

Sample from Glimpses of Grace: Stories of Hope

8

Descent into Grief

So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good. 1 Peter 4:19

WHAM! POW! WHAM! POW!

I did not roll with the punches. I went down for the count, stunned by the multiple blows of death and grief that battered my family in an eight-month period.

July 28 – WHAM!

"Your daughter has gone into cardiac arrest – we are working with her in a life threatening situation."

Shela had spent her life battling a neuromuscular disease which cripples and eventually kills by destroying the body's muscle mass. We adopted Shela when she was four months old. Her illness was diagnosed on her first birthday. She never weighed more than 55 pounds and was unable to walk, crawl, or dress herself.

Despite her disability, Shela was a committed Christian. She graduated from high school with honors and successfully completed her first year of college. These accomplishments followed a wheelchair fall in seventh grade that led to brain surgery!

Interaction with her four younger brothers was completely normal. She attacked them in irritable moments with her electric wheelchair, affectionately known as Leggs. In those moments we comfortably forgot her disease was terminal.

My imagined parting with Shela included a peaceful home-going surrounded by family as we gently released her into God's care. It was not to be that way at all.

We admitted Shela to the hospital for I.V. fluids following a viral infection. She could not regain enough strength to swallow properly and had lost nine pounds. After a temporary feeding tube failed, the doctor decided to insert a permanent one. The "simple" surgery would take twenty minutes. Her dad lifted a fearful Shela onto the surgery cot, kissed her, and said, "We'll see you later, Bebe."

Our friends and pastor rejoiced with us when the doctor called to say the procedure was successful. Shela was awake, *alert*, and would return soon. Everyone left except my husband and me.

An hour later she was not back and the first "wham" knocked me breathless. Shela had responded, smiled, then complained of weakness. Her heart stopped as the tube that would breathe for her was reinserted. She was declared dead two hours later.

Dead – gone from us at age nineteen, in a sterile recovery room without goodbyes, without our presence. . . and so began my "descent into grief."

We had a memorial celebration that focused on Shela's courage, the lessons she taught us, and the promise of her eternal life and healing. I tried to refocus my mind after living life always

Sample from Glimpses of Grace: Stories of Hope

mindful of her care and her needs. My sons seemed able to be honest and open with their loss and I was grateful.

We also shared our home with my 93 year old grandmother, who wondered aloud, "*Why not me instead? I'm ready to go home.*" Grief took its toll, but I moved forward.

November 15 – POW!

"Your dad is in critical condition in the hospital here – someone needs to come."

This call came from a stranger. My dad had divorced my mom when I was seven, virtually abandoning me and my three brothers. As an adult I corresponded on holidays and sent pictures of my children. He lived with my stepmother in another state.

Now he had advanced lung cancer. My stepmother was disabled, so we needed to be there. I arrived to discover a vague shadow of the man I had known. I shared with him that in his absence as a little girl I had come to know God as my "Everlasting Father" and that He would give His Son as our Savior and eternal life as a gift. He listened and even wept quietly, but never indicated a willingness to receive that gift. I urged him to consider it and read him Psalm 23, telling him how precious this Shepherd's Psalm had been to Shela.

I returned home and Dad died one week later. I never heard him express regret at abandoning us – I never received the blessing little girls seek from their dad. I now confronted an incredible two-way grief.

We survived Christmas even as my grandmother mourned the loss of her only child, this son she had not seen in years. Putting up Shela's angel tree, we remembered the joy she took in these little celestial ornaments. We talked of the delight she would have found in the light flurry of snow on Christmas Day. I had been knocked to the mat, but was attempting to get off the canvas.

January 30 – WHAM!

"Your grandmother will die without surgery – it's her only chance."

Not again – not now! My heart screamed as the surgeon gave me the responsibility for this decision. My independent, fun-loving grandmother had been reduced in the last two weeks to being completely cared for. What began as a virus had progressed until she experienced incapacitating weakness. Doctors determined there was an abdominal perforation that demanded risky surgery.

As she stared through a frightened haze of morphine, I told her our decision and the surgery began. But she never regained consciousness, going "home" twelve hours later.

I now had two small estates to settle, with the accompanying piles of paperwork and three wrenching losses to grieve. I clung to all I knew of who God is; a sovereign, loving, faithful Creator who promises in Jeremiah 29:31 that He has a perfect plan for my life. But I considered staying "down for the count."

I visited a Christian counselor who explained the physical reaction my body was experiencing, not only to grief, but to the loss of adrenalin which had allowed me to care for Shela so many years. I struggled to see purpose in it all as I sorted through the treasures of our two absent family members.

Sample from Glimpses of Grace: Stories of Hope

Midnight, March 19 – POW!

"Your husband has had a heart attack. We are placing him in Intensive Care. You should probably come."

I hung up the phone and bowed my head in disbelief. Surely this was a dream (a nightmare). In a blur I called our pastor and Tom's parents. Then I made the familiar trip to the emergency room.

Earlier, my 44 year old husband had complained about lingering indigestion. Because he had a family history of heart disease, we were alert to these symptoms although they seemed mild. I urged him to be examined. He showered and drove himself to the hospital while I put our children to bed.

Assuming it would be a few hours until I'd hear anything, I laid on the bed and dozed off. I was startled into reality by the ringing telephone and the voice of the E.R. nurse.

Tom apologized for the "poor timing" of his heart attack as he was rolled into the ICU, stabilized, and isolated until morning. Tom's mother stayed while I rushed home briefly to monitor a sick toddler's temperature.

Thankfully, his condition continued to improve. After further testing, he was placed on medication and given recommendations for lifestyle changes. For now, we were spared another painful confrontation with grief.

Prostrate from the canvas, I asked God for proper response to these trials. What was the balance between continuing to trust and honor Him, yet also allowing myself to experience the necessary sorrow? Joni Eareckson Tada wrote in *A Quiet Place in a Crazy World* that quiet trust is actually a sacrifice of praise and believes *"Embracing the will of God even when the feelings aren't there, is offering to God your heart, wholly dedicated to His purpose."*

God also reminded me that the death of His saints is precious in His sight (Psalm 116:15 KJV). That gives me comfort to accept the manner of home-going my family members experienced, however disappointing it was to me.

I have no great insight into finding peace and strength in the turmoil that accompanies loss. But I believe that God would have us wait on Him for healing, be patient with ourselves, and be ready to release the loss little by little, at appropriate times.

A father, whose son died unexpectedly, indicated, *"God's plans for my son were not my plans. But God's plans are perfect. I accept them."* A friend of Norman Vincent Peale's concluded that it would be better to rejoice that our loved ones had lived among us than to continually grieve their loss. Such insights helped me to begin emerging from the boxing ring floor, grope to my knees and prepare once again to stand.

My "Descent into Grief" robbed me of pat phrases and easy answers. But God has promised us in I Peter 5:10 (KJV) that after we *"have suffered awhile, He will perfect, confirm, strengthen, and establish"* us. My "descent" will be followed by "ascent" as I wait before Him.

Descent Into Grief" appeared in
The Lookout in November, 1999.

"Descent into Grief" received
the "Best Submission" award at Lifeway Writers Workshop in August, 1995.

