HEALING

A BROKEN HEART

Biblical Support/Practical Advice



Orville Wright

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To Cory

You brought such joy to my life while you were here;

You bring such purpose to it now that you’re gone.

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Chapter One

“Courage is being scared to death; and saddling up anyway” (John Wayne)

That from the lips of American icon John Wayne! Life in many ways can be a **war of attrition**. We begin our journey with naiveté. It is gradually sacrificed as we negotiate the mine fields of this life, for better or for worse. Circumstances chip away at our innocence. Whether we become jaded or jovial, change is inevitable. Life is a battlefield, and like it or not, we need to acquire the skills to be able to conquer ground. Our Christian beliefs equip us with tools to succeed. We were given many commands, very few which involved retreating. Our lives unfold, and each victory brings with it knowledge and experience. Knowledge can even be harvested from defeat. Building upon and using that knowledge endows us with wisdom.

"Wisdom" is an important word, and merits further discussion. Wisdom is generally viewed as a cherished reward earned over years. We wander through a valley of tears, and then rise to conquer a mountain of fears. Wisdom speaks of strength, a steadiness and stillness drawn from skirmishes and past triumphs. It is an analgesic that ministers to a broken heart.

Truth: Wisdom comes with wounds

I now approach the age when I might be considered "wise". I confess I am an actor given a part I am unable to play. We cannot distance ourselves from our imperfections. If I am indeed wise, I am wise, but scarred. Others are wise, but bitter. Others yet are wise, but sad. Fortunate ones are wise, and peaceful. I believe we can claim the title, but only with the requisite asterisk. Wisdom does not render us immune from the scar tissue of life. Solomon’s words, captured in Ecclesiastes at the end of his life, are written proof. I like to consider myself a warrior on a Christian battlefield, with the scars to prove it. I have been wounded. I have ventured too far and learned too much to simply throw in the towel and walk off the battlefield now. I have too many victories under my belt. I may limp over the finish line, but I will cross it.

I make these distinctions because we have been taught to believe in happy endings. The final pages of my life on this earth, yet to be written, will feature a wide and realistic mix of emotions. We came into this world crying, and there's no guarantee that we won't leave with unfinished business. Cradles and coffins are both made out of the same perishable material.

We are conditioned through countless movies that loose ends will be tied up before the credits roll. The truth is that those final pages of my life, yet to be written, may leave many questions unanswered on this side of glory. That thought leaves us troubled. We have made great strides in technology. I can speak into my computer now, and my voice-activated software will notate every word I say. I can vocalize a question, and my search engine will point me to the answer. What my computer cannot tell me, however, is why I am here; why bad things happen to good people. More importantly, there is no software developed that can make the pain of a broken heart go away. We are human. We want answers. Answers supply us with security. We walk in unison shouldering a silent insecurity that brings into question the meaning of life, and our purpose in it. Doses of faith give us all of our encouragement, but we sometimes stumble through life’s most tragic moments.

We are taught as Christians that we are to live in victory. “Live in victory” could be interpreted as somewhat passive; there is nothing passive about achieving and maintaining victory in this life. My battle has been *ongoing*, and I celebrate victories while I *continue* to fight against circumstances that call me to the battlefield once more. We cannot afford to let our guard down this side of glory.

Let me be clear. Our battle ceases when we leave this life behind for a glorious union with our Savior. We are talking of searing pain in our hearts that will one day dissipate and disappear. Our discussion now, however, is solely focused on our experience on this earth. This earth can be physically and emotionally barren, raw and desolate. The latter years on this earth may be the toughest test of faith we will face.

Let me speak to the issue of insecurity for a moment. Again, this is a revelation that only came to me as I edge ever closer to the end of my time

here on this earth. I walked in that “silent insecurity” I just spoke of for years.

I remember when I was young, *I feared that I wasn’t loved*. As I grew as a child, my father was the strong, silent type. I assumed he loved me, but by some unwritten rule we never expressed those feelings as a family. I look back now, and see a child who would have done anything to feel the acceptance of his father. What I wouldn’t have done to feel his warm, accepting embrace! His father before him was even more detached and unavailable, so I understand now the struggle that passed down through generations, and the weak hand he was dealt.

The day came when I made a journey across the country to visit my parents during a hot summer in a humid Florida sun. I found my father was in very poor health, and my mother worried. “He has given up….he won’t fight” she told me, tears welling up in her eyes. They had been together for over fifty years, and each knew no other way of life. I was speechless- I was verbally bankrupt, no encouragement to offer. We always held each other at a distance. I stood as I prepared to return home, and looked down upon my father. His legs were swollen; an oxygen tank by his side; his face had a finality etched into it that told me in my heart this would be the last time I would see him.

I stood near my vehicle, but couldn’t move. All of the work I had done to become a better man was on the line. This was the test of all tests. Could I jettison my pride? I took a step, then two. I walked up to his folding chair, leaned over and hugged him. As he put his arm around my shoulder, I softly told him, “I love you”. It was the first time in our entire relationship those words were uttered. It was as if I had broken a curse. I received no reply, but I didn’t need one.

I returned home to Texas. Three days later, my youngest son Cory was waiting for me in the driveway as I returned home from work. “Your father passed away last night” he said in quiet tones. I walked quickly past him into my bedroom, closing the door. Another generational curse- I didn’t want him to see me cry.

We all share insecurities, some linger throughout our lives. Death and tragedy can shake us to our very core. We need not walk down this dark and lonely path without hope. Fear melts before courage. Despair has its remedy

in optimism. A broken heart is not beyond repair. Insecurity is a virus that can attack, but should not disable us.

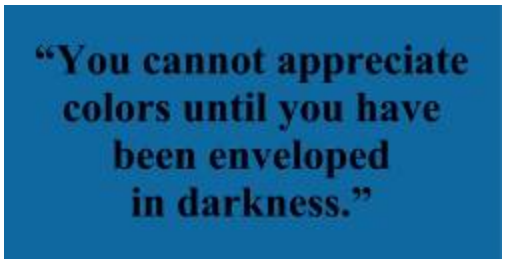
I can remember when I was young how *fearful I was of the dark*. At night, I would make sure the covers completely covered me; I feared that even one foot left out could serve as bait for some imaginary monster. He never came, of course. Oh, and the driveway…..We had a long driveway from the house to the road, where my brother and I would meet the school bus every morning…….in the dark. I listened for the bus as it made its way down the quiet country road. In the winter the wind would howl and the snow would blow. It would hit my exposed face and feel like a thousand needles piercing my skin. None of that bothered me when compared to my fear of the dark. I timed my run through the darkness so that I would meet the bus in stride. Fear makes us do silly things.

Later in life, the fear of the dark left me. As you grow and mature, old fears seem to fade into the background. Likewise, as we grow and mature as Christians, issues of greater consequence surface and have to be dealt with.

I found it interesting how the word "wisdom" finds it's meaning in two Greek words used in the New Testament. "*Sophia*" is wisdom in theory, insight into the true nature of things. A second Greek word "*Pheonesis*", used in Paul's Letters to the Ephesians and Colossians, is wisdom in practice, applying accumulated wisdom to events in everyday life. Notice that one is passive, and the other is active. Remember this theme. Wisdom not just accumulated, but used. That use brings both growth and a greater sense of security. That is assuming that we are a **willing**, **active party** to the process of spiritual growth. Allow me to state a fundamental principle that will be an overarching theme of this book:

"**We were not put on earth to be passive spectators in this life standing still; we were designed and empowered to be active participants moving forward"**

Later on in Ecclesiastes, Solomon reinforces our theme with this admonition: **"He who observes the wind will not sow. And he who regards the clouds will not reap" (11:4).** We must forge ahead, regardless of what may lie ahead.



The most popular preachers of our generation are those who often make promises that God has **no intention** of keeping. Why do I say that? Character is forged through adversity, *not through prosperity*. Prosperity preachers fail to understand the multi-faceted plan of God. Yes, we *may* prosper materially, but will only appreciate it because of contrasting adversity. You can’t appreciate colors until you have been enveloped in darkness. Has God left you alone in crisis? No, God hasn’t disappeared. He steps back at times to see what kind of return He is getting on His investment. How will I respond? Is my ability to handle adversity improving? God is in the business of ordering every step we take (Psalm 37:23). In the symphony of life, each note has been penned by God Himself, a cacophony of sounds and experiences uniquely tailored to each individual. This is the same God that knows the number of hairs of your head (Luke 16:7).

I believe there is purpose to be found. I believe there is peace to be embraced. There lies the battle before us, and therein lies our greatest challenge in this life: finding that peace on a barren, sin-scarred planet. Let’s take a second glance at the steps we have taken, and see if they speak of **randomness, or purpose**. Did I suffer loss for no reason?

By now you are beginning to realize that this is not your ordinary Christian best seller. There are too many books on the market that unrealistically lead Christians to believe that they will emerge victorious in every situation. Theoretically and theologically this is true, for God has a purpose for every situation. Not every victory brings celebration, however. Day by day I am gradually emerging victoriously from the challenge of facing the loss of someone I dearly loved. You won’t see me cheering. Life can be gritty, and real. The Christian life is no different. Christian authors focus on victory, at times at the expense of reality.

If I could obtain God's permission, I would change the name of the Book of Ecclesiastes to "Solomon's Sorrow". Listen closely to his words. You may find meaning in circumstances in your life that now appear mundane; purpose in life events that now appear to be tragic and senseless. You will definitely find sources of much needed strength, encouragement and direction.

I remember as a child watching "Wide World of Sports" every weekend with Curt Gowdy. Every show began with film of a victor, as well as an athlete who fell woefully short. "The thrill of victory, and the agony of defeat" was the theme, as a skier fell helplessly and dreadfully down the side of a mountain. The same holds true for life. The most devout Christian can suffer through a season of doubt. Traumatic events in your life can stop you dead in your tracks. In this period of weakness, you may be tempted to retreat to the behaviors and beliefs that we will explore in Ecclesiastes. Let's vow together that we are better than that.

Chapter Two

The Day of Darkness

"But if a man lives many years and rejoices in them all, yet let him remember the days of darkness, for they will be many." (Ecclesiastes 11:8)

I have been wanting to write this book for a long time. I have long been fascinated with the Book of Ecclesiastes, the Old Testament Book written by Solomon ages ago. It speaks of the randomness and insecurities I have been writing about. I have been drawn back to it, and have studied it several times. Each time those sacred chapters stirred something up inside of me. I began to write, but it wasn't time. I didn't understand. I couldn't understand.

Time passed, and the passage of time brought with it unfortunate, seemingly unbearable tragedy into my life.

The auditorium was full to capacity. I was literally taken aback as I walked to the stage. Sitting in the front row and looking forward, I had no idea how many people were in the sanctuary. Cory would have been so proud. In 29 short years, he had touched many lives with his love, wit and humor. I realized that truth looking at a sanctuary filled to capacity with people of all ages, and all walks of life. There were professionals, mothers with their children; rough-necks from the oil fields; childhood friends he never left behind. In the front row sat his wife, with my two little granddaughters. A mixture of sadness and love filled the room. I took my place behind an old wooden pulpit. I paused for a moment, looking down upon the casket of my youngest son. I could almost sense an air of disbelief permeating the sanctuary. I had preached funerals prior to this, but never with the investment I had in these moments. I would never wish that moment on anyone. I should have appeared crushed and utterly consumed with grief, or so I thought. What few people knew was that I could not bear to look into his open casket. Mine was a private, internal battle. I was businesslike and strong for the family, but it was all an act. I could not bear to look upon the body of my youngest son during the funeral preparation process. I was numb. I was scared. I was in uncharted waters. Every eye was on me. How

was I supposed to look? What was supposed to be feeling? I felt like I was experiencing a horrible dream. The reality of the situation had not sunk in.

An important note: not everyone grieves the same way; not everyone grieves at the same pace. Please, please don't forget that. I brought a short message that morning, much of which was centered on the verses I had come to love from Ecclesiastes. I lasted until my last few words before my voice broke. I had somehow survived the worst moments of my life. Nothing would ever be the same again. As I stepped down from the podium and slowly walked back to my family sitting in the pew, my search for the "new normal" had begun.

Everyone deals with life's issues with the skill set they have developed, and the situation they are thrust into. For some, grief is a predictable journey. It is accomplished in predictable stages. Others struggle seeming in vain to come to grips with a loss and a void that is beyond words. Others bury the pain. They choose to postpone the time when tears will flow, and eventually the pain postponed will cascade like a raging river poised to overflow its banks.

I was grieving. I felt a sense of purpose in what I was about to say, but not sure I had the strength to say it. That pretty much sums up this life. To paraphrase Paul, I know what is right, but to find the strength to do it is another story. Let me walk you through what I said that morning, focusing upon an obscure chapter of the Bible…..and one small verse. One verse, three or four words, can mean the difference between strength and weakness; between victory and defeat. Those ancient words of old remain "sharper than a two-edged sword" (Hebrews 4:12).

"**To everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under heaven" (Ecclesiastes 3:1).**

A simple, thirteen word verse. Suddenly, I understood what drew me to Ecclesiastes. In it was a verse of scripture that would one day jump off the pages and provide immeasurable comfort to me in my hour of need. Be thankful for a Bible that addresses every possible need. Read it a hundred times, and the next time you pick it up, a verse will jump out to address a present-tense problem. It is like a pharmacy for the soul…. dispensing doses of comfort and courage that address our pain and heartache.

Ecclesiastes brings us a dose of reality. Before we look at it more closely, let me set our sights on what we want to accomplish as we turn these pages. Maybe you, like I, have gone through life-altering events and question what to do next. Before you take your first step, repeat over and over again: “I am not alone!” Do not allow grief to turn into desperation. I am not the only person on earth who has ever lost their son or daughter to an early death. I know several mothers and fathers in my own circle of friends that walked the same painful path before me. Seek them out. You need to know from someone who has gone through something similar that there is hope. There **are** people who can understand what we are going through. We wrestle with problems that are **“common to man”** (1 Cor. 10:13).There is comfort to be drawn from that truth. Desperate people do desperate things. You want to be careful and not make desperately wrong decisions. Confronting mortality requires a measure of faith and courage that you may not see in yourself initially. Your “swagger” may be reduced to a “stagger”; but commit to walk those steps that lie before you.

This earthly journey can be a hard one. Why do others seem to have it so easy? Perhaps what appears “easy” to us is in reality a carefully crafted allusion that those around us create to camouflage their own struggles and weaknesses.

George Eastman, developer of the camera and founder of Eastman Kodak Company, had what most would view as an incredibly successful life. He donated millions of dollars to charitable causes, and by all accounts made an enormous impact on the world. Why, then, did he choose to end his life early? What unseen burden was he carrying? George was born in July of 1854. His father, George Sr., moved his family to Rochester, New York in 1860 to form a small business school, the Eastman Commercial College. Without warning, George Sr. suddenly passed away two years later. Young George was only eight years old. George had two older sisters, one confined to a wheelchair due to polio. Compounding George’s grief, his sister passed away when he was just 16 years old. That is quite a burden to place upon a young child.

George went on to accomplish great things, but I can’t help but believe that he carried with him a grief that may become less intense, but never goes away. The next time you walk past an individual, send up a quick prayer for

them. You have no idea what may have shaped their life, or the burdens that they silently carry.

George Eastman was a success by all accounts. Bear in mind, however, that true success may indeed be less external and more internal in nature. It’s not found in material possessions and outward success, but in inner strength and peace.

Chapter Three

A world without God is a barren place

Ecclesiastes is a portion of scripture that has numerous uplifting and encouraging passages. Remember though, what I said earlier? You cannot appreciate colors unless you have spent some time enveloped in darkness. Ecclesiastes also reveals the unvarnished truth about what a world without God is like.

Let's be honest. When tragedy strikes, isn't the first question on our minds "Why"? Don't you feel, even for a moment, let down by all of those biblical lessons you have been taught? Isn't there a sense of abandonment during those first painful moments? The intensity of these feelings cannot be wiped away by a couple of verses of "Amazing Grace". We are being pulled in two directions- back into this world of pain and disappointment, and into the arms of God who comforts in a time of trouble. You are down on the canvass, and God's adversary is hovering over you, hoping you have little or no fight left in you.

Ecclesiastes is the most misunderstood book in the Bible. It is a book of transition. If Genesis is the story of the physical birth of the world we live in, Ecclesiastes provides us with crucial foundational truths in the journey of our spiritual awakening and empowering. We are presented a world and all of its weaknesses and shortcomings. Eden's fall was devastating, indeed. We see the world we were born into in all of its darkness and misery. Solomon documents the frustration and hopelessness of living day to day without purpose. He purposely leads us to "rock bottom", choosing an approach called "literary pessimism"- a negative argument to demonstrate a profound truth.

The point of it all? In Ecclesiastes, we have a world without makeup. Solomon could have drawn from his limitless experience, but proposed to limit this study to all things **"under the sun"** (1:14). You won't find lofty descriptions of heaven here. "Under the sun" defines the parameters of our discussion, limiting our focus on earth alone, for the most part excluding heavenly contribution. He removes God from the equation and considers what is left lingering below the heavens. This is a study of a fallen planet.

This planet, beautiful from a distance, offers little more than perpetual heartache to a lost soul expecting more. Of course, he wouldn't be Solomon if he also didn't include some proverbial advice on how to conduct your affairs while wandering planet earth.

Why was this book written? There has been quite an argument in academia over the author's identity. Many theologians state categorically that it could not be Solomon, because it doesn't sound like his writing. I must protest. We have rejoiced in the joy in the Song of Solomon, and the unparalleled wisdom of Proverbs. What would an author of that caliber have to say in retrospect looking ***back*** on his life? Who would be more qualified to comment the meaning of life than the wisest, richest man in scripture? Solomon had experienced it all, and looking back on the breadth and depth of those experiences, Ecclesiastes remains his final report on what lessons he learned from his earthly sojourn. It is a critique that calls us to understand how to come into possession of the peace and strength we need in our time of trial. If life were a courtroom, he would be our expert witness. His final verdict?

Vanity

"**Vanity of vanities" says the Preacher; "Vanity of vanities. *All* is vanity". (Ecclesiastes 1:1)**

No, that doesn't sound like the Solomon of Song of Solomon. He is well beyond his work in the Book of Proverbs. He is at the point in life where one pauses, looking back in reflection on years gone by. It is obvious that he is profoundly disappointed in what he has seen, and what he has done. I am sure most of us can understand and share those feelings. I know that life's journey has brought me to a vantage point that enables me to see things quite differently from years gone by.

"Vanity" comes from the Hebrew "Hebel", meaning "breath", or "vapor". It is used extensively in the Old Testament, but surprisingly only three times (the Greek equivalent) in the New Testament. A similar verse invoking "vapor" is found in James Chapter 4, where the prophet states:

"**For what is life? It is even a *vapor* that appears for a little time then vanishes away" (James 4:14).**

Herein lies a truth we don't like to talk about. Our life on earth is a mere pin prick on the heavenly calendar. We can be fortunate and live to a ripe old age, or we can run out of time at age 29, like my son. Both options pale when measured by the promise of eternal life that lies beyond these mortal boundaries. For the moment, however, our vision is clouded; we **"see through a glass, darkly" (1 Corinthians 13:12).**

I must make my point again. This world does not offer up answers. It doesn't have them to give. Let's sum up what we have discovered so far.

1. The earth is an empty place, promising much more than it can ever hope to deliver.

2. Without divine intervention, man has no hope of understanding His purpose in life. To the naked eye, it would seem that man appears, only to disappear without rhyme nor reason.

3. Our time on this earth is brief, yet our decisions made here have weighty, eternal consequences.

And so we begin to explore the important Book of Ecclesiastes. To most Christians, you can find Ecclesiastes easily in the Old Testament. It can be located in the "sticky pages". For those of you that don't quite get my humor yet, the "sticky pages" are portions of the Bible you haven't explored yet. The pages still stick together. Go ahead now…… see if I am right.

Rather than do a verse by verse study of the text, I will be concentrating on two things: **word studies**; specific and important to the understanding of Ecclesiastes; and **important truths** that lead us to higher spiritual ground. We have already explored **"vanity"** and its role in defining our surroundings. It's time to move to a second important word.

Profit

"**What *profit* has a man from all his labor in which he toils under the sun? (Ecclesiastes 1:3)**

The story was once told of a church member who became perturbed with the preacher one Sunday over the content of the preacher's message. Apparently, the man of God was hitting too close to home with the theme of his sermon. After the service, the man approached and admonished the

preacher that he had “stopped preaching, and commenced to start meddling!”

It is easy to hit close to home when you deal with words like “profit”. It is quite telling that within the first three verses of Ecclesiastes, the word appears. A society without God looks to profits instead of prophets. Is there any wonder why emptiness and frustration floods in where the temporary and fragile priorities take root? The world’s gauge is measureable profit. It is the sign of earthly blessing.

Now I am going to step on toes. How many times have we used worldly profit as a gauge of church success? Does embarking on a building program irrefutably document the blessing of God on a church? No, it shows the world around you that you can build another building. If you want to gauge the amount of blessing in the church, it will be found in the hearts and lives of those people within its four walls. Remember the advice from the lips of Samuel, who stated:

“**Man looks on the outward appearance; God looks on the heart.” (1 Sam. 16:7)**

I am simply noting that a secular priority can drive the bottom line; one such measurement that stands as a benchmark of success in this world is PROFIT. Solomon uses the word “profit” six times in the Book of Ecclesiastes. What *emotions* do you find associated with its use? The first chapter is quite frankly sad and somewhat depressing. There are no legacies to point to; no memorials that last. Chasing profit offers few answers, opens up few doors. I said that we would concentrate on word studies and truths. It’s time to focus on our initial truth:

Truth: We value profit over peace

I spoke of the type of emotion found in the first chapter. As you read through it, you can find depression, as well as anxiety. What you will not find is peace and contentment. This is not to say that you cannot be profitable and peaceful. Strike a godly balance in your life, and you can be bountifully blessed with both. The portrait painted in these first words of this testament, however, are the views of a person without the benefit of spiritual insight and eyesight. The best the world has offer is the equivalent of “**grasping for the wind” (1:17)**.

The New Testament offers a stern warning:

”**What shall it profit a man, if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul” (Mark 8:36)**

The New Testament, of course, has a far different course charted for us, following Christ. Note the sharp contrast between the Old and New Testament choices: in the New, we have nothing to lose by following Christ, in the Old, we have nothing to gain by pinning our hopes on profit alone. It does not, it will not satisfy the longing in your soul for meaning, for security and for direction in this life. The lure of profit is a temporary solution. All the money and success in the world cannot mend a broken heart.

2.5 billion dollars. That’s what the United States spent over a nine-year period on “Curiosity”, an aptly named space program managed by NASA. A spacecraft was built and sent into space, rocketing at 13,200 miles per hour towards a distant destination: Mars. When it arrived in August of 2010, it deposited a one-ton robot gently on the planet’s surface, to the amazement of the world. What return did we get on the 205 billion dollar investment? We certainly got some wonderful pictures. Pictures of a barren planet, strewn with rocks and rubble. All that money, however, did nothing to answer life’s toughest questions. It was man trying to find God man’s way. Peace and purpose in life remained elusive, even after hundreds of scientists and billions of dollars were spent to “discover”, and satisfy their “curiosity”.

In the midst of tragedy, you must choose peace over profit. Throwing money at your situation or burying yourself in your work is a temporary fix at best. Spend all the money you want, work until you can work no more. The emptiness will still haunt you when you are finished

Reconfigure your life to fully include Christ. As I write, I am reminded of that old song of worship that began, “Turn your eyes upon Jesus……and the things of the world will grow strangely dim…..in the light of His glory and grace.” I am trying my best to nudge you out of your complacency, you indecisiveness. Those are you two worst enemies following tragedy. The road to peace requires you to move forward, not sit still.

Let me give one more practical example. Your pipe is leaking under the kitchen sink. Water is pouring out at an alarming rate. Do you do nothing? Watch it continue to pour out? Of course not. You act quickly, run to the street to turn the water off, and call a plumber. It would be nonsensical to do anything else. The situation demands urgency, and decisiveness. It demands action.

Life is no different. There are times when things around you begin to crumble that require you to act. Passivity and indecision just make a bad situation worse.

Chapter Four

We value Movement more than Progress.

Passivity. You won't find the word in Ecclesiastes, but its footprints are easy enough to spot on its pages. It is your mortal enemy, and the devil's most effective tool. Ecclesiastes chapter one points out how passivity manifests itself in creation:

"**The sun also rises, and the sun goes down, and hastens to the place where it arose. The wind goes to the south, and turns around to the north. The wind whirls about continually." (1:5-6)**

Looking up into the sky, we lament the fact that we were born into unending repetition, and that each day is no different than the one before it. We watch a cloud go by, then a day goes by, and pretty soon years have gone by. We are numb and hypnotized, unwilling or unable to change our circumstances.

We must break this ugly cycle, and introduce change and risk into the equation. Too many of our days go by without accomplishment of some sort. Are you willing to take on challenges that may take you out of your comfort zone? Change, hope and healing is your prize to reach for. Begin with starting an internal conversation with yourself that focuses on moving forward. Any success you have in life has a direct correlation to the confession of your mouth. Your verbal confession reveals the condition of your heart. So said Christ Himself in Matthew 18:

"**But those things which proceed out of the mouth come from the heart…." (Matthew 15:18).**

When I was growing up, I had a fascination with words. I do to this day. I am intrigued when I discover a new vocabulary word not in my arsenal. Words are very powerful; they can equip; they can empower. They can also disable and destroy. If the eyes are a window to the soul, the mouth might be a reflection of the heart.

Therefore, the imperative is to not only monitor our mouth, but commit ourselves to the point where we are willing to **"bring into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ" (2 Cor. 10:5**). Time is a potent antidote to grief and a broken heart. In the immediate aftermath of tragedy,

however, time can be an enemy as well. Our lives come to a crashing halt, and our daily routine is slowed and shattered. Life is put on hold, while your future is redirected to reflect the loss you have suffered. You have plenty of time to think. In my own experience, I found that friends were more than likely to leave you alone, rather than try to stumble through words of comfort. The first weeks after the tragedy were a silent struggle to corral my thoughts and emotions to the point that I could reenter the world around me with an ability to function. It took courage and determination. Your determination to not allow even the worst of circumstances dominate your life is a crucial step that will help you walk and work through the pain and loss.

Let's talk about your thoughts and conversation. They betray more than you think. Have you ever met someone for the first time, and known rather quickly through his conversation that the person was a very intelligent individual? His command of himself and his life is reflected by his conversation.

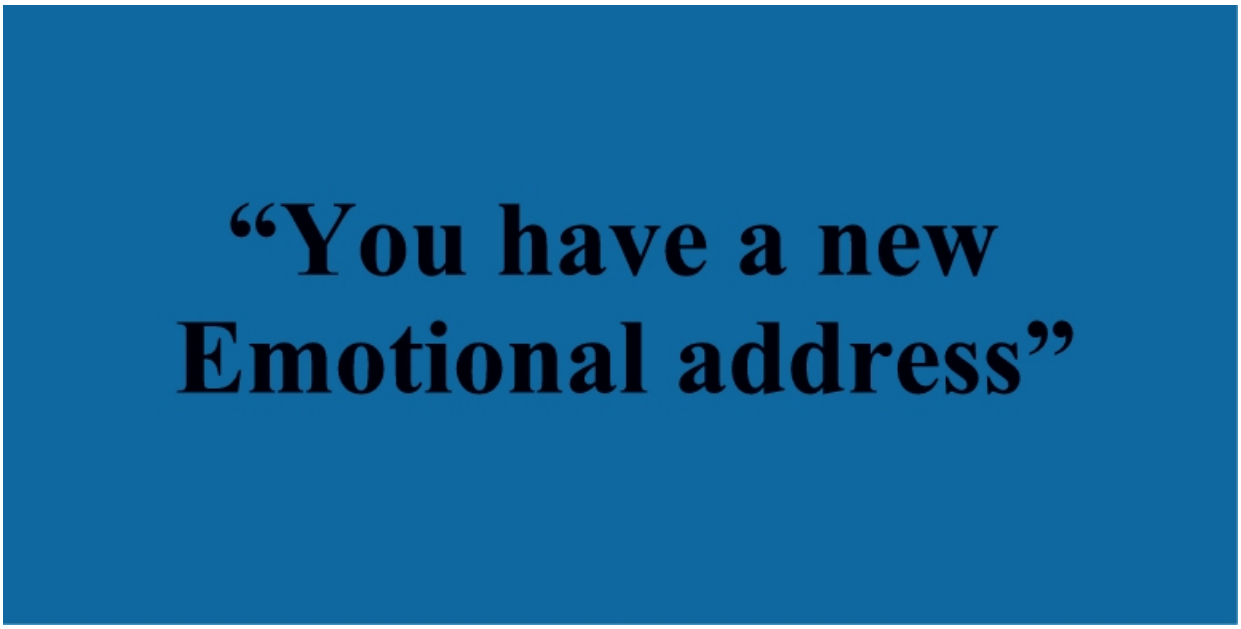
In the midst of grief, you are looking for that same sense of command. We are looking for something more than movement, or activity: we are looking for progress. We have been given that opportunity. Paul defined it well: **"We have not been given the spirit of fear, but of power, love and a sound mind". (1 Tim. 1:9).** Perhaps you need to "take command" of your own battleground, and have the courage to vocalize a conversation that points aggressively forward. Let me illustrate the difference between a person who is entangled in tragedy, and one who has encountered tragedy, and is dealing with it.

"I am grief-stricken"

"I am grieving"

What is "I am grief-stricken"? PASSIVE. What is "I am grieving"? ACTIVE. Doesn't it raise eyebrows, and make you think about the content of your conversation? Is your state of mind stagnant, or are you, in spite of the pain, positioning yourself to move forward? Are you locking yourself into a stationary position by the confession of your mouth? Don't tell me it doesn't matter, and words and inconsequential. They are an outward reflection of an inside condition. What is a fever? It's an outward indication that treatment is needed for in inward condition. Likewise, you choice of

words (and thoughts) may indicate that there's something wrong in your approach that needs to be looked at and adjusted. Let's take a moment and look one more time at our overarching theme. Hopefully, it has now become more defined.



"**We were not put on earth to be passive spectators in this life standing still; we were designed and empowered to be active participants moving forward".**

After the initial shock of tragedy and loss has worn off, we must approach and acknowledge the grieving process as a means to an end. The "end" is that point when we arrive at a new normal. New Normal is a destination. You will not arrive there without mapping out your journey and consciously moving forward. Walking in circles, or "keeping busy" gets you nowhere. You have a new "emotional" address. You may have not moved physically, but look around. Things have changed. Nothing will ever be as it once was. Every once in a while I will get in my car, and drive into my son's old neighborhood. I drive by his old house- it is vacant now, weeds growing up around a house left to itself. How I wish I could drive up upon that house, and find through some miracle that nothing has changed. I am reconciled to the fact that I must deal with "what is". The changes that took place on a crisp, fall evening in November, 2011 are irrevocable. I have changed as well. Some things are now less important, while others that didn't matter

before, have suddenly become priorities in my life. I have moved down the road from *indifference to sensitivity*.

Nothing will ever replace the one we lost. There will be a sense of loss that will linger, and triggers down the road that will bring back memories and pain. The “new normal”, though, is a place we arrive at where we can successfully function in spite of our loss. It is a place where we consciously refuse to allow our loss to define the rest of our life.

This does not indicate that we are turning our back on the one we lost. As I sit in my study typing this manuscript, I can look around the room and see numerous pictures of my son Cory. I had one blown up as large as I could, and framed it. Another smaller framed photo of the two of us sits on my desk. I haven’t forgotten him. I am learning to accept his loss, and trying to move forward. He would have wanted that. It’s been over two years now since he left us. I still have work left to do as I walk through the valley. Too many triggers still bring too much pain. But……..I move forward. I must move forward. I will not be held captive to unprofitable choices that tie me solely to the past and the pain. I watch my conversation…..even my thoughts…..to harvest ideas and words that move me forward on my journey. I am determined to team with God to make peace with circumstances beyond by control.

“I am grief stricken.” That is stationary. That is passive. I am not denying that each of us settle into that state during the worst days of grief. We cannot be held captive there. **“I can do all things, through Christ which strengthens me” (Phil. 4:19).** Recalibrate your mind: “I am grieving”. That confession puts God and the devil on notice that you are not an emotional cripple without designs on higher ground.

Let’s get back to Ecclesiastes. We have skimmed through the first two chapters. They serve as a backdrop as we move on to what will become bits and pieces of practical instruction that will give us needed perspective. That’s what the “new normal” is all about: perspective. We will take some time to step back, and look at life from different angles. We too often find ourselves stuck walking in the wrong direction, with the wrong attitude, reaching the wrong destination. We want to be happy. We want to sense meaning in life. Sometimes that requires that we step back get some much needed perspective.

Seasons

As we move on to Chapter Three in Ecclesiastes, we encounter some of the most memorable words of scripture. In researching this book, I found that funeral texts are more than likely going to originate in Psalm 23 and Ecclesiastes 3. Both hold some of the most comforting thoughts in the entire Bible. The third chapter of Ecclesiastes opens with a discussion of the seasons of life. This is so important, because too often we want our life to remain the same, void of change. Solomon cautions us, however, that life is a series of "seasons", and that change, like it or not, is a part of life.

"**To everything there is a season. A time for every purpose under heaven: A time to be born, And a time to die; A time to plant, And a time to pluck up that what is planted; A time to kill, and a time to heal; A time to break down, And a time to build up; A time to weep, And a time to laugh; A time to mourn, And a time to dance; A time to cast away stones, And a time to gather stones; A time to embrace, And a time to refrain from embracing; A time to gain, and a time to lose; A time to keep, And a time to throw away; A time to tear, And a time to sew; A time to keep silence, And a time to speak; A time to love, And a time to hate; A time of war, And a time of peace". (3:1-8)**

The comparisons in the first three verses show how many changes, or "seasons" we go through in life's journey. I talked earlier about dealing with passivity, and the need to develop momentum to move forward with our lives. A broken heart must not leave us motionless and powerless. The seasons of life will carry us forward, however reluctantly we cooperate.

Let's consider another **truth**:

Welcome the momentum that life provides; use it as an opportunity to recalibrate, reevaluate and recapture a more accurate perspective of life.

My son's death was the defining moment in my life. It made me examine not only everything I have done, but everything I have believed as well. That last sentence just poured out of my soul onto paper. It's alright to be honest with yourself. I want you to look at what I said, though. My son's death was the defining moment in my life. It was huge, it was horrible, it was incredibly painful- but it was a moment. Control your conversation. Choose words that keep your momentum moving. Even in my darkest hours, life

continued to go on around me. The sun rose, the sun set. People went off to work, and even as I sat in a fetal position mourning the loss of my son, somewhere…someone unrelated to the situation in the world laughed. God choreographed His ballet that day to fit the needs of each of his children.

If we are going to recapture the ability to see life in its proper perspective, we are going to have to acknowledge the fact that life is a series of seasons. According to God, each season has a divine purpose in our lives. They are the building blocks of experience. Exposed to a myriad of experiences, those experiences draw us to God, and help us know Him better.

What binds a marriage together? Two people walking hand in hand through life's triumphs and trials and experiencing them together. So it is with our relationship with God. As you look over the first eight verses in the third chapter, you see a representation of what's in store as you navigate through the rumbling waters of life. Birth. Death. Weeping. Laughing. Mourning. Dancing. Just as surely as there are physical seasons (spring, summer, fall and winter) there are seasons of activity for the sojourner as well. Some are pleasant, as the spring breeze is pleasant to the face. Some seasons in our lives are less pleasant and buffet us as the cold, biting winter wind does as it whips through its frozen winter surroundings.

The good news? Seasons change! Each one brings lessons and challenges. Each ends, however, and we move on better for it. Some seasons of life are more pleasant- who doesn't love to laugh! Who doesn't want to dance! But remember this thought- "He who cannot be tested, cannot be trusted…" A road to maturity is by nature uphill, and requires a certain amount of success against adversity.

To the broken hearted, there is comfort to be found in these verses. Notice that there is a "time for healing". I am so thankful that it was included. That is a promise from God. Perhaps you cannot not imagine yourself on the other side of the pain and agony of a broken heart. It's too fresh. It hurts too much. You can't visualize a time when you be strong enough to reenter the world and move on with life. God has promised you a "time to heal". He will provide the strength you need to heal. He doesn't lay out a timetable, because each of us and each of our situations are different. Our God, however, is the same.

To the conquering Christian who is moving forward in his walk with God, God promises maturation. To the battered and bruised Christian knocked backwards by the heartaches of life, God promises restoration. The very next verse in Ecclesiastes should be a memory verse for those in the midst of adversity:

“**He hath made everything beautiful in its time” (Ecc. 3:11)**

I know there were many moments during my journey through grief when I wondered if my loss was too great; my pain untreatable. Little did I know that God planned to make my life not only bearable, but beautiful! I can tell you in advance you will be encounter touching and meaningful moments as you move forward. My son is gone, but he has not been forgotten. Not a week goes by that I don’t see or hear a comment (many times in social media) about how much he is missed. That means in life, yes, even in death, he continues to make an impact upon the lives of others. I could not have predicted that. This was my first rodeo, so to speak, and I was terrified that my son’s memory would fade and disappear. Those are fears that have proven to be unfounded. In addition, I see his imprint on two little girls. My heart skips a beat when I can see Him shine through his children. Maybe it’s the way they carry themselves or a particular phrase they turn, just like their father used to. To me, that is beautiful. Those kinds of revelations go a long way in healing a broken heart.

Some of the most beautiful moments in my early life were spent during autumn in upstate New York. I would walk for hours watching summer fade, and autumn announce itself with a colorful transition that transformed trees into works of art. The leaves would change color, and the landscape would come alive in hues of orange, brown and yellow. I live in the south now, and miss the change of seasons I grew up with.

I have since learned the secret behind the spellbinding change in colors that bring autumn’s birth. Leaves contain chlorophyll, and thus appear green as they drink in the summer sun. As the summer ends, however, and the fall begins, the weather gets cooler. The once vibrant green begins to fade as its nourishment diminishes. The leaf isn’t finished yet, however. Layered underneath the chlorophyll undetected are xanthophyll and carotenoids. They bring us the browns, yellows and oranges of autumn. They are hidden all summer long, only to spring forth in beautiful splendor to usher in another season.

Perhaps there's a lesson for us as we watch the leaf's transition. Make no mistake about it, I hate change. I am a creature of habit, and always will be. I am learning, though, that I don't have to fear change. As I get older, I feel like the leaf… hanging on as the cooler weather brings with it the winds of change. There are plenty of surprises left in life. I continue to discover things about myself that I never took time to notice when I was younger and continually on the run. The autumn of life certainly brings with it changes, and personal revelations that time and experience now bring to light.

Chapter Five

Let us continue on meandering through Ecclesiastes. Solomon seems to skip back and forth. He is determined to emphasize how barren and fruitless life is when we walk without acknowledgment of a higher power. The New Testament calls it walking “in the flesh”. Paul in the Book of Romans in particular addresses the internal battle we face when we discover God’s role in our lives, and seek to follow Him.

In Solomon’s setting, however, we see man left to his own devices. That is not to say that Solomon does not take a moment to slip in some wise and spiritual advice along the way. We saw that in the first few verse of Chapter Three. Those are without a doubt wonderful words of wisdom- there’s a reason (3:1) for the season (3:2-8).

Solomon spends much of the rest of the third chapter taking note of the futility of work, as well as the temporary nature of popularity. If all you have in life is what surrounds you, disappointment awaits you. It is no wonder that depression is reaching epidemic proportions.

Statistics tell us that 1 out of every 10 people in the United States suffers from some degree of depression. Eighty percent of those suffering from depression are not getting treatment. The number of people diagnosed with depression grows at an annual rate of twenty percent. These facts shouldn’t surprise us, after studying Solomon’s critique on the frustrating nature of tackling life in our own strength. When you add personal tragedy to the mix, it becomes increasingly difficult to hold you head up without divine assistance.

Solomon, however, is the Prince of Proverbs. In the midst of verse after verse of bad news, he can slip in a tightly worded phrase that has the power to turn your life around. Be careful that you don’t miss these important bits of instruction and encouragement.

Truth: A burden shared is half as heavy. Talk!

Let’s let Solomon weigh in:

“**Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their labor. For if they fall, one will lift up his companion. But woe to him who is alone when he falls, for he has no one to help him up……though one may be overpowered by another, two can withstand him. And a threefold cord is not quickly broken.” (4:9-12)**

Sometimes, I will read a verse like the one above, and wonder why I just don’t bury my head in my bible every day for about four hours! Such wisdom.

Much of what we have talked about in dealing with loss is generated internally, as we talk ourselves through those toughest hours. We gradually gain enough control to push forward, and upon that decision find strength we never knew we had. The common denominator of every great tragedy or challenge in my life was my acknowledgement afterwards that I underestimated what God and I could accomplish together.

While a lot of the work involved in healing is done quietly by yourself, you need to swallow your pride and allow some close friends to come along on your journey as well. I am retired now, and spend most days by myself. Several months ago. I was retrieving laundry from the laundry room, one step down from the kitchen. I took one step up from the laundry room into the kitchen, when my black lab (my one hundred pound black lab), decided he urgently needed to enter the kitchen before I did. He went flying by me, knocking me over as he disappeared into the living room. I was caught completely by surprise. I fell forward into the kitchen, face first. I do mean face first- I did not have enough time to brace my fall. I laid on the floor for a few moments, feeling as if I were about to lose consciousness. My first thought was, “I am all alone. If something serious just happened, I am in trouble.” I was numb, and wasn’t sure what still worked, and what didn’t. It was a helpless, scary feeling. After several minutes, I was able to painfully get up, thankfully without major damage. I learned that day that being alone can be dangerous to your health.

I shared that story to say this: do not use the fact that circumstances have knocked you down as an excuse for isolating yourself. There are things you can do yourself that give you added advantage in your recovery. Friends! We just documented in scripture how important it is to surround yourself with people who have your back. In nature, predatory animals single out

those in a herd who are weak, falling behind and alone. The healing process, when faced with an unbearable loss, will have some “alone” time. You need time to acknowledge and accept what has happened. Having said that, the worst thing you could do would be to continue to isolate yourself from caring, sensitive people who want to make sure you don’t slip too far behind the herd.

Could I give some advice to someone who has a friend facing tragedy? Keep in close proximity and keep your mouth shut. Your friend doesn’t need to be entertained, coddled or preached to. Just be there. As long as you are needed. You are doubling his or her strength with your silent solidarity. The way to begin to deal with grief is by talking about it. You need to be available when it is time to listen.

Another thing I noticed is that there is no expiration date of grieving. A friend will be there two weeks later, a month later… whenever the walls come down and the tears begin to flow.

I begin this paragraph very early on a Sunday morning. Everything is still; quiet. It should be quiet at 6 am. I would probably be in bed tossing and turning if it weren’t for Jack. Jack is my rather large Black Lab I talked about earlier that begins every morning strolling to my side of the bed, and licking my hand. That’s his signal that he wants to go outside. It’s ironic that I took an early retirement thinking that after more than 30 years, I could finally sleep in any time I wanted. Until Jack. I have always been a morning person, though, and Jack has filled our home with joy. He likes to lay near me as I type.

I must pause here for a moment. Before I began writing, I read a good portion of what I have recently written. It’s just a habit, to try to build upon what I have been writing about. I believe that God is watching over me as I write. The portions of this manuscript I wrote a couple of days ago jumped off the pages this morning and ministered to my spirit. While my original goal was to help others, this has proven to be cathartic to me, as well.

I had a bad day yesterday. I just took a few seconds to do the math. I lost my son 791 days ago. That sounds so long ago, yet in many ways it seems like yesterday. I briefly mentioned triggers in passing earlier in the book, but I didn’t do the subject justice. Triggers are circumstances or events that open the floodgates to memories of the one you lost. With those memories

comes the pain of loss once again into your life. Triggers come out of nowhere with no warning. A normal day can be come crashing down in a moment, over something others might classify as “silly”. When the tragedy initially happened, I drew close to friends that had been through similar circumstances. My question was, “does it ever stop hurting?” Their answers were almost identical. “It will get better” was the chorus, and the best they could offer me.

Thank God they were honest with me. Those facing tragedy don’t need false hope, they need to know what to expect. Again, I must reiterate that every person’s journey through grief is different. Perhaps triggers won’t be an issue as you move forward with your life. A lot depends on your emotional DNA.

I have a problem with triggers. The problem lessens with time, but remains none the less. For a long time, ambulance sirens were a definite trigger. On that fateful evening, I raced the first responders and ambulance to the scene. I cannot erase the visual I have as I approached Cory’s house from one direction, and the first responders, with sirens blaring approached from the opposite. It was both surreal, and to my dismay, very real.

I told you I had a bad day yesterday. My wife and I, and my son-in-law were traveling on the other side of the city, and I hadn’t been over there in a while. We were hungry, and we decided to stop at a fast-food restaurant to pick up some food to take home. Well, it turns out that the restaurant was next to a cemetery, and that cemetery was the resting place for my son. I had not been to visit him in a while, and within minutes a black cloud seem to have enveloped me.

I generally give my wife a head’s up when I am starting to feel blue. As his step-mother, she has shared in both the joy and the tragedy of Cory’s life and untimely death. She has been enormously sympathetic and patient with me all through this tragedy, and I wouldn’t have wanted to tackle this without her by my side. I am at the point now, however, where I don’t share every episode with her. In the beginning, it was obvious that I was in distress. Now I am trying to discipline myself to deal with these moments internally and without fanfare.

Though I would love to keep my narrative clinical and not share the more personal side of dealing with a broken heart, I believe that you need to

know what to expect should a tragedy strike. There are emotional and physiological aspects of long term grief that you will have to accept and deal with. You will have your own set of triggers. It might be a favorite song; it could be any countless reminders that pierce your heart and immobilize you for moments in time.

Ok, I let down my guard for a moment. It's time to get back to scripture and see what else we can glean in our effort to piece together some semblance of a life. As I continue along our trek through Ecclesiastes, I must stop for a moment in the initial verses of Chapter Five.

Truth: You can't hear if you don't listen. Be quiet!

"**Walk prudently when you go to the house of God; and draw near to hear rather than to give the sacrifice of fools.** ….**Do not be rash with your mouth…Therefore let your words be few**." **(5:1-2)**

Now you might wonder what that verse could possibly have to do with the grieving process. When I first read the verses, nothing jumped out at me. As I paused to meditate on them, however, I got the message. Tragedy is a roadblock in your life. It stops you from moving forward, at least for a moment.

The more I think about it, the more I believe that the tough moments in life should also stop you from unnecessary conversation. It is a time of reflection. I like to talk as much as anyone I know. I also know the Biblical admonition **"in the multitude of words, there wanteth not sin"** (Proverbs 10:19). Tragedy and heartache purify the soul. It is a time of quiet. It is a time of reflection. It is a time to hear, not a time to speak. Let's face it, you don't have a lot of answers during a time of loss. You are not prepared to give a dissertation during a period of heartache. It is a time to **"be ye still, and know that I am God"** (Ps. 46:10). It is a time to pause, and listen for the still small voice of God. This is the flip side to what I was talking about earlier. Remember the balance of Ecclesiastes? "**A time to keep silence; and a time to speak" (3:7).** Earlier I spoke of the need to have friends available, and that talk is indeed a way to dissipate grief. A balanced approach dictates, however that you shouldn't become so busy that you can't sit in stillness and have some quiet time with God. It is during those moments that you begin to sense that *by God's grace you are stronger than you first realized*. The stillness, the quiet, gives God the chance He needs to

reveal himself to you. It is an empowering experience. It is a turning point on your journey through grief.

I can remember as a young man how I loved to disappear on long walks by myself. It was just me and my thoughts, me and my dreams. I would walk for long periods of time, enjoying the simple cry of nature; a bird chirping; a flock of geese in formation flying over the still waters of Lake Ontario migrating south for the winter. Again, it's all about perspective- getting it and keeping it. Later on as a teenager, my family would vacation on the shores of the Gulf of Mexico. Each and every night, I would be out walking the sandy shore, each step illuminated by a vibrant moon above me. I walked silently, but an internal dialogue inside of me helped me to sort out the sometimes difficult years of a bashful teenager's life. Part of maturing into manhood is the importance of feeling able to get away and silently reflect on what life has brought your way. The ability to stand alone and seek out God away from the noise and distractions of life is another ingredient to overcoming the grief and pain of loss.

As I write, I notice that we are slowly developing a set of strategies. There's no one solution to help us when bad news comes. We must have more than one arrow in our quiver. The longer we work through the pages of Ecclesiastes, the more options we can piece together that we can use to gather strength.

Chapter Six

"The sleep of a laboring man is sweet, whether he eats little or much" (5:12)

Truth: We opt for attitude over gratitude

I want to look back eventually, and see that the loss that I suffered was able to awaken something in me, reigniting passion and motivation. I do not know how many lives were touched and changed by Cory's loss. I do know this: I owe it to him to make sure that my own life is examined and retooled. He didn't get the chance I have to reach his potential, and follow through on his dreams. God had different plans. Funerals tend to be massive "wake up" calls; a collective time to examine each and every one of our lives. I have no excuses for allowing time to slip away and to settle for a mediocre life. We each have skills that oftentimes lie dormant. We become complacent and lethargic. I may have been knocked two steps back, but I have made a commitment to God, Cory and myself that I will move four steps forward and conquer measurable amounts of territory from this day forward.

We have come a long way without mentioning a word that stalls the grieving process- an attitude of bitterness. I will not move one iota beyond misery if I am mired in bitterness and unthankful. What do the men on a sinking ship do in a mad dash towards shore? They throw every non-essential item on deck overboard, to lighten the load, and improve their chances of staying afloat. I can visualize their frenzy and fight for survival even as I write.

I think it is up to us as well to strip away the non-essential baggage we are carrying, particularly in a time of grief. We should prioritize our effort to catalogue situations and negative feelings that weigh us down, keeping us from emerging on the other side of the storm. Nothing immobilizes us more than bitterness and a lack of gratitude for the work of God in our lives.

Let me share a true story, one that I will hold close until the day I die. Both my wife and I were fortunate enough to bear witness to the details of this

story, and invariably it brings a tear to someone's eye when it is told. Many years ago, our post office was looking for a way to promote their next-day mail express service. They came up with a unique idea- the Christmas Santa Program. The idea was simple. The customer would come down to the office during the week of Christmas, and mail themselves a piece of Express Mail for delivery on Christmas morning. The post office had a cadre of carriers ready, all volunteers dressed as Santa, each assigned to cover particular areas of town. The postal truck would pull up to the customer's house early Christmas morning, and out would jump Santa. It was prearranged, of course- the gifts for the customer's children would be hidden away on the porch in a traditional "Santa sack", which Santa would pick up prior to announcing his arrival. Santa rang the bell, banged on the door, and within a few seconds, you could hear the thunderous sound of children's feet racing each other for the right to open the door.

The children, of course, were thrilled beyond belief. They accepted Santa's gifts, and in the same motion began tearing wrapping paper and opening the presents as quickly as they could. It was quite an experience, going from house to house and hearing each home fill with joy and laughter. One particular Santa had spent most of his time in a well-to-do section of town, and the children at each stop were blessed, to say the least, with many gifts to open. Wrapping paper was flying everywhere.

This Santa had one more stop before his day was over. He had saved it for last, because it was off by itself in a poorer section of town. He arrived there, and approached the porch. He could not find a bag full of presents like he had at his earlier stops. Finally, out of the corner of his eye, he saw it- a single doll, with a red ribbon in her hair. It was awkwardly wrapped. Santa spotted it, and swooped it up and took it to the front door. This delivery was in sharp contrast to his others, he thought to himself. With some apprehension, he gently, then more boldly knocked on the door, letting out his best "ho ho ho!!!"

The front door slowly opened. She was a small, young girl, dressed in old, hand-me-down pajamas. She was barely able to open the door and Santa gave her a hand. Santa handed the package to her, by now with a little lump in his throat. He got down on one knee, and said "Merry Christmas, my little darling!" Her eyes lit up, and as she unwrapped the gift, she drew it close to her, and held the doll with all her might against her chest. She

looked up at Santa with the cutest smile, and said in a quiet, grateful voice, “Thank you Santa, that’s all I wanted!!” Santa walked back to his truck with tears rolling down his cheeks. He paused. His life had just been changed by a little angel. As he told her story to us later that day, her gratitude touched each one of our lives also. It still does nearly twenty years later. Gratitude is a powerful life-force.

Let’s pause for a second to recap some of the ideas we have pieced together. As shocking as my loss was, it comes with the territory. This earth is our temporary home. We too often act as if what we are pursuing on this earth is lasting and permanent. We build lavish houses and lofty reputations. During times of sorrow, we can see clearly how meaningless worldly possessions and acclaim are, and how fragile life is on this side of glory. There are nonessential weights we need to identify and jettison; there are also positive traits and behaviors we need to embrace!

I think we are ready to grapple with our next verse of scripture.

“**Sorrow is better than laughter; for by a sad countenance the heart is made better.” (7:3)**

Are you beginning to paint a broader picture now of the process of grief? You are going to have to rise to a challenge you have never faced before. You have lost someone, and there’s no one word answer that will ease your pain and help you find purpose. I am outlining a host of things you need to do if you expect to heal to any degree. And as a bonus- God says this process will make you both better and beautiful. If you can rise up and stand tall against grief and loss, there will be nothing that you cannot overcome. Let me say it again- there will be nothing that you cannot overcome!

Sorrow is like a medicine. I can remember as a young child running through the house, my mother close behind. She had medicine, and it almost always tasted awful. “It’s for your own good”, she would say as she took aim with a spoon full of foul-tasting liquid. Why do mothers lie? I say that tongue in cheek- my two brothers and I were quite a handful. On another occasion my dear mother gave me a pep talk as I sat in the hospital bed. I was about to go in for routine eye surgery, to address a lazy eye. I was young and I was scared to death. My mother was told to brief me and prepare me for what was about to happen. I was to be wheeled into an operating room, and given

anesthetic to put me under prior to surgery. In those days, physicians held a mask over your nose and mouth and administered ether. To calm my nerves, my dear mother assured me that ether smelled just like roses. Well, wasn't I surprised! It only took one sniff for me to decide that I would pass on surgery that morning. It took two nurses to hold me down before I could finally be sedated. I am not quite sure if I ever forgave my mother for that one. I had no appreciation for medicine of any kind for quite some time. There are indeed times when you feel worse before you feel better.

It is a reoccurring theme through both Testaments that God uses the worst of circumstances to ultimately produce the best results. Why not jettison our bad attitude, and instead walk in gratitude? In due course, the sometimes scary, unpredictable, but divinely inspired chain of events will melt into moments of beauty and splendor. Just repeat to yourself…."There is a time!" There is a time for every purpose under heaven.

Chapter Seven

**Theme: "It's not the size of the dog in the fight;
it's the size of the fight in the dog" –Mark Twain**

I have been trying to draw from several sources in our quest to find answers to overcoming grief. Much of my time has been devoted to Bible study, since it provides such comfort and so many answers. I have also used illustrations from my own life, and shared some of my struggles. I also have taken time to look at other's lives, to demonstrate through their testimony that life can indeed go on.

I would like to explore the life of one more person, and show you someone who faced enormous pain, but continued forward nonetheless. His name was Samuel Langhorne Clemens, know to us as Mark Twain. You undoubtedly know him from his famous novels, "The Adventures of Tom Sawyer" and "Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" among others. What you probably don't know, however, are the challenges he faced in his 74 years. The more I studied his life, the more I wondered if my knees would have buckled under the pressure he faced. When you think you have reached your limit, and cannot take another moment of torment in this life, read some biographies. When I place my life next to Mark Twain's, I am left feeling like a spoiled little brat. He strikes me as a "secular" Solomon. Wise and ambitious, Samuel tasted of the finer things of life, yet was not beyond reach of depression and struggle.

He was born Samuel Langhorne Clemens, son of Jon and Jane Clemens, in Florida, Missouri in 1835. He was destined to journey to the four corners of the earth, but began life in small and ordinary mid-western town. He was the sixth child out of seven. Sorrow would follow him almost as soon as he learned to walk. The family's first-born, a brother named Pleasant, lived only three months, dying six years before Samuel's birth. Samuel's older sister Margaret died at age six. Samuel was three years old at the time.

A year later, his father moved the family to Hannibal, Missouri. Jon Clemens had become quite a successful lawyer, and later a judge. It has been said that he was an introvert, quite the opposite of his wife, an

extrovert who would delight in telling stories to her children. Opposites truly did attract. Hannibal sat on the banks of the Mississippi River, a thriving town filled with both positive and negative elements lobbying for one's attention. Samuel was drawn to the riverboats that passed by, as a moth was drawn to a flame. For a few brief moments, life was settled and happy.

It was two years later that the Clemens' house felt the cold breeze of death once again. Samuel's older brother Benjamin, age ten, suddenly passed away. Samuel was now six years of age, and had already faced a lifetime of sorrow. One wonders how he coped with such repetitive loss this early in his life. What was he thinking? Perhaps he wondered if he was the next to leave this world.

The Clemens family continued to live quietly in Hannibal. Three years passed by uneventfully, until a nine year old Samuel found himself in the wrong place at the wrong time. He stood frozen as he witnessed a local man murder a cattle rancher in front of his eyes. Death, violent death, had visited Samuel again. It was barely a year later when Samuel had the bad fortune to watch once again, as a surly white slave-owner hit and killed the black man with an iron pipe. At only ten years of age, Samuel had walked a trail of tragedy. It makes me pause and consider how grateful I am for the many blessings that God has bestowed upon me. Samuel was full of courage, and a survivor.

He would need every ounce of courage, and then some. The very next year, the now eleven year old Samuel would have to deal with a loss and trauma that far outshone the many that had come before. His father contracted pneumonia and died. Samuel quit school and got a job to help keep his family afloat financially. Later in life one of his many famous quotes referenced what he learned during his youth:

"**There was never yet an uninteresting life. Inside the dullest exterior there is drama, comedy and tragedy."**

Another quote revealed an inner pain that he kept to himself:

"**Any emotion, if it is sincere, is involuntary."**

Samuel L. Clemens was by every measurement a strong and determined man. He followed up on his love for steamboats by studying for two years

in preparation for a test that would allow him to become a steamboat pilot. He loved his job, and probably wouldn't have done anything else had the Civil War had not caused a disruption and shut-down of the industry in the early 1860's. One thing he took with him as he moved on to new adventures: a new name. His love for the Mississippi was so great, that he started over fresh by using the name "Mark Twain". It was a boating term, a measurement hollered out as the boat came closer to the riverbank. "Twain" was actually two fathoms of depth, or twelve feet deep. It seems entirely appropriate that Samuel Clemens grant himself a new beginning as Mark Twain.

He didn't leave the river without leaving something very costly behind. Samuel had recruited his younger brother Henry, helping him gain employment on the steamboat "Pennsylvania". Samuel, now twenty-three years old, could not have known that Henry's career on the river would be cut short. Henry was killed in an explosion that rocked the Pennsylvania in 1858. This was a particularly bitter pill for Samuel to swallow, and it has been said that he would hold himself responsible for his brother's death for the rest of his life.

I could go on, for tragedy seemed to linger around Mark Twain for most of his life. There is no record of him ever claiming the Christ of Christianity. There is plenty of evidence that he had a particular distaste for Christians, and little use for God. His testimony is remarkable in its similarity to Solomon and the words laid down in Ecclesiastes. It has been said that Mark Twain at the end of his life was bitter, explosive, depressed and had little regard for those around him. He found world-wide acclaim, and was perhaps the most famous man on earth during his lifetime. He was a brilliant man, yet unable to finish the closing chapters of his life with peace in his heart.

Are there lessons to be learned from the life of Mark Twain? I could have simply written this book about him. I don't know of many people that have been more acquainted with grief that Mark Twain was. He managed, somehow, to reconcile the pain and accomplish things that made an entire world pause and take notice. Remember, however, in the first few paragraphs of Chapter One, I warned you that wisdom comes with wounds. We should be quick to embrace, slow to condemn.

Chapter Eight

Theme: “Like Father, Like Son”

You may remember me mentioning funerals and the various themes that pastors choose as their text. I pointed to Ecclesiastes Chapter Five as a favorite springboard: “To everything there is a season….” Solomon’s words are appropriate, powerful and strong medicine for the hurting heart. It should be no surprise to you that the most widely-used verse of scripture to comfort those in emotional turmoil comes from Psalm 23. The most quoted scripture in the Bible has a direct connection to the book we have been studying- Ecclesiastes. You see, the Book of Psalms was written for the most part by Solomon’s father, David. The ability to comfort must have been handed down from father to son.

Let me address young parents for a moment. Raising children is an awesome responsibility, and difficult. Your children will be watching you. Year after year, as they grow, they will be watching you. They will model what kind of adult they become based upon what they have seen throughout their youth. They will become strong, because they have seen strength in you. They will become discerning, because they have seen you carefully weigh and make decisions in life. They will be inoculated against hopelessness, because they have seen you sail safely through troubled waters. Now don’t expect this to happen overnight. My boys each struggled to find themselves. I believe to a certain extent each of us do. Life’s lessons do not come easy, nor life’s journey for the faint at heart. That’s why developing a plan and having some effective strategies is so important.

I remember being introduced to death as a youngster. I grew up fairly sheltered from the problems and challenges that others my age faced. I was upper middle-class, and lived on a lake. I took my friends out water-skiing. I wanted to study music, so my parents bought me a huge, expensive Hammond Organ to play. I received a yellow Firebird for my sixteenth birthday. I didn’t want for anything. In some ways that was a disadvantage. My life of comfort kept me away from some of life’s tough lessons- lessons

some of my classmates had already experienced. I will always remember the first time death knocked on my door.

I arrived home from school one day, to find several cars in the driveway. I had no idea what was going on. I hesitated as I approached the front door. Suddenly the door opened and my father walked outside to meet me. I don't believe I had ever seen him quite a serious as he looked that day. He took me for a short walk away from the house, and broke the news that my grandmother had passed away. I was young, and had no idea how to process death and all of the emotions it generated. I sat quietly that day, never saying a word. I just watched my family, especially my mother, making mental notes and taking cues from what I saw and heard. My life changed that day. I found out that grief was real, and it was painful. In subsequent years, I lost both my uncle and my aunt and two grandparents. Death lost its element of surprise, but was life-altering none the less. I learned that death was part of life's journey, and nobody can outrun an eventual encounter.

David and I have little in common. The author of Psalms spent much of his life on the run, as contemporaries tried their best to locate and kill him. Keep that in mind when you read the Psalms, and hear David cry out to God for assistance and protection. He had good reason to be afraid. Born out of these experiences was Psalm 23, expressing David's confidence in the Lord's ability to deliver him from those who plotted against him. Those words that come to us today were born of discomfort. Perhaps it will help us to see fruit in some of our discomfort, knowing that our pain comes with a purpose, and that something good can blossom from it all.

Let's stop for a moment to examine the Valley of Psalm 23 and see how many important lessons we can draw from it. First of all, there really was a literal "Valley of the Shadow of Death". Back in Biblical times it was a long, narrow and winding road outside of Jericho that cut through steep mountain terrain. It was considered very dangerous to travel through, because of the ability of thieves to hide among the rocks unnoticed. David uses the terrain around him to illustrate several spiritual truths in Psalm 23. This happens quite often in scripture. Paul writing to the Church at Rome encouraged them that they could understand God

"**By the things that are made, even his eternal power and God-head" (Romans 1:20)."**

Since we all will make the journey through our own Valley of Death at some point in our lives, it might be noteworthy to bring out some of the most important points of both caution and encouragement that Psalm 23 brings to light.

You must make this journey alone. David begins by stating: “Though **I** walk”. Whether it is your final journey, or grieving for the loss of someone else, it is a unique experience that no one can walk for you. The auditorium was filled to capacity for my son’s funeral, yet nobody shared the same experiences that I had with my son during our short time together. My grief was unique, and I had to claim it, and deal with it. That doesn’t discount friends and their importance during this time. Don’t hide behind them, though, and refuse to accept what has come to pass. We are beginning to notice that the Bible continually strikes a balance in every subject it encounters. It helps keep you centered. Therein lies hope and help. Most of the problems we encounter in life don’t lend themselves to simple answers. As we plot our course, we take into consideration different perspectives, different angles, and solutions that blend together to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat. Once again, in spite of people around us, we are walking through the Valley alone. Don’t panic. God has a plan.

The Valley’s path is very narrow. The pathway through the literal Valley was narrow, and was best traveled walking single file. You simply follow the path, for there were not a lot of choices to consider or places to turn. Your only option was to move forward, and so you did. The same holds true for us today. Our wisest course is down a very narrow path. Bear in mind, that the world offers a much wider alternative. The wider path is a carnival of chaos that vies for our attention. It’s not made up of jagged rocks or darkened hues, but of bright lights and loud noises that command our attention. Its subtle purpose is to cause our eyes to be drawn away from the path, long enough for our journey to come to a halt. All around us we will find short-term pleasure, and activity that will divert our attention away from our grief and our sorrow. We will stand motionless, allowing the distraction to turn our attention away from our true purpose. We have a goal. Our goal is to heal. Two words that are sometimes difficult to hear actually serve as our marching orders, “move forward”. Begin to move forward, and you will undoubtedly feel strength begin to flow through your veins. Tributaries of courage and peace will likewise trickle into your life as you let God be God.

Yes, we do indeed have a narrow path to walk. It remains however, the shortest and only way to success and happiness. It was Jesus who said, **“I am the way, the truth, and the life**. **No man cometh unto the father but by me” (John 14:6).** That is very specific. I don’t know about you, but that’s leadership I can follow. We might be tempted to complain about how narrow the path is to reach our destination. Let’s think positive, however. Let’s be pragmatic and practical. There is peace to be found on a narrow path. There’s little chance of getting lost on a narrow path. It leaves you with fewer decisions to make on your own. That’s always good.

I can remember as a youngster becoming lost at Hamlin Beach State Park. I wandered off, exploring as kids do, until I realized that the sun was going down. I was never very good at directions. I stayed fairly calm initially. At some point, I remember looking down and coming to the realization that I was no longer on any recognizable path. Fear begin to flood my soul much like a sinking boat gradually taking on water. I had no idea where I was. I looked for landmarks. I couldn’t find anything recognizable. My heart rate increased, as well as the pace of my steps. This went on for what seemed to be an eternity. This young man was starting to feel the symptoms of hopelessness. Finally, I heard the sound of a car in the distance. Heading in that direction, I stumbled upon a road and knew that, while still lost, I was safe. I wasn’t afraid as long as I could look down and see I was on the path.

I learned that day how important it is to pay attention to the path that you’re on. Believe me, a narrow path is much better than no path at all. I prefer a narrow path to a wide path. We live in a day and age when we crave “freedom”. We want a lot of latitude to navigate through life- the wider the path the better. While we want these additional choices, we have looked past the fact that some of these options may set us on a path that arrives at an unplanned, unpleasant destination.

The Valley is a cooler and darker place.

Your walk through the Valley of Death is by its very nature uncomfortable. The valley is a cool and darkened place.

Years ago, I went off to Colorado on vacation. I decided to tour some old, abandoned gold mines, nestled up in the mountains. What I thought would be a fun and informative activity turned out to be an eye-opening experience. The air was thin, and my body was not accustomed to the elevation. I was

with about ten others taking part in the tour, and I struggled to appear normal. In reality I was gasping for air. Male ego on display. We approached the entrance to the cave, and began to make our way deeper and deeper into its belly. Not only did the mine shaft get narrower, but it got much colder, as well. As a confirmed claustrophobic, I was definitely out of my element. Needless to say I don't plan on exploring any more mine shafts in the near future. The poor soul that worked in those mines lived a far different and more difficult life than I realized.

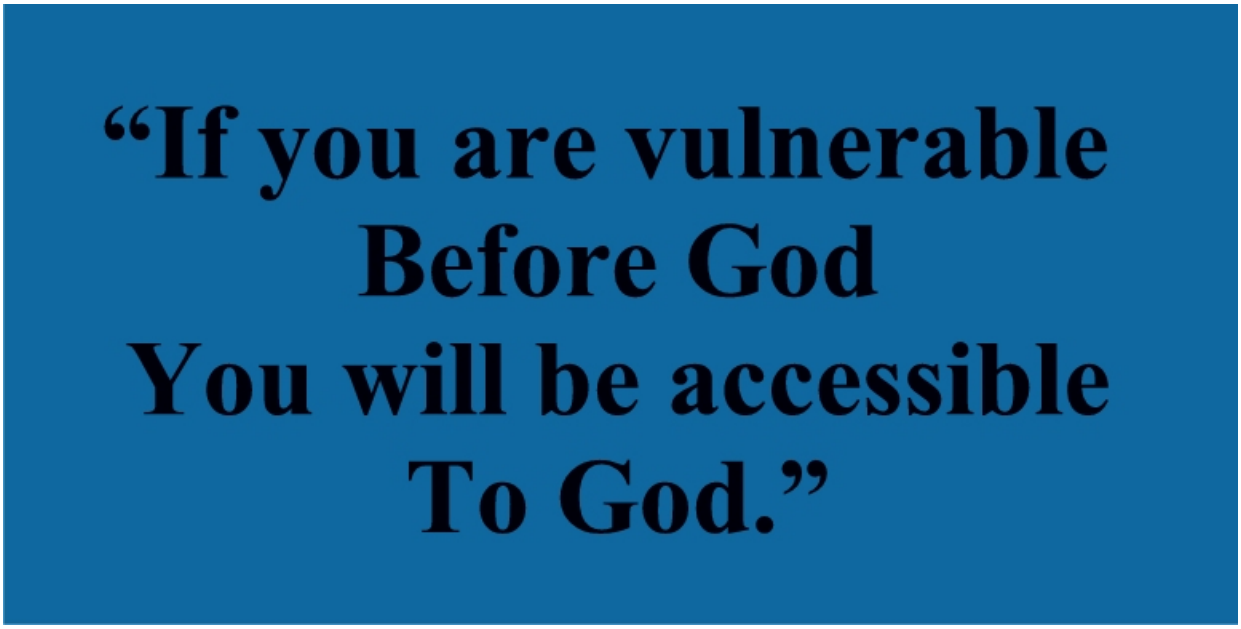
It isn't difficult to make the leap in comparing the conditions I just described with what we confront as we approach the Valley of the Shadow of Death. We don't know what to expect. The further along the journey, the more uncomfortable we become. Death is a cold breeze. When I studied the conditions that existed in the original Valley in the time of Christ, I found that sunlight only directly reached the floor of the valley at one point during the day- noon. Only when the sun was directly overhead did light and warmth reach those on the trail. It was simply an uncomfortable journey.

Such is our confrontation with death, whether it be ours, or those we cherish around us. I doubt that we will ever be pushed farther out of our comfort zone than when we are forced to embrace our own mortality. It sends a cold shiver up our spine. It becomes harder to breathe; the world appears to be closing in on us. A quote from long ago puts it best:

"**I feel a thousand deaths, in fearing one…."** (Author Unknown)

The Valley leaves you exposed.

Yes, you are leaving your comfort zone. The historical Valley was a dangerous place, with thieves having an advantage hiding in the rocks above the shadowy path below. It was a risk to walk through the Valley. Outside of the Valley, you may have controlled people, places and things around you. You were protected from confronting anything you didn't choose to confront. Once you entered the Valley, however, you were exposed….you were vulnerable. There was risk involved in continuing the journey.



Let’s carry that over and apply these principles to our journey. Perhaps the prospect of death, of approaching that Valley and having absolutely no control, is the common denominator that levels the playing field for mankind. It doesn’t matter if you are rich or poor. It doesn’t matter if you are educated, or uneducated. It doesn’t matter if you are a philanthropist or a thief. We all will be exposed for just how vulnerable we really are. Physical strength offers no advantage, nor does mental prowess. The author of Psalm 23 had the ability to slay Goliath, yet he speaks in quiet, measured tones about his own encounter with mortality.

It is an appointment with destiny. We all know it is coming. History’s portraits show sailors from ages ago sporting a single golden earring in their ear. Do you know the purpose of that particular piece of apparel? It has been said that sailors wore the earring so that upon their death, the earring could be sold to pay for the sailor’s burial. I guess that may have been the earliest form of “life insurance”. At the very least they had thought at some point in their lives of mortality, and that life in this mortal flesh has a beginning, and an end.

Vulnerability is too often frowned upon in today’s society. We confuse meekness with weakness. Pride turns our attention away from our obvious vulnerability by substituting false bravado in its place. Bravado’s fuel can carry us a long way. It may be years before the dark storm clouds form ominously over your head, and circumstances bring you to your knees. It is a

lesson that is part of God's curriculum. Why is vulnerability important? If you are vulnerable before God, you will be accessible to God. If you are wrestling with overwhelming grief, it must be countered with overwhelming humility. Its help you need, and **"the peace of God, that passes all understanding" (Philippians 4:7).**

You will hard-pressed to find the answers you are looking for, and the peace you are yearning for, if you are content living a superficial lifestyle. Remember our over-arching theme from Chapter One calls us to action:

"**We were not put on earth to be passive spectators in this life standing still; we were designed and empowered to be active participants moving forward".**

Psalm 23 features a humble David. That humility is essential to unlocking the doors and opening the pathway to our continued recovery from tragedy. We are starting to piece together very good strategies to help us stand up and move forward. Our quiver is filling up quickly with ammunition to use in our quest to recapture a full and meaningful life. We still have some loose ends, however. Our next chapter may be the most important.

Chapter Nine

Survivor's Guilt



Hamlet:

(Gertrude speaks quietly to herself on the subject of guilt)

"To my sick soul (as sin's true nature is)

Each toy seems prologue to some great amiss.

So full of artless jealousy is guilt,

It spills itself in fearing to be spilt." (Act 4, Scene 3)

Ophelia is about to be granted an audience with the Queen of Denmark, Gertrude. Her aides warn the queen that Ophelia has been driven to insanity over her father's death, and rambles on incoherently. The guilt the queen speaks of is her own. She feels partly responsible for the death of Ophelia's father. The guilt simmers as she looks upon Ophelia in the throes of madness. The queen can barely contain herself.

What is it that weights heavy on your heart today? You realize of course that the essence of who you are is for the most part not apparent to the world around you. Yes, those that are closest to you know you better than everyone else. Grief however, is something we hold close to the vest. Another emotion is held even more securely and secretly- guilt. Guilt is oftentimes a component of grief. Depending on the circumstances of your loss, the sense of guilt you feel may haunt you each and every day. Guilt and its cousin shame are lethal, and can be the toughest obstacle to overcome in your battle to move from grief to gratitude.

It was Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, a Swiss psychiatrist, who first observed:

“**Guilt is perhaps the most painful companion of death.”**

If it is difficult to open up about grief, it is doubly difficult to confess to feelings of guilt. This is a battle we usually choose to fight quietly by ourselves. I can share with you first-hand how sharp and painful guilt can be. Let me illustrate by contrasting two encounters with death in my life.

My father lived a long and full life. At the end, he had many health problems that made his ultimate death not totally unexpected. He was fortunate enough to pass in his sleep. I felt no guilt dealing with the loss of my father. He lived a wonderful life. I have often told my children and wife that there will be no need to feel sorry for me should I pass away. I, likewise, have had a wonderful, full life. I have been blessed upon measure, and though not without regrets, I am at peace with myself and my destination.



The second encounter with death is a completely different story. I lost my 29 year old son suddenly, without warning. Without going into detail (it is a long story) he passed from a prescription drug overdose. He was in pain from injuries he received, and the resultant surgeries. In his quest to dull the pain, he over-medicated himself.

I sat with him and chatted about an hour and a half prior to his death. I could tell he was heavily medicated. A voice in my head would later repeated bombard me with the charges against me: “you should have done something!” I had no idea how dangerously over-medicated he was. Guilt, however, accepts no excuses. I could have called an ambulance. He walked down the sidewalk that afternoon, and I thought he would be fine. Guilt accepts no excuses. Shortly after supper that evening I got the call that something was desperately wrong. I dropped everything and got in my car. As I sped to his house, I could feel the guilt begin to overpower me and take up residence. If grief is painful, guilt is even more so. They are interconnected.

The British poet and novelist Lawrence Durrell illustrated the progressive and pervasive nature of guilt:

“**Guilt always runs towards it’s compliment, punishment, only there does it‘s satisfaction lie.”**

The onset of guilt is marked by a downward spiral, leaving you silently punishing yourself for things you may or may not have done. It is a no-win situation. You cannot retrace your steps. There are no “do-overs” when death is involved. Grief and guilt are a potent one-two punch. More often than not, you convict yourself of an imagined offence without any evidence to back it up. You feel guilty, and nobody can convince you otherwise.

The most prevalent form of Survivor’s Guilt is the feeling of guilt for simply being left behind. I have lived a wonderful, full life….Why couldn’t God have taken me instead of my youngest son? He had so much more life to live. Two young girls will grow up without a daddy. My story is a common one, and leaves those who have walked this road feeling helpless and alone.

Guilt is such a strong word. It sounds so final. We are heavily influenced by a judicial system that weeds out those who it has hopefully proven guilty. Off to jail you go! It is also true that our guilt, held to tightly to the vest, separates us from the ebb and flow of the world around us. We are trapped in a prison of our own making. We have taken steps down a road that has led us to condemn ourselves without a trial. The evidence we used to convict ourselves is flimsy if not nonexistent. This progression is so subtle that you hardly feel yourself slipping down the slippery slope. There are three components: Regret…….Guilt…….Shame.

Author Jane Adams rightly observed that

“**Regret is guilt without neurosis”**

We all have regrets. Regrets are a natural part of life, and don’t disarm or disable us. Regret is to guilt what a pin prick is to a stab wound. We carry regrets with us as we walked through life, but they don’t hamper us from reaching our final destination.

If we allow regret however, to morph into guilt, we cross the line and subject ourselves to thoughts and feelings that can cripple us. Guilt left to fester degenerates even further into shame. Oh so quietly and quickly we lose our bearings. What was once self-esteem becomes self-loathing.

These may seem like subtle nuances and inconsequential details that we need not trouble ourselves with. I started this project with a preconceived notion that grief was like a cloud that simply stations itself over our heads and inconveniences our lives for a short period of time. Grief is far more

complicated than that. Grief is like a cancer – unpredictable, and a formidable foe. Grief is too often unspoken and untreated.

We are quick to run to the nearest clinic when we suffer from physical pain. There is even a scale to rate our pain so that the doctor can effectively treat it. Your pain is rated on a scale from 1 to 10, 10 being the most disabling. I often find myself using that pain scale to gauge my grief at a particular moment, or during a particular circumstance. I substitute “grief” for “pain”. When I began my journey after my son’s death, my grief would have to be described as a 9 or 10. During the initial stages I felt disabled. Perhaps it wasn’t physical pain, but the emotional pain was just as powerful. As I moved forward, the pain was ever-present, but yet I felt myself making progress. Several years later, I can honestly say that my grief is much more manageable stabilizing on the opposite end of the scale.

I can almost guarantee that your grief will go on unabated if you fail to address and harbor issues of guilt in your life. Think of grief as the surface, and guilt an emotion below the surface. You must not leave symptoms untreated simply because they are below the surface, and others cannot see them. I can’t tell you that there is a fool-proof way of ridding yourself of guilt. Countless books have been written, but few solutions found to be effective. I must defer to men much wiser than me for the best possible solution to this struggle.

The Apostle Paul was an average man, who dealt with all of the same problems and short-comings that you and I deal with. He often admitted his frailties, and lamented when he would fall short of goals he had set for himself. He wrote to the Church at Philippi, trying to encourage them to stay in the fight, and hold fast to Godly principles that would strengthen them. He was honest in Chapter Three, letting them know that he was not “perfect”. He made it clear, however, his goal was to be more perfect, and to act and think in a way that would honor God. In that same chapter he commented on falling short, and how he dealt with issues of failure in life. The words he wrote to the church are a lifeline to us, as well.

“**But this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:13)**

I see one important word in this verse of Scripture. It's a word that will serve as an antidote to guilt and to shame. The word is "forgetting". It is a common word, but not as common as you might think in the New Testament. It has its roots in the Greek word "Epilanthanomai", which meant "to neglect, or no longer care for". The word occurs only eight times in the New Testament. Seven out of eight of the references refer to things we shouldn't have forgotten, or to something that simply slipped our memory. In other words, there was an element of carelessness involved. The forgetfulness we find in Philippians however, is unique. It is completely different and vitally important. Philippians 3:13 is the only place in the New Testament where God ***instructs*** us to forget.

Paul wanted desperately for the Church at Philippi to grow and mature, yet he knew that baggage from their past could easily hold them back from securing their future. There comes a point in life, maybe more than once, that we have let go of the past before we can be released to conquer new acreage. Paul's not telling us to turn our backs on our past lives, but to definitely let go of things in our past that bind us **to** the past. I will never forget my son, yet I must jettison any guilt built up over his death in order to be free to move on. There may be a million things we would like to go back and correct, but we cannot. God gives us permission to let go. God in fact instructs us to let go.

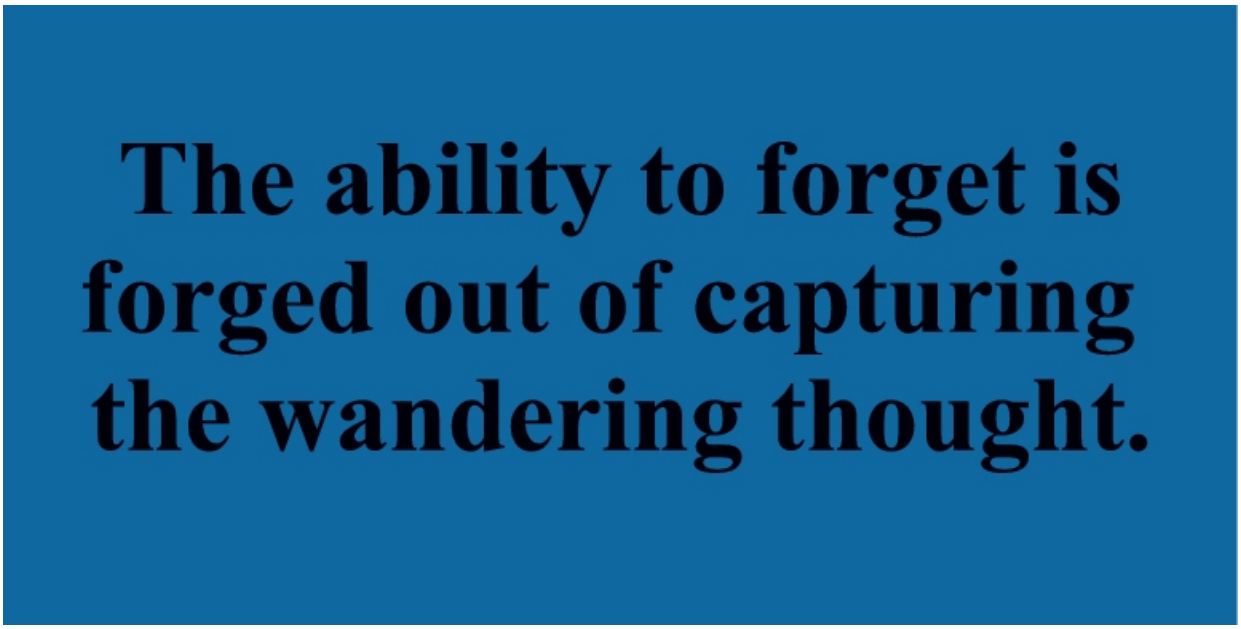
Many of us have allowed guilt and shame to become a comfort zone. We quietly live in self-condemnation, with our confidence shredded. We sabotage any attempts we make to succeed, because we are afraid that success will expose us to uncharted waters. How do we get to the point in life where success is uncomfortable? Allow yourself to begin again with a clean slate. Your past should not define you, but propel you. Take the knowledge and wisdom of the past with you, leave the pain and condemnation behind. To paraphrase the message in the language of today's youth, God has got your back. He always has, and He always will.

Our instructions didn't stop with the admonition to forget. God calls us to move forward. We need to provide separation from those things in the past that weigh us down. Moving forward gives us momentum to make a clean break from the pain of the past. Obviously this important step we are discussing takes place down the road on our recovery. We are going to need a certain amount of strength to reconfigure our life and walk away from

what we are comfortable with. Again, I think you will be amazed at the inner strength you possess. I can think of no other event in life that transforms your life like the death of a loved one. As I stated earlier, you relocate to a new “emotional address”. The way you think changes. The way you see things, changes.

Let’s stop here for a moment and talk about nurturing the ability to forget. Yes, Philippians does instruct us to forget. I’m sure you would agree with me that is easier said than done. How do you forget? What can you do to address the pain of things past?

Let’s list for strategies that you can use to help put the past behind you. Strategy Number One**: Consider a change of scenery**. You don’t have to literally pick up and move in order to change the scenery that you’ve grown accustomed to. If life has indeed changed, then perhaps your movements need a makeover. If you don’t redirect your steps, you will continue to walk over familiar territory. That familiar territory as the potential of triggering familiar memories, and thus a downward spiral. During the grieving process there are places you can visit that only served to make your recovery more difficult. You may need to stay away from a particular restaurant, if it brings back memories and rekindles your grief. In rare cases, you may need to consider changing jobs, if your present circumstance is and will continue to be too painful. Certainly day trips out of town, or even a full-blown vacation would help break the routine that you have grown accustomed to. It’s time you conquered some new territory. It’s time you stretched your boundaries. Rather than sitting still, you can be turning a negative into a positive. It’s time to create new memories.



Strategy Number Two**: Commit to training your mind and controlling your thoughts**. The ability to forget is forged out of capturing the wandering thought. This is so important. Paul told us that we were to bring our thoughts "into captivity". Wild and wandering thoughts tend to lead directly back to painful memories. What do you say to a person who is about to bring up an issue that will lead to a strong disagreement between the two of you? Three words suffice: "don't go there"! You are well served stopping that discussion in its tracks if it's about to lead to conflict.

The same holds true for the workings of your internal mind. You can be your own worst enemy. Your thoughts can wander. The subject matter can turn ugly and painful without warning. Your day can turn from happy to sad because of a few stray thoughts that you didn't stop in their tracks. You need to discipline your mind, and have the courage to reprimand yourself. "Don't go there" can certainly apply to both internal and external conversations.

Strategy Number Three: **Find and develop your gift.** You were put on this planet for a reason. The endgame here is not only to feel good, but to feel good about yourself. You are unique. There's no one else like you. You need to discover why. What sets you apart, what gift do you possess that lies dormant and undeveloped? If you can paint, paint. If you can sing, look for outlets that will allow you to develop that gift. If you have a soft, kind and giving heart, look for places and situations to nurture a giving spirit while helping other people. There is a huge shortage of people who have the ability

to listen. That is a gift. Find out what it is that moves you, and develop a passion for it. Not only will you be doing something that adds to the quality of life of those around you, but you are substituting pride and fulfillment for grief and pain.

Forgetting isn't an easy task. It is achievable, however. It requires three things: decisiveness, discernment and passion. Why not make this journey fun by participating?

Recently I went to the eye doctor for a routine checkup. I stay away from doctors when possible, but advancing age works to my disadvantage. I figured I would breeze in, and breeze out, but that was not to be. The assistants ushered me from machine to machine, advances in optometry I never knew existed. Finally, I got in to see the doctor, and she looked at my data. Her diagnosis: my eyesight had worsened, and if I didn't address it I would not be able to pass the next driver's license exam. Needless to say I was momentarily speechless!

She began to drop lens down the old fashioned way, asking me if I could see better or worse. This process went on for some time until we had come up with the best possible prescription for a new pair of glasses. I came back a week or so later, and put those glasses on for the first time. I was literally shocked. It was like changing from a regular television channel to a high definition channel. Life in front of my eyes jumped out at me in surreal fashion. I never knew. I never knew.

The same process takes place when we take a chance and abandon our comfort zone for something better. We are so afraid to take a chance and step out. That act of faith allows God to open your eyes to see things in surprising clarity, much like my new-found ability to see following a simple Doctor's appointment. Remember out theme: take some chances. Don't settle for mediocrity. Know in your heart that there is more out there for you if you will just take the first step. Remember our theme:

We were not put on earth to be passive spectators in this life standing still; we were designed and empowered to be active participants moving forward".

Don't let guilt and shame take root in your life. You deserve better.

A good portion of this book is devoted to the difference between a life which is active, and one which is passive. I have stated more than once that passivity is your worst enemy. Having said that, I find nothing more passive than being mired in guilt. It is a trap. It is a snare. Guilt brings progress to a complete stop. Let's look at this from another angle. We have looked at what we can do to address guilt. Let's take a moment and look at what God has done to address guilt.

What has God done in our behalf? Let me preface my remarks by asking some questions. Was it you that looked upward; and seeing darkness, bedecked the sky with stars? Is it you that oversees the transition from spring to summer, from autumn to winter? Can you control the hurricane, and redirect the path of the tornado? Can you manufacture a rainbow? I believe the answer to those three questions would be "no".

I am, of course, pointing to the fact while we don't have much control over circumstances that come our way, God does. Nothing "slips" through His fingers. Nothing gets lost in translation. Nothing is delayed, denied or disturbed without His permission. We too often are blaming ourselves for a sequence of events that have been expressly and purposely ordered by the Lord. My proof comes from David's Psalm 37….

"The steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord; and he delighth in his way" (Psalm 37:23)

I have a musical background. I have composed music for orchestra, and know the complexities of composing music for such a large group of musicians. The composer must be fluent in strings, percussion, brass, woodwinds, and any other instrument that may accompany the orchestra, such as piano. Each instrument is unique, and has its own unique staff filled with notes written specifically for that instrument's sound. The sounds range from loud to soft, from brash to plush. Just as an artist loads his brush with a particular color of paint, so the composer chooses his instruments to create a tapestry of sound. The flute player (third chair) may think his role is minor, because the full orchestra drowns out his best efforts. It is each part coming together in unison, however, that marks the difference between a work, and a work of art.

Each of us brings an important voice to Creation's March. It is the Conductor that has the responsibility to bring these voices to life. The same

holds true for our lives. We only have our part of the score in front of us. We cannot predict what role others will play, because they have a part written especially for them. We have to trust that the conductor will use each of our talents to bring to life something beautiful and bigger than ourselves.

The point: grief is a difficult enough adversary. Don’t compound your pain by awarding yourself unnecessary and unwarranted guilt and shame. God was not on vacation the night my son died. There was a reason and a purpose for events that night, and some day in glory I will have access to why Death’s Concerto was performed that evening. Until then, I must accept my limitations, and know that my life has a purpose, and what I have learned can benefit other people.

Chapter Ten

Pieces of a Puzzle



It’s time to pull together what we have learned, and knit it together as a plan of action. We have drawn illustrations from many sources. We have looked at quotes from many authors. We have scoured the Bible for words of wisdom. We have tried to establish what behaviors help us to move forward, and identify those behaviors that hinder our progress.

This final chapter will try to condense what we have covered into a mantra that is easy to remember. We want to coalesce around three main themes we will liken to pieces of a puzzle. I must admit I was never any good at completing puzzles. You have to have patience to correctly identify the pieces that fit together. As you labor, the pieces connected begin to appear as an emerging but still unknown picture. Each piece properly placed gives you even more insight into what the final product might look like.

Can I suggest that life can be looked at as a puzzle? Piece by piece you put the puzzle together, and you begin to see more clearly the beauty of life, and your place in it. When we started this study, we were “puzzled” as to how to address grief, and the pain it brings into our lives. As we end our study, I believe we have a far better picture of what we are up against, and how to address it.

I will identify three pieces of a puzzle, when connected together, will give you the strength and direction to overcome grief as well as other obstacles in life. We have discussed various practical steps to take to make our journey smoother and more productive. Now let's back away, and think of the bigger picture. We will need to focus our attention, and look

1. INWARD



Aw, who needs a twelve-step plan? We will focus on three important principles. First, we need to **look INWARD**. The world is a three-ring circus. Bright lights, fancy cars and the all that glitters has caught your attention. You must be willing to take inventory, and find out who you really are, who you have become. This first piece of our puzzle is key to positioning yourself for success. Acknowledge who you are, and take ownership of it, good or bad.

When we are discussing the **INWARD** look, we are trying to strengthen our character. We need to establish one trait we will never relinquish: **ACCOUNTABLITY**. "For nothing is secret, that shall not be revealed" (Luke 8:17). "Man looks at the out-ward appearance, God looks at the heart" (1 Sam. 16:7). In other words, you can run, but you cannot hide! You cannot hide from God; you cannot hide from those who encircle you; and you cannot hide from yourself. Adversity sands the rough edges off the human character. The process is uncomfortable, but none the less you walk away better for it. Own it.

I was looking through my old pictures yesterday. I have them stored away in my closet, but from time to time I pull them out for a trip back in time. It reminds me how fast time flies. We just talked of feeling uncomfortable. My thoughts immediately went back thirty years or so. We were in the barber shop, and one of my boys was getting his first haircut. You would think he was about to be murdered. He howled, he kicked, his face contorted into various angry looks. The barber was gentle and patient, and even had a hint of a smile on his face. He obviously had been down this

particular road before. This screaming child would surprisingly grow up to love a mirror and a comb. Go figure.

We are no different as adults. We chafe at the prospect of being accountable. We can have things our way. That attitude is definite proof that we may have to come to grips with our shortcomings. We may have to change our ways to address those shortcomings. This is an ongoing process that helps us get through the tough times such as loss, health issues, and circumstances beyond your control. Looking inward, you will be delighted to find a reservoir of strength and courage that will empower you to handle turbulent times.

We speak of a three-fold accountability. We are accountable to God as we study and follow a well-lit path outlined in His word. We have discovered how powerful and practical His advice is during the course of our study. You can learn life's lessons the easy way through studying, or you can be stubborn and learn life's lessons the hard way at a much slower pace on your own. I advise you to choose the former rather than the latter.

We are also accountable to each other. Don't sequester yourself from the outside world. It stunts your growth. We have friends and family that have grown to count on us, and we on them. There are times when the mere existence of family and friends serves as a deterrent. They will run to your side if your wander off course. They will be the first to rush to your side if you stumble and fall. Likewise, you harbor the same level of commitment to them as they journey through life. We need to be part of a life that is bigger than ourselves.

We are accountable to ourselves. We need to be goal-setting, earth-shaking, life-changing forces moving unflinchingly forward. We are fueled by our own dreams, and benchmarks we set for ourselves to hurdle as we run life's track. True leaders and success stories are people who quietly set boundary-stretching goals, and refuse to let themselves off the hook.

2. UPWARD



A life that is bigger than ourselves. That necessitates a request for Divine assistance. Not simply a “Help me!” when we cower before obstacles. It involves you working in concert with your God, keeping that all-important perspective as you tackle life’s sorted trials and tribulations.

The INWARD look is a cleansing process that looks to keep us from repeating the mistakes of our past. An honest look inward deals with issues that hinder you from moving forward.

Ok, it’s time to unveil the second and third traits that we must never relinquish: **AVAILABILITY** and **VULNERABILITY.** Just as ACCOUNTABILITY is linked to an INWARD look, these next character traits- availability and vulnerability are linked to the **UPWARD** look.

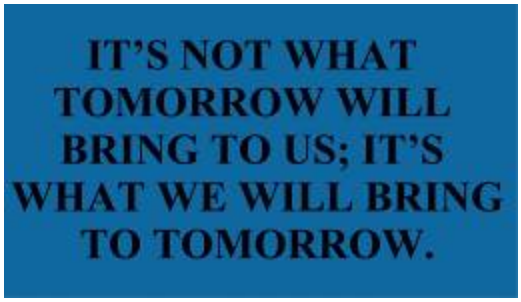
The next logical step is the UPWARD look, which will empower us to leave that baggage behind. It was Peter who promised in Acts 1 that

“**Ye shall receive power…..” (Acts 1:8)**

We dare not move one inch forward without that anointing and power. If you are available to God, He has fertile ground on which to plant and harvest fruit in your life. Rest assured I speak of a consistent and committed availability, not just a Sunday appearance in church. We’re not just talking about a sense of peace, but a “**peace that passeth all understanding” (Phil. 4:7).** How many of these blessings have we missed out on simply because we were not available to God at that particular moment. We waste no time at all, however, to make ourselves available to God when trouble comes and we our knees begin to buckle under the weight of the trial before us. Availability means what it says. You are available. You are available to be molded, retooled, strengthened and whatever else it takes to transform you into a valuable and productive member on the march towards higher ground.

That availability extends to those around you, as well. Once again I warn against sequestering yourself away from people who need the wisdom and experience that you have accumulated. I believe that people in trouble can sense people around them who are emotionally and physically available to them. “She’s easy to talk to….” No, she carries herself in such a way that disarms those around her. She is available. Not only is she available, but she

has experienced what you are going through, and is willing to listen and help.



If you are one of those that made it to the other side of the shore, that withstood the stormy sea, much is expected of you. You need to develop and maintain a sense of **VULNERABILITY**. We think of vulnerability as a sign of weakness. One meaning of the word states:

"Capable of or susceptible to being wounded or hurt."

A second definition captures a certain strength in vulnerability, however:

"Open to moral attack, criticism, temptations….."

This may sound contradictory, but only a strong individual can be open and transparent. The vulnerability I seek to nurture in myself enables me to be honest and real, in spite of attack and criticism. There's no reason to run and hide- God is well aware of my many shortcomings. I believe He would have us come to a place in our lives where our accountability to God calls us to become more available to God. Our quest to become more available to God makes us more vulnerable before Him. In taking that humble path, we become strong.

3. THE OUTWARD LOOK



This is the third and last piece of the puzzle**.** We will have made significant progress to get to this point in our journey. This final step means you are

functioning again, gaining strength and moving forward. You will always have “moments’, or even “days” where grief tugs at your coattails. Now, however, you have developed and implemented strategies that enable you to keep walking without being knocked off-course.

Of course, we will introduce one more indispensable character trait you will need to master the outward look: **ADAPTABILITY.** The world must increase, and your comfort zone must decrease. Just as the seasons change, so do our lives and the circumstances we encounter. There are no guarantees what tomorrow will bring our way. What do we bring to tomorrow? We bring new-found strength, and both passion and purpose. What a powerful thought! It’s not what tomorrow will bring to us, it is what we will bring to tomorrow. We will be able to draw upon the fruits of experience- strength, wisdom and success. Once you have tasted success, it is difficult to drift back into mediocrity. I come prepared each day. I am primed to succeed. I am **ADAPTABLE**, because I know it’s a key ingredient in success. I am willing to venture into unknown territory, because I have developed enough confidence to be able to negotiate through new and differing circumstances.

What a journey- from being riddled with grief, to being filled with purpose and strength. I won’t happen overnight, but we have mapped out a way to get there. As you progress, don’t forget to extend an out-stretched hand to someone else embarking on this difficult transition. When you suffer loss, you join a huge congregation of those in various stages of recovery. Most suffer silently. Many want help, but don’t know how to ask. It’s time for you to stand up now, and get back in the battle. You have encountered mortality, and walked away stronger for it. To whom much is given…….much is required.

About the Author



Orville Wright is an author, pianist, classical composer and former pastor who lives with his wife Melinda in Wichita Falls, Texas.

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