

BALM FOR BROKEN HEARTS

Frank A. James

Pain Is Real

Midnight, it is said, is the axis linking the mundane world with the spirit world and is associated with chaos, death and mystery. It is the moment of dark visitations and so it was for me in December 2006. At first, the drowsiness of interrupted sleep prevented me from grasping the full meaning of the words that were coming through the phone. It took a minute or two for me to realize my little brother was trapped in a snow cave on Mt. Hood and a relentless blizzard prevented rescue.

The mountain proved to be Kelly's final adventure. Losing my brother on Mt. Hood was a stark reminder that the pain of bereavement is real. None of us is immune to the heartaches and sorrows that inhabit this misbegotten world. Even though I am a preacher, a professor of theology and the president of a theological seminary, I have found it incredibly difficult to cope with my brother's death. It is one thing to talk about death in the abstract—or someone else's death or loss—it is entirely another thing to talk about the death of someone you love very much. The truth of the matter is that losing a loved one hurts deep down in your soul.

Knowing that Kelly was gone was hard enough, but telling the rest of the family transcended every previous emotion I had ever experienced. Karen, the children, our mother and the three brothers and sister—took the news hard. I have never heard weeping like I heard that night. The Bible sometimes refers to “wailing” as an especially awful kind of weeping. That is what I heard that night—wailing. I hope I never hear that sound again.

Death is ugly and we cannot, indeed should not, try to make it palatable or explain it away with pious platitudes. Death is a cruel, ugly, brutal and fearsome companion in this world. It is an intruder and a thief. I lament the loss of my brother because our living relationship has been disconnected by death. Kelly is not returning my calls. No one calls me “Frankie baby.” I sometimes feel as if I am stumbling in the dark reaching out to grasp him, to converse with him—but he is not there.

We are created for life not death. Kelly had a shameless zest for living life to the fullest. When death strikes suddenly from the shadows or claws at us mercilessly until the last breath, those left behind experience a kind of dizzy disorientation. Somehow we know in our hearts that it is not supposed to be this way.

God Does Not Waste Pain

Our family is still trying to make sense of Kelly’s death. The numbness and disorientation remain. Through the emotional stupor, one thing has taken firm shape in my mind, namely, the necessity to be honest with myself and with God.

Like others who face tragedy, we could not suppress the big question: Where was God when Kelly was freezing to death on Mt. Hood? The issue, it seems to me, is not whether we should ask such questions, but how we ask it. One can ask the big question in a fit of rage, shaking one's fist at God. Many of us, if we are honest, have done that. But once the primal anger settles to a low boil, we can, and I would submit should, ask the question again.

I am not suggesting that mere mortals can stand in judgment of God or call Him to account. God does not report to me. But an honest question posed from a broken heart is to my mind a good and righteous thing.

To ask this kind of anguished question is an act of faith. It presupposes a genuine relationship in which the creature can actually engage the Creator. If God is my Father, can't I humbly ask why He did not come to Kelly's rescue? Not to ask this question—and other hard questions—would be a failure to take God seriously.

So, where was God? I don't know. I may never know. Perhaps the biggest challenge for my faith is to come to terms with what Martin Luther called the hiddenness of God (*Deus absconditus*). Contemporary Christians do not like to admit God sometimes hides from us. But King David was unafraid to ask: "*Why do you stand afar off, O Lord? Why do you hide Yourself in times of trouble?*" (Ps 10:1).

As far as I know, God never answered David. However, one of the most astonishing and perplexing things about David's unanswered question was not that he posed such questions, but that God made the unanswered question a part of Israel's worship for generations and then recorded it for all humanity to see. It boggles my mind to imagine the people of Israel singing a chorus of "*Why do you hide Yourself in times of trouble?*" every year, century after century, millennium after millennium. These are gut-wrenching questions and I suspect they were often sung with tears.

I am still trying to make sense of Kelly's death. I don't know why God did not rescue Kelly from the cold grip of the mountain. What I do know is that my relationship with God has entered into another dimension—more honest and more intimate.

I am reminded of something my friend and author, Jerry Bridges, wrote in his book *Trusting God Even When Life Hurts*. Jerry wrote: "*God Never Wastes Pain.*" I believe that. Jerry wrote those weighty words as his wife was dying of cancer. It is in the midst of suffering that something mysterious happens—we are drawn to God. Somehow we learn to trust God, even when we are hurting and even when we do not understand.

The Gravitational Pull of God

Grief is a dreadful predator. Some who have lost loved ones tell me one never completely escapes it. Strangely, there is a part of me that does not want the grief to stop, because the

grief itself is a kind of spiritual connection to Kelly. But there is another part of me that is weary of carrying the burden of a heavy heart.

In the midst of our family tragedy, I have made a peculiar discovery. One might think that grief would lead to bitterness against God. In our nightmare, we not only prayed privately but we had the opportunity to publicly declare our faith and confidence in God on CNN and yet Kelly never came home.

There is disappointment, sadness and confusion, but oddly, there is no deep-seated bitterness. Instead, I find myself drawn to God. He is more mysterious and complicated than I had thought, but I can't seem to shake loose from Him. There seems to be a kind of gravitational pull toward God.

I am not the first to notice this gravitational pull in the midst of pain and suffering. In Psalm 13, David calls out in anguish to God: *"How long O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?"* (Ps 13:1). A few verses later, the same distressed David is declaring: *"But I trust in your unfailing love"* (Ps 13:5). Even as he pleads with God to come to his rescue, David finds himself inexorably drawn to Him.

It is on the surface paradoxical that David would seek to embrace a God who hides Himself when he needs Him most. I sense that David had a different kind of relationship with God—one that many Christians do not understand. It is more honest and more mysterious than they have been led to believe. It is the kind of relationship where simplistic spiritual

formulas and insipid clichés have no place. There is a spiritual dynamic at work in David's relationship with God that combines brutal honesty with grasping faith. It is a relationship where disappointment can be juxtaposed with hope.

One of the profoundly difficult lessons learned is that amid all the spiritual consternation and wanderings under the shadow of death, God manifests Himself in our grief. He is somehow in the disappointment, the confusion and the raw emotions. This does not exactly make sense to me and I am not even sure I like it. But I have found that there is a divine gravity that pulls us toward God even when our hearts are broken.

Faith, Hope and Grief

Many Christians read the Nicene Creed with its marvelous stanza: "On the third day He rose again." They are familiar with the story of Christ's dead body being placed in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea on Friday but on Sunday it was full of glorious new life. By the other-worldly violation of natural laws, Jesus was again breathing and walking in and among his astonished disciples. One doubtful disciple even felt compelled to put his finger into Jesus' wound to convince himself that the crucified Jesus was indeed alive. It was hard to believe but there before them all Jesus stood. The tomb was empty; death had been defeated.

So what does the empty tomb of Jesus have to do with the snowy tomb of Kelly James? Everything. Kelly confessed as I do, and as Christians have for nearly seventeen hundred

years (since A.D. 325 when the Nicene Creed was written), that “We look for the resurrection of the dead.” Nicene Christians were not immune to the heartache of loss and grief. Over the centuries, and amid enough tears to fill an ocean, so many of us have had to bury our loved ones in tombs.

There is a profound connection between the empty tomb of Jesus and the snowy tomb of Kelly James. The empty tomb of Jesus was a promise that one day Kelly too will rise from his grave.

But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep...For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. (1 Cor. 15:20-22).

This glorious promise does not remove the grief of losing a beloved brother or even the disappointment with God. It does, however, deepen our faith in ways we never imagined; and in the midst of our despair, hope continues to poke through the heartache. Like beautiful sunbeams piercing through a cloudy day, they inevitably portend better weather is around the bend.

* * *

I have to look for cracks and crevices.
Don't tell me how God's mercy
Is as wide as the ocean, as deep as the sea.
I already believe it, but that infinite prospect
Gets farther away the more we mouth it.
I thank you for lamenting his absences—
His absence from marriages going mad,
Our sons dying young, from the inescapable
Terrors of history: Treblinka. Vietnam.
September Eleven. His visible absence
Makes it hard for us in our time
To celebrate his invisible Presence.
This must be why mystics and poets record
The slender incursions of splintered light,
Echoes, fragments, odd words and phrases
Like flashes through darkened hallways.
These stabs remind me that the proud
Portly old church is really only
That cut green slip grafted into a tiny nick
That merciful God himself slit into the stem
Of his chosen Judah. The thin and tenuous
Thread we hang by, so astonishing,
Is the metaphor I need at the shoreline
Of all those immeasurable oceans of love.

Rod Jellema