



Season 3 | Episode 40

How to Grow through Significant Loss and Grief

Jerry Sittser

NOVEMBER 18, 2021

Crystal Keating:

I'm Crystal Keating, and this is the Joni and Friends Ministry Podcast. Each week we're bringing you real conversations about disability and finding hope through hardship and sharing practical ways that you can include people living with disability in your church and community. Be sure to subscribe wherever you listen to podcasts or find us at joniandfriends.org/podcast.

In September of 1991, theology professor Jerry Sittser tragically lost his mother, his wife of 20 years, and his four-year-old daughter in a catastrophic accident after a drunk driver collided with their family's car on the way home from a field trip to Idaho. Left as a single father to care for his three young children, Jerry was nearly overcome by the tremendous weight of grief, mourning, and darkness, a suffering he and his remaining children had never known. Jerry writes openly about his life following this devastating accident in his memoir, *A Grace Disguised: How the Soul Grows Through Loss*. A book which has deeply impacted countless readers, including our own Joni Eareckson Tada after a reckless dive, left her spinal cord injured and paralyzed from the shoulders down.

And today, after 30 years since the passing of his mother, wife, and daughter, Jerry joins us on the podcast to share the message of God's transforming grace through grief, disappointment, and suffering. By God's grace through his sorrow, Jerry is here to share how new life is possible. One marked by spiritual depth, joy, compassion, and a deeper appreciation of simple blessings. Jerry, thank you so much for joining me on the podcast today.

Jerry Sittser:

My pleasure, Crystal, it's just lovely to be with you.

Crystal Keating:

I have to say that your book, I was so surprised how much it gripped me. It gripped me like no other book I've read in quite some time. And I resonated with many of the questions you asked of God and the soul searching you did in the midst of deep darkness. And I just want to thank you because your words really put words to some of the emotions I've experienced, even in the past year of isolation and great disappointment in my own life.

And you really shed a brighter light on the way that those I love have probably felt through their own tremendous grief. And I found it helpful how you remarked that loss is a universal experience. This really gripped me because I think in midst of disappointment and loss, we feel so alone. And we are the only ones that are going through this. So you wrote how, it's not the experience of loss that becomes the defining moment of our lives, but how we respond to loss that matters. Jerry, as you reflect on the past 30 years, how have you experienced this to be true in your own life?



Jerry Sittser:

It's something, Crystal, to look back after all these years. There are a couple of impressions that I have right away in this reflective exercise I've done, especially in adding two new chapters to this book, which came out in 1996 in the first edition. And then 10 years later in a second edition. Now this is the third 25th-anniversary edition and there are a couple of things that have been quite surprising to me. The first is that the memory, including the memory of violence and suffering, is not faded that much for me. It's not as if I've recovered or I've gotten back to something that I was before. I haven't really overcome anything if by overcome you mean you can get behind the experience again. In fact, I define significant loss as irreversible, and it creates conditions which you can't get behind it again.

I mean, look at Joni as a classic example, but there are many others like that. People who get divorced or have a chronic illness; I know a number of people have Lyme disease and they will never recover from that anything short of a miracle, for example. So what's happened to me over time is not that the experience has faded or that I've recovered, nothing like that, but that I carry it a little more lightly, but I still carry it. What's happened is that I haven't gotten over something, I've grown into it and I'm wearing it differently. And I think it's been because my soul simply has a little bit more spiritual muscle than it did 30 years ago. I've asked more and more all the time. "Okay, what can happen to me through this? How can I grow as a Christian man? How can I grow as a father and a friend and a mentor to others? And ultimately as a follower of Jesus?"

But don't get the wrong impression. That is not some kind of convenient whitewash of the experience. I can't do that and it's simply not true to my experience. In fact, at the 30th year of the anniversary, I went out with two of my kids for lunch. We reflected on it quite a bit and I found myself with tears, just thinking these children, lovely children, now in their '30s, they lost their mother. They lost their mother. They had to grow up in a home with one parent, a flawed parent at that. That's unbelievable. It for some reason it strikes me every once in a while, but it knocked me over when I thought about that on the day, we were observing the 30th anniversary. They lost their mother and that has made growing up especially difficult for them. Now they negotiated that passage very well. They're lovely human beings, but it just showed the weightiness of the loss to me. So I didn't get over it, I grew into. That's the overarching impression that I carry.

Crystal Keating:

Well, and I'm so glad you said that because Joni has said similar things, especially now as a quadriplegic, who's gone through cancer and lives with chronic pain. One of the things she says repeatedly, even to her own self is, "Lean into the pain, grow with the pain." And I'm thinking, "No, you want to get rid of it. You want to divorce it. You want to medicate it, suppress it." But her path really is to walk through it and let God's grace sustain.

Jerry Sittser:

Yeah. And that's right. Even if we can somehow get over the pain in our own lives, I think it's pretty clear that God calls us to carry the pain of other people. When Jesus was teaching the beatitudes, he said, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." He doesn't say blessed are those who once mourned and aren't anymore. It's a present tense verb he uses. And I think that reminds us that our own pain should lead us to be able to carry the pain not just of ourselves, but of other people as well. That's kind of a job description for a Christian, especially a Christian who matures. I have to tell you about a waking dream I had. Oh gosh, this is months



after the accident, and this has had a big impact on readers. I've heard from many hundreds of readers just about this paragraph alone in the book.

I'm chasing frantically after a setting sun, and I can tell that I have a feeling of utter panic because I don't want to let the sun go. I want to stay in the fiery warmth of that sun. And it occurs to me over time that the sun's going to beat me to the horizon. So finally, I stop running and exhausted as I am, and then watch with horror as the sun sets below the horizon. And then I look over my shoulder to the east and see the darkness sweeping over me. And I wake up. And Crystal, I'm going to tell you, I felt like I was going to live in existential darkness for the rest of my life. That dream was so visceral-

Crystal Keating:
That's horrifying.

Jerry Sittser:

... and so painful. It was like torture, soul torture. Two things happened to me in the next week. I talked to my sister as my best friend about this. And she said, "Jerry, this might be a cue to you. As long as you run west, you'll actually stay in the darkness all the longer. But if you have the courage to turn east and plunge into the darkness, all the sooner will you come to the sunrise." Then a cousin of mine sent a poem written by John Donne, a very famous Christian metaphysical poet from the 17th century.

And he describes the difference between east and west on a flat map where they're farthest removed from each other. The farther you go east, the farther you get from west. And when you look at a globe, because if you go east, you'll eventually come to the west because it's circular. And now those two, the poem and my sister gave me a cue. If you can find the courage, however broken you are, the courage to step into the darkness with support from community, maybe a therapist and other things, all the sooner will you come to the number of sunrises that will happen in your life over the years to come.

And it's not a one-time occurrence. You keep coming, you keep plunging and then coming to this sunrise and plunging and coming to the sunrise. But that was a cue that was enormously helpful to me: dare to step into the darkness. And I mean, Jesus did that. Jesus suffered in a way that we'll never comprehend. This is not some God who remains distant on his throne, pulling the strings of the universe. This is a God who becomes a human being and enters into the human story and in such an inauspicious way. And then with a birth which was lowly enough, his down trajectory continued until he dies outside the city gates on a hill in the most torturous way a person could be executed. And then the Apostles' Creed said, he actually went all the way to hell for us. This is unspeakable to me. And in the end, I think it's the Christian answer to suffering. It's that God chooses to come and enter into our human world, our human existence, our human predicament, and suffer in a way that even we will never be able to comprehend.

Crystal Keating:

And Jesus knew exactly why he had come to this world. It was to defeat the works of darkness and to die on a cross for our sins so that we may be reconciled to God.

Jerry Sittser:

And put an end to all sin.



Crystal Keating:

Yes.

Jerry Sittser:

... and hell, and death, and suffering itself. This is an insight I gained when I was studying John 11, the Mary, Martha, and Lazarus story years ago. And I smiled when Martha and Mary, obviously memorizing the same line of accusations, say to Jesus, "If you had been here, our brother would not have died." What they wanted was a miracle. Fair enough. Who doesn't want a miracle? Crystal, we all do.

Crystal Keating:

Oh, absolutely.

Jerry Sittser:

The problem with a miracle is it's always a temporary solution. The people who are fed in the miracle of the 5,000, they all got hungry again. And Lazarus, bless his heart, died again. What we really want in our heart of hearts is not a resuscitation, we want a resurrection. And that's exactly what Jesus Christ promises to us. Now that might not always be comforting when we're in the middle of something that's really painful. But if we get our way, it's only postponing the inevitable, all of us are going to die.

Crystal Keating:

In the midst of the acute grief, the months, and even years following the loss of your wife, mother, and daughter, what was pushing you toward God. And you described giving yourself to grief. What was that like? I know it's been so many years.

Jerry Sittser:

This might be a little harder for listeners to accept actually. I'm going to say, first of all, my predominant emotion for years, Crystal, years was not anger, was not denial. It was bewilderment. I was so confused. I didn't get it. I couldn't get it. How could you take a four-year-old and a fabulous wife and mother, a woman who loved Christ and a godly mother and just yank them out of earth? I just didn't understand. It was like, my head was cocked. There was a question mark on my forehead all the time. And I was so exhausted emotionally and spiritually. I suspended belief for a while. Now don't misunderstand me. I didn't stop; I suspended belief. I just didn't have the energy for it. I couldn't pray. Every time I prayed, I cried. I couldn't sing hymns. Every time I did that, I began to cry.

After about six weeks, I went back to worship with my three little kids, clustered around me, cuddled around me. And I would just sit there in silence. That's all I could do. And then I discovered the people of God were praying for me. Now, I don't mean praying for me directly. I mean, every time they prayed, they were picking me up on their backs and they were praying as if I was praying. And they sang for me. I just sat there in silence and let the people of God, for a season, do the work for me. I remember walking down for the Lord's Supper and I felt like I was a little bird that was opening my mouth to receive the food of God. And that was the extent of my faith. At night after I'd tuck my kids into bed, and we'd always follow a ritual.



I would lay on my face before God. And I would just weep. I was so broken. I put on music and that's pretty much all I could do. So I gave myself to that. I ritualized the process; you know experts talk about the difference between mourning and grieving. Grieving is simply the raw emotion, mourning is what you do to put it to a process, to ritualize it in some way. There were certain pieces of music that became profoundly healing to me and certain Psalms that I internalized that became powerful for me. And I would just sit in silence privately, and also in worship. Now Crystal, years later, I sing for an awful lot of other people. That's probably why I sing so loud. Because I'm aware of people around me who can't sing and who can't pray. And so I've got a list I pray for every day of people who are so broken, they don't even know what to say to God. I do know what to say to God because I've gone through this. And I'm in a very different place now.

Crystal Keating:

Nice. So beautiful. We had a podcast guest talking about mental illness in the church and he talked about one of the women he was counseling and ministering to who suffered from deep depression. And she would go to church and feel so overwhelmed by the joy of singing. And I think it was really a transforming part for her to say, "When I am in the depths, I can't sing joyously, but someone else can for me."

Jerry Sittser:

Yeah, that's right.

Crystal Keating:

Yes.

Jerry Sittser:

Exactly. And that's what we do for each other.

Crystal Keating:

Right.

Jerry Sittser:

In the body of Christ.

Crystal Keating:

That's right.

Jerry Sittser:

I've said to people, "Will you let me just have faith for you for a while?"

Crystal Keating:

Yes. Oh.



Jerry Sittser:

Then feel like you can get back on your feet. Christianity is a communal experience. It's not just individualistic. And some people panic. They'll say to me, "I can't muster the energy to believe right now." And I'll listen to them, and I'll smile. And I'll say, "Why don't you let me do it for you for a while?"

Crystal Keating:

Oh, if we could be that for other people, I want to talk a little bit about depression because in your book you write about sensing. You were close to being on the verge of a breakdown and eventually recognizing, "You know what? I am depressed." What was that like for you? And where did you go from there?

Jerry Sittser:

Yeah. The first year there was just a lot of adrenaline. I mean, I was responsible for being a parent to three traumatized children. John, my two-year-old was injured very seriously after the accident. He was in a traction for three weeks, in a full-body cast for another three months. He's doing fine now, he's married, got a couple of kids, healthy. But the other two were eight and David had just turned seven and they experienced that terrible violence. So I was so attentive or I tried to be anyway to the chaos of their world, but at exactly the one year anniversary. Exactly on that day, I don't know why I woke up in the morning and I was in a pit, Crystal. I read a book years ago by William Styron. He's a famous novelist. He wrote *Sophie's Choice* and some other great pieces of literature, hard to read.

And he wrote a book called *Darkness Visible*. And it's a memoir on his own experience of suffering and depression. And that gave me a language, *Darkness Visible*. I was in a darkness that I had never known before. And it was incomprehensible to me. I'm not even sure as a poet, you could get to it and describe it. And it would not go away. Now, I continued to function. I had to. I had to put food on the table and show up to work and make money and other things. But I'll tell you, I was like death, not even warmed over. I was just like death. And that lasted quite a while. I did see a counselor that was really helpful to me. That gave me a boost. And I did have a community of friends, a bunch of guy friends. I have been meeting with a small group for 30 years now.

And they surrounded me after the accident, those little things nudged me along, but I was in the abyss. I was in the abyss, Crystal. And the only thing that brought comfort to me was coming to the realization that God had gone deeper into the abyss than I did. Now that didn't solve the problem. It just didn't. I was still depressed, but maybe gave me a little edge of perspective that kept me moving in life and just doing what I had to do. And then gradually I came out of it. And in my case, this isn't everybody's case so I'm not going to universalize my experience at all. I've never been depressed again since. But I'll tell you it was ferocious. Anybody who talks about depression as having a bad few days doesn't understand. People who are really depressed, have enormous difficulty getting out of bed in the morning. And it doesn't go away after a week or two.

Crystal Keating:

No. And there's this sense of like, "Am I going crazy?" How did you get through even that time of, "My wife, my mother, my daughter died senselessly, how do I make sense of a God that could have stopped it but didn't?"



Jerry Sittser:

Well, it was after that first year when the existential reality of this and I know that sounds like a fancy abstraction that a university professor would say, but it really was that, this kind of existential experience of just utter loss and darkness really took that long to sink into me. When people say, how long am I going to have to go through this? Or there were some people who said to me, "Come on, Jerry, by now, you should be snapping out of this." And it was only in that second year that I think I really started to reach the pit. Now that's not true for everybody, but it certainly was true for me. And that abyss, that utter darkness, it was not just the experience. Now, it was my own soul. It was like all the shades were drawn in my life and I couldn't get them open.

And you're right, you feel like you're going crazy. You wonder what's wrong with you, but you wonder if you're going to be in this for the rest of your life. You're so tempted to resign yourself to it and give yourself to it and just think this is the way life is going to be forever. And there's every reason to think that because your whole inner person bears witness to that. This is all I see. This is all I feel. It's nothing but darkness. And at that point, self-help doesn't do you one bit of good. You can't rule yourself out of this. And yet, somehow there was this little flicker of faith in me that said, "Hope is still possible." Hope is a kind of light that's deferred. It's very future-oriented. There is still life ahead. Something will occur.

I remember having another waking dream, here goes again. I had a number of these, and I was sailing in a ship with my three kids. So it was just the four of us. And we were pulling out at this beautiful harbor, and I wanted everything to turn the ship around and I was not able to. So I went the bow of the ship and looked out over the horizon. And all I saw, Crystal, was an empty horizon. That's it. Nothing else, but an empty horizon. And again, I woke up and thought, "I'm going to be living in this emptiness for the rest of my life." And again, I talked to my sister, my brother-in-law and they said, "Of course you can't see because of the curvature of the earth, but there's land out there, Jerry. There's more, you just can't see it." Yeah. And that's exactly right, isn't it?

Crystal Keating:

That's good.

Jerry Sittser:

"The curvature of the earth, there's a whole continent out there, but you can't see it. And even if you could see a million miles, you wouldn't be able to see it because your eyesight can't follow the curvature of the earth." And that was just enough for me, just enough to be able to get out of bed in the morning. I will not diminish or belittle the significance of people when they go through depression. It's really hard.

Crystal Keating:

And thank you for affirming that. I found it also interesting as you were talking, that we talk about the traditional stages of grief as if one could go through the stages and then move on and get over. You said it several times in our conversation already, but I think it'd be interesting maybe to extrapolate that a little bit, when you move from guilt to regret and bitterness.

Jerry Sittser:

Yeah. Bargaining, so on and so forth.



Crystal Keating:

Yeah.

Jerry Sittser:

And then finally acceptance the end...

Crystal Keating:

Right. And as if, oh, okay. I've accepted it. So now I'm okay.

Jerry Sittser:

Then I'm going to move on. Right?

Crystal Keating:

Right.

Jerry Sittser:

Oh, the person who came up with this, Kübler-Ross, did not necessarily intend how it became understood on the popular level.

Crystal Keating:

Yes, that's true.

Jerry Sittser:

What we tend to do is to think, "All right, I'm in this stage, then this stage (as if they're successive) and at the end of it, I'm going to get better." So that's the underlying assumption behind the language of stages. There are a couple of problems with it. Number one, we have different personalities, Crystal, and our personalities and inclinations of character always come into play when we face a significant loss. There are some people who are going to excel at being angry and other people-

Crystal Keating:

That's a nice way to put it.

Jerry Sittser:

Excel at denying or bargaining or just getting depressed a lot. So we bring a personality into the process of loss and suffering and grief. And it's not going to look the same for people. I really have never dealt significantly with anger, even after 30 years. Bewilderment has been my predominant emotion. So one is you got to kick into consideration your personality. The other one is that you don't get over it, you grow into it. And there's a difference between the two. So you learn to carry suffering and loss with you. And I think if you mature over time, you're going to start carrying everybody else's too. And that in my mind is a good thing not a bad thing. Now not indulging yourself in self-pity or becoming voyeuristic, but it's just with your friends, you pick them up on your shoulders and you help carry them.



Paul said, "Bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ." Until we can all bear our own load. And sometimes we have to pick people up and put them on our shoulders and carry them for a while until they can get back on their own two feet. The last thing that's problematic is that he assumes that somehow once we go through it once that's it. And I think loss and grief is more circular. So you may circle through it a number of times, it's going to be different each time. I remember what it was like when my kids got married and their mother wasn't there. Or when we had grandchildren born and their mother wasn't there, and those new experiences invited me and sometimes forced me to cycle through some of those emotions in those stages again.

Crystal Keating:

Yeah. And that really resonates, I think, with some of the families we've talked to who have children with significant disabilities.

Jerry Sittser:

Exactly. Yes.

Crystal Keating:

And they talk about those milestones, how grief comes back around, when they see other children graduating from high school and going on to university.

Jerry Sittser:

Right. Yes.

Crystal Keating:

And then that realization, "My child may never marry, and I may never be a grandparent." And going through that grief again. And so I think that the truth that loss is universal and that God's grace is there, and yet it's a process and it's a painful one. How much more do we need community? And this makes me think about identity, how we think of ourselves, how we think of other people, what God says about us, whether we face the loss of loved ones or loss of a marriage through divorce or loss of mobility, or health, how that impacts our identity. And we've spoken with a number of guests on our podcast, who've gone through a crisis of identity following a diagnosis. As I mentioned, children having a severe disability or those like Joni who survived a life-changing accident and confusion often happens after great loss.

So as you adjusted to your life as a single father, then with three small children, you talk about how it, wasn't simply a loss of identity, "I'm no longer married, here I am a single father." But it was the difficult conditions under which a new identity had to be formed. Can you talk a little bit more about that?

Jerry Sittser:

Yeah. It's a profound question, Crystal. I'm really glad you brought it up because it is a really big deal. I have talked to so many people who in the wake of loss simply don't know who they are anymore. And that's because we're defined by our circumstances. At least to some degree we are, if we're married or if we're an athlete and then we get an injury that takes us out of the sport, or we were a professional violinist and we lost a finger, we can come up with so many examples. A woman is pregnant and she's excited of child and the father's eager to introduce the child to



basketball and she to something else. And then the child is born and they have severe disabilities. All of that creates a kind of crisis of identity. And I think we have to just stare at it straight and realize that we had expectations, we defined ourselves a certain way by circumstances and by hopes and longings.

And all of a sudden, we look in the mirror and the person we're staring at is not the same person. I came to the point of deciding that I was a married person without a spouse. I mean, it's weird, isn't it? I was a married person without a spouse. I'd been married 20 years. We had four kids. I still felt married, but I didn't have a spouse anymore. And marriage is so intimate Crystal, that it affects every area of your life. It's not as if one part of you is gone. In marriage, when you lose the spouse through death or divorce, in one sense you lose all of you, at least in terms of how you understood yourself to be.

And it takes a while to forge a new identity. And the one thing you can't do is forge the identity denying what happened to you. The new identity has to integrate the losses into it. So I was married and then I became single. And I defined myself peculiarly as a married person without a spouse. So I remarried 11 years ago, after 20 years of widowhood. And now I define myself as being married the first time around the second time. That's the closest I can get. For the reality of my experience in both cases, I was still a husband. I didn't have a spouse around. It's just very strange.

Crystal Keating:

Yeah. I'm taking that all in, but I totally understand what you're saying because she was a part of you and she was a part of your children's lives. And she was a part of every routine you had.

Jerry Sittser:

That's right. And listen Crystal, my kids didn't just lose their mother. They lost what I call the us. They lost the relationship between me and her. And that's a different thing, isn't it?

Crystal Keating:

Yeah.

Jerry Sittser:

They lost all the conversations we had, the affection, the fights and making up, the humor, the common experience, all the things that characterize a healthy home, where a husband and wife are both active. It's so huge to think about. These are all questions having to do with identity. What you do, in my mind, when you form a new identity is you have to carry the old with you into the new one. What happened to me over time and Crystal, is I learned how to remember things in a new light, a more redemptive light, a more hopeful light. So instead of forgetting, pushing it aside, I took all of that past, all of those memories and I carried them forward and tried to integrate them into a kind of, I don't know, a larger landscape of life. So I remembered all those years of being married and being a partner to my wife and raising children, and then figured out how to carry that forward as I was raising three kids without their mom. But she remained a presence in the home.

Crystal Keating:

Yeah. That sounds like the most beautiful and I don't know if I want to say healing way to do it, but it's not like you can just shut that off and move forward-

Jerry Sittser:
Well, you shouldn't.

Crystal Keating:
... and take all the pictures off the wall and move forward. She is forever in your heart.

Jerry Sittser:
I didn't create some kind of alter but to this day, 30 years later, and I've been remarried, we still have photos of the four of us. In fact, what Pat and I have done is we've integrated our two life stories together in a series of photographs. I still have a beautiful photo of my first wife, Lynda, up and of my mother and of Diana Jane. We have a darling, a little framed picture of a piece of white paper. It was the first time Diana painted her name in watercolors. So it's Diana.

Crystal Keating:
Diana was your daughter?

Jerry Sittser:
Yeah. She was the daughter I lost. So she was four at the time. And so she has a D-I-A and then above it is the N-A going in the opposite direction.

Crystal Keating:
Yes. I can picture that.

Jerry Sittser:
Yeah. And we have that framed and we have that next to her. So we've tried to keep the memory alive without becoming frozen by it. And then we have photos of the four of us together and now we're 21 strong with two more on the way.

Crystal Keating:
Oh, praise God.

Jerry Sittser:
And ironically, I married a woman whose two daughters were very close friends of my two sons.

Crystal Keating:
Oh really?

Jerry Sittser:
So it's quite peculiar. Yeah. Yeah. They're all good friends. Which is unusual and just a divine gift.



Crystal Keating:

It is, it is truly. Well, we started this conversation by talking about, it's not necessarily the loss that defines who we are, it's what we do with the loss. And you expressed that loss provides an opportunity to take inventory of our lives. And I think what you said really made me consider, okay, we have choices when we feel out of control. When we feel that something senseless has happened to us. In those moments, we have choices to make. And you said that loss can actually help us to reconsider our priorities and to determine new directions. So how would you summarize some of the goodness that came from your loss and suffering?

Jerry Sittser:

Yeah. I had a couple of older friends, mentors. He said, "I don't worry about you, Jerry. In fact, someday people are going to be jealous of you because what happens in your life." Crazy to say to somebody who's just in the absolute depth of grief. I had another friend though, and another mentor, an older man say to me, "Jerry, as strange, as this sounds take advantage of it, turn over every rock, don't limit yourself. Look at who you were as a husband, look at who you were as a father, revisit your story. Let this shape you in ways that are in the long run, really powerful and healing and redemptive. Don't collapse in on yourself. Let your world open up because of this, because that is the best way you will honor the dead."

Crystal Keating:

Wow.

Jerry Sittser:

There's a fabulous novel written by Wendell Berry. He's an agrarian and an environmentalist and a poet essayist and a novelist. And it's called Hannah Coulter. It tells the story of a woman living in a small town who loses her husband as a young woman, she's pregnant. And obviously she's just overwhelmed by grief, but there's this fabulous line that says, "Life eventually spoke to her." Now what he really means is God, but he used the word, "Life spoke to her and called life out of her. You must keep living. That's your moral obligation. If you don't, you will experience a second death." It's not just the death of the loved one or of health or marriage or career or whatever it happens to be. It'll be the death of your very own soul. And that's the choice we have. I know that sounds ruthless, but that is a choice we have to make. And I had friends that were saying in effect, "Life is calling forth life in you, Jerry, and your choosing to live is a way of honoring the dead."

Crystal Keating:

Right. Because the tendency, when a spouse has died or our loved ones have passed, is to almost join them, except we're still alive.

Jerry Sittser:

Except we're still alive. And that's the irony, isn't it?

Crystal Keating:

Right.



Jerry Sittser:

Is that we're not dead yet.

Crystal Keating:

No.

Jerry Sittser:

But it's not just losing a loved one. It could be losing health or a career or our physical capacities in some way. And we think my life is now done. See, we imagined our life being a certain way based on our career path or our health or our marriage or the four kids we had. And then all of a sudden something changes. The child becomes wayward, we lose our health, we lose our job, whatever. And our imagination has to be free to set a different course and it means life is going to look different. It doesn't mean it's going to be less meaningful or less fruitful. It's going to be hard in some ways, but in the end, life is always hard in some way.

Crystal Keating:

You had such tremendous friends and community coming alongside of you. Frankly saying things that as someone who's studying counseling, I don't think we were ever trained to say, but it sounds like they really rang through and they stuck with you. But I'm wondering if you could give our listeners advice. Is there a way that we as Christ-followers, just as your friends did for you, how can we enter into the loss and grief of our friends and community around us?

Jerry Sittser:

Boy, I thought a lot about this. Not only because I've had this experience, but also I'm a friend to other people and I've also written a book. So I hear from thousands of readers. And there are a couple of things that I think have gotten lodged in my soul about this, Crystal. First is that the circle has to be small, otherwise you keep explaining yourself all the time and it gets exhausting. I mean, in the first few months, you've got everybody and their brother and sister coming out, showing the sympathy, writing the card, bringing you a meal, but that has to be whittled down fast. And it's the natural course of things. It's funny, my kids said literally after two weeks of a meal train, literally said, "We're done, dad, you cook. We're sick of the food." And what they were really saying, Crystal, "We want normality. We don't want to be a charity case. We don't want people knocking on the door with this long, drawn-out face that says, oh my gosh, you kids are going to be suffering for the rest of your life."

They wanted routine, normality. Even if mom wasn't there; Diana Jane wasn't there. So the circle has to be small. And I think if you are the one providing the support, common sense will simply tell you whether you're going to be on the team or not. Now in one sense, we're always on the team because we can pray for people at a distance and be a witness of joy and goodness and sympathy and compassion for them. But to be let into the experience is for the few, not for the many. I have to admit I had a lot of voyeuristic people after I experienced the accident. It was such a big event, five people killed, papers across the country. It was a weird celebrity thing. And I think people wanted to cozy up to it so they could all tell their friends. And I know that sounds uncharitable, but it really was true.

But after about three months, the people who really stayed with me for a long time, and it was just a handful. And that's what I do now, too. I know pretty well whether I'm going to exchange two emails with them and they're going to be gone, or whether I'm going to be having a cup of



coffee with somebody once every two months or a month or something like that for the next five years. I think we need to exercise prayerful discernment, "Is God calling me into this in a more intimate, long-term way, or do I need to maintain my distance, pray for them, smile, show compassion, and let somebody else do that?" If we're on the other side, if we don't have a natural team, we've got to be bold enough to find one. Find an older believer and just say, "I need you. Maybe I don't know you that well, but I sense you've got compassion and wisdom. I need you in my life or I think I'm going to fall apart." And most people will go with that and say, "Yes, I'd love to." But only a few.

Crystal Keating:

Those are wonderful pieces of advice, especially as we have multiple conversations about how to come alongside families impacted by disability and people living with difficult diagnosis. And I just really appreciate what you said about seeking God, about how he wants us to connect with people, whether it's just through prayer or if it's regular encouragement, or if it's being someone that kind of goes behind the veil and knows the intimate details of a situation. So Jerry, I cannot tell you how much your book impacted me. I'm so thankful to have read *A Grace Disguised: How the Soul Grows through Loss*. The 25th-anniversary edition is available wherever books are sold and it's tremendous. I highly recommend our listeners to go out and read that book. So as we close our time together, would you like to share some encouragement with our listeners who just really are in desperate need of God's grace and hope through their own hardship?

Jerry Sittser:

I think it would be this that I think the best we can expect, and it actually is really the best, is to live in some tensions as followers of Christ. So I had an experience about a year ago. I got up early in the morning. I always wake up early and I went outside to get the morning paper, which dates me right away because most people don't get papers anymore. And I noticed Venus in the morning sky and it was huge and beautiful. It was breathtaking and I just gazed at it. I was so moved by looking at this bright planet early in the morning, all the stars were gone. It was just Venus on the horizon. And I went in and grabbed my cup of coffee and sat down and all things seemed right in the world. It was an experience of beauty, Crystal, beauty.

That afternoon I got a call from my sister telling me that my grandnephew, and I know him quite well, was diagnosed with osteosarcoma. And he since lost his leg and is hanging on for dear life, 19 years old. And I thought there it is. That's what life is, is learning to live in this strange tension between beauty and terror. And we find that those two meet in the Christian faith and in Jesus Christ, the Son of God who suffered and who runs from the death. That's beauty and terror in one place and at one time. And we can do that, we can look for beauty and goodness all around and embrace it. Have our eyes trained to find it and at the same time realize life is also going to be filled with terror and pain. And we'll never quite get over that either. And we can find the strength and the capacity to experience both as followers of Jesus.

Crystal Keating:

I just want to close with something you've said that just stuck with me. You said, "God is in the business of reclaiming people that belong to him."

Jerry Sittser:

Amen.



Crystal Keating:

People maybe who've turned away from him. He doesn't want to just save us, he wants to reclaim us. And he often-

Jerry Sittser:

That's right.

Crystal Keating:

... does that through suffering. That's not our way, but we need some kind of suffering.

Jerry Sittser:

I mean, just think of the father and the prodigal son.

Crystal Keating:

Yeah.

Jerry Sittser:

With those bright eyes and that big smile and welcomes his son home and reclaims him. "No, you're not going to be my servant. You're going to be my son."

Crystal Keating:

That is our God. Jerry, it's been such an honor to speak with you today. Thank you again. And listeners, *A Grace Disguised: How the Soul Grows through Loss*, the 25th-anniversary edition is widely available. I highly recommend it. Jerry, God bless you. Thank you again for spending this hour with me.

Jerry Sittser:

Thank you, Crystal, it was lovely talking with you.

Crystal Keating:

Thank you for listening today. If you've been inspired, please send me a message or leave a five-review on your favorite app. That's a great way to help other people find encouragement from these conversations. And to get our next episode automatically, subscribe wherever you listen to podcasts. I'm Crystal Keating and thank you for listening to the Joni and Friends Ministry Podcast.

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