

FINDING GOD'S GRACE WHEN YOUR WORLD TURNS UPSIDE DOWN

Saturday, July 27, 2013. I don't remember dates very well, but I will always remember July 27, 2013. On that day our church bus rolled over, killing my son Chad, my daughter-in-law Courtney, my unborn granddaughter, and Mrs. Tanya Weindorf. On Saturday, July 27, 2013, a bus rolled over, and my world turned upside down.

I was just leaving my office when our church's big yellow school bus rolled into the church parking lot. It was full of fourth through sixth-grade campers returning home, so I was not shocked by their screams. During my nine years in youth work (early in my ministry), I had become accustomed to noisy children. But this noise was different. It was so different that I sent a text to my son Chad, the youth pastor of our church. The text is still on my phone: "Is all ok w/ junior bus?"

As I walked out of the church building, a man ran to speak to me. "Pastor, the other bus has been in an accident at Keystone and 465."

I jumped into my Jeep and headed to the scene of the accident. I had no idea that my life would never be the same.

Chris, a U.S. Marshal and a member of the youth staff, had travelled with our group to camp. When I arrived at the scene, he put his arm around me and led me to a private place—away from the ambulances, away from the rescue-copters, away from the fire trucks, away from the noise and the gruesome scene. Then he said it: "Pastor, Chad didn't make it." While I was trying to absorb what I had just heard, he added, "Courtney didn't make it either."

I asked if the rescue workers were aware that Courtney was seven months along (hoping that the baby could be saved). Chris assured me that they knew about the baby.

Then my son Caleb came to me, carrying my grandson Chase. Chase had been on the bus when it had rolled over. Courtney somehow had been able to push him to safety. Chase's little face was bruised, and his eyes were filled with uncertainty. Caleb had witnessed the accident, had stopped the vehicle he was driving, had run across the busy parkway, and had scooped Chase up in his arms. Chase had no idea his parents had been taken from him. He was only twenty-one months old.

Soon my wife, daughter, and youngest son arrived at the scene. My mouth was dry; my mind was scrambled; my heart was filled with anxiety.

How does a Christian move from trauma to tranquility? Here are a few Scripture-based thoughts that helped bring calm to my crisis.

Be willing to accept the help that others offer. God knows how to dispatch his angels (Heb. 1:14). He will send His servants to support you when your world is falling apart (Ex. 17:10–12).

Our family was helped by first responders, health-care professionals, and counselors who seemed to drop from the sky. There were phone calls, e-mails, text messages, and cards from friends and strangers. Fast-food-restaurant workers offered meals; hotel managers offered rooms; members of churches in our area volunteered to provide a funeral dinner; and life-long friends from far away found ways to be near. Then-governor Mike Pence even came to speak to our church.

I've been in pastoral ministry for over thirty years. I have often been comfortable giving assistance and seldom comfortable receiving it, but I have learned that there are some trials I cannot handle alone.

Remember to count your blessings. David reminded his soul to, "Bless the Lord," and not to "forget...all His benefits!" (Ps. 103:2). It's easy to count your blessings in the good times. It is essential to count your blessings in the rough times. My wife, Linda, and I reminded each other that even David risked great loss when he cried after the death of his son, Absalom, forgetting those who were faithful to him (II Sa. 18:33–19:7). Make a conscientious effort to remember the goodness of the Lord.

Be responsible to do the work that God has called you to do. When I assessed how much I had lost and began to grieve that I would never see my loved ones again on this earth, I wanted to dig a pit and crawl into it. Then I remembered how God had met with Elijah when the prophet had been on the run and had asked him, "What doest thou here?" (I Ki. 19:9, 13). God had restored Elijah's spirit by giving Elijah an assignment (I Ki. 19:16–18).

It is tempting to hide your head under a pillow when the storms come crashing down, but your troubles will be waiting for you when you come out from hiding, and your responsibilities will have compounded. Irresponsibility leads to greater anxiety.

Be still and listen for God to speak. The Spirit of God takes the Word of God that is hidden in our hearts during times of peace and brings it to our memory during times of pain. On Sunday, July 14, 2013, I prepared to go to church. As I stepped across the room, the Spirit of God reminded me of I Corinthians 15:19–20: "If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable. But now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the first fruits of them that slept." At that time that passage touched my trembling heart.

"Be still and know that I am God" (Ps. 46:10) is good counsel for every day, but it is critical counsel when your world is turned upside down.

Gather with God's people and anticipate God's grace. It's often hard to see people when your heart is filled with pain. Some people find it hard to go to church. I am no exception.

During the months that followed the deaths of our children, it seemed that every hymn our congregation sang was filled with truth that touched my heart. I found myself weeping when the choir sang and feeling overcome when we bowed to pray. Yet, God's grace was present in

unusual ways during church services. For weeks Linda and I would say, “The only time we really feel normal is when we are at church.”

Psalm 122:1 states: “I was glad when they said unto me; Let us go into the house of the Lord.” I wasn’t always glad to go, but I was always glad that I went. I learned what Asaph meant when he said, “I went into the sanctuary of God; then understood I.” God uses “psalms and hymns and spiritual songs” (Ep. 5:19) to strengthen us in our sorrows and to teach us through our trials. Those who gather on the Lord’s Day have stories of survival to share with us when we are struggling. There are times when the few words shared by a fellow believer in the foyer bolster faith enough for us to survive until the next Sunday (Heb. 10:25).

Be honest about your hurts. When your world is turned upside down, you can play the hero and pretend that everything is fine, but such play-acting is not helpful. The Spirit of God does not say that we cannot sorrow, but rather that our sorrow is not like the sorrow of those who have no hope (I Th. 4:13). Our Great High Priest carried our burdens willingly to the cross and was honest enough to ask the Father to let the cup pass from Him (Mt. 26:39). To be honest, when I think about what happened when our church bus flipped, it is still very painful. It’s so good to know the One who “carries our griefs and has borne our sorrows” (Is. 53:6).

Let your tragedy become an opportunity. My son Chad loved to put words together in new and meaningful ways. For example, our youth group has an annual “Intro-Nally” (a word Chad coined) to celebrate graduation and to welcome seventh graders. After the bus accident, our church minted a new word—“Tragi-tunity.”

The comfort that God supplies for our struggles is sufficient for us to be servants to others when they struggle (II Cor. 1:4). As God shows you how to get through your trial, He will train you to lead others through theirs.

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