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Finding Courage ...

when the blow falls

WORDS BRING US OUR NEWS—our worst news and our best news.

Charles and I were sitting in the living room with the windows wide open to the afternoon sea breeze, talking about something, I don't remember what, when the phone rang. It didn't set off any particular alarms in us. I answered it, as unsuspecting as anyone in these situations, but in one instant and a few words, everything changed.

Jeff's girlfriend, Suzanne, was on the line, wailing incoherently, and I responded by clicking into calm-and-under-control mode. "Take a deep breath, honey, and say that again." Whatever it was, we would absorb the shock and deal with it, as we'd been dealing with crises in Jeff's life for years.

“Oh Janet, Jeff’s dead. He’s dead.”

“Suzanne, that’s not possible.”

That’s what I said and that’s what I meant. In my mind there was no place for that possibility. Jeff could not be dead. Not that he hadn’t come close plenty of times, with two suicide attempts and years of drug use and addiction. He’d been careening near the edge for a long time.

Parents hope all things, but we were veterans, and in spite of the latest six months of rehab, we hadn’t breathed any sighs of relief. Addiction is vicious, and Jeff’s bright and beautiful mind seemed damaged from his years of use—especially after his graduation to speed. His drug of choice had been “whatever.” But when he started using speed, he began to change, to lapse into paranoid delusions, which were terrifying for him and for us.

Even after months of sobriety, he still wasn’t thinking straight or reacting normally. He had this little hesitation before he answered questions, as if he had to pull himself back from wherever he was. Sometimes you’d catch him pacing around muttering in a cognitive world of his own. So we were still on alert, still braced.

Too many times we’d thought, “This time he’ll get past it,” only to watch everything collapse yet again. Rehab, medication, counseling. We had hopefully, urgently, sought out one solution after another. At that point it would have been naïve to have optimistic expectations based on what we saw in Jeff or what one more program might do for him. But we were looking past all of

that to Jesus. We didn't have any clear picture in our mind of what we expected from Him, but we knew He'd heard our prayers and that He was able and willing to save our son. We had peace about it. Some intervention, some work of power and grace would come from the Lord and blow the little flickering flame of Jeff's faith into a blaze that would set him free. This was why those words, "Jeff is dead," were impossible.

Impossible, but true.

Turning onto Jeff's street in San Clemente thirty minutes later, we saw police cars lining the sidewalk, three of them, with lights flashing. I glanced up to his second-floor apartment and saw his bike chained to the rail of his balcony. Behind that balcony my son's body lay, dead on the bathroom floor where Suzanne had found him. Unbelievable.

My mind raced to get up there and see him, do something, get some answers, but my body moved in slow motion as we stepped out of the car. Somehow my legs carried me dazedly in the direction of the stairs to his apartment. A policeman took charge of us after first determining we weren't just mildly curious onlookers stopping to ask questions. We were VIPs, parents of the victim. Pulling us aside, he gave us our first little bits of information. I stared at the yellow crime-scene tape blocking the stairway and listened to him explain that we weren't allowed up because an investigation was underway. They had seen no signs of foul play, nor found a suicide note, and that's all they knew so far. Soon the

coroner would arrive and remove the body, and in the meantime a neighbor had opened her apartment downstairs where I could hear Suzanne sobbing. I went in, hugged her, came out and sat on the step with our eighteen-year-old son, Peter. I was introverting, desperately wishing I could be alone to think and pray.

Charles, the extrovert, was talking to people. Eventually he brought two officers over to introduce them, explaining that they were chaplains, routinely dispatched in these situations to minister to family and friends of the victim. But they were more than that; they were believers. For Charles, the presence of those men was like Jesus arriving on the scene of our nightmare and turning it into a place of worship and witness. It quickly came out that Charles and I were also believers, and that he was the speaker on a Christian radio program, *Haven Today*. From then on, as he said later, “It was a camp meeting of faith.” Instantly bonding with Charles in the knowledge of Jesus, they freely shared the gospel with Suzanne and much later, after the coroner’s van drove away, joined us in a circle in Jeff’s apartment and conducted a little worship service.

But that was Charles. To me it all skimmed over the surface. Underneath, I was in free fall. Something was collapsing inside me and I had to get away and figure it out. I had this clammy fear about letting Peter out of my sight, so I asked him to walk down to the beach with me instead of doing what he wanted to do, which was call his friends and get away.

When we got there, the pain and something like fear intensified

into a crisis. The juncture of all those young people enjoying a carefree San Clemente day at the beach and my son's body laying two blocks away made my knees buckle with every step. It was that old familiar pain of Jeff's exclusion from the normal goodness of life. Only now he was finally, fatally excluded. It combined with the anguish of having trusted in the Lord for a rescue, an intervention, that hadn't come. A great silent wave of grief was welling up inside of me but this loss of certainty about the Lord was even more terrifying.

I mouthed out a desperate cry, "Jesus! Help me!" In my hand I was clutching a purse-sized Bible. I didn't know what to look for; I only knew I was desperate to hear something from Jesus, so I stood still and opened it. The crowd streamed past us, the surfers calling it a day in the fading pink light, and the book's pages whipped around in the wind. I held them down with my thumbs and brought the words up close and read Hebrews 10:17 (NASB):

 Their sins and their lawless
 deeds I will remember no
 more.

As I read those words, they came to me like light reaching into darkness, like landing on solid ground. Those words changed everything. Jesus was making a declaration, bringing down his gavel like a judge announcing a final, favorable ruling concerning our son. It became clear to me as I stood there on the

beach and read those words that Jeff's well-being was firmly established in the heavenly realm. In defiance of his death, Jesus presented this reality to me to believe. It didn't matter what his status appeared to be in the context of that San Clemente beach. It didn't ultimately matter that we hadn't seen him transformed in the "land of the living" as the Bible calls it. What mattered was his standing in the sight of God. His whole life depended on that verdict.

Bang, the gavel of His justice fell and the judge rendered the blood-bought judgment, "His sins are forgiven and his lawless deeds remembered no more." It rang out into the early evening air with the weight of ultimate authority—the same authority that said, "Let there be light," and there was light. Those words declared Jeff's ultimate and complete well-being. They were what Jesus went to the depths to accomplish, and like a champion victorious from battle, He was declaring the prize He'd won through death, the key to unseen realms of glory, and He was telling me to listen: This is the verdict. His sins and lawless deeds are remembered no more. They have been removed.

So Jesus had not arrived too late after all. The rescue had come two thousand years ago on the cross.

"Your prayers have been heard! All is well!" That was the message on the beach that night. The details of the "all" weren't completely clear but the Lord disclosed them to us in wondrous ways over the days and weeks to come. And taught us a great deal about courage.

Finding Courage ... in their words:

Dear Haven,

I try to listen to your program every morning. I was especially touched by Charles Morris' story about his son's death. I am praying for his family. If he has time to read this I would like to send him some words of encouragement. I have three sons and my middle son was killed in a motorcycle accident a few days before his 24th birthday.

Hearing him talk reminded me of the first few days after my son's death—it was like a fog and yet the pain was very sharp. I know now that our dear Lord was sheltering me from much of the pain with His loving arms. My heart was broken and my world was shattered.

When I first heard my news I begged God to not let it be so—let there be a way out of this and he be alive. I was frantic with disbelief. But God very clearly spoke to my heart that it was true and that it had to be this way and that I just had to trust Him for the reasons. He reminded me that He had recently allowed me to confirm my son's salvation at

a wonderful dinner we had together. I knew I had to dwell on that for that was the eternal. This life is only temporary—for all of us.

I believe I will understand it all when I get to Glory but for now I just need to trust His loving heart. He has proven His love to me in so many ways throughout my life.

In Him,

Tim



Dearest Charles & Janet Morris,

I am writing to offer my sincere condolences for your dear son. I am so sorry. My heart goes out to you because I have a son that is 18 years old that struggles with life. I'm in constant prayer for my son and all I can do is lift him up daily. Here are some words from our Lord that I pray will encourage you:

"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us" Rom. 8:35, 37.

"The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to ... provide for

those who grieve in Zion—to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair”Is. 6-1:-1.

“You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy.... Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy” John 16:20, 22.

“You hear, O Lord, the desire of the afflicted; you encourage them, and you listen to their cry” Psalm 10:-17.

Your family will be in my prayers and thoughts.

God Bless you,

Denise

Finding Courage ... in the Word:

ISAIAH 44:21–22

*I will not forget you. I have swept away your offenses like a cloud,
your sins like the morning mist.*

ISAIAH 51:22

*See, I have taken out of your hand the cup that made you stagger;
from that cup, the goblet of my wrath, you will never drink
again.*

MATTHEW 1:21

*You are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people
from their sins.*

ROMANS 4:7–8

*Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered.
Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against
him.*

EPHESIANS 1:7

*In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins,
in accordance with the riches of God's grace.*

COLOSSIANS 2:13–14

*He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with
its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us;
he took it away, nailing it to the cross.*

HEBREWS 10:17

Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more.