

Death of a Spouse, Part V: Risen Hope in a Risen Savior

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Preface:

"For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us." - Romans 8:18

Four years later, I am still rummaging through Heidi's personal effects. Trinkets, cards and notes she wrote and received, gifts and other items that hold no substantive use in themselves but memorial value. As I was clearing, I began to wonder, *what parts of my story will I share with my child who will be born in just a few months*. As that thought began circling, it prompted me to wonder about this idea of "closure", a closure we are sometimes told eventually accompanies "healthy grief". For the first time, I began to wonder how much our ideas of closure are actually an illusion. It seems to me that no matter how well we move on or move forward in faith, there will always remain a story to be told. So as long as that story has meaning, it lives, and so in the case of "closure" I now wonder whether there is any.

We live in a world where death remains, and because of that, it can take a great deal of effort to console ourselves with the notion that closure, the kind of closure the heart really wants deep down inside, is ever found on this side of Heaven. Even so, if there is any good in death, it is that terrible but providential means whereby God receives us back unto himself. Death is the entryway to Heaven but thanks be to God that death never dies at its threshold. What I am noticing anew is that what my heart is after isn't so much closure per se as it is consummation.¹

Introduction:

Four years ago, on June 29, 2021, which would have been my ninth wedding anniversary with my late wife, Heidi, I began this series not as a eulogy but as a testament—a chronicle of sorrow laced with gospel-centered hope because of the surety of our future resurrection. Heidi passed away on March 28, 2021 after a sudden cascade of medical complications. During the four parts of this series, I sought to honor her memory by engaging honestly with pain and loss wrought by the death of a spouse while consciously serving to be a living example of how to avoid and fight off worldly grief.²

¹ By consummation, I mean the return of Christ where he gathered the saints and the elect from all over the earth, to be with him forever. Consummation is the new heaven and new earth.

² 1 Timothy 4:12

Now, as I pen the fifth and final part of this series, while the weight of grief has not, in the strictest sense, completely vanished, it is, by God's grace, you might say, being renewed.³ For those who are in Christ, death is not an end but entrance to that celestial city for beleaguered pilgrims.

Part 5 concludes this series, reflecting and pointing, not to complete closure, but a risen hope born out of a risen Savior, who meets us in our struggles and pain, restores and renews us by His grace, assuring us of eternal reunion with all the saints in glory. As I close this series, I do so as a man who has remarried and awaits the birth of a child. Even as I carry the sacred memory of Heidi, God continues to write new chapters, extending new mercies, reminding me that the final word is not death. It never was. The final word is "Behold, I am making all things new."⁴

A Journey Through the Valley

When I first wrote about Heidi's passing, I expressed a resolve to share this journey as a means of proclaiming truth in the midst of sorrow:

*"I wanted to write a piece because I think it's time to begin sharing this journey. Though I want to write about the death of a spouse as I continue to grieve, I know others reading this will or are facing their own grief, so I am writing as a way to preach the gospel to myself (and to others)."*⁵

This commitment shaped the series, as each entry worked to dynamically weave how to grieve with integrity by and through the eternal Word of God. What I discovered early was that *"the gospel is beautiful and powerful and the balm my soul needs; the succor to nourish my heart in the wake of grief."*⁶

In Part II, I grappled with some of the lingering sting of death, crying out with the Psalmist, *"How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?"*⁷ The rawness of that season taught me that, *"Death is horrible and powerful. Yet something more powerful than death is the goodness of God in its wake. God's goodness in the wake of death is the reality of His presence with us as we face it."*⁸ This truth anchored me when my days seemed fuzzy and uncertain, when my heart longed for Heaven, when my very own footsteps would echo in an empty home. These things would threaten to undo me.

By Part III, as I recounted the significance of Heidi's burial on April 1, 2021, I found myself refreshed by the resurrection hope that transforms our understanding of the grave: *"Hope for men and women who bury their spouses is the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead."*⁹ I realized, that *"When Christ, our Ever True and Great Head rose from the dead, the whole myriad of grief lost its undergirding power, that*

³ Roman 12:1-2

⁴ Revelation 21:5

⁵ Death of a Spouse, Part 1: <https://ccfamilyservices.com/2021/07/02/the-death-of-a-spouse/>

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Psalm 13:1

⁸ Death of a Spouse, Part 2: <https://servantsofgrace.org/the-death-of-a-spouse-part-ii/>

⁹ Death of a Spouse, Part 3: <https://ccfamilyservices.com/2023/06/29/death-of-a-spouse-part-iii/>

is death.” The providential timing of her death serves as a reminder that even in burial, the hope of Easter morning reigns.

Part IV shifted focus to those who walk alongside the grieving, offering guidance to friends and family members who may feel unsure of how to walk alongside and face another's sorrow. I wrote it because *“The impulse to comfort our friends is the right impulse, but we recognize a challenge that seemingly few words come to mind when we consider how to comfort.”*¹⁰ How do we comfort others exactly? What words do we use? What actions do we take?

Today, I stand in a place I could not have imagined four years ago—not entirely free from grief per se, but certainly not bound by its poignant power it once had. Some degrees of sadness remain, ebbing and flowing, but grief is not the loudest voice in my heart. Instead, the still voice of God’s grace, the nearness of His Spirit, and the surety of His promises have grown clearer, offering a hope for the soul that rises like the dawn.¹¹

Although a grief journey may change us, it does not define us. Christ does. And because He is risen, we too will rise, not with closed-up wounds, but in a renewed hope that Christ’s resurrection does mean our resurrection. Thus, we do not work to avoid pain and sorrow, but we find and meet God as we walk through it.

Healing Is a Daily Resurrection

Like the idea of closure, I’ve thought a lot about healing. What does healing really mean anyways? Does Jesus really heal our pain like he healed the blind man?¹² I’ve come to see that healing, during our time on this side of Heaven, is not so much being free from pain, but a daily process of renewed hope by being in the presence of the Healer. Like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, in our flesh and during our harder days, we can fail to recognize the nearness of Christ who dwells in us by his Spirit.¹³

Yes, He is here, not with thinking-of-you or wishing-you-well platitudes, but by his Spirit sustaining us in ways we may not recognize until we look back from eternity. Worldly grief, when it speaks of “closure” and “healing”, it never points us beyond the one grieved. Indeed, it cannot. Healing in our godly grief is entirely a work of the Holy Spirit, reminding us of his promises written in his word; assuring and convincing us of what is always true, always right, always good and always best: Himself.

This is why worldly grief cannot find closure or healing in the strictest sense, because there remains a reverberating uncertainty about the pain that can be quelled only by Christ himself. However it is that we “move on” or move forward by faith, the Christian carries the memories of our loved ones without depending on those memories for a comfort that can only come through eyes fixed on Christ, looking to the Day when every tear will be wiped away.¹⁴

¹⁰ Death of a Spouse, Part 2: <https://ccfamilyservices.com/2024/06/29/death-of-spouse-part-4/>

¹¹ Proverbs 4:18 - But the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn, which shines brighter and brighter until full day.

¹² John 9:-7

¹³ Luke 24:13-35

¹⁴ Revelation 21:4, Proverbs 4:25, Hebrews 12:1-2

The Unfolding Power of Grace

So, it serves us to know that in many real and tangible ways, healing is possible because of the way Christ meets us in our pain to restore us by His grace, doing so one day at a time. In the months following Heidi's death, on my harder days, I wrestled with questions that had no neat answers. Why did her health, always fragile, finally give way at that moment? Did I miss something that could have possibly helped her?¹⁵ Yet, even through that wrestling, I saw God's kindness, through the Body of Christ, who came along side-by-side to bear my burden.

Yet, in receiving and embracing these mercies of God, it serves us well to note that they do not necessarily lead to dramatic revelations. They do, however, add up and over time the wounds slowly dissipate under a kind of unfolding power of grace. "*The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.*"¹⁶ Like sin, we do not see all our sin all at once because it would completely consume and undo us. So grace, because it flows from an eternal God, we do not receive the entire bounty of all that is possible to receive from him all at once. Instead, we receive what is sufficient. As Israel and their daily manna, we are given our daily portion of grace that is truly sufficient to sustain our heart and lives until Christ returns.

The Sanctification of Memory

"Truly I tell you, wherever this gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her."¹⁷

One unexpected grace has been the sanctification of memory itself. In the early days, grief was something like a monster that used my memories to ambush me, and where the Enemy sought to dissuade me of the goodness of God. But in time, I began to accept that it is possible to hold on to memories without making them an idol, getting them to serve me as only idols can serve. Rather, because of the way God designed us, there are good and proper ways to remember the past; ways which ought not be neglected.

The grief journey has taught me that healing does not mean clearing out the home from every memory of the one you love, it means adjoining those memories under the memory of the death of Christ. "And he took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. *Do this in remembrance of me.*"¹⁸

Perhaps this is the best memory of them all, and so as we journey through life where we can't help but also remember those we love, it serves us well to consider that a sanctified memory of our loved one are memories that do not compete with the new ones being made. This is especially true where these memories flow from God's new mercies. Because we have the gift of remembering Christ's body broken, we can align our earthly affections into their proper place.

¹⁵ "This is my hope" A song: <https://youtu.be/U8TyjOySX9A>

¹⁶ Lamentations 3:22

¹⁷ Matthew 26:13 (NIV)

¹⁸ Luke 22:19

While marriage does not last forever, it ends at death, our memories will. The love shared with Heidi was real and good and blessed by God. My new love for Tiffany serves as a foundation for new memories that will also flow into eternity, never needing to compete with the old ones, but to enrich the new ones with a deeper understanding of marital love.

Closure Is a Myth, Reunion Is a Promise

The more I carry on, I am realizing that despite the best of intentions in our efforts to find closure, we must realize that Christ offers something far better, a promise of communion that transcends death and a hope that outlasts the grave. The more we think too much on *closure*, the more unwittingly we find ourselves stuck in “below the sun” thinking.¹⁹ I no longer accept the notion that closure exists in any place where death exists. Indeed, that kind of closure is a myth. Rather than closure wrought by a mysterious psychological process; instead, consider *reunion* undergirded by the eternal promises of our Heavenly Father. In fact, on this basis, the Apostle Paul instructs grieving Christians to look above and as we await the coming of our Savior, Jesus Christ.²⁰

So a question worth considering is: *What does it mean to move forward “without closure?”* For me, it’s rightly orienting the manner of my trust in God, the Maker and Sustainer of all creation, who is present in both my past confrontations with death and in the gifts of new life. Psalm 30:5 declares, “Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning.” This verse doesn’t promise the absence of tears but the presence of joy alongside them. It’s also believing what we in the Reformed Tradition have come to hold fast to: “*God from all eternity did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass.*”²¹ Heidi didn’t enter glory one moment too soon, and now, as I prepare to welcome my child, I feel this joy stirring—a gift from our gracious God who renews and restores.²² The anticipation of new life doesn’t negate the weight of death but points to its defeat in Christ. Jesus’ resurrection assures us that death is not the final word. This hope doesn’t close the door on grief but opens a window to eternity, where all things are made new

Practical Wisdom for the Journey

For those beginning their own journey through the valley of the shadow of death, allow me to offer some practical wisdom gleaned from these years of walking through grief:

Guard Against Isolation

It serves us well to understand that Biblical community is the access point of transforming grace. Worldly grief, like the sinful men who entice us, offers no lasting consolation.²³ Don’t go where grief leads you when it leads you away from the Body of Christ. The Church is not a support group but the living body of Jesus Christ, His hands and feet on earth, the community through which His love becomes tangible expressed to wounded souls.

¹⁹ Ecclesiastes 1:3

²⁰ 1 Thess 5:1-11

²¹ Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter 2, Section 1

²² Titus 3:5

²³ Proverbs 1:10-19

Paul's command in Galatians 6:2 to "bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ" is not a suggestion in a list of coping strategies, but long term aid to experiencing God's sustaining grace on this side of Heaven. Not only does grief, when left to itself, tempt us to lead us astray, it truly is, in itself, too heavy for any individual to carry alone, and God never intended it to be borne in isolation. The beauty of Christian fellowship lies not in its ability to eliminate suffering (our friends can't "heal" us), but in the inner workings of how God's gracious transforming work in our hearts and lives show itself.

There is a strong temptation to withdraw from the biblical community when we are bereaved, but it must be consciously resisted. "Do not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing."²⁴ Even when fellowship feels difficult or meaningless, maintain connection with the Body of Christ. Accept the meals, tolerate the awkward conversations, and receive the imperfect comfort of imperfect people. Inasmuch as he will use you (and has used you) an imperfect sufferer, God will use broken vessels to pour out His grace. In other words, give them a chance to extend God's grace to you.

Hold Fast to unchanging Truth amidst ever-changing Feelings²⁵

There will be days when God feels absent, when prayer feels pointless, when Scripture seems like mere words on a page. In those moments, hold fast to unchanging truth rather than to ever changing feelings. The resurrection of Christ is not dependent on your ability to feel its power. God's love is not diminished by your struggle to perceive it. God makes one day as well as the next. He is sovereign. He is good. And everything our God ordains is right.

Remember That New Joy Does Not Betray Old Love

"Say not, "Why were the former days better than these?" For it is not from wisdom that you ask this."²⁶ If God brings new relationships, new joys, new chapters into your story, receive them as gifts rather than betrayals. The capacity to love again is not evidence that past love is compromised; rather, it is an opportunity to tell the story of God's abiding mercy despite the hardships we face. On the other hand, if you force new love to abide by old love stories, both you and your new love will be disappointed. "And no one puts new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the new wine will burst the skins and it will be spilled, and the skins will be destroyed. *But new wine must be put into fresh wineskins.*"²⁷

God's sovereignty clears the way for faith

"The heart of man plans his way, but the LORD establishes his steps."²⁸ The fact of God's sovereign rule and reign over every molecule of our existence including life and death, clears the brush so that we can learn to walk by faith. It is possible to have a sort of suffering journey that is pleasing to God, not because suffering pleases him, but because of the manner of our suffering.

²⁴ Hebrews 10:25 (NIV '82)

²⁵ Hebrews 10:23, 1 Thess 5:21, James 1:17

²⁶ Ecclesiastes 7:10

²⁷ Luke 5:37-38

²⁸ Proverbs 16:9

The sovereignty of God in suffering is not a theological puzzle that can be fully solved but it is a truth to be trusted. My biggest need in suffering isn't relief from pain, but obediently walking by faith in the midst of it. This does not translate to a minimization of the reality of our pain or the legitimacy of our questions, but it does help us rightly order our affections while we wait for consummation.

God's Sovereignty in the Shadows

“How great are your works, O LORD! Your thoughts are very deep!”²⁹ I do not offer these observations as tropes, quips or saying with nicely tied bows, hoping to leave warm and fuzzies. No, I offer them, and I could go on, as testimonies to God's ability to keep the true, living and active hope of a future resurrection, made possible because of Christ's resurrection, intact, however imperfect the expression of our grief. In fact, because grief occurs in a world that remains fallen and stained by sin, every part of our grief will necessarily reflect at least some remnant of those stains.

We believe in a God who is both all-powerful and all-loving, yet we live in a world where those we love can be taken from us at any moment. I do not understand all of *God's ways*, why or how he does everything he does, but I do understand *God's way*, that he is Sovereign and present in those valleys and shadows of death.³⁰

The Dawn Beyond the Horizon

Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. “Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror.”³¹ A question I ask myself as I conclude this series - how am I different? Will what God has wrought in me be forgotten or misapplied. Has my hope, anchored in the good news of the gospel, become more sturdy? Is my suffering honoring God? Did I hold on to my integrity in the midst of grief?³² How will God use my pain to bring him glory?

Whatever the case, this series started with a journey in that shadow of death but concludes in the light of the empty tomb. As I reflect on how grief has shaped my heart, I recognize the ever present battle against sin but my gratitude for God's kindness has grown fuller. I am learning the meaning of the phrase, my grace is sufficient. I have seen with my own eyes that our Lord does meet us in our pain, restores us by His grace, dwells in us by His Spirit, and promises reunion with all the saints in glory.

The Continuing Story

“For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour out my Spirit on your offspring, and my blessing on your descendants.”³³ This is not a farewell to the grief journey per se. The pangs of loss may come and go like the passing and going of the wind. I don't expect to never feel them

²⁹ Psalm 92:5

³⁰ Deut 29:29

³¹ James 1:22-23 (NIV)

³² Job 2:3

³³ Isaiah 44:3 (NIV)

while on this side of Heaven. The chapter that began with the death of a spouse continues with a new spouse, not as a replacement narrative but as a continuing story of mercy and grace.

As I prepare to welcome a child with my new wife, I think about how this child will not know Heidi in this life, but one day in eternity they will. My child will grow up in a home shaped by the lessons I've learned through grief, and will be loved by a father who has tasted and seen the goodness of the Lord despite the confrontations with death that are inevitable until our Lord returns.

The Final Victory

Paul's triumphant words in 1 Corinthians 15:55-57 ring with eternal authority: "O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." This is not wishful thinking or whistling in the dark but a declaration for those who have seen the empty tomb and believed.

Death remains an enemy, but it is a defeated enemy. It can still inflict pain, but it cannot claim victory. It can separate us from those we love for a time, but it cannot separate us from the love of God or from the hope of reunion in His presence.³⁴ The sting of death is real, but it is not final.

For those who are in Christ, the dawn beyond the horizon is not a metaphor but a promise. The same power that raised Jesus from the dead will raise all who belong to Him. The same love that conquered the grave will reunite all who have been separated by death. The same grace that sustains us in sorrow will perfect us in glory.

Conclusion: Rising Hope in a Risen Savior

As I close this final chapter of reflections on the death of a spouse, I do so not with a sense of completion but with anticipation. The grief journey does not end but rather it is renewed. For those who are beginning this journey, know that you are not alone. The path through the valley, though well-worn by the feet of many saints before us, leads ultimately to the presence of the Good Shepherd who gives His life for the sheep.

I do not want to minimize the deepness of the darkness, but neither do I want to minimize the sweetness of God's abiding and comforting presence, the anchoring effect of His living Word and the encouragement needed by the fellowship of the saints. At times, the darkness is quite real but understand it is not permanent. The pain may rattle us but it cannot truly undo us. The separation is heartbreaking, but it is not forever.

To those who walk alongside the grieving, continue to bear their burdens, to weep with those who weep, to offer the ministry of presence when words fail. Your faithfulness is a tangible manifestation of God's patient grace, a visible sign of the invisible love of Christ.

³⁴ Romans 8:38-39

And to all who mourn while claiming the name of Christ, remember that our hope is not in the resilience of the human spirit or the healing power of time, but in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Because He lives, we shall live also. Because He conquered death, death cannot conquer us. Indeed, if the Heavens cannot contain our great God, how much more the grave of our Lord.³⁵ The grave was too weak a power, and for us in Christ we will follow in his train.

This is rising hope in a risen Savior—hope that acknowledges the reality of present pain while fixing its gaze on future glory. The final word is not death. The final word is “Behold, I am making all things new.” And in that word, we find not the end of our story, but its glorious beginning.

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³⁵ 1 Kings 8:27