

UPDATED AND EXPANDED

WHEN

I LAY

MY ISAAC

DOWN

Unshakable Faith in

Unthinkable Circumstances

CAROL KENT



“If I were to read only one book this year, it would be *When I Lay My Isaac Down*. This honest, heart-wrenching story caused me to look deep within and say to God, ‘Yes, I am willing to give up what I love to You who loves me more.’”

—LINDA DILLOW, author of *Calm My Anxious Heart* and *Intimacy Ignited*

“Carol Kent has poured her heart onto these pages, sharing her tragic and triumphant journey with breathtaking honesty. Her compassion for others lifts this story far above a simple testimony to God’s faithfulness. *When I Lay My Isaac Down* is about a believer’s faith put to the ultimate test.”

—LIZ CURTIS HIGGS, bestselling author of *Bad Girls of the Bible*

“What a rare treasure it is to weep, mourn, and rejoice with Carol, finding in her words the strength in Christ to let go of my ‘Isaacs.’ Please receive Carol’s invitation to take up our crosses together, knowing that with God, the story isn’t over.”

—BONNIE KEEN, writer/recording artist of the song “Isaac”

“Carol consoles others with the very same comfort she has received through God’s ever-present mercy. For anyone facing the unique heartbreak of having to surrender what feels like a part of yourself, this book is a must-read.”

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“Carol has faithfully laid down her life for the gospel. And now, God has asked her to lay down her most precious treasure — her only son. Today, Carol has come away from the altar gloriously transformed . . . so will you.”

—KATHY TROCCOLI, author, speaker, recording artist

“For all those experiencing Job’s dark day in the present, and for all whose day is yet to come, this book points the way to the dawn of a new day.”

—JILL BRISCOE, speaker, author of *A Little Pot of Oil*

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Unthinkable Circumstances

CAROL KENT

NavPress 

A NavPress resource published in alliance
with Tyndale House Publishers



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When I Lay My Isaac Down: Unshakable Faith in Unthinkable Circumstances

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Study guide by Amber Van Schooneveld

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ISBN 978-1-64158-272-8

Printed in the United States of America

26 25 24 23 22 21 20
7 6 5 4 3 2 1

DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to our

“Stretcher Bearers”

and to all of you who take the time

to respond to the needs of others

by answering the question,

“How can I help with tangible encouragement?”

Our “Stretcher Bearers” became the

hands and feet of Jesus to us

when we ran out of resources.

You have modeled a lifestyle of giving

that has forever changed our lives.

Please hold Gene and me accountable

for “finishing well.”

CONTENTS

<i>Prologue</i>	DOES LIFE GET ANY BETTER THAN <i>THIS</i> ?	11
<i>Chapter 1:</i>	AN UNEXPECTED JOURNEY The Power of Unthinkable Circumstances	15
<i>Chapter 2:</i>	LAYING ISAAC DOWN The Power of Relinquishment	33
<i>Chapter 3:</i>	WHY DIDN'T GOD DO SOMETHING? The Power of Heartache	57
<i>Chapter 4:</i>	STRETCHER BEARERS AND YELLOW ROSES The Power of Community	75
<i>Chapter 5:</i>	EVEN IN THIS . . . The Power of Hope	93
<i>Chapter 6:</i>	BUT WHERE IS THE LAMB? The Power of Faith	113
<i>Chapter 7:</i>	EMBRACING THE UPSIDE-DOWN NATURE OF THE CROSS The Power of Joy	135
<i>Chapter 8:</i>	FINDING OUR PURPOSE IN GOD'S GRAND STORY The Power of Speaking Up	159
<i>Epilogue</i>	THE MELODY OF THE FUTURE	181
<i>Epilogue to 2013 Edition</i>	TEN YEARS LATER . . . THE POWER OF PERSEVERANCE	187
	STUDY GUIDE	209
	ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	291
	NOTES	294
	ABOUT THE AUTHOR	300

*Circumstances may appear to wreck
our lives and God's plans,
but God is not helpless among the ruins.*

— ERIC LIDDELL, OLYMPIAN

DOES *L*IFE GET ANY BETTER THAN *THIS*?

IT WAS AN IDYLIC FALL DAY. OUR MICHIGAN TREES HAD TURNED FROM their magnificent summer greens to a panoramic palette of golden yellows, burnished oranges, russet browns, and deep reds. My husband, Gene, and I walked hand in hand along the glorious two-mile stretch of sidewalk beside the St. Clair River. The sun rose high in the azure sky, producing a reflection on the river that lived up to the advertisements in local chamber of commerce brochures. The complete tranquility of that moment is frozen in my memory.

We paused along the walkway, inhaling the fresh, crisp air, and talked about all of the good things that had been happening in our lives. Our son, J.P., had graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy a couple of years earlier, and we recounted the pride and joy we experienced on his graduation day in Annapolis, Maryland. He was an officer in the Navy with a bright future, and he had married a delightful young woman just the year before. With his marriage to April, he also became a devoted stepfather to her precious young daughters, Chelsea and Hannah. We adored our granddaughters and looked forward to watching this young family thrive. Gene's business was flourishing. My speaking and writing career had exploded with opportunities for international travel and stimulating variety. We were young empty nesters entering what had all of the potential of becoming the best season of our lives.

After naming our blessings with grateful hearts, I looked up at my husband and said, "Does life get any better than *this*?" We finished the walk with our arms

encircled around each other's waists, never dreaming that in less than two weeks, everything about our future would change.

This book is the story of two parents who received the devastating news that their remarkable son, a young lieutenant in the Navy, had committed a crime so unthinkable it was impossible to believe. For a long time I could not talk about my pain, and I could not write publicly about what I was feeling. There are some tragedies that are too big for a heart to hold, and they defy any description that makes sense. Time weaves its way through the shock, the hurt, and the inexpressible feelings, and one day you discover that in the process of daily survival, you have instinctively made decisions (good and bad), defined your theology, formed an opinion about God, and determined that you will either curl up and die emotionally or you will choose life.

The terrifying but truthful fact is that, in choosing life, you realize it will never match the kind of life that was in your carefully thought-out plan for your future. It will force you to view the people around you differently. The brokenness will challenge you to new levels of personal compassion. It will melt your pride, diminish the importance of your carefully designed agenda, and it has the potential to develop an unshakable faith that defies rationality. It is my prayer that *When I Lay My Isaac Down* will forever change your view of personal challenges.

Part of this book will examine a man named Abraham. He had a son. I have a son. His son had done nothing wrong. My son committed murder. This book is not about the sons. It is about people who make heart sacrifices while living in the midst of uncertain circumstances in a world where many things make no earthly sense. Abraham made choices that teach us how to live with purpose in an imperfect world. Other Bible characters did too.

There are times in life when all of us are called upon to make heart sacrifices. Some of those sacrifices are things we choose because of a cause we believe in or a desired end that makes our decision worthwhile. However, most of us will face an "Isaac experience," when a crisis is thrust into our lives without warning and without survival instructions. Our "Isaacs" are the heart sacrifices we make when we choose to relinquish control and honor God with our choices even when all seems lost. We have to decide if we will let go of our control over

a person, situation, or event, or if we will hang on for dear life and refuse to relinquish something we cherish.

As much as I don't like the process, I am learning that the cup of sorrow can also be the cup of joy. If you choose to embrace the principles outlined in this book, I pray that you will be infused with a fresh perspective on how to be authentic, courageous, and steadfast as you discover the hidden power in heart sacrifices. All of us have circumstances that produce varying degrees of personal loss and devastation. Will we maintain our grip on hope in the process of defeat? Will we live our lives with passion and purpose even if, in this lifetime, we are not permitted to have an answer to why something has happened? Will we choose unshakable faith, or will we give up on God? I believe God's great invitation is to engage us in the process of discovering the power of choosing faith when that decision makes no sense. There is hidden power in our unthinkable circumstances.

Several years have come and gone since I asked my husband the question, "Does life get any better than *this*?" They've been the hardest and most painful years of my life, but what I have learned about authentic faith and about what really matters in life doesn't get much better than this. In the middle of laying our Isaacs down, we are not alone. Anne Lamott describes the awareness of His presence in the middle of desperate circumstances:

After a while, as I lay there, I became aware of someone with me, hunkered down in the corner, and I just assumed it was my father, whose presence I had felt over the years when I was frightened and alone. The feeling was so strong that I actually turned on the light for a moment to make sure no one was there — of course, there wasn't. But after a while, in the dark again, I knew beyond any doubt that it was Jesus. . . . I felt him just sitting there on his haunches in the corner of my sleeping loft, watching me with patience and love.¹

This has been my most important discovery, and it is my prayer for you as you read this book. When God seems the most absent, He is the most present. He is in the middle of your circumstances whether or not you have recognized Him.

Because it's so hard to think clearly when the unthinkable happens, I offer you some questions to reflect on at the end of each chapter. You may find it helpful to write your thoughts in a journal or talk about them with a friend or in a small group. Or, if you're the friend of the person who's facing the unthinkable, you may find these questions useful as you seek to offer support.

As you embrace God's enduring, unconditional love, I pray that you will discover an unshakable faith that defies description welling up and infusing your soul with courage.



Ten years have passed since this book was originally written, and much has happened since the story recorded on these pages took place. This updated and revised edition of the book has a second epilogue that will bring you up-to-date on our adventure in faith.

AN UNEXPECTED JOURNEY

The Power of Unthinkable Circumstances

There are moments when God makes utter and complete sense to us, and then suddenly, life changes and he seems a foreign remnant of a childhood force-fed faith. . . . “[Lord,] give us eyes to see your coming and going, ears to hear your voice and your silence, hands to hold your presence and your absence, and faith to trust your unchanging nature in all seasons.”

—ELISA MORGAN

THE PHONE RANG IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT. I SQUINTED IN THE direction of the alarm clock as Gene reached for the receiver. It was 12:35 A.M. Who would be calling at this hour? Listening to my husband, I instantly knew he was receiving dreadful news.

Gene pulled the receiver back and haltingly choked out the words. “J.P. has been arrested.”

I was dumbfounded. What illegal act could my son possibly have done that would have resulted in an arrest? My husband continued speaking with tears spilling down his cheeks. “He’s been arrested for the first-degree murder of Douglas Miller Jr.”

My feet hit the floor as I tried to get out of bed, but my legs were incapable of holding my weight. I slumped to all fours. Nausea swept over me. I began crawling toward the bathroom where I could throw up, but everything was in slow motion. I had never before experienced shock. No strength. Wave after wave of nausea. Dizziness. I had to remind myself to breathe.

Thoughts began swirling in my head. *This must be a mistake. Or a cruel joke. Perhaps it's a case of mistaken identity. Maybe I'm living inside a horrific dream. Surely this news is not true. Someone is playing a perverse game. My son is not capable of taking the life of another human being, much less a premeditated act of such violence. This is not happening. My son is a dynamic Christian. He's a graduate of the United States Naval Academy. He defends American citizens; he doesn't destroy them. I will go back to sleep and wake up in reality.*

Our daughter-in-law, April, was still on the phone, and through hysterical sobs of her own, she verified that she had just received a call from Jason at a jail in downtown Orlando, Florida, and he had been arrested for the murder of her ex-husband. Gene tried to calm her while simultaneously dealing with his own raw emotions. We were filled with incredulous thoughts. *How? Why? What really happened? What was Jason doing in Orlando, a six-and-a-half-hour drive from his home in Panama City? Was it an accident? Was it self-defense?*

The next few hours were a blur of tears, panic, fear, and erratic, meaningless activity. It was after 1:00 A.M. when Gene finished the conversation with April. Still on my haunches on the floor, I called the Orlando jail to see if anyone named Jason Kent had been brought to the facility. The woman on the end of the phone line was rude and irritated; her speech was slurred. "Lady, we ain't got nobody by that name, Jason Kent, in here. Your son ain't here."

For a few brief moments hope returned. *It was a mistake. Our son had not been arrested. Jason was okay and we would be okay. But within an hour, another call confirmed our worst fears. Jason Paul Kent, our only child, son of my womb, was locked up at the Thirty-Third Street facility in Orlando. And he was being held without bond on the worst felony charge possible—first-degree murder.*

Florida is a death-penalty state. My mind flashed to the documentary I had seen the week before, giving the blow-by-blow account of an inmate on death row. *Would my son end up in the electric chair?* I choked out a fresh sob.

As the next few hours crawled by, Gene and I held each other and wept. Two parents in the grip of a nightmare. A mom and a dad who loved their child deeply. A child who had been a joy to raise. A focused, disciplined, compassionate, dynamic, encouraging young man who wanted to live for things that mattered. A young adult who had dedicated himself to serving his God and his

country through military service in the U.S. Navy. But that day the unthinkable roared into our lives. Without warning our dreams for our only child came crashing down in a thousand broken pieces. Our whole world felt shattered.

DESPERATE PARENTS

Throughout the wee hours of that morning, Gene and I watched the clock as darkness slowly turned to dawn. I had always taught other people to pray when they were in trouble. It was easy to tell somebody else what to do during a crisis, but living through our own unspeakable situation was different. I am a woman who takes action. I am a researcher, a public speaker, a leader in my community. Surely there was something I could *do* to fix this horrible problem. But I didn't know where to begin.

My mind recalled a verse from the book of James:

If you don't know what you're doing, pray to the Father. He loves to help. You'll get his help, and won't be condescended to when you ask for it. Ask boldly, believingly, without a second thought. People who "worry their prayers" are like wind-whipped waves.¹

Gene and I didn't do formal prayers that morning. We did wailing, pleading, moaning prayers. "God, please protect and comfort our son. God, please send Your angels to console the family of Douglas Miller. Please put Your arms around April, Chelsea, and Hannah (our granddaughters). God, *please* help us to know what to do and who to call. We are *desperate* for wisdom. We need You. *Please*."

Looking back, I believe our prayers were more like "wind-whipped waves" than bold, believing prayers. We were begging God for assistance. We had never felt so needy in our lives. We alternately burst into sobs and clung to each other, followed by intermittent list making. Relatives needed to be notified, and action steps had to be taken. We needed to see our son. If this had really happened, then J.P. needed his parents. He also needed an attorney. We needed the best legal counsel available, and we didn't know where to go for help.

I quickly discovered that a person who is in shock cannot think beyond the

moment. I could only do one thing at a time, and for the next several hours we did “the next thing” one item at a time. At sunrise Gene called the only pastor we knew in the Orlando area, Dr. Joel Hunter of Northland Community Church (where J.P. and April had first met, followed by a whirlwind romance). Gene asked Joel if he knew of any outstanding criminal defense attorneys in central Florida. Joel assured us he would call back as soon as he got the advice of people he trusted.

Our next call was to our brother-in-law and lifelong friend, Graydon Dimkoff, a family court judge in western Michigan. We hoped that my sister Jennie’s husband might be able to guide us to a resource that would lead to a competent attorney. Within an hour the pastor in Florida and the judge in Michigan returned calls to us with the identical recommendation for a criminal defense attorney. Gene and I believed this was a direct answer to prayer. Before 10:00 A.M., attorney Bill Barnett had agreed to take Jason’s case.

With the assurance of legal counsel, we were also informed of the fee for this service—a sum much larger than we could have imagined. We needed to empty the savings account, cash in retirement funds, and figure out a way to give our son the best legal defense possible.

Our crisis was only hours old, and on the surface we were moving forward with decisions that were difficult, necessary, and important. But inside our souls we were curling up in the fetal position and wishing to die. I wailed, “God! This is too big for me. I cannot walk this road. Please, take me home to be with You right now. God, *please* . . . I don’t know how to live through this.”

But even as I uttered that prayer, I knew my son needed me more now than he ever had before. He was locked up in a maximum-security jail with more than four thousand other prisoners. We could not telephone him and had no way of knowing what his physical and mental condition was. As my thoughts hovered over all of the frightening possibilities of debilitating harm Jason faced in his current circumstances, my heart started palpitating and my breathing was labored.

As night turned to morning, I was in too much of an emotional upheaval to make the necessary calls to relatives. Gene carefully made a list of people who needed to be contacted before they got their information from a newspaper or

from a stranger, and one by one he began making the calls. First, he asked Graydon and Jennie to tell my parents in person. They live in the same town on the other side of Michigan from where we lived. We feared that one or both of Jason's grandparents might have heart attacks when they received the news. J.P. is the oldest grandchild in the family and deeply loved and respected by my mother and dad.

Following my sister and brother-in-law's visit to their home with the devastating news, Mom and Dad called us. The exact wording of our conversation is a blur, but one thing about that call stands out: We sobbed together over the phone. Before the conversation was concluded, my parents assured me of their love for us and for J.P., and then my father prayed for all of us. Dad is a semi-retired preacher, and his deep, resonant, pastoral voice was a comfort to my desperate and weary soul.

Jennie called later that morning, and once again I experienced the "fellowship of tears" with one of my four precious sisters. We are the oldest of our parents' six children, and even though I'm four years older than Jennie, our deep heart connection has long caused us to refer to ourselves as "twins born four years apart." When I picked up the receiver, Jennie's voice was such a comfort to me. Our children were as close as siblings, and Jennie loved Jason deeply.

"Oh, Jen," I stammered, "I don't know how to fix this. I don't know what to do next. I don't know where to go for help. I don't know how to help my boy."

I could hear her labored breathing between sobs as we held each other as closely as the telephone would allow.

Gene's mom called and cried with us over the phone too. Gene had asked his brother, David, to break the news to his mother and her husband, Bruce. Bruce has been Gene's stepfather for over three decades, and J.P. spent a lot of time with this set of grandparents during his growing-up years. He was their pride and joy, and they were in deep agony over this shocking report.

Gene's father is a man of few words, and after David broke the news to him, he called us and struggled through an emotional response. He ended the call by saying, "I love you, Son." I could see tears in Gene's eyes as he hung up the phone.

When it rang again, my best friend from high school, Jan Fleck, was on the

line. Jan and I have known each other since we were fourteen years old and remain close friends to this day. Both of us lead busy lives and we aren't in contact weekly, but she seems to have a "sixth sense" when I have a need for prayer. This time we hadn't communicated with each other for a couple of months, and when I picked up the phone, she asked immediately, "How are you?"

"Not very well," I sputtered. "How did you know to call me *today*? J.P. has been arrested for first-degree murder." She was not prepared to hear those shocking words, but she knew God had prompted her to call me. We were two redheads who had encouraged each other spiritually for several decades — kindred-heart sisters who prayed for each other regularly. She loved my son. I don't remember the rest of the conversation, but that morning I felt the power of knowing that a friend was weeping with me. I knew I was not alone.

Later that day, Dr. Joel Hunter became Jason's first visitor at the Orange County Jail. Immediately afterward Pastor Joel called us and said that our son was a broken young man, still stunned by the ramifications of his actions. Joel went on to say that they had gripped each other's hands tightly and he had prayed with J.P.

Intermittently throughout that interminable day, denial kicked in and I once again believed I was living inside a grotesque nightmare. Several hours later, however, a collect phone call brought all denial to a stunned halt.

"Mom and Dad?" Our son's voice was soft, and I sensed his broken and crushed spirit.

"J.P., are you okay?" we asked, almost simultaneously. We were so grateful to hear his voice.

"I'm all right." I sensed my son's feeling of being unworthy to voice any concern for himself and his circumstances in light of what had transpired the day before.

For at least a full minute there were no words — just shared tears between a father, a mother, and their only child.

"J.P., we love you and we are here for you," I assured him through intense emotions. "We will always love you. You are not alone."

Gene added, "We've hired an attorney for you who has been highly recommended to us."

“Thank you, Mom and Dad.”

We prayed over the phone for J.P.’s safety, for his mental and emotional state, for the family of Douglas Miller Jr., for wisdom to know what actions to take, and for God to help us. The call was terminated abruptly by the cutoff of the digitized telephone system at the jail that regulates the length of all inmates’ calls.

LIVING *on the* EDGE of REALITY

The next day I had a long-awaited appointment for my annual gynecological exam. I vacillated about whether or not to go. I was getting nothing done at home. Only a handful of people knew about our circumstances, and I needed to have a prescription filled. I decided to go.

The waiting room at the doctor’s office was filled with women and children who were happily laughing and interacting with each other. A very pregnant mother tried to balance a two-year-old on her lap, and she flashed a smile in my direction. Another woman was paying her bill at the counter. Others were watching a soap opera on the television in the waiting area.

I felt like I was sitting on the edge of the real world, but the feeling was otherworldly — like I was an observer, not a participant, in what was going on around me. Countless thoughts somersaulted wildly in my mind. *How can the people in this room act so normal when my entire life is falling apart? I wonder if they can see the agony on my face when they look at me. I pray that none of my friends walk through the entrance, because I will fall apart if I have to face them. I’m sure God doesn’t love me, and I don’t think I love Him either. I hate what I’m experiencing. My son used to be as adorable as the two-year-old on that mommy’s lap. How does a child go from that level of innocence to taking the life of someone else? I shouldn’t be here. I should have stayed at home.*

Suddenly my name was called and I was ushered into the examining room. I quickly donned the paper gown women wear for the dreaded Pap smear. I was sitting at the end of the examining table when the nurse reappeared. “Are you ready for the doctor?” Before I could answer, she spoke again: “Are you okay?” I burst into tears. I *wasn’t* okay. I wasn’t even *close* to being okay, but it felt good to be near a compassionate person, even though the nurse didn’t know the real reason behind

my tears. She walked over to the table and put an affirming hand on my shoulder. Leaning closer, she said, “The exam won’t be that painful.”

The moment suddenly felt even more surreal and bizarre. For the first time in forty-eight hours I laughed out loud. It was only one of many times when “black humor” would strike me at the oddest moments. The nurse thought my anxiety was induced by my fear of the gynecological exam. If she only knew the *real* source of my distress! I felt deep sadness for my son and for the family of the son who was now dead. I felt betrayed by God and helpless to change anything. Life could never be the same again — and I had been in this strange, distorted facsimile of reality for only two days.

Gene began to chronicle the devastation in his journal.

October 25 — We received the news that J.P. was arrested. Cried.

Found an attorney.

October 26 — Coped poorly. Cried. I am so afraid for my son.

October 27 — Carol and I go through the motions of being alive, but inside we are dying.

In my own journal the next day, I wrote:

Laurie (my assistant) brought a blood pressure cuff to the house, and Gene and I took our blood pressure readings. For the third time this week mine was higher than it normally is. I suddenly blurted out, “I am the mother of a murderer.” My sobs could not be stifled.

The love poured out from family and friends is beyond description.

Gene and I hold each other, weep, and feel each other’s pain during unusual moments each day. When one is strong, it seems the other is weak.

The phone does not stop ringing.

WRESTLING *with the* ENEMY

Jason Kent loved people, and he was committed to Christ. He had a stellar record in high school, lettered in sports, and was president of the National Honor

Society. In addition to volunteering with Habitat for Humanity, he mentored younger students, and he gave blood every time the Red Cross was in need. He earned a black belt in karate and was a leader in his church youth group. He was a typical teenager and young adult, but he was easy to raise. He never caused us to have serious concerns regarding any inappropriate behavior: He did not get caught up in drugs, alcohol, or hanging out with “the wrong crowd.” As a student in the United States Naval Academy at Annapolis, Maryland, he studied hard and earned good grades. He was a disciplined person, physically and mentally. He joined the sailing team and set his sights on serving his country as a Navy Seal.

If the allegations of what happened on October 24, 1999, were true, then we instinctively assumed that our son had snapped — emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. How could it be that *our son* had stooped to this act of violence? For him to get to the place of being able to pull the trigger and kill a man, something was going on in his head that Gene and I could not see. We were desperately sad we did not see warning signs that might have allowed us to intervene. We didn’t know what had happened inside our son’s brain, but we knew that there was nothing about his crime that was justifiable.

My mind flashed to the invisible world, and I could envision Satan laughing with a cadre of demons. They were having fun, and in between cackles several of them looked in my direction as the leader pointed at me and said, “Let’s wipe her out spiritually and emotionally. Let’s put a guilt trip on that mother that will make her give up on God. We’ll put such financial and personal stress in the lives of the Kents that they’ll give up on their faith.” I could hear the creatures jeering in the background. And I sobbed.

The Enemy quickly seized the opportune moment and delivered his lies to my heart. In my wounded state of mind, all of the untruths were entirely believable.

Lie #1: I must have done something wrong as a parent or this wouldn’t have happened.

Lie #2: If I had read my Bible more consistently, prayed more intensely, and stayed closer to God, I could have prevented this terrible thing from taking place.

Lie #3: If I had been less busy, I could have fixed the problem before it got out of hand.

Lie #4: If I were a more perfect Christian, God would protect my family and me from such hurtful circumstances.

As I struggled to make it through the next several hours, the lies hovered over my mind like vultures as the Enemy tried to control my emotions. Feeling panic, shame, and guilt, I went from window to window and closed the blinds. I envisioned reporters at the door with a multitude of questions that my husband and I couldn't answer.

One of many desperate scribbles in my journal during that time reflects my anguish:

When your only offspring commits a murder, you can't think of yourself as "a good parent." Will Gene and I ever stop wondering what we could have done differently in our parenting that would have prohibited our son from taking the life of another human being? We did the best we knew how to do. Obviously, it wasn't good enough. Does that mean we were bad parents? Who knows? Definitely, we should have been better parents.

While I was feeling lost at sea in a tidal wave of fear and despair, Gene found a life preserver by going to the Word of God seeking wisdom and solace. In his journal he wrote about the day he picked up his Bible for the first time since the appalling news smashed our world:

I started reading where I had left off last week. I'm in Genesis 28 where Jacob falls into a dream and sees a ladder. The bottom of the ladder is resting on earth, but the top reaches to heaven and God's angels are going up and down on the ladder. Jacob awakens, more alert than he's ever been, and he realizes, perhaps for the first time, that there is much more going on in the visible and in the invisible world than he has been aware of before. "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it."²

I showed Carol my “find,” and we wept together, realizing that in the middle of this earthquake in our lives, we have been very unaware of God’s presence, but that doesn’t mean He isn’t here. We were encouraged to know that Jacob felt the same way.

The image of the ladder between earth and heaven reminds us that there is activity going on in the unseen world. Have the demons been fighting to destroy our family? Have they been in strategy meetings in the invisible world, figuring out how to take us out — starting with our son, assuming the “trickle-down impact” will tempt us to quit serving Jesus?

One of my favorite visual images of the apostle Peter comes from John 6. People had been following Jesus out of curiosity and because they got free food and saw some eye-popping miracles. But then Jesus began explaining the real reason He was on earth — to reconcile us to His Father in heaven — and His bizarre message about people needing to eat His flesh and drink His blood in order to have eternal life was incomprehensible and offensive to most. Many of His followers said, “This is tough teaching, too tough to swallow.”³ When Jesus added that no one was capable of following Him unless the Father willed it, many disciples deserted Him for good.

Jesus then turned to the twelve handpicked apostles and asked, “Do you also want to leave?”⁴ Peter’s response has been my key question while walking through this personal journey of unspeakable pain and deep grief. It fills me with sincere respect and with brotherly affection for the irrepressible Peter, the sanguine disciple who often acted without thinking. He answered Jesus’ query with his own heartfelt question: “Master, to whom would we go? You have the words of real life, eternal life. We’ve already committed ourselves, confident that you are the Holy One of God.”⁵

I agonized over the overwhelming journey ahead of us — Jason’s current incarceration and our desperate fears for his safety, along with his upcoming trial. I grieved over the needs of his wife and stepdaughters — Chelsea was seven then; Hannah four. There were monumental legal fees and a great need to continue

being active in ministry so the bills could be paid. That need for economic stability was combined with the desire to curl up in the fetal position and disappear, which was only intensified by the haunting question, *If people in my audiences knew I was the mother of a murderer, would they even want me to be their speaker?*

I drew comfort from Peter. I could almost see his furrowed brow and the questioning look on his face. I could feel the heaviness of his potential loss. I understood the sincerity of his simple response when he said, “Master, to whom would we go?” *Where else did I have to turn in this dark hour?*

I found myself sometimes angry, often hurt, always broken—but the bottom line of my heart was this: *Lord, where would I go if I turned away from You? If I didn't have You, I would have nothing. I have nowhere to turn, so while I'm pounding Your chest with my hurt, pain, and anger, please know that I am still facing You, still leaning into the warmth of Your embrace, not sure I can trust You, but knowing You are all I have. If I left You, I would be completely aimless and lost. So while I feel devastated by what You have allowed to happen, I still cannot resist pressing into the comfort of Your strong arms. I am angry that I am not resisting You more, because I know You could have stopped this thing from happening—but I have nowhere else to go.*

Gene continued our first week's chronicle:

Carol and I both feel more empowered because we've gotten a small mental picture of the battle that is going on around us. We are in pain, but we are not giving up. We are engaging in this battle. We will choose life. We will choose hope.

But first we got mad. In fact, I had an all-out temper tantrum with Satan. The irony of the situation plagued me. *Could the Enemy have taken my son's strongest attribute—his sense of righteousness—and twisted it into making him believe he was destroying evil?* The more I contemplated, the angrier I got. *Did Satan, in his destructive, conniving way, also take a look at my ministry as a writer and a Christian public speaker and say, “Let's wipe out the parents along with the kid. If I can get to the kid, the parents will be immobilized too?”*

I got so angry, I screamed out loud, “Satan, you can come after me, but don't put a finger on my child! I command you, in the name of Jesus Christ and His shed blood on the cross, to leave Jason Kent alone. Get away from him! You are

despicable and disgusting! You are a loser! You are a DONE DEAL! You have only a little while longer to leave your mark and I know the end of your story! We win! You lose! Leave my family alone!”

My anger against the real Enemy felt empowering. It helped me to pray with passion. I finally had a good reason for being on all fours pounding the floor!

When we fully understand that we are in a spiritual battle, that the world is not our home, just a “stopping-off” place, we can begin to get excited about having a short time to engage in the battle raging around us. The Enemy wants us to waste our time generating anger toward others, ruminating over personal betrayals and over injustices due to sickness, accidents, and evil. He wants to destroy our ability to function productively and to disengage us from inspiring others to be Christ followers. He wants us to give up and die or to control everything around us in such a tight-fisted manner that we’re tied up in ridiculous knots.

The most freeing thing I did in the hours following the devastating blow at 12:35 A.M. was to activate my brain and decide that I would *not* let the Enemy win this round. I *would* choose hope. I *would* choose faith in unthinkable circumstances. If I practiced “eternity thinking,” I could even glimpse beyond the end of my son’s life. I could see further than the suffering of this situation with all of its losses.

I wrote to my family that night: “Included in this walk through the valley of what feels like death is an awareness of His presence I have never experienced before. I can almost hear the sound of angel wings.”

THE POWER of UNTHINKABLE CIRCUMSTANCES

Looking back on the beginning of our crisis, I am now able to see how much power is released when we are in the middle of a totally unexpected situation that cannot be reversed. As days became weeks and weeks became months, Gene and I began to uncover the hidden treasure in our unthinkable circumstances.

- *We realized the world is in a mess.* In fact, we experienced as never before what it feels like to live in a chaotic, fallen world. Horrible things

happen to people. Life-altering changes come into the lives of good Christian people who are trying their best to be Christ followers and point others to the faith.

- *We asked for help.* Being in a situation that was totally out of our control forced us to seek wise counsel. It made us listen to advice and evaluate alternatives. Instead of following our gut feelings and making educated guesses, we sought assistance. This was a new response for me, because even though I had been a Christian for forty-five years, my natural tendency was not to depend on others, not even on my sisters and brothers in Christ. I was used to being the “strong” one, the self-sufficient one. I had a lot to learn about being “poor in spirit.”
- *We recognized that everything trivial was just that—trivial.* Spilling a full cup of coffee on white carpeting was not a big deal. Running out of ink in the printer when an important letter had to be in the mail immediately was not a huge issue. The great debate over the new flooring in the church sanctuary was not a matter worthy of gigantic amounts of emotional energy. Compared to the “elephant” in our lives, everything else was less significant. It felt good to realize that “sweating the small stuff” was a ridiculous waste of time and energy. Having a measuring stick in our lives that helped us understand the difference between what was inconsequential and what was important proved to be freeing.
- *We admitted that our sense of control was an illusion.* I am a firstborn of six preacher’s kids and grew up in a home where my father always said, “The oldest child in the house at any given time gets to be the boss.” With my background as the chief babysitter for four younger sisters and a younger brother, I was very used to being in charge, and control came naturally to me. I was a people pleaser and loved to do things perfectly and to be known as a competent person who “got the job done well.” I was obsessive-compulsive about following through with my personal goals and would often work on projects for ridiculously long hours, having little respect for getting sleep or setting realistic expectations of my limits. Much of the time, I felt

- like there was nothing I couldn't "handle" or "manage." I was wrong.
- *We were humbled as never before.* Often my goals (and Gene's, too) were spiritual in nature, which probably made us even more frustrated when we faced this huge tragedy with our son and hoped that God would be more direct with His answers to our questions. I realized that there was a part of me that thought, *Don't I deserve better than this after all I've done for the Lord? I love Him so much; why is He letting me be crushed like this?* I learned quickly that I wasn't unique and that pain is pain. And I needed comfort, like a baby.
 - *We had to affirm or reject our faith.* For years I had been telling audiences that God is good and He is trustworthy. "No matter what happens to you, God has your best interests in mind," I preached. "He will never walk away from you. He is your advocate. He is your provider. He is your victor."

During the early days of our crisis, I wondered about *all* of this. Where was God on the Sunday afternoon when my son shot Douglas Miller Jr.? Was God busy with affairs in the Middle East that day? Was He preoccupied with the issue of international terrorism? Was He distracted by a worldwide crisis? I agonized, "God, since You are omnipresent, why didn't You give Jason a flat tire that would have prevented him from entering that parking lot? Lord, why didn't You make his vehicle break down between Panama City and Orlando? You had six-and-a-half hours! Why didn't You *stop* this awful thing from happening?"

Gene and I were reeling from the shock and the loss of our son's future, and we were also grieving for the unspeakable loss the Miller family was experiencing. In a deeply personal way we realized that when unthinkable circumstances enter your life, there comes a point when you either stand by what you believe or you walk away from it. Over time, we chose the powerful reaffirmation of our foundational posture in the universe: God was God and we were not. We were utterly dependent on Him, and if we were to continue living with a sense of purpose and passion, we knew that our only hope was in His infinite mercy and His unshakable plan for redemption regardless of sin, sorrow, and shame.

God's Power in *Your* Circumstances

I sincerely hope that nothing has happened to you as horrible as learning that your child has committed murder. But with unthinkable circumstances, comparison is irrelevant. Is what happened in my family worse or better than learning that your daughter has a terminal illness or that your spouse is leaving you or that a disability will change the course of your plans and dreams? It doesn't matter. What matters is, *What will you do in response?* Will you curl up in that alluring fetal position or will you struggle on to find God, hope, purpose, and passion amid your circumstances?

1. "Unthinkable circumstances" look different for each individual. In your own experience, current or past, what are some of the challenging circumstances you've encountered, and what were the feelings you experienced as a result? What are some of the ways you have expressed and dealt with those feelings—either constructively or destructively?
2. What's going on in your prayers these days? Look back through this chapter and notice that begging prayers—the "wind-whipped waves" that James urges us to get past—are entirely normal when we're in shock and pain. Notice the ups and downs of my prayer life during this early stage. If your prayers are a "mess," take heart. Is there anything in what I said to God that you'd like to say to Him? Why not write a heartfelt prayer to God? Writing helps me like nothing else when my thoughts are in a jumble.
3. Are you asking for help from other people? If not, what keeps you from asking? (Embarrassment and self-reliance are possibilities.) Carefully consider what might benefit you most right now (and at each stage of your journey through unthinkable circumstances): Professional advice? A shoulder to cry on (literally)? Help running errands or keeping your household or business in order? A weekend away? Financial support? Whom can you ask to help you get what you need?

4. Do you tend, like me, to try to keep your world under your control? If so, what are some of your typical ways of trying to achieve that feeling of personal power? Why might it be good (rather than horrible) to accept that such control is an illusion?
5. Think about the idea of living in a chaotic, fallen world where bad things happen. Does that idea drive you toward God or away? I wrote, “In a deeply personal way we realized that when unthinkable circumstances enter your life, there comes a point when you either stand by what you believe or you walk away from it.” Where are you right now on this choice about standing or walking away?
6. Discovering the power and the invaluable lessons found in unthinkable circumstances usually takes a great deal of time. If you can already articulate some of the things you’ve learned and ways you’ve grown, write them down as a testament to God’s faithfulness even amid devastation and sorrow. If you have no idea what your circumstances are telling you, gently let yourself “off the hook” and *accept* that your experience is a *process*.

INTRODUCTION: HOW TO USE THIS STUDY GUIDE

When God seems the most absent, He is the most present.

If you are reading this study guide, then most likely you are facing, have faced, or are close to someone who is facing unthinkable circumstances. Each person's "Isaac experience" may look different. Perhaps a loved one is facing a terminal disease, or your spouse is leaving you, or you are coping with a miscarriage or unemployment.

Whatever your Isaac experience is, you are faced with a choice. *What will you do in response?*

How do you survive each day? How do you simply "do the next thing"? But most of all, what will be your response to God? When unthinkable circumstances enter your life, there comes a point when you either stand by what you believe or walk away from it. Will you curl up in the alluring fetal position, or will you struggle on to find God, hope, purpose, and passion amid your circumstances?

This study guide will help you along in your journey of answering these questions — of struggling through the "whys" while still leaning into God as your comfort.

Each chapter of this study guide has two parts. The first is for individual reflection and journaling, for you to process through your thoughts, questions, prayers, and response. The second part is for you to go through with a small group that is either reading the book with you or watching the *When I Lay My Isaac Down* DVD together.

If you are reading the book together with a small group, complete the individual reflection section before each meeting. If you are watching the DVD together rather than reading the book, you can complete the individual reflection section after each meeting to go deeper.

You'll find extra lines in the group discussion section where you can jot down ideas about specific things you would like to share with your small group, or you can use that space to take notes on helpful comments made by your group members.

If your group is large, you'll want to break into groups of about four to give everyone a chance to speak and feel comfortable being open.

Create an atmosphere of trust and safety within your group as you discuss these difficult questions. Agree not to discuss what other people have shared outside of the group, and commit to be Stretcher Bearers for one another, lifting one another up in prayer and support.

May God use this study guide to comfort you, challenge you, and bring you closer to Him. May He use it in your life to cement an unshakable faith even amid unthinkable circumstances.

AN UNEXPECTED JOURNEY

The Power of Unthinkable Circumstances

There are moments when God makes utter and complete sense to us, and then suddenly, life changes and he seems a foreign remnant of a childhood force-fed faith. . . . “[Lord], give us eyes to see your coming and going, ears to hear your voice and your silence, hands to hold your presence and your absence, and faith to trust your unchanging nature in all seasons.”

—ELISA MORGAN

ON YOUR OWN: INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION

- I. “Unthinkable circumstances” — circumstances that derail our carefully thought-out plans for our future — look different for each individual. In your own experience, current or past, what would you consider your “Isaac experience”?

2. When tragedy strikes, we face a number of reactions: shock, paralysis, dizziness, anger. Carol found herself “sometimes angry, often hurt, always broken.” What were some of your initial reactions to your situation? Which of those were constructive, and which were destructive?

CONSTRUCTIVE REACTIONS	DESTRUCTIVE REACTIONS

3. One of our first reactions when we face tragedy is to cry out to God, though often what we’re feeling “words cannot express.”

In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through inward groans (Romans 8:26).

Have you ever experienced this? How does it comfort you to know that the Spirit is with you, interceding on your behalf?

4. Write here your current prayer to God. Maybe you're confused, angry, tired, or even hopeful. Maybe you need His comfort or strength. Or maybe you need the Spirit to intercede for you.

5. One of Satan's tricks is to whisper lies in our ears that go straight to our hearts and cause us to doubt God and truth. They might be that God doesn't love you or that you should have been a better Christian or even that as a good Christian you shouldn't have to suffer. What three lies are you tempted to listen to because of your circumstances?

Lie #1 _____

Lie #2 _____

Lie #3 _____

Summing it all up, friends, I'd say you'll do best by filling your minds and meditating on things true, noble, reputable, authentic, compelling, gracious — the best, not the worst; the beautiful, not the ugly; things to praise, not things to curse (Philippians 4:8, MSG).

The lies Satan whispers into our ears are “the worst” and “the ugly.” In Philippians, Paul told us to not fill our minds with the worst but to meditate “on things true.” Replace the three lies you wrote with truth. What truth from the Bible can you replace these lies with?

Truth #1 _____

Truth #2 _____

Truth #3 _____

If you need some help finding truth to cling to in Scripture, try starting with these verses: Isaiah 49:14-16 (God has not forgotten you); Jeremiah 31:3 (God loves us with an everlasting love); Psalm 103:12 (God has removed our transgressions from us); Daniel 9:9 (God is merciful and forgiving); Psalm 34:18 (God is close to you when you are brokenhearted); 2 Corinthians 1:3-4 (God is your Comforter).

6. How can you actively choose to replace the lies you wrote with the truth of Scripture? Write here some practical and active ways you'll choose to meditate on the truth.

as a testament to God's faithfulness even amid devastation and sorrow. (If you have no idea what your circumstances are telling you, gently let yourself "off the hook" and accept that your experience is a process.)

GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Before launching into your discussion, turn to the person sitting next to you and answer this question in one or two sentences: *What is one thing on your mind that could distract you from hearing what God wants to say to you today?*

- I. We each have faced our own unthinkable circumstances. Share with one another an "Isaac experience" from your past or one you are facing now. What were some of your reactions that were constructive and not so constructive? (Sharing stories can take a lot of time. Share about your experience briefly, giving everyone who wishes to share a chance.)

2. Read James 1:2-8 out loud together:

Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you. But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do.

How have your trials developed your perseverance, maturity, and wisdom?

3. Which of James's instructions are hard for you? What's hard about them?

4. It's completely normal in times of extreme trial for our prayers to be "wind-whipped." How would you describe your prayer life right now?

0	1	2	3	4	5
almost nonexistent		pretty windblown		clear, full of faith	

5. Satan tried to defeat Carol by making her believe lies, such as she was a bad parent or could have prevented the tragedy if she were a perfect Christian. What lies have you been tempted to believe in your situation?

6. Is there a particular verse you cling to that is your life preserver of truth when you hear these lies?

7. Read Philippians 4:8 together:

Summing it all up, friends, I'd say you'll do best by filling your minds and meditating on things true, noble, reputable, authentic, compelling, gracious — the best, not the worst; the beautiful, not the ugly; things to praise, not things to curse. (MSG)

What are some practical ways that you can actively fill up your mind with the truth of Scripture, replacing Satan's lies?

8. Is your situation driving you toward God or away from Him? Have you decided to stick with Him, or do you still feel unsure about God and whether you can trust Him?

9. In what way do you need support from others right now, and how can you pray for one another?