

Restored Lost Joy and Faith

1 Peter 5:10

And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you.

I want to tell you about the most impactful event of our lives that became the cornerstone of who we are.

We were in Brazil as missionaries. We were serving the Lord faithfully and loving what God was doing, seeing Him do great things. Our 12 year old daughter Aimee went with her girlfriends to cross the road to buy bread at a local store. In the process she was hit by a car, thrown through the air, and suffered massive brain injuries. I happened to be out of the country at the time. I was on route to Argentina. When I arrived in Argentina they gave me the news, desperate news. "Your daughter has been in an accident and she is not expected to live." I cannot possibly tell you the immense pain that brought to my heart.

Being a thousand miles away when your little one is in the moment of life and death is a living torment. It is like hanging between earth and heaven. Marilyn called me on the phone and she said, "Dick, you've got to get back here." I was paralyzed, I couldn't get back. There were no flights until the next day. There was no way to get back. That night was a sleepless night of prevailing prayer. I knelt before God unable to sleep calling on the name of the Lord. I used every principle in every Scripture, and every bit of faith I could muster to hang onto God for a miracle.

The next day I was able to catch the first flight out and got back to Brazil. I was met there by Steve Renicks, my colleague in ministry. We immediately went to the hospital and there I heard the diagnosis that Aimee was brain dead. The doctor told us that though her brain was dead her heart could keep beating for days or even weeks. He explained that soon we would have to decide to unplug the machines and let her body die. We went back home and struggled through that issue of turning off Aimee's life support system.

That night when all of us gathered in our room we prayed and put our hands on Andrew and little Angelica, and said, "Lord, we don't know what you want to do. We want you to heal Aimee, but if not, we don't want to be the ones to pull the plug. We ask you to stop her little heart and take her home, if that is your will."

That was about 11 o'clock at night. At one o'clock in the morning we got a call from the hospital saying Aimee's heart suddenly stopped beating. Aimee was in heaven that day.

I don't tell you that story because I like to tell it. I don't like to tell it at all. I'd like to erase it from my life, but it's there. It's a reality that all of us have to face that sometimes God says "no" to our prayer requests. Sometimes God says "no" when we cry out to him with everything that is in us. We begged and we pleaded and we got mighty men and women of prayer praying for us but God said, "No, I'm not going to answer that one, not the way you wanted."

I've written a book called *Restoring Shattered Faith* because my faith was shattered. My faith was shipwrecked one day in 1982 when our twelve year old daughter died in an accident while we were serving as missionaries in Brazil. It didn't shatter all at once. Adrenaline gets you through for a time. It shattered over a period of time. Looking back on those events of our daughter dying I began to wonder, where was God? Why didn't He answer? Why didn't He save our daughter? Why didn't He heal her? Why didn't He raise her from the dead? We hung onto our faith for two years after her death and continued to serve in Brazil.

Then my world fell apart. My health broke. I had chest pains and an ever increasing band squeezing my brain. At first the doctor thought I had a heart attack. After tests, he said there was nothing wrong with my physical heart. What was wrong was my broken heart that no one could fix. Marilyn and I knew I needed to get out from under the stress of Brazil and get some help. We stood in the kitchen talking about my feelings and Marilyn suggested it was time to go home. I said, "God called me to Brazil and I am not leaving unless they drag me out on a stretcher." That was almost the case. By the time we left I had collapsed from stress. I was on heavy antidepressant medications. I was so sick I hardly remember those last weeks in Brazil. I felt like I was living in a fog.

When we arrived home we met with the officials of our mission and they suggested, and then mandated, that I seek psychological counseling. I didn't want counseling. It was like hearing a diagnosis that I was crazy on top of everything else that happened.

This was two years after Aimee's death. My faith was gone. Life seemed unfair, hopeless, out-of-control. I was angry at God, but didn't know it. It began as disappointment with God, and then it grew to disillusionment with God and His promises. Life felt unreal. The world around me seemed an illusion. I continued to be on heavy medications unable to stay awake for more than a few hours at a time.

I started to see a counselor recommended by our mission. He was a former missionary and understood the stresses of missionary life and tragedies. He was located almost two hours drive from where we were living with Marilyn's parents. The drive was long and I was not well. The sessions were painful. I didn't like the counselor. I didn't want to be there. I hated having to go to a counselor.

Early on in our sessions Dr. Draper told me that he believed I would not stay in counseling. He knew I hated it and would find any excuse to get out of it. He said, "Dick, you will sabotage these sessions so you can stop coming and say it didn't work." I was insulted by that, but it was true. I was looking for a way out of counseling. It was expensive, too far away, and I didn't like the counselor.

I went home that day and told Marilyn what he said. We thought and prayed about it and knew that I really did need to talk to someone about my inner conflicts. We looked at our meager savings accrued during five years overseas and decided we would invest all of that to get this counseling. I took that \$1500 to Dr Draper and laid it on the table and asked, "How much counseling will this buy? I'm paying it all up front so I can't quit." He said, "It's enough, and I'll give you a discounted rate so that you are covered for a full year."

We started meeting three times per week, an hour each session. After a month we went to twice a week. Eventually, it would be once a week. I stayed with him for two years of counseling.

During those first months I still was not feeling well. I slept much of the time. One day I received a call from a church that had sponsored us as missionaries. We knew them fairly well. We had visited them before going to Brazil and on our furlough in 1982. They had sponsored our children as their "missionary kids." A friend of mine from college had been the pastor of that church. The head elder called to tell me that my friend Dave had left the church and they were looking for another pastor. He asked if I would consider being their pastor. I told him I didn't feel up to being anyone's pastor and didn't even know if I wanted to preach again. I told him he didn't know what I was going through and that I was unworthy to be a pastor.

How he responded made me cry. He said, "Pastor Dick, we know what you are going through and we want to minister to you as you minister to us." I made a few other excuses and told him he would have to go through the District Superintendent and the whole candidating process. He acknowledged that process but said he wanted me to know they already knew they wanted me to be their pastor.

I didn't want to go to Pitman to be their pastor but I consented to candidate. I was pretty well set on not going there. I did what I always do; I made a list of all the things the Lord would have to do in order to convince me I should go there. When the District Superintendent called to extend a unanimous call I checked my impossible list. God had answered every item on the list, except one. I wanted a fireplace. They did not have one, but we agreed to go there anyway.

Although I became the pastor of the Pitman Alliance Church I was still in bad shape emotionally and spiritually. God had broken his promises to me. I felt God's promises were not true any longer. He took our 12-year-old daughter in a horrible accident, though we cried to him, and perhaps thousands of people across Brazil and America prayed and interceded on our behalf, and God didn't answer. That was devastating.

Shortly after starting with the counselor I made a trip out to Michigan to my hometown. I remember being at the bottom of my well. I felt like I was as low as I could go. I couldn't lift myself out of that pit of despondency. I couldn't see my way clear for anything. It felt like all of God's promises were lies.

I remember driving into a McDonald's (I really had to be depressed to do that) to get my lunch and then parked beside the dumpster. I didn't want to see people. I didn't want to be out in the open. My heart was breaking. I sat in my car weeping bitterly and said, "Lord, I'm giving up on you. I'm giving up on everything that I believed and held dear because it's just not true anymore." My heart said, "Drive west young man. Drive west. Just get in the car and drive and don't stop. Leave your family. Leave everything behind and forget what's happened. Forget about God and start a new life." My heart was fully tempted to do that and it scared me.

In those moments as I sat there next to the dumpster I said, "Lord, I can't believe you anymore. Your promises are not true. It seems like everything I built my life on is bogus. It's wrong. It's incorrect. It's not true at all." In those moments, God spoke to my heart with that still small voice of the Holy Spirit. He challenged me in that moment of my deepest crisis.

He said, "Dick, can you believe me for one thing?" I angrily responded, "Lord, I can't believe you for anything. You've failed me. You haven't heard my cry. You've torn my heart apart. You've torn my life apart. You have torn my ministry apart."

God whispered again, "Can you believe me for just one thing?" Again I sobbed, "I don't know if I can do that. I don't have any faith! Don't ask me to believe!"

Then in frustration I shouted, "What one thing?"

God whispered this to me, "I DO NOT LIE!"

My heart broke. I sobbed and just poured out all of my tears. I said through my tears, "Lord, I wish I could believe that. My faith is gone. I'm empty. I have nothing else." Then God said, "I ask you to believe me for one thing, just this one small thought—I DO NOT LIE. Forget all the other promises. They're all built on this one thing. I do not lie."

In those scary moments I felt like I stood between life and death. With the weakness of my faith at that moment, I said, "Lord, I don't have faith, but if you'll help me, if you give me faith to believe you for that one thought then I'll give you one more chance. I will hang on to that thought."

In that moment God reached down in pity and touched my heart. He gave me faith like a tiny mustard seed. He gave me the minutest little faith to believe one thing. That began a turning point in my recovery. I did an about face. I turned around and drove back to my family, and went into the counseling, and the counseling was built on that one thought. God says, "I do not lie."

During those years of prolonged grief, a broken heart, and broken spirit, God began to restore my soul. Healing does not always come through some immediate miraculous touch as we see so often in the New Testament. This time my healing came over a long period of time. We spent eight years in the Pitman church. It was a place of peace and healing. They indeed ministered to us as we ministered to them.

I began to preach through the book of Romans, which became another way in which the Lord slowly mended my broken heart and restored my faith. Truly the Lord fulfilled his word that *"faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God."*

On one occasion I had been disqualifying all the positive input my counselor suggested. He could not get nowhere with my stubborn heart. Finally one day he said, "Dick, if you could stand before God right now and say anything to God, knowing he would not scold you or judge you, what would you say?"

My answer surprised me. I didn't even have to think about it. It was a breakthrough moment. I suddenly blurted out, "I would say, 'God I am angry with you. You are unfair. You are cruel to me. You took away my daughter in a terrible accident. We asked you to spare her life, but you didn't. You let her die. You did not answer prayer. I feel like you are punishing me, and I didn't do anything wrong. I've served you faithfully. I've searched my heart. I did nothing worthy of this punishment. Your promises are not true. You failed me! You lied and I can't trust you anymore!'"

My counselor listened as I cried tears, sobbing as I poured out my anger to God. When I finished ranting he sighed, "Dick, now I think we can get somewhere. Let's start with your anger and accusations against God. I perceive in all that you have told me that you have never really believed God loves you unconditionally. Everything in your spiritual life is about your obedience and God's reward.

Nothing is about grace. It's all about your work. You believe your work equals your worth."

He was gentle and wise as he guided me and challenged me to search the Scriptures to find the unconditional love of God, which I never really understood, nor could I see it. I went through the Scriptures asking God to show me if unconditional love was really true. That led me to Romans and justification by faith and salvation by grace alone. I knew all that in my head, but I did not know it in my heart.

Through the word of God, God healed my broken theology and my wounded heart. He restored to me the joy of my salvation.