



# ROAD TRIP TO REDEMPTION

*A disconnected family,  
a cross-country adventure,  
and an amazing journey  
of healing and grace*

**BRAD MATHIAS**

*Road Trip to Redemption* is a must-read for all parents. It's a true story of pain, healing, and fighting for your kids' hearts. I was personally challenged and convicted to look beyond superficial, check-mark Christianity. I can't thank Brad enough for empowering me to connect my kids with the real, authentic, life-giving Jesus. I'm looking through my calendar now, booking my own "road trip to redemption."

**CHRIS SPRADLIN**

Founder of EpicParent.tv

Author of *Sex, Lust & XXX: Fighting for Your Kids' Purity in a Sex-Saturated World*

If you think your family is out of options for reconnecting, whether with your kids or your spouse, this book is for you. *Road Trip to Redemption* is an intimate adventure of one man's journey to recapture the hearts of a family he had all but lost. Filled with practical advice and insight, Brad's vulnerable approach to storytelling kept me turning the pages and opened my heart to the changes I needed to make as a father. What a beautiful story—one that can be everybody's.

**ROBERT BEESON**

Founder of iShine

Former president and founder of Essential Records





# ROAD TRIP TO REDEMPTION

BRAD MATHIAS



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*Road Trip to Redemption: A Disconnected Family, a Cross-Country Adventure, and an Amazing Journey of Healing and Grace*

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*Somehow we have overlooked the fact that this treasure called the heart can also be broken, has been broken, and now lies in pieces down under the surface. When it comes to “habits” we cannot quit or patterns we cannot stop, anger that flies out of nowhere, fears we cannot overcome, or weaknesses we hate to admit—much of what troubles us comes out of the broken places in our hearts crying out for relief.*

*Jesus speaks as if we are all the brokenhearted.  
We would do well to trust his perspective on this.*

JOHN ELDREDGE, *WAKING THE DEAD:*  
*THE GLORY OF A HEART FULLY ALIVE*



# Contents

Foreword xi

Introduction xiii

## Part I: Detour Ahead 1

PROLOGUE: To Hell and Back 3

ONE: Flashback at the Falls 21

TWO: Stepping Back from the Edge of Fear 33

THREE: Parent Guilt and Parent Pain 49

FOUR: Leaving the Old and Embracing the New 71

## Part II: On the Road 91

FIVE: My Family on a Road Trip: Genius or  
Insanity? 93

SIX: Nashville to South Dakota: An Anxious and  
Stormy Start 111

SEVEN: South Dakota to Montana: The “Four Chins”  
to Tornado Alley 121

EIGHT: Montana to Canada: Running Wild and  
Free 137

NINE: A Week in God’s Country and the Hike That  
Changed It All 147

TEN: Canada to Yellowstone and a Memory in the  
Tetons 171

ELEVEN: Lost in the Present and Finding Bethany’s  
Moose 187



TWELVE: Caleb's Climb and Jessica's Rainbow	213
THIRTEEN: Road-Trip Theology: Learning to Read the Road Signs	235
PAIGE'S STORY: My Reflections on Our Journey	243
APPENDIX: Planning Your Family's Road Trip	247
Notes on Chapter Opener Photos	253
Endnotes	255
About the Author	257

# Foreword

AS A CLOSE FRIEND and ally to the Mathias family, I was within arm's reach to the story that unfolds in this book. And yet, as I read the story once again, I began to realize the power in the retelling. For if you change the dates and names and some of the circumstances, this could probably be your story. This is likely why you've cracked this book open to begin with. You may be in the first chapters of your personal parenting journey, and the "fog of war" that seems to cloud most days may have you feeling hopeless right now. If so, you will find great comfort as you read these pages, because you will find yourself in them—and with God's providence, you will take away a posture of heart that will lead you to your own story of redemption.

I've known Brad for many years. We're the best of friends, and I know the restoration in his life firsthand. I've also known his beautiful, heroic daughter Bethany since she was a little girl. As you turn these pages, you'll get to know them both, as well as the rest of the family. What you will find here is that God redeems everything he touches, and that redemption is available to all. In reading this book, may that message of hope be transferred to your heart.

Over the next few hours, you're going to nod your head with recognition, laugh, tear up, and experience the exhilaration of the open

road. Fasten your seat belt and watch as your heavenly Father makes the signposts clear in your own road trip to redemption.

*Brian Hardin,*

founder of Daily Audio Bible and author of *Passages*

# Introduction

IT WAS JANUARY, it was sleeting ice, and it was dark. As I drove across the northern Arizona desert with my dear friend Brian Hardin, we were racing to avoid a serious winter blizzard coming down from the northwest only a few hours behind us.

Driving due east in the high desert at night is a lonely and eerie experience, and that's true without any bad weather to contend with. The seven-thousand-foot average elevation makes for cool evenings any time of year, let alone in the dead of winter. Two-lane, 1960s-era highways are the only option for travel beyond the rutted dirt and gravel switchbacks to the Indian reservations along the way. The high mesas and arroyos make a dark red stain in the distance as the car windows reveal an arid and rocky landscape as far as the eye can see. Of course, not a lick of this was visible at night. Because there were no towns, cities, or gas stations for hundreds of miles, there was also no ground lighting. Instead, we had to drive with only fifty feet or so of dimly illuminated, cracked blacktop in front of us, revealed just long enough for me to keep the SUV we were driving out of the ditch and the boulder-strewn shoulder of the road.

The sleet kept coming. Over the past hour or two, the ice had built to about a solid inch on the roads, and more was being added every minute we drove. The eighteen-wheelers were creeping along

at ten miles per hour, and so were we. If the road had been flat, it would just have been slick—somewhat dangerous, but not too bad. But this road was not flat. It was twisty and banked, and it quickly gained and shed elevation every four or five miles as we went up one mesa and down into another valley. The side of the road might have a five-foot drop into a rocky ditch or a five-hundred-foot slide down a cliff face. We just couldn't tell with the conditions outside.

Did I mention there were no real snowplows to speak of? The one salt truck we had seen was no longer going in the same direction we were, returning to its state or county line as we crept farther away from civilization into the looming darkness ahead and the blackest of road ice below.

I hate ice on roads. I can drive through a twelve-thousand-foot mountain pass in the dead of winter with twenty-foot snowbanks on either side and not break a single bead of sweat. In the backcountry of British Columbia, I can navigate old, rutted wilderness-access roads that are absent from the map without slowing at all. But black ice on a two-lane isolated highway in the middle of nowhere is a different matter. That stresses me.

I was tense. I had almost bent the steering wheel in half from the pressure I was exerting on its weakening rubber frame. All this stress came from my fear of losing control while driving at a “reckless” ten to fifteen miles per hour. Rather than risk sliding off the road, I preferred to stop. I wanted to find a hotel with a hot shower, cable TV, and a crummy vending machine that would have Fritos and Coke and a chance to get off this insane highway. Yet I noticed that Brian continued to sit quietly in his seat, absently listening to some eighties rock while chewing on his beef jerky and Corn Nuts. He seemed completely unconcerned about our predicament. I was 110 percent focused on keeping us on the road and out of the ditch, avoiding the

semis on both sides of us, and watching diligently for the blizzard that was sure to come up behind us from Utah. Meanwhile, he yawned and stretched out as he took a swig from his water bottle; it seemed he was just about to fall asleep. Either he trusted my driving skills more than I did, or he knew something about the road ahead that I didn't know—or maybe a little of both.

### Unpacking the Metaphor

Parenting can be a lot like my evening drive in the desert. As parents, we're doing our best to drive our family safely on unfamiliar highways, far from the comfort of our well-traveled paths. We often encounter unexpected hazardous conditions along the way—bad weather, construction, road detours, and breakdowns. We're constantly engaged in a struggle to keep our vehicles on the road and in between the white lines of life. There are distractions both inside and outside our vehicles all along the way. Out-of-control cars and trucks rush around us, speeding recklessly past or driving dangerously close, and objects in front of us go way too slow. We worry that we missed our exit, and we wonder if we're driving in the right direction or if we've mistakenly gone miles out of our way. We want to get our family safely to our destination, but we're afraid we'll get lost, distracted, or wrecked—or just run out of gas.

As the drivers, we parents can get anxious about everything around us we cannot control. We react by gripping the steering wheel with both hands and squeezing with all our might; we tighten everyone's seat belts and ride the brakes in vain attempts to keep us all safe.

Here's the thing: We can worry with each mile we pass, or we can relax and enjoy the view as we drive by. The truth is, we have a GPS, and we have a map. God has given us his Holy Spirit (GPS) to keep us from getting lost, and we have his Scriptures (map) to show us the way.

We don't have to figure out the best route because we have a navigator already. In fact, we're not even required to steer; God has offered to do that for us too. We really don't have to sweat the details. All we have to do is stay on the road we've been directed to drive on, being careful to avoid hitting any wildlife or falling asleep at the wheel.

If we believe this is true, the "road trip" of parenting becomes an amazing journey of discovery and personal connection, as well as a powerful reminder of the beauty of God's creation around us. Yet if we insist that we alone will chart our course and navigate our lives, we'll miss out on most of the amazing and restful experience God intended. Too often we forget to enjoy the process; we miss the fact that it's a privilege to take the journey at all. If we're not careful, we can become so obsessed with navigating safely from point A to point B that we can't experience anything else but the manic fear of not arriving.

As drivers (parents), we have a choice in it all: We can either react like Brian chose to, in total trust and peace, content to ride along, or we can react the way I did, trying to maintain control and ending up anxious, frustrated, and exhausted the entire way.

\* \* \*

On many levels, I hesitated even to attempt this book, but I felt compelled to share my family's story—of hard lessons learned, battles won and still ongoing—with fellow parents. Our story is told openly and with full transparency, leaving us vulnerable before you. We don't reveal this lightly, but we do it in hopes that it will offer some encouragement to other parents. We all share in the common struggle of being fathers and mothers. Together we're on a parenting pilgrimage, a rite of passage every generation must complete.

This is the story of a family crisis that threatened one of our children. In the aftermath of that crisis, God took me on a profound

personal journey, leading me to rethink much of what I thought I knew about being a good father and the goals of Christian parenting. Eventually he directed me to take my family on an extended road trip, and he used that experience—full of incredible natural beauty, hours in the car, and forced family togetherness in a way we hadn't encountered before—to speak to us individually and as a family . . . to bring us healing.

I am not a fan of formulaic how-to books for Christian living. This is not meant to be another three-point version of how to enjoy a better Christian life. I don't wish to give you a false hope of quick resolution to whatever crisis you face. I fear that many parenting books engage little but our need to do *something* to change our circumstances and avoid our pain. That is not this book's purpose. Instead, this book is intended to be an encouragement to any family who finds itself in the midst of a crisis, or to parents feeling a growing concern over the condition of their family. It's specifically for those families who are feeling detached from one another and are looking for ways to reconnect at a heart level. If that sounds familiar, this book is definitely for you.

My hope is for you to be inspired to press on with your calling of being a parent. I want to challenge you not to give up or settle for living in survival mode, and to help you avoid being just another “wounded, weary, and wary” kind of parent.

My goal is to help parents look beyond the external symptoms of their children's behavior to the heart level. Through my story, I want to help you see your kids as they are: multidimensional, unique individuals who need your love and attention, or, simply put, your time. I want to remind you of the difference between kids who appear to be okay and pay lip service to Christianity and those who are genuinely being drawn into their faith by a growing understanding



of the overwhelming love God has for them. I want to inspire you to parent out of love and a commitment to gain a deep, lasting connection with your kids, instead of out of debilitating fear and a desperate desire to “get it right.” I hope you get a glimpse of what it means to be an authentic parent, even when your past choices—like mine—have not made you the perfect role model.

Throughout the book I’ve included family photos from our trip so you can experience the ride with us—the ups and downs that made our adventure so memorable. As I tell our family’s story, my prayer is that these hard-won insights will be deposited solidly in your mind and heart. The principles my family has discovered have their roots in the Bible and are helpful in every human tragedy and triumph. The truths I’ve referenced are ancient and remarkable, capable of guiding and directing the most desperate and cynical among us to new hope and life and faith in Christ. The experiences I recount from my own life are intended to encourage everyone to get up and try again, no matter how messy your circumstances or your past.

I believe it will take parents pursuing God diligently and sincerely to change the world, starting in our first missionary field: our own homes. We cannot trust to the efforts of others to educate and engage our own children’s hearts to the truth of God and his plan for their lives. We are responsible for keeping our families on the sure road of true life, and we must not be asleep at the wheel. With God as our help, we can overcome dangerous conditions, unfamiliar roads, distractions, and bad weather. May God richly bless you on your own parenting pilgrimage, your own road-trip journey as you seek to lead your family in the most amazing adventure of all.

Peace and grace to you,

*Brad Mathias*



PART I  
Detour Ahead





## PROLOGUE

# TO HELL AND BACK

I REMEMBER THE PHONE CALL, 2:30 A.M. late in the summer of 2001. I was groggy, disoriented, and alone, lying in the middle of a double bed in a beat-up old hotel on the outskirts of Lake Geneva, Wisconsin.

The phone kept interrupting my fitful sleep, ringing over and over with a harsh and unrelenting insistence. I cursed in the dark as I fumbled for the receiver, reluctant to talk, but willing to do anything to make the noise stop.

As my sleep-fogged mind tried to connect the sounds I was hearing to some slightly functional part of my brain, I could sense more

than understand that my wife was yelling angrily at me. She was ranting—no, raving—screaming at times, coldly angry at others. The message was coming through loud and clear: *Don't bother to come home, EVER! Don't call me. Don't ever talk with me again. I am DONE! I am getting an attorney in the morning and filing for divorce.*

I was wide-awake now. A cold pit of nausea formed in my digestive tract. I whispered my question in between her ranting: “But what did I do?”

Of course, I already knew the answer.

I had cheated on her. I had violated our marriage commitment, and worse, I had loved someone else, long before this call disturbed me in the night. That was why I was here in Wisconsin and she was at our place in Iowa with our three children, Jessica, Bethany, and little Caleb. They were six, five, and three years of age, respectively, and they were *the* pride and joy of my life. My marriage . . . well, it seemed it was about to become a testament to one of my greatest disasters and regrets.

### **Falling in Love and Learning to Pretend**

We had married young. Paige and I had come from very different worlds, she a genuine Southern belle of the old Memphis style and I an odd catch from rural Illinois. I was loud and full of confidence, tall and “cute,” but not handsome by any stretch. She was short and petite, a gentle soul with beauty, grace, and quiet refinement.

I had pursued her with all I had, with a long-distance dating relationship that would earn me an A for effort and an engagement ring on her hand in eighteen months. We had met when I was a sophomore in my undergraduate studies at Eastern Illinois University and she was a senior at Illinois Wesleyan. We studied hundreds of miles apart but had met at a weekend retreat in Decatur, Illinois,

hosted by InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. She went for a weekend of Bible study and fellowship with her fourth-year college classmates, and I went as an indecisive seeker of truth, only casually interested in Christianity, mostly looking to hang with some newfound friends. I was much more curious to find out if InterVarsity girls from other colleges were cuter than the ones I already knew.

I was a lifelong cultural Christian, raised in the severe and legalistic world of a nondenominational association of churches, unorthodox and spiritually abusive. They spoke with authority on all things and believed their particular brand of faith to be the only way to truly experience God. At nineteen years of age, I had been thoroughly overwhelmed by the negativity and harshness of what I thought was Christianity, and I had already developed deep anger and suspicion of the church as a whole. Yet I needed to stay just close enough to it for my own stability, to reduce my well-developed sense of guilt and fear of God's punishment.

Paige had been raised in a blended family, her mother a true Southern lady with deep roots in the traditions of the Bible Belt. She cherished family and faith and had a well-balanced view of the church and mainline denominational observances. Her family members were Methodists and were careful to keep their faith in balance with the realities of normal life. Paige, as a result, had no real baggage with the church or with other Christians, and she trusted her pastor's leading and her family's advice with few reservations.

As I got to know Paige and her family and could see that they were content in their Christian faith, I chose to simply go along with it and not rock the proverbial boat. After all, I was in love, and the movies seem to say that if you're in love, things always work out in the end. But this realization of our different, even conflicting perspectives on faith, life, and spiritual truth led me to avoid revealing myself. I

chose instead to adapt and become something both duplicitous and dangerous.

Instead of having an open discussion—an upfront, truthful, and transparent sharing of my reservations about Christianity—I faked it. I was afraid. I believed it was possible that if I told Paige my real feelings about God, church, and faith, I might scare her away.

Looking back, I was in *love*. I was full of adrenaline, hope, and joy at finding someone so beautiful, so kind, and so perfectly suited to balance me. So in my presumption and blinded state, I pushed on, accepting the need to be two people: myself and whoever Paige and her family wanted me to be. I blended in. I accepted and absorbed whatever they seemed to prefer and hid my true self somewhere deep, dark, and far away.

This accommodation of living in two worlds would become my normal, functional state for the next seven years. Not a great foundation to build a life on, let alone a family.

### Seven-Year Heartache

In June 1991, Paige and I were married. It turned out to be a memorable day for everyone—a beautiful ceremony and reception, bookended by an outbreak of severe thunderstorms, oppressive humidity, and tornadoes that hit the city of Springfield, Illinois. That was the backdrop on the day we professed our love and vowed before God to become man and wife.

Of course we had an outdoor evening reception, but the rain and wind that battered our tent only seemed to give our festivities some character. Paige and I were young, in love, and full of life. So what if it rained on our wedding day? We didn't care. Nothing could keep us from being husband and wife forever, and we were confident in the future we could create together.

By the end of my graduate studies two years later, Paige and I had gotten used to sharing our single-room studio apartment in downtown Davenport, Iowa. I had learned more about accommodating her needs and wants and had further enhanced my skill at burying my own feelings and frustrations, so we didn't really fight or disagree very often. We each just chose to avoid confrontation and trusted that, sooner or later, the other person would change. Our long-distance romance had settled into a real-life coexistence that centered on my medical studies and her teaching English as a second language at an adult education facility nearby.

We avoided real discussions on faith, family, and personal beliefs. Instead we focused on our goals, our dreams, and our hopes to have children, a nice home, and a successful life. We attended church regularly and found a small group of other couples to hang out with in our free time. We were polite, educated, and generally considered to be happy and well-adjusted. We even believed it to be true.

Our first child, Jessica, was born in February 1994, two weeks before I graduated from Palmer College of Chiropractic. Suddenly our married life flipped from being about us to being about her. I have never been as excited as I was to see my precious little girl come into this life, and to this day I can recall the exact size and look of her newborn form. Starting a new practice in Illinois, raising a baby girl, and leaving the pressures and frustrations of college behind us, we were ready to kick-start our lives, to make our family into something beautiful, and to enjoy the benefits of the sacrifices we both had made.

I remember Paige beaming with pride and joy when she showed everyone our daughter. She was so happy, so excited, and maybe even a bit scared at the same time. So was I. We rented our first real home—a two-bedroom apartment—and got our first taste of family living.

Paige became a stay-at-home mom, and I began building my new



practice. I was Dr. Brad Mathias now. For fifty to sixty hours a week, I kept my nose to the grindstone, working for my soon-to-be retired father, Dr. Gerald Mathias. He was eager to give me the reins and trade this prairie town for the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia. Soon every hour of every day was full to the brim. I joined Rotary, we attended the local Methodist church, and Paige was involved with MOPS (Mothers of Preschoolers). We were settling in, growing roots and predictability.

By 1998, I was a workaholic with a thriving, successful practice. Our family had grown too. Bethany Rose, our second daughter, was born in 1995, and our son, Caleb, arrived in 1997. Paige was as stressed and overwhelmed as any mother of three kids under the age of four—compounded by living with an absentee husband who seemed to have time for everyone but her.

Paige began to grow some significant anger, and I continued to “adapt.” I endured her resentment over my work, pointing out that as a professional it was my obligation to care for my patients and work late hours, answer after-hours calls, and play golf with the local leaders. It was my duty to meet our family’s needs, and I was providing for her every “want” along the way.

She had a new house on the golf course, a brand new minivan, a white picket fence (literally) in the backyard, and a time-share in Florida. We wanted for nothing on the outside, but on the inside we were struggling to sustain any kind of personal affection or connection. Paige was a reserved, shy, brand-new member of my hometown community and had to work harder than I did at making new friends; I was extroverted and had trouble saying no to anyone. Our growing personality conflicts, normal for couples in their fifth or sixth year of marriage, were amplified by three small children, isolation, and fatigue—all overshadowed by my narcissism.

It didn't take long for the wheels of our marriage to come off completely. What had once seemed to be a promising future and a perfect family dissolved into a shell of its former self. I was beginning to develop some serious anger toward my wife. I was working hard to support my growing family, run my practice, and stay involved in the community—all while dealing with what seemed from my self-centered perspective to be an ungrateful and nagging wife.

In my frustration and anger, I reached out to a close friend for consolation. That relationship eventually led to an affair. I was still “adapting” to the situation, seeking to maintain the outward facade of a healthy and balanced life. But on the inside I was alone, afraid, and weary of trying to make everyone in my life happy.

I hid the affair from everyone but a dear friend. I shared it with him after getting drunk one night at his business office after a Rotary dinner. I barely remembered telling him, but he didn't forget. It was this friend who, over a year later, told another mutual friend about my infidelity. That man then told his wife, who told my wife. The situation culminated in Paige's phone call in the middle of the night, venting her pent-up rage, anger, and frustration at me as I lay in a beater hotel room in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin.

After seven years of adapting, accommodating, and trying to make my wife and everyone I knew happy, I had successfully created a false self. I had disassociated my actions from reality and justified all I was and did by the approval of those around me. I was false from the inside out—fake, foolish, and now exposed. My marriage was officially ending, and I had no one to blame but myself.

### **Over and Done**

The problem was that, by then, I didn't care about our marriage. I didn't care about Paige, myself, or anyone else. I didn't want to be

married to anyone; I didn't want to rely on any other person ever again! I had walked away from the affair and still found my life miserable. After a decade of sacrifice and extraordinarily hard work, I had lost all my savings and financial successes, I had lost my professional reputation, and I had lost my honor and my credibility as a man, as a husband, as a *father*. I was dead on the inside.

Despite my failures, I believed I just needed a new start. I knew I didn't love my wife like a husband should, and I couldn't keep "adapting" to try to feel in love with her, or to help her feel in love with me. I could tell that Paige didn't really want to be married to me anymore either. She wanted a man to love her and help her raise our three kids as a true husband should. She wanted a man who was stable, predictable, and consistent—three things I wasn't ever going to be.

Even before Paige learned about the affair, I had tried to leave our marriage "gracefully." I had suggested that she would be better off without me, that I no longer had feelings for her. Our physical intimacy had been gone for years, and I hadn't felt connected to her since our third child had been born in 1997.

Paige's response was to ask for counseling. She said we needed to get help from a professional, attend church more regularly, and work on repairing our relationship. I didn't want help, hated church, and was about to be done with playing any more relationship games. After my affair, I thought I knew what genuine passion and acceptance and happiness felt like—and our marriage was missing them all.

Several months before Paige found out about my affair, I had a job offer in Wisconsin. I took it, knowing that Paige would not move again. We stayed married, but only by the thinnest of legal technicalities. She didn't file for divorce, and I didn't ask for one. I sent checks home twice a month and visited the kids and her every weekend. But for all practical purposes, I was gone.

When she received the call from her best friend back in Illinois with news of my adultery, it was the anvil that broke the camel's back. Paige was mortified to learn of my infidelity. Despite our troubles, despite our lack of intimacy and my physical absence, she had clung to the idea of keeping our marriage alive. That hope ended with her late-night phone call.

All her rage, all her frustration and feelings of betrayal spewed out of her that night. As I sat in the hotel room, I could almost physically feel her words sting my ears as I listened to her vent seven years of heartache and pain. I could tell by her tone and her never-before-spoken profanities aimed squarely at me that this family was about to officially end.

### **Divorce and Delay**

I received the certified letter at my office in Lake Geneva a few days later, solemnly served to me by a local county sheriff's deputy. It was as expected: Paige had gone through with her threats. I held the divorce paperwork, brimming with complex language and descriptions of required responses, hearings, affidavits, and pending legal depositions. It was inches thick and sounded as angry as official words can.

I sighed, put the paperwork in a drawer, and refocused on work. I had already put my failed marriage behind me. I was deeply regretful of the pain I had caused Paige as a husband and friend, but I had decided just to move on and start over as soon as I could, for her sake and mine. She really wanted a husband who would be there for her every hour of every day, and I was *not* that guy. But I was confident that she would find someone very quickly. As long I could be with my three children every other weekend and holiday, I was more than willing to let her go.

Nine months later, I was well down the road to a new life, but my

wife seemed fixated on the past. My contact with Paige was limited, as I lived in another state and only saw her for a few moments twice a month when we switched off with the kids on the weekends. But whenever we met, I could tell she absolutely hated me. I was tolerant of her anger, knowing I had failed her and betrayed her, but it seemed to me she wasn't even trying to move forward. She was frustrated, angry, and resentful almost every time I saw her—while I was upbeat, relaxed, and refocused on life.

After all, for the first time ever, I wasn't "adapting"; I wasn't being forced to pretend or fake my way through a day. I could just be me, and I was reveling in the freedom of that reality. I was deeply buried in my work, had a few new friendships, and had even started to date again, believing my old life was over and a new one had begun. I had walked away from any form of Christian faith and was openly studying different religions to see what might make the most sense to me.

I had instructed my attorney to give Paige whatever she wanted in the divorce. I had made no legal moves to restrict her financially or put any pressure on her for custody or assets. I truly had no agenda except to get on with my life. I just wanted to see my kids every other weekend and holiday. That seemed the best solution for everyone, and I was puzzled by the delay in those conditions being accepted by Paige and her attorney.

After eleven months of waiting, I still had not received the final divorce paperwork. I had almost forgotten I wasn't technically divorced. Paige had relocated to Memphis to be with her family; I was fully distracted by my new career and relationships in Wisconsin. I spoke of her as being my "ex" and believed it to be true, expecting a final signed document in my mailbox any day—formally declaring the end of our marital state.

It never came.

### **Divine Intervention**

Over a year after my wife and I split, I had a vision. A serious and unexplainable supernatural experience. It happened while I was sick—as sick as I have ever been. I was lying in bed, suffering from a severe middle-ear infection. A fever and abscess had formed near my central nervous system, and the doctors had done surgery to ease the pressure. If the antibiotics kicked in, all would be fine. If they didn't, I risked life-threatening complications.

Lying there, exhausted and alone, I reflected on my thirty-two years of living and felt a bit ashamed of my life, the choices I had made, how I had acted, and how my kids would never really know their dad. I decided if there was a possibility that I might not pull out of this, I needed to get some stuff sorted out. So I uttered a simple prayer. I only wanted to know if there was a God and if he, she, or it cared at all about me.

I was sincere in my simple request. I had studied both ancient and modern religious teachings of many faiths and customs; I had researched Eastern mysticism, Mormonism, Satanism, Universalism, Lutheranism, Scientology, Islam, Hinduism, and finally Wicca. All told, I had read dozens of books and reviews of various faiths and had concluded that there was probably no single God, but rather a sacred truth in the vitality of the earth as a holy object that deserved our love and admiration and respect. I became a tree hugger.

As I lay in bed, I suddenly felt and saw things that were not in the room. I had a profound sense of something or someone much greater, much larger than any person could be. I somehow experienced God in person that day—Jesus, in fact. I was shown my life in two states: as it would be unaltered and as it could become if I chose to surrender to this truth.

It's hard to describe in words, but suffice it to say that I was

radically affected by this encounter. My fever and my infection vanished; in just a moment, my mind and body became clear and healthy.

I could tell you only a few things for sure at that instant: I was no longer sick; I had just experienced Jesus for myself; and this Christianity stuff was for real. Then I began to feel a deep and profound sense of loss at the failure of my marriage and at the compromise of the covenant I had made with God and with Paige. So strong was this sense of injustice and angst that I got up, dressed, and immediately drove to Memphis.

Twelve hours later I showed up at the door of my kids' new home. Their mother was waiting for me. I had called to tell them I was coming, and an amazed Paige had asked why. Living three states and a thousand miles away, one didn't just hop in the car and commute to see the kids. I didn't know how to explain it. I tried, but I kept choking up. The tears kept drowning my words as I attempted to describe what had just happened to me, but she got the gist of it and allowed me to come without a full explanation.

Inside, I was exploding. It felt like something very important had just clicked into place for me, as if a huge puzzle piece that had been missing was suddenly found. Life was beginning to return to my heart and my soul. I never cried—maybe twice in thirty-two years—but on that twelve-hour pilgrimage to Memphis, I wept like a baby. I cried for my past sins and failures. I cried for my kids, for my lost marriage, and for the ridiculously selfish things I had done. I cried for joy and for happiness at finally finding something, someone to believe in.

I wept as I felt the heart of God breaking for my family and me. I shuddered as I thought of all the pain and tragedy I had created along the way. I wasn't returning to Memphis to save my marriage or prevent a divorce—I was going to be reconciled and to start my

new life in Christ. No more holding back, no more pretending. I was totally ready to repent, to relocate, to reconnect however God wanted me to. I was done making decisions on my own, and I was done trying to figure things out.

On that drive I had no idea that God might actually be planning a resurrection—to raise the burnt ashes of my marriage from the dead, as he had raised his son, Jesus, from the literal grave.

But he did just that.

A year later, Paige and I were fully reconciled, living together with our three children in Germantown, Tennessee. It was a miracle. We were a family again, rebuilding a life and a home that had been in ruins only months before. God, in his power and purpose, had shown my wife that I had indeed been changed. He encouraged her to trust him with our marriage restoration, as much as she had trusted him in my absence.

Just a few weeks before I had my incredible experience with Jesus, Paige had uttered a powerful prayer in which she surrendered me, the kids, and her stability to God. She was genuinely ready to let go and move on. She stopped praying primarily for the restitution of our marriage and instead began praying for me, that I would let Jesus take control of my life. She prayed Scripture for me as well, including Ephesians 1:17: “I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better” (NIV).

In those moments of release, I believe God acted, and by the power of his Holy Spirit he began to move in both of us to accept the impossible, to begin a process of full and complete restoration back into the marriage covenant of our youth. For the first time, I was able to be truly honest with Paige, sharing all my thoughts, fears, and beliefs. She in turn seemed to be much stronger and more focused in her faith, unfazed by my issues or the baggage of the past.



It took several long counseling sessions, active accountability, and long-term rebuilding of my integrity with my in-laws, friends, and family. But in the end God was able to demonstrate his divine power in our lives by restoring our marriage and preventing us from becoming just another statistic.

### **The Road to Recovery**

Our journey back into recovery, although miraculous, was not easy. I don't want to gloss over the many issues of trust, consistency, and integrity that needed to be overcome in the following years, but it's accurate to say that God did indeed rapidly restore our marriage and our home.

What is most difficult to portray is the lasting impact of my infidelity and the brokenness of our marriage on our three precious children. When our family came back together, Jessica was eight, Bethany was seven, and Caleb was five. The turmoil created from the verbal grenades Paige and I had hurled back and forth for months, followed by my absence, imprinted numerous profound memories on their young lives, and the impact of those emotional traumas was unavoidable.

Jessica was especially aware that something bad had occurred, and she knew that it had to do with Daddy leaving Mommy for someone else. Jessica sensed that she had to be a helper to her mom, because she was the oldest and Dad wasn't around, so she immediately matured before her time.

Bethany developed a deep sense of almost constant anxiety about being left by me or Paige. She was fearful that if she went to sleep at night she might die and not wake up at all—or awake all alone with no one to care for her.

Caleb was very young during the earliest of our fights and remained

very quiet, sullen, and angry at me for most of the first year I was back. He was jealous of his mom and didn't even seem to know why. He kept his distance from me emotionally and physically and got very irritable whenever Paige was gone and I had to care for him alone. It was obvious that at first he resented my being around at all, as if it were an intrusion into his normal world.

For all three of my children, I believe these struggles were directly attributable to the fifteen months of separation and instability that took its toll on our home.

Over the next seven years, God orchestrated a series of events in my work, Paige's work, and our Christian faith to direct us out of the Memphis area into Nashville. From my professional work as a chiropractic physician, I moved into the executive management of Christian ministry and media. During those changes, our relocation, and the shifts in our schedules, there was always a sense of unease connected to Bethany's fears and Jessica's need for control. Caleb was the most laid-back about it all, slowly warming to having a life in which being with his dad was more normal again.

Given the very public nature of my failings as a husband, I never tried to hide the events of my past from my three kids. I was very open with them about the general details of our marital separation, openly admitted my role in the "almost divorce," and asked for their forgiveness. I did all of that, in tears on my knees, with them and their mother in the living room of their Germantown home the day after my experience with Jesus.

Over time as my kids grew older and more mature, I was able to fill in some of the details of our past marital problems, with edited specifics about my affair and lack of integrity. They seemed to be able to process the past, while reconciling it with the current reality of Paige and I being back together and living in harmony. On occasion

the kids would overhear a heated argument between their mom and me and would creep closer to our bedroom door to listen and see if everything was okay. No matter how far we had come in restoring balance and peace in our home, the past still loomed over us, reminding us that our family's new happiness could come crashing down at any moment.

It took at least five years of my careful and consistent behavior as a father and husband before my kids began to relax, to trust that our home was really back to the way it was supposed to be. Gradually they felt more confident that Dad wasn't leaving, that Mom wouldn't throw Dad out in the heat of a disagreement, and that their parents were resolved, determined, and working to make their marriage better.

As Paige and I grew stronger and our family became more cohesive, many of the kids' fears and concerns slowly subsided. Caleb, who used to sneak into our room almost every night to sleep with us, started to stay in his own bed. Jessica, who had seemed determined to help make every parenting decision for her sister and brother, began to trust that Mom and Dad might know what we were doing as parents and that she could just be the older sister. Bethany, however, continued to struggle with her fears and anxieties, often needing Paige to repeat at her bedside "You're not going to die" two or three times in a row before she could fall asleep.

It's impossible to say how much my failings as a father and husband injured the mental and emotional health of my kids and my wife. But it was painfully clear to me that the years of our strained and dysfunctional "almost divorce" had left some long-term scars. I can't imagine the hurt and turbulence in families who live with the reality of divorce and shared custody every day for years on end.

As Paige and I were growing in our mutual trust, love, and respect,

our marriage was becoming publicly restored and strengthened, leading to our increased involvement at church and in couples' ministry. We found that many couples had endured infidelity, and worse. A lot of families in the local church were struggling with similar if not identical issues in their own homes. They needed to see an example, a real-life testimony to the ability of God to fix the seemingly unfixable. They needed to find hope and encouragement in our story and see that the God who had saved our family could save theirs, too. Suddenly our painful past took on significance and purpose. From our loss and regrets emerged new hope, grace, and confidence for others to take the same journey we had taken.

It amazed me to see how powerfully God had recovered what I had lost, how his redemptive work not only recovered our marriage but made it stronger and more beautiful—a testament to his power to resurrect even things that were completely dead. Since the day I drove to Memphis to ask for forgiveness, my love for my wife and the pattern of our lives have shifted dramatically. We have changed in ways I never could have imagined. It's the same with everyone who discovers the power of grace and love in Jesus.

But even with the miraculous work God had done in our lives, my fears for my kids began to grow when puberty and adolescence hit. Hormones, crushes, pop culture, body image, and public school all became huge issues at one time or another with each of our kids. Every time there was a crisis brewing, I found myself wondering if their problems were a delayed time bomb of my own making, ticking from a fuse that I had unintentionally lit years earlier.

It's not a good way to live, but the fear and the guilt were always there—just under the surface of my mind, waiting to pounce on me and prove to everyone how screwed up I really was. How much I had lost and failed. How responsible I still felt for all the problems

my family had to endure. It was crippling, and it often kept me from taking parenting action to correct my kids when they needed it. I frequently held back, worried that they would resent me or disrespect my authority.

This led me to parent mostly out of fear and not love, a theme that will be explored further in other parts of our story. Suffice it to say, this fear-and-guilt cycle sometimes paralyzed me and other times tempted me to overreact to the failings of my kids as I began to see ghosts of my own past haunt their lives. Although anyone from the outside could have seen that these issues were mostly normal behaviors common to any family with tweens and teens, I was convinced at times that they were in fact punishment for my compromised living a decade before. I had great anxiety about how I could ever hope to lead my kids into the future as a father without creating further problems for their lives and my own. It would take a family crisis years later to shake me out of this personal pattern once and for all.

\* \* \*

Our prologue is a significant part of our family's complicated history and provides context for our road trip adventures eight years later. Your own family's history may not include the same dramatic failures and victories, but every family has baggage: issues from the past that threaten to derail the future. I'm willing to bet that most parents sometimes look at their kids' problems and feel shame and guilt, wondering if their past parenting decisions or poor choices contributed to their children's struggles. If you're in that place and are parenting out of fear, have courage—and read on.



ONE

## FLASHBACK AT THE FALLS

*Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.* PROVERBS 3:5-6, ESV

### June 2010

Hiking along the sapphire blue shores of one of the most beautiful lakes in the world, I found myself invigorated and out of breath. The combination of high altitude, frigid morning air, and the thirty-pound backpack I was carrying caused me to pause on the trail. Looking back over my shoulder, I saw my little band of intrepid flatlander suburbanites following dutifully behind me as we crossed this magnificent mountain landscape. We were exploring a remote

seven-mile trail to Bow Falls that skirts the picturesque Bow Lake in Alberta, Canada, located only a few miles from the idyllic Lake Louise resort region of Banff. We had left our rental cabin before dawn that day, hoping to get on the trail in time to reach our isolated destination by noon.

I had led my family from Nashville, Tennessee, to Canada on a quest to reintroduce them to the Author of all beauty, the Creator of true life, Jesus Christ. I could envision no place in the world that could convey the majesty and creativity of their spiritual heritage better than this remarkable piece of paradise.

An avid hiker and road warrior, I had visited Alberta several times before with my lifelong friend Brian Hardin. As a professional photographer, he had explored this lake with me, and I had kept one of his pictures framed in my living room ever since. Bow Lake was a sacred place for me. I had wept on the day I first stood on its shores. Dramatic mountain walls swept down into a crystal-clear, glacier-fed lake that perfectly reflected the snowcapped peaks from every angle. This valley had been designated a UNESCO World Heritage site. Every summer, tourist buses swept by its shores following the world-famous Icefields Parkway—an ice-trail road running from Banff to Jasper—carrying hundreds of visitors eager to see the sights, buy the trinkets, and pose for pictures. These drive-by gazers were content to leave the majesty of the lake's shores with a few digital memories. In their rush to see more, did they truly understand or appreciate the silent and awesome presence of this pristine wilderness? I doubted it.

When I stand on the shores of this lake, I always feel as if I am standing in the presence of my Creator God. No other place in the world moves me like this place does. It is unique, special, unequalled in its beauty and its serenity. So when I had an opportunity to take a

trip with my family, it didn't take me long to decide where we would go. Now here we were, hiking past the well-worn shoreline of the casual tourist trail and heading to the soaring glacier's edge, which in summer forms the magnificent Bow Falls, rising over five hundred feet in the far distance.

The trail was long and winding, with very few easy stretches, and we quickly realized it would tax us much more than any trail we had tried before. My sophisticated teens were excited, engaged, and anxiously snapping pictures as they hiked. Exclaiming like little children who had just discovered another new ride at Disneyland, they shared their joy with anyone who would listen. I smiled at their random outbursts of oohs and aahs, their pointing and yelling at the wildlife and mountain scenery around us:

“Dad, this is AMAZING! It's soooooo cool.”

“Are those elk? Are they dangerous?”

“Is that an eagle? How cool is that!”

“Seriously, are there bears up here? Will they eat us?”

They would each exclaim their discoveries or shout their delight, as if they alone had seen the beauty and we risked missing a critical life moment if we didn't immediately stop and stare with them before it suddenly disappeared. It was awesome to see my suburban, media-addicted teenagers running around the wilderness like kids in a candy store. It was a prayer answered—and a major passion of my life shared with my family for the first time.

I sensed something critical happening in them at this remote, wild, and beautiful mountain. God was present for them like he had been for me. They were seeing the majesty of the mystical and mysterious Creator we worshiped together every Sunday. Only this time, they were worshiping spontaneously, without me leading or prompting them.



As I paused by the trail, my mind flashed back to that devastating night my family had experienced not even a year ago. The events that had shaped our decision to be here were painful memories, yet the sting of them was already fading in the magic of this moment. Nevertheless, that shockingly unexpected crisis had formed in my wife and me the resolution to change our lives, to adapt our parenting in ways I never would have dreamed of a few months earlier. That priority shift resulted in our decision to drive our entire family seven thousand miles in two weeks in an effort to reconnect with each other, and in the process, we saw our journey connect us all with God. Here is our story. . . .

### September 2009

I could tell something was wrong. Even in the midst of my hectic schedule and the busyness of everyday life, I had noticed changes in my middle child, a shift in her mood and appearance over the past few months. She had withdrawn a bit—removed herself from our simple weekly family life, sat out our evening dinner discussions, and always had too much to do on family movie nights. She was still there, physically present, but she was emotionally “checked out.”

Bethany had begun to fade into a shell of her normally dramatic and exuberant teenage self. She was still an athletic, slim, blonde “Barbie doll” of a girl, but her beautiful sky-blue eyes had seemed to lose their color. They were darker now, especially with the extra mascara and eyeliner she had begun to wear. Her skin looked more frail and white than I’d ever remembered. She kept her eyes down, usually with a hoodie over her head and iPod earbuds jammed in her ears. She was trying to keep us all out. It was frustrating, irritating, and disrespectful, and I had made a mental note to confront her about the many rude behaviors I had observed in her recently.

My patience for her teenage angst had worn thin. She needed to be corrected. It was time our family quit being punished by her unpredictable moods and her annoyance with everyone and everything around her.

I loved her dearly, but I had to admit it—Bethany could be a real snot sometimes. Her older sister and younger brother were always complaining about her attitudes and selfishness, and on more than one occasion Paige had thrown up her hands in frustration and despair, wondering if Bethany would *ever* grow up. It didn't take a PhD to figure out that we were giving her way too much latitude. Her schoolwork was starting to suffer, and seemingly overnight she had changed her clothes from a well-groomed "preppy" style to a sloppy, skinny jeans "skater" look. What was going on with her?

Whatever it was, I assumed it was related to her growing hormonal imbalances, combined with girl-boy teen drama and high school social stress. I also assumed her attitude was a jab at her mother and me, an attempt to show us that she was older and independent now, able to handle herself without our help. So I, the supposedly wise father, was already judging her actions as rebellious and in need of correction before I had talked with her at all. I was seriously right—and I was seriously wrong.

In retrospect, the signs were there, if I had taken the time to notice. If I had been paying attention to Bethany, really paying attention, I would have seen the faint scars from a few old, purple cuts—long, swollen, twisted welts—as well as the chronic scars on the insides of her forearms. But I didn't. I might have noticed that the girl who had once been the most voracious eater in the family was suffering from an ongoing loss of appetite. I might have noticed that her choice of music, art, and reading had shifted from bright and uplifting to dark and depressing. She had, in fact, been morphing

from an animated and optimistic young woman, full of life, hope, and excitement, into a shadow of her healthier self.

In my naiveté, I was still remembering her as she was before, instead of seeing her as she had become. I had missed the transformation in front of my very eyes. Actually, I'd seen the symptoms, but I hadn't taken them seriously. Instead of investigating the sudden changes in my daughter, I'd dismissed them, chalking it all up to normal teen issues. Day after hectic day had come and gone, and I was blindly doing my best to keep everything and everyone in their proper places. Hypnotized by the repetitive schedules and demands on my time, I was slowly losing my awareness of the very real and dangerous problem growing in my own home. I had fallen asleep at the wheel.

Not only had Bethany changed in appearance and attitude, but the time she spent alone in her room and away from her family or friends had grown from a few hours each week to a few hours each day. When she was around, her blank and absent stare was devoid of any emotion—beyond her growing irritation with the rest of us. Yet I continued to misread her activities, changes in appearance, and nasty attitude. I shudder to think what might have happened that dark week in September 2009 if I hadn't taken a moment to pray with my wife late one night in our bedroom.

### **Divine Intervention**

As I took the time to quiet myself, and as I emptied my mind of the day's worries, I opened my heart in prayer and immediately felt the presence of God intrude into my awareness. It was like a firm, tender, but powerful impression, a deep whisper in my mind: *Ask Bethany what she is hiding from you.* I thought, *Tonight, Lord? Right now?* My heart felt an intense surge of emotion as I sensed the urgency. *Immediately!*

Since committing my life radically to Christ eight years earlier, one thing I had learned is that when God clearly speaks to me, it's wise to respond right away. My wife and I agreed it was important enough to interrupt our sleep that night, and we decided to find out what was really going on with our daughter.

As we walked the short distance from our room to hers, I felt frustration and anger build within me. Obviously Bethany was lying to us about something, and I was determined to find out what. Like many parents, we had battled with the pattern of deceit and half-truths so common in adolescents. I was convinced that Bethany had lied to us once again and was secretly pursuing some defiant violation of our house rules regarding boys or Facebook or texting. She was always pushing the boundaries with us, and this time she must have gone too far. After all, the middle child is often the most difficult—everyone told us so. Bethany had fought her mother and me every step of the way, ever since she was a little toddler. “I DO IT!” she had screamed at us when she first learned to talk and walk. And in the next decade, it seemed she had continued to resist every effort we made as her parents to win her heart and her trust.

### **Reality Check**

At the door to my daughter's bedroom, I paused and listened. I could hear her quiet sobs and restless movements. I was beginning to grow more concerned and less angry at whatever she had done. I began to feel a darkness—deep pain and despair—coming from her room. It was a palpable sense that something or someone was tormenting my daughter.

I had often felt unprepared and unqualified to raise a daughter, let alone two. I seemed unable to understand their unique emotional needs. Yet I knew for sure that I loved Bethany with all my heart,

and I was ready to do anything for her. Like any father, I would take a bullet to the brain or a knife through my heart—whatever it took to protect her. But that night, I sensed something deeper and more terrifying trying to harm my child, something I couldn't touch, fight, or repulse.

Whatever this problem was, it threatened to destroy my daughter, and it was time for me to battle for her like I had never done before. I immediately began to pray and to seek the wisdom of my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Rarely do we get to pray for something else as pure and as needed as wisdom in raising our children, and I was exceedingly short and to the point. *Lord, I need some insight here for Bethany. Please, Lord. I'm scared and confused, and I don't know how to help her. Please, God.* And again I sensed the peaceful but firm impression in my mind: *Just ask her to reveal what she has hidden.*

Bethany by now was restlessly moving in her bed; maybe she could sense that someone was at her door. As her mother and I entered and approached her bedside, she moved suddenly as if to hide something. When we turned on the hall light and its illumination flooded her dark room, we could tell by Bethany's swollen eyes that she had been crying for some time. Embarrassed, she quickly got up and turned her face, trying to wipe away the evidence of her weakness.

My wife and I simply told our daughter that we felt God had revealed to us in prayer that she had been struggling with a profound and painful secret. We assured her that we wanted to help, but to do that we would need her to be completely honest about whatever was going on in her life. As we gently but firmly asked her to reveal what she was hiding from us, it seemed her entire body shuddered with the impact of our words. Instead of denying her actions, she slowly sat down and began to weep into her hands. This was *not* the reaction she usually had when we confronted her about inappropriate

behavior. This was the response of a broken and devastated soul, weary and hopeless and alone.

I remember the sudden and painful tightening in my gut, the nausea in the back of my throat as I listened to my little girl tell me she had been molested—touched inappropriately by a male student in her middle school, the day of her graduation from eighth grade. *How that could be? Why didn't she tell us?* Dozens of thoughts and questions invaded my mind like a tidal wave. I watched helplessly while my wife erupted into tears and smothered my daughter's little frame with her protective hug.

The nausea inside me quickly grew into numbness. My mind refused to accept what my ears had just heard, and I almost shut down with the emotional shock of her revelation. *Not my family! Not my daughter, not in my house!* As my fear and shock subsided, my rage surged—rage at whoever had done this, rage at my inability to fix this terrible wound in my Bethany, rage at my own failure to protect her from harm, from violation. I choked as I tried to absorb it all. Why had this happened? What was going on in my own family? And why didn't I have a clue?

Something much worse and much different from a secret boyfriend or an abuse of freedom had occurred. In my haste to confront and correct, I had missed the other possible explanation for my daughter's progressive changes in attitude, appearance, and behavior: despair.

The space between defiance and despair is very small. As a parent, I had yet to learn the difference, and given the history of Bethany's stubborn and persistent personality, I had categorized her in my mind as a "strong-willed child." Long before this terrible night I had judged her incapable of being forthright, truthful, or respectful, and so at the apex of her young life, I had rushed to a premature judgment of

my daughter's motives long before the facts were revealed. In that moment I had a parental epiphany: Bethany wasn't acting so strange because of some stereotypical teenage funk; she was acting out of pain. Her world had grown increasingly dark as her heart gave way to despair and shame. She had carefully hidden her pain from us, fearing we would not understand or continue to love her like before.

As a father, that moment broke my heart. I realized in an instant how foolish I had been, how easily I had assumed the worst of my daughter, and how legalistically my own religious nature had intruded upon the most fragile of life moments. If I had continued in the path of correction and confrontation that night with my daughter, I believe I might have lost her forever. Instead, by the amazing grace of God alone, I kept myself from launching into another angry tirade at her deception and intuitively was able to grasp that her actions were being caused *by* her secret, not in an effort to protect it.

Bethany sobbed and rocked back and forth in her chair as she told her mother and me in a rush of words and gasping cries of her attempt to take her own life a day before. She told us how she had been cutting herself, desperate to stop the pain and shame of being molested four months earlier. She begged us to believe her and forgive her and protect her and help her. Her words were like broken glass as they hit my heart, ripping away at my hardened beliefs and deepest fears.

A long night ensued, filled with explanations, choking cries of despair and shame, and anger at God for letting this happen and at myself for leaving her all alone to figure it out. Anger for the many nights she had cried herself to sleep, only to wake up to the same sense of unrelenting fear and guilt. For victims of molestation and abuse, the irrational feelings of guilt and condemnation are overwhelmingly intense. The fear that somehow they had caused the incident, the anger at being helpless to prevent it, and the deep identity-shattering

belief that they deserved it—all this forms an inner core of despair so devastating it often leads them to contemplate taking their own lives, just to end the pain. My daughter, my precious and beautiful child, had been mistreated, abused, and then isolated by her fears and my prejudices to a point where she felt her best option was to take her own life rather than confide in us, the ones whose greatest role was to protect, nurture, and love her into adulthood.

My shame was well-deserved; hers was not. To say that I felt remorse, regret, and guilt at my failure to recognize her condition is a monumental understatement. My heart burned with the pain not only of my daughter but also of my heavenly Father as I realized how little I really knew my own child. How little of a genuine relationship I shared with her. How much I had wrongly assumed about her. The lies I had agreed to believe about her life and her attitudes. I had somehow lost touch with my daughter to such a degree that she couldn't take her greatest crisis to me for help and counsel and comfort. In effect, when she needed me the most, I was no longer there. Paige, too, was heartsick at hearing Bethany describe what had happened. As her mother, Paige had always been there to protect her children and felt grieved to the core that this time, she hadn't. She wanted to reverse time, to go back and protect her daughter from all this suffering.

Such was the shock and surprise at the night's events that I had to step back and consciously calm myself in a moment of prayer and sacred Scripture reading. Accepting my failures, I was determined to learn, grow, and improve in my God-given role as Bethany's earthly father. I began the process of rearranging my schedule, my priorities, and my life to a substantial degree and began asking God to show me what I could do to help repair the wounds in my daughter and in our home. Over time, that prayer for healing, wholeness, and restoration would be answered in a most unusual way.