
Living through Loss

By Kristi Bothur

I am convinced that losing a child is one of the hardest trials a parent can go through. As parents, we expect our children to bury us, not the other way around. When that child is still in the womb and is lost in a miscarriage or stillbirth, the loss is marked by its own unique characteristics. What memories there are, are limited to doctor's visits, sounds of heartbeats, hazy ultrasound images, and perhaps fluttery sensations of movement. Lost forever are the dreams, hopes, and won't-ever-happen events of the now-impossible future. What has been an experience of joyful anticipation transforms in an instant into an unanticipated tragedy. The overriding questions are "Why?" and "How?"

And when the medical reasons have – or, very often, have not – been provided, many parents are left with another question of eternal dimensions – where was God in this? Why did He let *our* baby die? Would it have been so difficult to step in and prevent this? In the words of Tevye in *Fiddler on the Roof*, "Would it spoil some vast eternal plan" to allow another baby to be born into the world?

When we lost our second daughter in a late miscarriage after eighteen and a half weeks of pregnancy, these were the questions that filled my mind and heart. Our first daughter was not even a year old when we were thrilled to learn we were expecting again. The pregnancy itself was normal and healthy in spite of some medical challenges on my part, including an emergency appendectomy at ten

weeks' gestation. When our baby survived that surgery, we assumed we had a strong little one and looked forward to my August due date with a combination of excitement and apprehension at having two children in diapers at the same time.

Then, eight weeks after my appendectomy, my husband rushed me to the emergency room again with abdominal pains that sent my heart rate skyrocketing. Fighting to sustain my life while the medical experts tried to determine what was wrong, my body couldn't keep our baby going, too. I miscarried the morning of

March 9, giving birth to a beautiful, eight and a half inch long, very still baby girl whom we named Naomi Faith. Through my emergency surgery the next day for what turned out to be twisted intestines, through the

months of recovery that followed, through the heart-wrenching burial and memorial service for our daughter, the questions hammered at my mind. The doctors had no explanation for why so many things went so horribly wrong in my body at such a crucial moment. With no medical or human factor to take responsibility for my grief, I was left pointing an accusing finger at heaven. How could God have let this happen? I felt abandoned by the Lord I had walked with since childhood. My previously-held belief that He would protect me from serious hurt and harm had been blown out of the water.

As I heard and read others' stories of loss and compared my grief to those who seemed to have suffered so much more, my question of,

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“Why me?” transformed into, “Why anybody?” I found myself face-to-face with the ancient question of how a good and powerful God can allow bad things to happen to good people. Is He not powerful? Or is He not good? Or do His goodness and power intersect with our lives in a way that is beyond our understanding? It was a question I had never been forced to deal with on a personal level before, and now that I was, the reasons I had come up with in seminary classes ten years before rang hollow. While I had walked with the Lord too long to turn my back on Him completely, if this was what walking closely with Him had brought me, I would follow Him at a much greater distance in the future. Close hurt too much.

In my desperation for some measure of peace in my grief, I searched the Scriptures for any mention of unborn babies. Not surprisingly, my search led me again and again to Psalm 139. I had studied it often in the past in my

passion to fight abortion and show others that life did indeed begin at conception. Now I delved into it to see what it would reveal to me about the daughter I would never know. What I found was both familiar and new, and it was a salve to my raw emotions and hurting heart.

First, it reminded me that the God I was holding at a distance was intimately involved in Naomi’s development for the four months that I carried her. David’s descriptions of development in the womb are filled with tenderness – God forms us, weaves us together, knits us. I don’t knit, but I do crochet, and in the days following Naomi’s death I threw myself into crocheting projects – a burial blanket for Naomi, a gown, a cap. One friend of ours lovingly made a small burial

gown for her; another helped my husband fashion a tiny coffin. All of these were projects done in love with careful attention given to the details. The picture David painted of God’s hand in Naomi’s formation was no less loving, as He gently and skillfully forms each cell, each organ, each part in its place. After she was born, the nurses in the hospital cleaned Naomi up and brought her to us to hold. We had marveled at how, even at this age in the womb, each part was as it should be, from her delicate facial features down to her minuscule fingernails and toenails. No wonder David praised God that he was “fearfully and wonderfully made.” I could see, too, how even for the short time we had her, Naomi’s very life was a blessing and a miracle, a gift of love from God to us.

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Second, I was reminded that God is aware of everything that happens in the womb. Verses 15 and 16 state that our frame and unformed substance were not hidden from God in the secret place – and

this coming from a time before ultrasound gave us a window to that secret place. It comforts me to realize that God saw Naomi from the time she was conceived until the moment that she passed from my body. Earlier in the Psalm, in verse 5, David describes God as enclosing us and laying his hand upon us. During my appendectomy in January, His eyes and hand were on her, sheltering her from harm, and giving us another two months together. Eight weeks later, when I was fighting for my life and her heart beat for the last time, when I was unaware of what was going on, God knew. He saw. She was not hidden from Him, and she was not alone as she slipped from this world into eternity. Her heavenly Father’s hand never let go of her.

Finally, God showed me that Naomi's death did not surprise Him or catch Him unaware. On the contrary, all of the days of my daughter's life were "ordained and written in His book" before she was even conceived. I had been grieving my daughter's death not only for my loss but also with anger over how her life had been cut short, as if God's purpose for her life had been thwarted by the enemy of death. In His defeat, He had let me down, and left me scared – if God could be defeated, who could I trust? How could I trust Him with my life, and that of my husband and daughter and others whom I loved? Now, however, I saw that although death was still the enemy, God was the victor, not the victim. I could trust that Naomi's life, though brief, truly had fulfilled the purpose that God had for her. What that was, I still wasn't sure, but I had seen a hint of it in the aftermath of her death as God had used it to open doors of conversations with others that blessed both them and us.

Did the fact that Naomi's days were "ordained" mean that God was responsible for both her death and the way it had happened? I still wrestle with this question. In the grand scheme of things, I can see that we live in a world distorted by sin, and that leads to problems like sickness and death. No one is immune, no matter how closely we walk with God. To prevent all of that, God would have to heal the whole world – which He will do someday, but hasn't done yet.

On a more personal level, though, I can't get away from the belief that if God is sovereign and powerful, then He could have stepped in to prevent my particular illness and so preserved Naomi's life – as He could prevent

any painful tragedy in this world, and as He sometimes does. In my case, He chose not to, for reasons that I can't imagine. What I struggled with was why, if He loved me, He willingly withheld his healing power. I don't understand that kind of love. But I also don't understand the kind of love that prompted God the Father to send his Son to die – and withheld his hand as he watched him die. And seeing afresh in the pages of Scripture His care for her, His tenderness toward her – and toward me - I have been reassured that He is both powerful *and* good – and yes, that the intersection of those qualities in this part of my life *is* beyond my understanding.

I'm also beginning to see that I don't need to understand in order to believe. And close on the heels of belief is trust – trust that as I rest in God's goodness and power, I can trust Him to oversee my life and the lives of those I love in the way that does us the most good while at the same time bringing Him the most glory.

Of course, my idea of "good" is not necessarily His. My preference in the area of "good" is health, happiness, and provision for me and my loved ones, with enough tribulation to build character, but not enough to do permanent damage. Letting go of my definition of "good" is not easy. King David once purchased a place to offer God a sacrifice, declining the owner's offer to give him the land outright with these words: "I will not offer burnt offerings to the LORD my God which cost me nothing" (2 Sam 24:24). The sacrifice of praise that I offer God today is one that has come at the cost of my own insistence on what my life should look like, and it comes having counted the cost of following the One who, as was said of the lion Aslan in the *Chronicles of Narnia*,

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isn't safe – but He is good. The words of Job 1:21, “the Lord gave and the Lord has taken away,” have a bittersweet meaning to me now, as I contemplate the gift of my daughter and the brief time I was allowed to have her, and my “blessed be the name of the Lord” is not without tears. But I offer it sincerely, knowing that while His ways are beyond my understanding, so is the peace that is gradually filling my heart again.

The apostle Peter, when confronted with the choice of whether to continue to follow Jesus or not, responded, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that You are the Holy One of God.” I, too, have had to choose in a difficult season – would I follow still or turn away? Like Peter, I cling to the words of eternal life and the Savior who holds them, and trust that not only will I see my daughter in His presence someday, but that He will use me and my life, with all its hurts and joys, to bring as many people with me as possible. And so I am able to pray with David, “Search me, O God, and know my heart. Try me and know my anxious thoughts; And see if there be any hurtful way in me and lead me in the everlasting way” (Psalm 139:23-24).

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