

Introduction

Tortilla chips

I wish I could go back to the 28th of December. It was my last proper night with Megan, and we spent the evening together on a hospital ward. She sat on the bed, and I sat on the chair beside her. We spoke about, of all things, tortilla chips.

Our conversation that night reflected our expectations. We *expected* Megan to be out of hospital soon. So we spent our evening discussing our grocery delivery. We set out the week's menu and spent a special amount of time planning the food for our annual New Year's Eve 'open house.'

You see, the year before, we'd forgotten the tortilla chips, which forced me into a frantic search across London. Who would have thought that every shop in our area would be sold out? But they were. And there we were, laughing about it all a year later.

It's both sad and ironic that our family ended up eating a lot of tortilla chips over the next few days. It's a gross understatement, but things didn't go quite as planned. Nothing those days really did.

Let me back up a bit. While we sat in hospital, Megan was seven months pregnant with our seventh child. We already had five boys and a girl, and we eagerly anticipated the arrival of another boy. We'd welcomed a child almost every two years. Our lives were happily full at home and with gospel ministry. I was then (and still am) serving as one of the pastors of a church in north London. The Christmas period is normally a busy and exciting time, full of carol singing, gingerbread houses, nativity plays, and turkey dinners.

That Christmas morning, the children and I drove Megan to hospital. For a few days, she'd had crippling headaches, and that morning it was more than she could handle. The headaches hurt, but the blurry vision was frightening. The doctors gave us an early diagnosis: pregnancy-induced migraines. That seemed reasonable. So I preached my Christmas morning sermon, and then the children and I had a subdued Christmas dinner. We sent Megan photos of the Christmas pudding she'd made, and we even saved a bit for her. Over the next few days, Megan was in and out of hospital. The headaches didn't really improve. On the 28th, the doctors decided she should stay under observation.

That night, Megan had a fitful night's sleep. Her headaches were too much for her, and the ward was anything but quiet. We spoke briefly on the phone the next morning, and she was desperate for sleep. Who could blame her? At home, our morning plans continued, as of yet, unabated. I took our 13-year-old to the GP's. He had tonsillitis, and needed antibiotics.

When I got back home, I got a phone call that nobody ever wants to receive: get to hospital as soon as possible. Megan was in a bad way, and she wanted me there. I shudder anytime I remember that moment. Hastily organising childcare, I rushed down to the hospital. When I got there, mercifully, she was asleep. 'Yes,' I thought. 'Just what she needs.' I quietly sat at her bedside on the same uncomfortable chair I'd occupied the night before.

I couldn't have been there longer than five minutes before everything changed.

In an instant, Megan sat up and half-asked, half-mumbled for a pillow. Her neck hurt – or at least that's what I concluded from her pointing.

Have you ever had one of those moments where life just seems to be happening around you? You're there, but you seem to be looking in from the outside? It may sound cliched, but that's what happened to me. Within seconds, Megan's bed was surrounded – there must have been ten people there – nurses, doctors, strangers.

One of them pulled me aside: Megan wasn't breathing. They didn't know why. They rushed her to critical care so that they could stabilise her and begin running tests. I was urged to call our family and friends, and then meet Megan there in an hour. I phoned family in America and friends across the UK. I needed help. I needed prayer. I didn't really know what I needed.

All of this happened on the afternoon of December 29th. And so began a climactic week in hospital for us all. In the early hours of the 30th, our sixth son was safely delivered by Caesarean. Delivering him, the doctors believed was the best course of action as it allowed them to more actively care for Megan. There I was: the proud father of seven. I went to see the wee one soon after. He was well, even though his mummy wasn't.

I was torn in two – overjoyed, but distraught. Full of joy at the birth of our son, yet full of fear at Megan's precarious state. Now, our attention turned to Megan.

She continued to be heavily sedated and on life support. Early scans showed severe swelling of the brain. That was a blow. Of course, this generated all sorts of questions: How bad was the damage? What had caused it? Would she recover? The

first 36 hours in critical care answered the first question: the damage to Megan's brain was, in the words of the registrar: 'catastrophic.' The early signs for survival, let alone recovery, were grim. Another day of tests didn't lead to better news. On the 31st of December, we were told that, barring a miracle, Megan would die.

We still didn't know the cause of the swelling, but we nonetheless began to pray for a miracle. Our God created the world by His powerful word, calmed the storm with a word, healed the blind, and, himself a man, rose from the dead on the third day. Our God is more than capable of healing catastrophic bodily conditions. So we prayed, and we waited.

A few days later, we learned the cause of the swelling: Megan had a bacterial infection through, of all things, a scrape on her knee. It sounds ridiculous – unbelievable, really – but it's true. We knew when and where Megan had scraped her knee: a few weeks earlier, on the night of our church's carol and nativity service. She'd slipped on the stairs.

Over the days that followed, Megan had managed the minor wound. It had started to look a bit infected, but we'd thought nothing of it. Now we saw things in a different light. We were floored – so much damage done by such a small scrape. Still, we prayed, and we waited.

Those seven days Megan spent on the critical care ward were touch-and-go. I spent nearly all my waking hours at hospital. I didn't want to leave Megan's side, in case there might be some change or some news. Quite literally, I spent an entire week walking between Megan's bedside and the critical care 'relatives' room. I only left the ward for meals. Kind nurses from neonatal intensive care regularly brought the baby to see Megan and I on the ward. We cherished those times. Megan 'held' our little guy, and I talked to both of them.

Megan remained in a medically induced coma. Nonetheless, a number of brothers in Christ came by to spend time with us; their presence encouraged me. We spent the days together, and, other dear friends (usually couples) sat by Megan's bedside through the night, so that I could try to get some rest. It was a hard week.

The miracle we prayed for that week didn't happen. Megan wasn't recovering. And then things got worse. The neurologists conducted further assessments, and the results were conclusive: the swelling had so severely damaged Megan's brain stem that there was no basic brain function – no heartbeat, no breathing. She would

never again regain consciousness. Megan only appeared to be breathing because the ventilator kept her lungs pumping and her heart beating.

Under the direction of the doctors and recognising God's sovereign will, we made the grave decision to turn off the life support. Before doing so, we gave friends and family a final opportunity to say 'goodbye.' We were overwhelmed by their love and support.

A day later, ten or so of us squeezed into the light blue curtained cubicle surrounding Megan's bed. Megan seemed to be merely sleeping, but the tubes connected to her body told another story. There were weak smiles and lots of hugs. The critical care ward seemed a sterile place for such a moment, but there we were. After singing a hymn and having a brief time of prayer, we turned off the machinery. The beeps and the hisses, ever-present over that last week, were strangely silent. In that little cubicle, we expressed our thanks to God for Megan's life even as we mourned her death.

She really was gone. Some remained for some time; others went back home.

A mere eight days after our tortilla chips chat, Megan was gone. Our beloved wife, amazing mum, devoted daughter, and faithful sister was no longer with us. At home, it was me and our now seven children.

Inward desolation

What I've just done is give you our family's story and the background to all that follows. What I didn't do, really, is tell you how much it all *hurt* – both in that week and in all the days since. I may have hinted at it, and we certainly will get to it. Snapshots from that time come to mind, and I *feel* them still. I'm not sure I would have used the word at the time, but we were grieving.

What is grief? JI Packer's definition is helpful:

It can be safely said that everyone who is more than a year old knows something of grief by firsthand experience, but a clinical description will help us to get it in focus. Grief, then, is the inward desolation that follows the losing of something or someone we loved – a child, a relative, an actual or anticipated life partner, a pet, a job, one's home, one's hopes, one's health or whatever.¹

Inward desolation. That puts words to how I felt, how we felt. Our world had been rocked to the core. Everything looked and felt different. Over time, this inner feeling has been accompanied by all the usual realities: tears, shock, exhaustion, discouragement. We were grieving. We are grieving.

A grief observed, a help desired

Thank you, whoever you are. Somehow a copy of CS Lewis' *A Grief Observed* ended up in my hands shortly after Megan's death². I got a lot of gifts like that around that time. Humorously, I already had a tatty, old copy on my shelf that, I admit, I hadn't read. So I welcomed a pristine, new copy. I managed to finish it within a few months or so after Megan's death.

The book offers an account of Lewis' experience following the death of his wife, Joy. They were only married for a brief period, but Lewis was profoundly affected by her death. It's a good book – useful in all the ways Lewis is always useful. He reflects so well on human experience, and then he manages to put things so well. Lewis felt Joy's death, and he describes it painfully and beautifully.

And yet, I was left wanting more. I didn't necessarily want more from Lewis. How dare I presume to say CS Lewis fell short? That thought might get me in trouble with some! His book accomplished what he set out to do.

What I wanted was *more* help in my grief. What do I mean? Let's liken grief following a bereavement to a storm at sea. In *A Grief Observed*, Lewis describes the storm. You can see and even feel the wind and the waves crashing against the boat. But I needed more help to find my way *through* the storm. I wanted someone to direct me towards land, someone to remind me how to steer the ship, and someone to give me hope even if I felt like I might never make it. Lewis wrote a travelogue through a storm with an eye to God. I wanted a God-centred travel guide through storms. I wanted comfort in light of the gospel of Jesus Christ. I wanted (and needed!) truths to direct my thinking according to Scripture. I wanted biblical direction on how to live with and through grief in a way that honours God.

I needed help to grieve *better*, in a 'manner worthy of the gospel' (Phil. 1:27). Even in our sorrows – perhaps especially in our sorrows – we can grieve *better*.

To some, this idea will be offensive. 'How dare I dictate how anybody *should* grieve?! Grieving is very personal.' To pick up our storm at sea image again, many feel that in our journey through grief we are at the whim of the wind and the waves. You must simply go where the storm takes you. Grief may be a process, but it can't

necessarily be directed. There's some truth to this, but don't sailors want to sail *well* through a storm? A sailor wants to actively steer the boat as best he can, setting up the boat (and any passengers) to survive (and maybe even thrive) in the storm.

The idea of comparing grief to a storm at sea isn't original to me. It's God's idea – more on that later on. Between the Bible and today though, many have used this image. Perhaps none more memorably than Horatio Spafford. His story is well known to many: shortly after losing his fortune in a fire and his son to scarlet fever, Spafford lost his remaining four children in a shipwreck. In his grief, he powerfully wrote a hymn with the counter-intuitive title: 'It Is Well With My Soul.' Somehow, he penned these words:

When peace like a river attendeth my way
When sorrows like sea billows roll
Whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say
It is well, it is well with my soul

Spafford had been *taught* to grieve well. That's what I want this book to do for you.

Obviously, then, the idea of grieving well isn't original to me. It's God's idea. To quote a famous passage: 'Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope' (1 Thes. 4:13). Quite simply, God wants his people to grieve a particular way. A different way than the world grieves. A way that's founded on, or a response to, our hope in Christ.

It's this distinctly Christian grieving that this book aims at. I want to help you sanctify your grieving. I want to offer you the help I myself wanted and needed. I want to grieve better. I want to help you grieve better. I want us to look more and more like Jesus through our grief, and perhaps even because of our grief. I want to teach you to say: 'It is well with my soul.' Every writer says this, I know, but I don't know of another book quite like the one you're holding.

What you have in your hands is a reflection upon the death of my wife and our family's experiences around and since that time. But this is not purely a memoir. This book is a God-centred travel guide through grief. Its thesis: we can not only survive but thrive through the loss of our loved ones. We can and should become more like Christ in our sorrows. We can learn how to say 'It is well with my soul.'

Mourning with those who mourn

This book is written for our seven children. Of course, I don't expect them *all* to read it, at least not yet. But I hope they will one day. I want to explain to our children how I thought about and how I grieved over their mum's death. I want to convey to them my deep love for Megan, and my enduring hope beyond her grave. I want to help them miss their mummy and yet respond well to her death. I want to instil in them a love for and faith in Jesus Christ. I want them to grieve *well*. I want them to say: 'It is well with my soul.'

Of course, this book is not merely for my children, this book is also for me. That's right. I began writing in the days around and after Megan's death purely for the benefit of my own soul. Some of these reflections have their beginning in a series of messages I wrote during the time. I've continued to write up till the present.

Though it's been more than four years, I'm still grieving Megan's death. I still miss her. I ache for her almost every day. I wanted to capture how I felt, and then I wanted to direct myself back to the Bible. I told friends at the time I wasn't sure if my writings would ever see the light of day. I was 'ok' with that. I wrote what I wrote because I want to be more like Jesus. I want to grieve *well*. I am saying and want to keep saying: 'It is well with my soul.'

Lastly, of course, I also wrote this for you, whoever you are. This book is for anyone who mourns. Anyone who is grieving the death of a loved one. Anyone who is sad because of all the varied sufferings of life 'under the sun' (Ecc. 1:3). If this is you, right now, please see in this book my desire to help you. I'm not trying to tell you how to grieve 'properly' or beat you over the head with biblical principles. Through this travel guide, even through my missteps, I want you to see Jesus. It's only as you see Jesus, in and through your sorrows, that you will be able to say: 'It is well with my soul.' Stay with me. Let's learn how to say it together.

Hopefully, there's also some help here for those who will help others in their grief – pastors, concerned brothers or sisters in Christ, fellow church members. If we heed the commands of Romans 12, this should be all of us: 'Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn' (Rom. 12:15).

If you're a Christian reading this book, then you have the privilege and the responsibility of mourning with your brothers and sisters. This is not merely a passive 'I'll sit and cry beside you,' although that's appropriate at times. To mourn with those who mourn, we must show intentional care. 'And we urge you, brothers

and sisters ... encourage the disheartened, help the weak, be patient with everyone' (1 Thes. 5:14). In a word, we all must encourage our fellow Christians to grieve *well*. Together, let's say: 'It is well with my soul.'

Time is on my side

What follows is a series of reflections divided into three time periods. The first set of reflections focus on 'that week,' that fateful week Megan spent in hospital before her death. These chapters all focus on the early days of uncertainty, waiting, and heartbreak. The second set of reflections focus on the immediate aftermath – from the day of Megan's death onward. The unthinkable had really happened. We had to deal with the pain, and we somehow had to carry on without Megan. These chapters are often raw and painful. The last set of reflections focus on the long-term. Our grief doesn't magically disappear three or six months on, but it does often change. These chapters aim to help you live with long-term sorrow and the general pain of life in a fallen world.

You could, I hope, dip into this book anywhere with profit, but reading these reflections in light of their context will strengthen their helpfulness. It's my sincere hope that the progression of our family's experiences will help you grieve *well* when sorrows like sea billows roll.

¹ J.I. Packer, *A Grief Sanctified: Love, Loss and Hope in the Life of Richard Baxter*, SPCK Publishing, 1998, pg 11. Packer's book on Richard Baxter's bereavement is well worth a read. Though focusing on Baxter, Packer compares CS Lewis' writings on grief with Baxter's writings on grief. The comparison is edifying, and it encouraged me in the writing of this book.

² C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, Faber and Faber Limited, 1961