrapped the green handkerchief around her head in a cute du-rag. Nancy showered every day. I knew she hated having dirty hair, so I told her we would wash it as soon as we could. She was very out of it. I wanted to sponge her mouth to keep it moist, but she kept her teeth clenched. I think it was a neural response of some kind.

Steve and Risa came back around 7 a.m. I told them she had fluid in her lungs. We prayed, and her lungs cleared. I confirmed it with my stethoscope. We never heard another moan or rattle again. Her lungs remained clear. It was a miraculous moment. She was breathing peacefully. The day nurse came in at 7:30 a.m., and her pulse ox was 98%. She was so out of it but calm that I asked if there was any way to decrease the Ativan so she might be a little more alert when her parents and Damian came. They explained they had taken her off other seizure meds, and the Ativan was to keep any seizure risk at bay. The doctor came during rounds and said since she had not had a seizure, they could switch from every

two hours to every three, but to notify them immediately if she had one. We agreed. That was about 8 a.m.

Damian texted me that it had been a rough morning with emotions at home. He said her parents were on their way and to give them space. Her parents arrived. They wanted to worship and pray, and we did. Her friend LaVonne came from Florida and joined us also.

I sent Damian a text at 8:09 a.m. saying, “She is resting peacefully now. We are praying and worshipping. God is faithful. He is ministering to her.”

Damian texted me at 8:33 a.m.: “I don’t know if this is emotions or the Holy Spirit, but I feel like we need to let her go to the hands of Jesus, and if He gives her back (resurrects her), He will. I just keep hearing one of her favorite songs—‘It Is Well with My Soul.’” More people kept telling me that she had said she had peace on Monday before the biopsy when they reached out to her.

I responded, “I have been singing ‘It Is Well’ this morning. It is good. I trust Him. Damian, you have been given such wisdom. She is safe in His arms.”

We sang. I started to notice Nancy's color changing. Her feet were mottling (purple), and she looked bluish-gray. I knew the time to say goodbye was approaching. I texted Damian at 9:01 a.m., "You should come now if you can, friend."

He responded, "Okay, coming," at 9:09 a.m.

I felt led to play and sing "In Christ Alone" and then "10,000 Reasons." I felt like I was singing her into heaven. I can't quite describe those moments. I sat down on the left side of her. LaVonne was reading Scripture. Her mom and dad were on her right side. LaVonne began to command Nancy to wake up. I knew that was off. I felt the tension and knew she needed release instead. Again, I can't describe it, but I felt protected. I said firmly, "No," and told Nancy about Damian's text—that he felt we could let her go into Jesus' hands. "Blessed Be the Name of the Lord" was playing. A single tear fell from Nancy's closed right eyelid. I wiped it with my right hand. Immediately, I remembered wiping tears from the same cheek when I surprised her on Mother's Day in 2021, when she was preaching her first sermon. Now, I had my right hand on her chest and my left hand on her pulse. She took her last breath.

I felt her pulse gently slow to a stop. I said, “She’s gone.” LaVonne panicked.

Nancy’s parents seemed to already know. Her mom crawled up onto Nancy’s bed and clung to her body.

I went out to tell the nurse and doctor. The doctor looked at me like I was crazy and said in a patronizing way, “Oh honey, I don’t think so.” But when she came in, she saw that I was correct. They called the time of death at 10:10 a.m. I remember thinking they were wrong—she had been with Jesus for at least five minutes already.

I stepped out to call Damian. It was such a hard call. I can’t remember what I said past, “She’s gone.” I was sobbing. I remember thinking it wasn’t fair that he wasn’t there. I felt so broken for him, and yet immediately felt reassured that he was right where he was supposed to be—with the kids, exactly where Nancy would have wanted him to be.

As I hung up, I turned around. The night nurse was still there charting. She wrapped her big, strong arms around me. It was a powerful hug. I felt safe. She said, “You have no idea what your beautiful

friend was saved from. Glioblastoma is the worst kind of death. It is a miracle she went so fast. It makes no sense."

With the One She Loved the Most

At 10:10 a.m., my bride, the love of my life, the best mother in the world, went to be with the One she loved the most—Jesus. It was a holy, peaceful moment.

After receiving the phone call, I told my mom and my brother, who were at the house with me. The boys were upstairs. I called them into my bedroom and, with tears flowing down my face, told them that Mom had died. The shock and surreal feeling in moments like that feel like an out-of-body experience. We sat and cried together for a few minutes. I told them I needed to go to the hospice, and I asked if they wanted to see her. Thankfully, they both said no.

The drive was about thirty minutes, so my brother offered to drive me. I was thankful not to have to go alone. As I arrived, I saw my in-laws in the waiting room. We hugged and talked for a few moments,

then I made my way back to the room I had left just twelve hours earlier, believing this was going to be a long journey. When I saw Nancy's body lying there, it was just that—her body. I had always been attracted to Nancy and always thought she was beautiful, yet at that moment, she was not nearly as beautiful as she had been. It was a body without a soul, and I realized that even though Nancy was attractive on the outside, her soul was what made her truly beautiful. The longer I stood there, the less it seemed like Nancy.

Later that day, I went to the funeral home. The director, a woman, said, "Your wife is beautiful." Without hesitation, I replied, "You should have seen her alive. She is only half as beautiful as she was then."

I wasn't there very long because there was nothing more to say. Nancy was gone; only her body remained. I also had to pick up Jade from school and tell her that her mom had died. My brother drove me across town to her school. She attended a small Christian school and had just started there in August. On the way, I called the school and told the dean what had happened. We planned to have her come

to the office without her name being called over the speaker. Someone would escort her so she wouldn't be startled, because she's a smart girl and would immediately know something was wrong.

Fortunately, when we arrived, she was at lunch. The care director went and got her and brought her to the office without telling her what was going on. When she entered the lobby and saw me standing there, she said, "Oh, I'll go get my bag." The care director said, "Jade, don't worry about that." I looked at her and said, "You know why I'm here." We both started crying right there in the lobby. I held her tightly as we walked out. On the drive home, I sat in the back seat of my brother's truck with my arm around her the whole way.

CHAPTER 19: DEATH AND THE MYSTERY THAT FOLLOWS

On the morning of December 8th, between texting Kim and her telling me to come quickly, I received a Facebook message from another Kim. We had met Kim and her husband Steve when we were in mission school preparing to go to Mozambique, Africa, in 2006. Kim is a missionary kid, and at that time she and her husband Steve were heading to El Salvador, where she grew up, to serve as missionaries. After serving there for some time, they transferred to Nicaragua. They lead an impactful ministry there, along with a prayer room that has seen great miracles.

Steve and Kim had been fervently praying for Nancy since November 27th, when they saw our post on Facebook. They had been sending encouraging messages ever since. Then I received this message on December 8th:

“Woke up praying for her. Last night while praying I felt like she’s having a supernatural time right now with the Holy Spirit. Jesus is so close to her. We are believing with you for her complete healing.”

Here is the transcript of the voice memo that Kim sent us at 9:20 a.m., about thirty minutes before Nancy left us. I tried to leave the transcript as real as possible so you can capture the hesitation, wonder, and hope in her words.

“Hi Damian, Steve and I are actually together right now. We’re praying, and we have been praying for Nancy since the very beginning when you posted something here. I am praying and believing, and I’m still believing. Last night, I saw something. I asked the Lord to show me something, and I hesitated to share because I don’t know what it means.

I was praying, and what I saw was very clear. It was like a movie, and it was beautiful. But I don’t know, and I didn’t know if I should share this, but I felt like I should, so I asked Steve, and we prayed. I just decided to share it because it started scrolling on your Facebook. I didn’t want to ask you questions about Nancy’s family right now. I know you are in a time of pressing in for this moment for whatever God has and believing.

Anyway, I don’t wanna be a distraction or anything.

But I saw Nancy in my dream, hugging—with so much joy—this man, and he had dark hair. He had a beard, but not a big beard, just kind of framing his face. And I thought maybe a mustache—I don't know. It was dark, and he was a tall man, looked tall, not super tall. Just like, you know, tall. And I was like, is that her dad? I didn't know if her dad had passed or what happened with him, but she was hugging him with a father-like love. And I thought, was that supposed to represent Jesus? I didn't know what it meant.

Anyway, I saw that and then I saw her looking at her reflection in this beautiful water. It was just like either a lake or another body of water. I don't know what it was—like just water, ocean. I don't know, it was water.

She was just seeing all these things, and Jesus was standing with her, and she looked back. She kept looking back like about her family, and then when I was praying and seeing this, I was like, yes, God bring her back. She's seeing heaven as I'm picturing as I'm praying and seeing this. I saw it was like a movie. And she saw her reflection for the first

time, and everything was so beautiful, but she kept looking back and I saw you guys.

And this morning, I was thinking about her dad and whether he passed, and I started looking up pictures. I didn't want to ask you, and I just scrolled and got down to a picture of a man that I think was her posting. He died nine years ago and I started crying and I told Steve I said that's him. That's exactly who I saw and it was—it was her dad I think I don't know.

The post was about nine years ago, my dad passed, but it was the exact person. No lie, I would not tell you this is the craziest thing.

So I wrote you that she's having a supernatural time, but that's what I actually saw. I kept seeing her look back, and for me, that pushed faith in my heart like God she's seeing Your beauty. We can't stop being in awe of Your beauty and the beauty of heaven and the beauty of the reality of real life is this is just a temporary place of passing through. Heaven is our destiny. It's like we're on an airplane, like mission life, you know. But I kept seeing her look back, and it gave me a glimpse of hope. I have seen so many miracles happen in the last several years,

and I just—I am believing and standing with you, and so are Steve and our kids, actually all of us, that Nancy’s going to be healed. I’m believing. Anyway I just thought I’d leave this message I don’t know if it’s a comfort or what it is, but I just felt like I was supposed to share it because it was so clear and I was asking God to show me something to show you to tell you. Anyway, we are—we are praying and believing with you guys.”

I don’t even know what to do with that dream other than to say God is so good. God’s love, grace, and care for each of us is greater than we can imagine. If you knew Nancy—and even if you did not—after reading this, not many (or any) of us would question if Nancy is in heaven with Jesus. She loved Him. She continued to ask the Holy Spirit to search her heart and see if there was any wicked way in her, and she would repent for her sins—so much so that sometimes I was like, “I don’t know if that is a sin.” Yet she wanted a clean heart, and she taught my children the same.

At the same time, some have questioned privately—and even asked me—if I believed my dad went to heaven. I did not struggle with this, as I had

read his journals that we found in his home. In those journals, he is crying out to God to save him, to set him free from this bondage. But for some, dying from alcohol the way he did, in our human limited perspective, we put religious limits on the love and grace of God.

For some reason, God had given this missionary in Nicaragua a dream/vision of Nancy hugging my dad in heaven. Was it for someone in my family who struggled with those questions? For someone else who knew and loved him? Or it could be for you—the one reading this book—who doesn't know my dad but has struggled with understanding the grace God offers sinners who call on His name. Maybe you have questioned the eternal salvation of ones whose inward profession has not yet matched their outward appearance. Maybe they died, and their life was still messy.

Is God holy and does He judge sin? Yes! And yet God is a just judge who forgives us of our sins because of the finished work of Jesus on that cross. Jesus took my sin and your sin on Himself. We are no longer judged because of sin because of what Jesus did for us.

CHAPTER 20: MYSTERY OF PRAYER

I have helped plan a few funerals in my ministry life, but it was a strange role to plan a funeral as a husband. I'm not sure if it was a coping distraction or what, but I leaned into planning the best way I could. We wanted to celebrate Nancy's life, so I called it just that: a Celebration of Life. As I planned the service, I envisioned our life together as chapters in a book. We had lived a faith-filled, adventurous life together. We had been willing to go and do whatever we felt Jesus had put on our hearts. I had friends and family share from those different chapters of our life—those who were there and saw our love start and grow in Bible school and in Jamaica. Others shared who only knew us as pastors of River City Church.

As I prepared for the service, I felt a strange sense of pride in celebrating Nancy's life. I know that she finished her race full of faith and trust in Jesus. As Scripture tells us, I know she heard, "Well done, good and faithful servant." Nancy had finished her race here on earth, and I was a part of that race for nineteen years of us saying yes to God together. It

may seem strange, but as my helpmate, my spouse, lover, and best friend passed from this life into eternity, there was a sense of pride. We did not waste our life. We may not have accomplished everything in our hearts; we came short of leading well in every situation, but we did good and faithful work together. There were no regrets as we were faithful to each other and modeled a loving marriage to our kids and to others around us. We lived by faith.

Nancy was able to say what Paul said in 2 Timothy 4:7: “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.”

I was a part of that race for nineteen years, and there is a joy in knowing she has received her reward. Are there moments I am upset that she went before me and I am left leading my kids through the teenage years alone? Yes—more times than I want to admit. I have often felt she was better equipped for leading the kids at this time and that I should have been the one to go first. But here I am, and there is a more extraordinary grace than I have ever known in my life to be a single dad of three teenagers, so I cannot deny the goodness and nearness of God.

Many who came to the service said they had never attended a funeral like that before. Nancy's life preached the best sermon. The impact of her love for Jesus translated into a love for people and encouraged others to do the same. Still, to this day, many remember Nancy for her way of speaking life into hard, challenging situations. Soon after the funeral, my brother-in-law Jordan was so impacted by the conversations he had with people he had never met—who told him that Nancy led them to Jesus by making cookies, or Nancy influenced their marriage by speaking into the complex challenges—that he created a hashtag #NancysImpact. So many people wrote beautiful attributes about her.

I was amazed and had this realization. Growing up in a pastor's home, Nancy's dad always complimented her singing voice and wanted her to sing at church. As a married couple, I would share my thoughts in preparation for my sermons, and she had incredible insight and always encouraged me to rephrase things in a way that drew people closer, not push them away. So many times I would ask her to preach and would get frustrated when she said no. It wasn't until our last month at River City Church that

she finally preached. It was an incredible message, and I am thankful I can share it with my kids as they get older. The realization is that even though she never sang at church and only preached once in our nineteen years together, her influence without a microphone was greater than mine with a microphone. I still enjoy preaching and believe it substantially impacts lives, but this reminder has caused me to see again that ministry is not what is done on the stage; we are to minister to one another. I now desire to slow down, sit with people, and hear their stories.

People have stories of faith, hope, doubt, and pain that they want to share, and they need to share. We have to be willing to slow down, ask questions, and listen. Since going through the tremendous loss that I have gone through and as I have shared openly about the doubts and challenges, others have trusted me with their most painful stories.

The statement is true: people resonate more with your pain than your victories. Yet we are prone to share our accomplishments, successes, and wins. There is a time and place to celebrate our achievements and truly honor God because every

good and perfect gift comes from Him—even our ability to work hard and succeed. I believe a more powerful witness is when someone shares about the pain or tragedy and doubt they have gone through and yet they still have faith to believe and even declare that God is good. The longer I live, the more I am drawn to those who acknowledge that this life here is difficult; it has challenges, trouble, and pain... yet God is good, and God is faithful. Even when God does not do as I want Him to do or act as I want Him to... there is something deep within me that wants to—and even needs to—trust that God is good.

Questions and Mysteries

As I continued to walk in those early days of heavy grief, I struggled because my faith was different than it once was. I still believe God is over it all. Yet our experiences shape us. I still believe that God can do what is impossible. I believe that we should pray for healing and that miracles will happen in our lives. But what if, from our limited perspective, it seems as though the one true, all-loving, and all-powerful God did nothing? What do we do with that?

When this happens—when we are disappointed by hope—we are left in this puddle on the floor, distraught and broken, and we do not understand why God would answer the prayers of a lost bike in Chicago but seem distant and unconcerned about the life of a young, loving wife and mother.

At that moment, all the answered prayers for little things seemed too ridiculous to ask for compared to this one request. I questioned the purpose of prayer. It was hard to pray. During those first months, it was nearly impossible to pray out loud with my kids. As soon as I did, tears would start to come. I knew they were struggling with the purpose of prayer and could not comprehend why God did not answer our prayers.

Sometimes I wonder if Spirit-filled believers would handle the silence better if miracles and healing were not part of their beliefs. As we started attending church again in early 2023, my kids did not want to attend churches discussing miracles and healing. I get it. I did not want to either. By that summer my kids were attending church camp with their cousins in Ohio. My son was not excited about the church services at camp. He said, “I just don’t trust God.” It

is hard to hear your kids say what they really feel about God and prayer, but I love that they have been open and honest with what they feel. Even a year and a half after Nancy has been with Jesus, my youngest really struggled with faith that God can heal or even help. One night he said, "I believe God can forgive my sins, but I don't know if He answered my prayers because He has not even healed my stuffy nose or a headache." That is heartbreaking for such a young boy to wrestle with immense doubt. Yet this same child will not go to sleep without me praying with him every night. And that is hope and faith. Even in my doubts and frustration with God I am still going to pray because what else can I do?

So what do we do with all of that? How do we approach the God of the Bible? What do we do with Jesus when what we read does not align with what we experienced?

I had to lean into Scripture and the mystery of God. I have seen that God is much more mysterious than I ever thought. Our lives are not as predictable as we might have thought.

The questions of prayer and its purpose plagued me, and then I remembered a teaching I had heard

from Tyler Stanton of Bridgetown Church. This helped me to start to see my way through the web of confusion the questions of prayer had brought.

Ask, Seek, and Knock

In Matthew 7:7-8, Jesus offers a powerful encouragement for us to engage in prayer: “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.”

These words can ignite a spark of inspiration within us—who wouldn’t want to jump into a prayer meeting right now?

Yet when we reflect on our own life experiences, these verses can feel misleading. Are they truly as straightforward as they seem? Do they risk being false advertising? Or is there a deeper meaning that has been lost over time?

At the heart of this passage are three verbs: Ask, Seek, Knock. Each represents a step in a common journey of prayer—a journey that often begins with a specific need but ends in a relationship far richer

than we might have anticipated. Jesus reveals a hidden invitation within the act of praying.

Ask is where many of us begin. We often turn to prayer because of a pressing need, be it a health crisis, a job loss, or the heartache of missing a loved one during the holidays. In my weekly men's group, we regularly share prayer requests, and it's these needs that draw us into prayer. Our petitions are often rooted in diagnosis, loss, or anxiety—realities that prompt us to seek divine intervention.

Once we ask, we are led to seek. This verb appears throughout Scripture, always pointing us back to God Himself. The narratives of kings, the poetry of the Psalms, and the proclamations of the prophets consistently encourage us to seek after the Lord. In this context, seeking becomes a vital part of our prayer life.

Through our asking, we discover a deeper yearning—not just for solutions to our problems but for a relationship with the Creator. In the midst of our challenges, seeking becomes a path that leads us toward God's presence. It's in this seeking that we realize our greatest need is not merely for gifts or answers, but for connection with Him.

Finally, we arrive at “knock.” In biblical terms, knocking evokes the imagery of table fellowship, reminiscent of Revelation 3:20: “Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they will be with me.” This invitation to “eat with me” signifies a profound level of intimacy and acceptance. Jesus faced criticism for dining with sinners and tax collectors, demonstrating that eating together was more than a meal; it was an affirmation of a relationship.

Similarly, when we knock, we are seeking not just gifts but the Giver Himself. In our prayers, we may receive various gifts and answers, but the greatest gift—one that we are guaranteed to receive—is the presence of God. The essence of prayer is this divine interaction with the Creator of the universe. We are invited into a relationship where He delights in our presence just as we learn to delight in His.

Thus, the journey of prayer starts with our needs but culminates in a deep, abiding relationship with God. It’s a transformative process, one that teaches us to recognize that our most profound longing is not just for what we can get, but for who God is. As we

navigate this journey of asking, seeking, and knocking, we discover that the ultimate destination of our prayers is not merely answers, but the intimacy of knowing our Creator.

Remember how I told you that my brother-in-law created a Facebook hashtag #NancysImpact?

This was a post that made me cry but also was a true example of this prayer journey.

(Emily) It has taken me a few days to process what has happened here. I have checked the feed daily. I have read others' beautiful posts. I have taken the time to listen to the different videos, songs, and such... I have felt such sadness as I have been trying to find the right words.

I met Damian and Nancy as I was in the middle of a divorce. I moved into a place with a very young Olivia, and fortunately the McCrinks were my neighbors. I found myself very drawn to them—their warmth, their kindness, their humor. I quickly realized I had never met anyone like Nancy. She was so genuine to her core. I felt like she would always be my friend.

As we moved around, we slowly started to lose touch, but it never stopped me from checking in on their beautiful family on Facebook to see what adventure they were on next. I'm so sad that I feel that I took for granted that I would see her again.

So for my #NancysImpact story I'd like to share this: It's been a minute since I've really prayed. Here and there, while driving or in the middle of the night when I'm up with the baby, I find myself talking to God. Sort of like a check-in. When all of this started to happen with Nancy, I found myself praying every day and praying hard. I found myself asking others to do the same, and before you knew it, Nancy had thousands of people across the country—and maybe even the world—praying in unison. That's really powerful. Sometimes when the outcome is not what we wanted, we feel like "it didn't work." But I bet if you had the chance to ask Nancy if it worked, she'd tell you, "You bet it did."

Ask, seek, knock...

Here's the prayer journey according to Jesus: we come for gifts, we get the Giver, and we find ourselves seated at His table—welcomed, accepted, and loved. Ask. Seek. Knock.

Mother Teresa says it this way: “Prayer enlarges the heart until it’s capable of containing God’s gift of himself.”

Now, all that’s great, but of course some of you are already thinking like me: Yeah, that’s beautiful and great, but Nancy still died from a brain tumor in just thirteen days.

What about when my asking doesn’t result in receiving, my seeking doesn’t lead to any finding, and despite my knocking, this door is not opening?

This, for me, falls into the sovereignty and grace of God that we cannot see in the moment. Some things I will not understand this side of eternity. Yet along the way we get glimpses of understanding. Maybe not full understanding, but some.

Update from Kim Aneed (Nancy’s best friend)

On February 1, 2023, almost two months since Nancy went to heaven, I was in the airport preparing to fly to Arizona for a personal retreat before meeting friends. I was bringing my questions with me and had been asking God to meet me during that time to mend and bind up my broken heart. I received a text

from Damian while waiting to board. He was telling me about a book he was reading by Dr. Lee Warren—I've *Seen the End of You*. He sent a picture of a paragraph in the book: "Glioblastoma multiforme, Grade IV astrocytoma, malignant glioma. This tumor goes by a lot of names, but they're just aliases, a.k.a.'s for what ought to be called the brain's assassin. A stone-cold killer. It takes your mind long before it takes you. GBM is pretty much the most malignant, mutative, destructive form of human cancer."

Immediately I had a thought which I knew was the voice of God: "He did answer prayers. The prayers He answered were Nancy's." I remembered Nancy's sister saying the night before the biopsy she was in such pain that Nancy asked Jesus to take her. I was in the airport, overcome with certainty that He answered her prayer in His love for her. I finally got what the nurse was telling me when she said, "You have no idea what your beautiful friend was saved from. Glioblastoma is the worst kind of death. It is a miracle she went so fast. It makes no sense."

Nancy Grace was covered with grace upon grace. She died peacefully, knowing she was loved,

knowing her husband was with her babies. Her kids never had to see her suffer. She loved Jesus more than almost anyone I have ever met. He loved her too.

The Invisible Hand of God

This is not how I wanted our story to end. This was not what I ever envisioned our life would be like today. We spend our time planning, dreaming, and even praying for the best possible story, hoping that one day we could tell our grandkids—and maybe even our great-grandkids—of our unwavering commitment and God’s faithfulness in our lives.

How do we respond to a God of infinite power and yet who, at times, responds with deafening silence? What do we do with the God who gives a family dog in response to some prayers and nothing in response to others?

We go back to the Word of God—to what we know is true and not what we feel. Our feelings mislead us. We trust that we only see in part what He is doing. We acknowledge that we live in a fallen, broken world where sin, sickness, and disease have entered in. We know that it was not meant to be this

way, and we hold on to our blessed hope that it will not always be this way. Jesus will return and make all things new again. Until that day comes, here I am in the middle, holding on to the fact that God is good, and this is hard.

On the other side of the struggle, the doubts, the pain, and the grief, we somehow find a way to pray again, to have faith again that God is not as distant as we felt He was, but in fact He is close to the brokenhearted.

If you have made it this far in my story, thank you. We are coming to a close even though my story is not done. There is still more to be written as I know that God has some way He is going to redeem this pain. My role is to slow down and listen for His still small voice and look for His invisible hand that has led me this far.

Even in my anger, doubt, and pain I can't deny that the Holy Spirit has been leading my steps. Let me go back to **Psalms 37:23-25 NLT** "The LORD directs the steps of the godly. He delights in every detail of their lives. Though they stumble, they will never fall, for the LORD holds them by the hand. Once I was young, and now I am old. Yet I have

never seen the godly abandoned or their children begging for bread.”

This story started when I was young, falling in love with the love of my life... now I am old—well, older. I can say as I have tried my best to trust God in all situations we have never been abandoned or gone without. Even what seemed like a mistake He will turn it for good.

One more conversation with Nancy that I have recalled is that once we had kids, every few years when we were out alone, Nancy would start the discussion: “If I die or if you die?” I hated and tried to avoid these conversations. Yet Nancy would bring them up as she read about the importance of these conversations in a marriage book.

As I would be reluctant to engage, she would start, “If I die, I want you to have me cremated. I don’t want you to spend all that money on a casket and tombstone. Instead, take the kids on an incredible vacation.” She would continue, “I want you to be sad for a while, but I want you to get remarried. You are a good husband, and I don’t want you to be alone.” Then she would ask, “Do you think you would move to Georgia if I died?” To which I would reply, “I don’t

think so. The kids don't think of Georgia as home; they just visit Grandma there. Besides, our community is here." Nancy would always end the conversation with a challenge: "I think you should pray about moving to Georgia if I were to die."

I remember us having this conversation a few times, and every time I did not like to even imagine that this would be my reality. I truly thought we would be together until we were both in our eighties or that Jesus would return before that time came.

Now I look back at those conversations as a gift. When I was at the funeral home and the director was telling me how beautiful Nancy is, I felt the need to do the open casket so everyone could see her lovely face one more time. But her request came back to me, and I was able to make the decision with confidence that cremation was what she wanted.

Shortly after the funeral, Marc and Kim invited us to join them in February on their vacation in Hawaii. I told them that I did not want to bring my sad grieving family on their Hawaii vacation. They both insisted, and Marc even said, "We can bury our sorrows in the Pacific Ocean." A few weeks later, I looked up the price of plane tickets because they told me that the

house was already covered and we just had to get there. The price was \$3,600 for all of us to fly there. I was not sure if this was wise with so much unknown in my future. Yet God was already working it out. During our time in the hospital, the network that we planted our church with, Church Multiplication Network, sent a request to raise funds for us. A day after I looked at the plane tickets, one of the directors texted me to tell me that \$3,600 was donated and they would be sending the check that day.

Because we were seen and loved by God and His people, I was able to fulfill another desire of Nancy's—take the kids on an amazing vacation. It was incredible as we spent one week visiting my brother in Kauai and one week with our friends that are like family on the Big Island.

“If I die, I think you should pray about moving to Georgia.” Nancy had said this a few times, and isn't it fascinating that we had moved to Georgia and been settled in our house and had the kids in school just months before this unexpected tragedy happened? The way we arrived here was through what seemed like a mistake, through a misstep.

“Though they stumble, they will never fall, for the LORD holds them by the hand.”

That is the love and grace of God—that even through what seems like a mistake and bad decision was Him quietly leading us, connecting us with His people that have been His hands and feet to us through this most difficult time.

I could go on and on about the invisible way that God’s hand has led me through this journey of life. This is a great reminder that even when I feel let down or disappointed by God, He is not as distant as my feelings want to believe. He is close. He is working in the details, and I can say that He is God and He is good.

Will You Hope Again?

Let me close with a familiar story from the Book of Acts—in Acts 12.

During a time of great tension between the early Christians and the Jewish authorities, King Herod Agrippa decided to assert his power. He began persecuting the Church, targeting the apostles to gain favor with the Jewish people.

Peter, one of Jesus' closest disciples, was arrested and thrown into prison, chained between two soldiers, to prevent any chance of escape.

As Peter sat in prison, the Church was fervently praying for him. They gathered in the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark, where many believers had come together, pleading with God for Peter's release. Their prayers were filled with urgency and hope.

That night, as Peter slept soundly between the guards, an angel of the Lord appeared in the prison. The prison was suddenly filled with a bright light, and the angel struck Peter on the side, waking him up. "Get up quickly!" the angel said. As Peter stood up, his chains fell off his wrists. The angel then instructed him to put on his clothes and sandals.

Confused but obedient, Peter followed the angel, who led him out of the prison. The guards were completely unaware of what was happening. They passed through the first and second guard posts and reached the iron gate leading to the city. Miraculously, the gate swung open by itself, and they stepped outside into the street.

Once they were free, the angel suddenly left Peter. Now fully aware of his miraculous escape, Peter realized that this was not a vision but a real event. He hurried to the house of Mary, where the believers were still gathered, praying for his safety.

When Peter knocked on the door, a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer. She recognized Peter's voice and was so overwhelmed with joy that she ran back inside without opening the door. "Peter is at the door!" she exclaimed.

The believers, still praying, dismissed her excitement, thinking she was out of her mind. They insisted that she must be mistaken or that perhaps it was his angel. But Peter continued knocking until they finally opened the door. When they saw him, they were astounded!

Peter motioned for them to be quiet and explained how the Lord had sent an angel to rescue him from prison.

This is an amazing, incredible story, but look at the setup of this story.

Acts 12:1-3 "It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church,

intending to persecute them. He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. When he saw that this met with approval among the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also.”

What? James was just arrested, most likely put in the same prison as Peter. I would assume if they prayed for Peter, I am sure they prayed for James. This was Jesus’ brother so of course they did, right? Yet James was put to death. What? The prayer for Peter results in an angel showing up and doing the impossible, and yet James dies. Why?

The truth is, I don’t know why.

I don’t know why some people are healed and others are not. I don’t know why my wife died in thirteen days from brain cancer and others are healed.

But what I see here is the greatest miracle of all: a body of believers who knew James died and still had faith to believe and pray for Peter. That is incredible.

In Luke 18:8—in the parable of the persistent widow, a teaching about prayer—Jesus says, “When

the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?”

After disappointment in life and walking through a time that seems like God is silent, will you still have faith? Will you still keep asking, keep seeking, and keep knocking?

Will you pray for the next person to be healed when your loved one was not healed? Will you pray for your friend's prodigal when your prodigal has not come home yet? Can you pray with faith for someone needing a job or financial help when your own answer has not yet come?

My hope and prayer is that you will. You might not be able to today or even tomorrow, but over time, as you open your heart to dare to trust God again—even in your pain, hurt, and disappointment—you will find yourselves conversing with your Creator one day.

Epilogue

As I wrote in the opening of this book, I want to remind you that your story matters. Your experiences matter, and your story is worth telling. When life does not go as expected, when what seems impossible happens to you and you are left disoriented, you question what you thought you knew about love, life, God, and the promises of Scripture. Don't run from the pain. Don't run from the questions you have for God and about His Word. Lean in. Lament. Yell. Tell God of all the pain, hurt, and disappointment. And allow Jesus—the One who said He is near to the brokenhearted—to be near to you. May you find the strength and insight to say that life is hard and full of pain and sorrow, yet God is good in the middle of it all.

Thank you for reading my story. My story is not over. It is still being written, just as your story is not over. You still have a story to tell. My prayer for you is that you join me in learning to thank God for what was, accept what now is, and have an expectant faith for what will be.