

## Reestablishing Your Relationship with God

This was probably one of the more difficult messages to put together – not for me, but for Keri, because she put together the majority of the content. I helped her out with a little bit of it. But she put it together so I could be the mouthpiece.

So what do you do when your prayers are not answered the way you think that they should be? What happens when the God we trust – trust with all our hearts – doesn't come through for us? It feels like such a breach of that trust. When terrible things happen in our lives, sometimes our relationship with God is damaged. That damage can be severe. That has been our struggle recently. (Of course, whenever I refer to...when I say, "I," I'm talking about we – Keri and I.)

Sometimes, we as Christians expect a *sitcom* life. Twenty-two minutes is what it lasts. Things are happy. There's a problem that presents itself. You pray. The problem is solved quickly. And Twenty-two minutes is over and it's all resolved, and everybody is laughing – ha, ha, ha – and it's over. It doesn't really work that way, does it? Wouldn't it be great if that was the reality? For most of us, that is not the case. I have learned that God doesn't answer prayers the way I want Him to, just because I ask Him. You would think that that would be simple and easy.

Even in the Bible, there are very few instances where people received exactly what they prayed for. For example, Moses prayed that God would send someone else. But God still sent him to free the Israelites from the Egyptians. He sent Aaron along with him to hold his hand and to speak for him. Paul asked God repeatedly to remove the thorn in his flesh, but the thorn remained.

When Chloe was lying there in the hospital, I saw the pain of our family's devastation. We were desperately crying out to God. I saw no evidence that God was doing anything with my cries. I saw painful minutes turn into hours, which turned into days. I saw doctors scratching their heads. But I didn't see God doing anything about any of this. And isn't that what deeply troubles us about the whole relationship thing we're encouraged to have with God? Doesn't a relationship mean you're supposed to show up when needed?

There are few things that affect me more than being disappointed by those people who love me. I kept picturing Him standing beside us with the color slipping away from her face so quickly, seeing our anguish, hearing our cries, but making the choice to do nothing. But I couldn't make sense of that. All of us were asking the same question, "Where are you God?" but there was no answer. I mean, even humans with the slightest bit of compassion are moved to do something to help another person in deep distress and pain. So how can a perfect God seemingly stay silent at times? I personally don't want to be a Stepford Christian and pretend that everything is always okay with my relationship with God when it's not. Thankfully, God can handle that, because He made us and He knows how we work. Pretending away reality never makes things better. It just causes you to implode on the inside while smiling on the outside. That's really no way to live.

The longer we avoid facing our feelings, the more we delay our healing. And pain is much the same. It's the pain we feel that finally demands we slow down enough to address what's really going on inside. Depending on the level of pain, you'll use different words to describe the feelings – words like devastated, down, or driven to the brink of total frustration. Whatever it is, the roots of all these feelings can be linked back to disappointment. You are expressing that your experience of life isn't matching what you expected your life would be. Those feelings are painful and they must be addressed. Sometimes, to get your life back, you have to face the death of what you thought your life would look like.

Comfort and peace isn't a solution to seek. Rather, it's a byproduct we reap when we stay close to God. What if the comfort and peace we seek are a deadly recipe for complacency that will draw our hearts further and further away from God? There are many examples of this in the Bible, but let's look at one. If you'll look at Jeremiah 48, over in verse 11:

**Jeremiah 48:11** – *Moab has been at rest from youth, like wine left on its dregs, not poured from one jar to another. She has not gone into exile, so she tastes as she did and her aroma is unchanged.*

That's kind of wordy there, so let's break it down a little bit. On the outside, Moabites may seem like they have it good. They're comfortable and they haven't been taken into exile. They haven't known what it is to suffer or to go through trials. But this verse is very clear that this is *not* what's best for them.

Winemakers, at the time of Jeremiah, would pour wine from jar to jar for two reasons. First, so the wine wouldn't absorb the flavor of the jar. And second, to rid the wine of the dregs, or the sediment, that would settle into the bottom and prevent the wine from being pure. The Moabites were lulled into a false sense of security. Without challenges and changes, people tend to grow increasingly distant from God and resistant to His ways.

On the other hand, the Israelites were forced to depend on God and learn to survive suffering, captivity, and of course, slavery. They appear to be the ones not being saved from hardship by God, but, if we look through the lens of what's best in the long term, Israel was being strengthened by God for its eventual good. We will never appreciate, or even desire the hope of our true love, if lesser loves don't disappoint.

The piercing pain of everything in this world creates a discontent with this world and creates a longing for God Himself and for His Kingdom, where we will finally have peace and security, and eyes that no longer leak tears, and hearts that are no longer broken.

If you turn to Revelation 21, I'm going to read verses 3 through 5. It says:

**Revelation 21:3-5** – *Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people and He will dwell with them. They will be His people and God Himself will be with them and He will be their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death, no more mourning, no more crying, no more pain. For all those things have passed away. He who is seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new." Won't that be an exciting time!*

Notice all the words used to describe the world we live in – mourning, crying, suffering, pain, death. Utter disappointment often taps into the place of deep tears. Everything on this side of eternity is in a state of decay. This is the natural result of sin. Bright days become dark nights. The constant threat to our deep feelings brings in depression, anxiety, callousness, and quite honestly, a skepticism about the goodness of God – unless we see that all those harsh realities aren't the end, but rather a temporary middle space – the place through which we will have to wrestle with and wrestle well.

There are times when I want to throw my hands up in total frustration and yell about the unfairness of it all. To deny my feelings is to rob me of being human. But to let my feelings take control and overrun me robs my soul of healing perspectives with which God wants to comfort and carry me forward.

Our feelings and our faith will almost certainly come into conflict with each other. Our feelings see rotten situations as totally unnecessary hurt. That just stinks. Our soul sees it as fertilizer for a better future. Both these perspectives are real. *To wrestle well* means acknowledging our feelings, but moving forward, letting our faith lead the way. The disappointment that is so exhausting, and may be crushing, actually holds the potential for so much good. But we'll only see it as good if we trust the Giver.

In the book of Hebrews, chapter 13, verse 5, it says:

**Hebrews 13:5** – *I will never leave you nor forsake you.*

Sometimes, when we're in the depths of struggles, trials, this can be so hard to believe. However, this is the verse we really need to wrestle with, isn't it? Disappointment isn't proof that God is withholding good things from us. Sometimes, it's His way of leading us back to Him. Did you realize that? But to see this and really understand what's going on, we have to take a step back and see it from *His* point of view – the one where He rescues and reconciles all to Himself. We Christians talk about these unexplainable horrors with Bible verses and sermon points and well-meaning clichés, but in the less trusting places of our brains, we scratch our heads. “God, this doesn't really add up. How do I see all this senseless suffering and still sing about You, God, being a good, good Father? It adds so much fuel to the fire of skeptics and, quite honestly, makes my heart so heavy. I don't want to question You, but it's hard when I'm so completely disappointed. It feels like You're not showing up here.” (For Keri and me, I know that that's how *she's* feeling right now.) God loves us too much to answer our prayers at any other time than the right time and at any other way than the right way.

But we have to remember, God sees things that we can't see. He knows things that we don't know. Only God knows what the good plan is and what it will take to get us there. And most of all, He knows, if we saw the full road ahead, we would just stop halfway, and we would just quit walking. We would think the cost is too high, the path too scary, the way too overwhelming, and the enemy too frightening. No human is strong enough to withstand seeing too much of God's plan in advance. It must be revealed daily. And we must be lead to it slowly – little by little. So we need to turn from the deep desire to know all the answers, to see too much of the plan, to carry a weight we were never supposed to carry.

Now I do believe that God is good and that the world is not. That's pretty simple – pretty simple. The Bible is so clear that, because this world has turned their backs on God, we live in a world full of sickness, natural disasters, pain and death. This is *not* God's plan for us. He wants us to *live* – live! – live with Him, where there is no pain, no sadness and no death. But for this to happen, He had to make the greatest sacrifice. We know the story. We know the history. He sent His Son to die for us – to pay the price for our wrong. It's hard to imagine that He loves us so much that He would allow His Son to die on purpose. When Jesus rose from the dead, He crushed the power of death that was held over us. Still, we have the choice to accept or reject this gift. *That* is the faith that I have.

We've been angry with God. We will never be happy with the fact that our daughter is away from us – even temporarily – and that we won't get to meet our Rice-puff Patty-cake, which is our nickname for the one that we lost yesterday. The reason we called her that is because, at six weeks, the baby is the size of a grain of rice. Now of course, we miss Chloe terribly. There is a hole in our family – in our hearts – and it's always going to ache until God returns. But God does know – He knows – how we feel. He loves us more than we can even begin to understand. So we keep trying to remind ourselves of that. So I hold on, even when I don't feel like it. This is how I have a faith...it's a faith. It's not a feeling or an experience, but it's a decision. As Job said, “Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him.” Some days that's so much harder than others, but I can't imagine life without God.

Holding on to faith has been a big struggle, but to live without it is just unimaginable, unthinkable. If the enemy can isolate us, he can influence us. His favorite entry point of all is through our disappointments and fears. The enemy comes in as a whisper, lingers like a gentle breeze, and builds like a storm. You don't even see it coming. But eventually, his insatiable appetite to destroy will unleash the tornado of destruction he planned all along. He doesn't whisper to our disappointed places to coddle us. He wants to totally and completely crush us. One of the lies he keeps telling Keri was that God took Chloe and wasn't

giving us another baby, because He didn't trust her to raise two children. This fear became so debilitating for her, I'm afraid that fear is going to rear its ugly head again now – with what happened just recently.

If we don't find a way to process our disappointments and fears, we make it so easy for Satan to twist God's love story into a negative one, leaving us more than slightly suspicious of our Creator. The enemy wants us paralyzed and compromised by what ifs, opinions, accusations and misunderstandings. While God converts with truth, the enemy perverts the truth. God wants us transformed, but Satan wants us paralyzed. So, when we hear thoughts like, "I'm not good enough," that causes us to shrink away. We must keep in mind that the enemy will do anything he can to prevent us from moving closer to God or connecting more deeply with others. This "truth" we think we hear is *not* truth at all! God wants us near, no matter our imperfections. Again, He made us. He knows how we're made up and how it works.

And please understand that the enemy doesn't just whisper, "You're not good enough," as a passing thought. No, he makes it very, very, very personal – so personal we decide it's an authentic mountain of evidence, proving that we'll fall so very short, we don't even know this is all coming from Satan. Because the familiar voice we hear saying it over and over again is our own.

The enemy will try to trip you and rip you to shreds with the hurtful hisses that all this longsuffering is for nothing – for nothing! So guess what the best thing you can do about it is – the *best* thing you can do about it. Don't listen to it!!

If you would, turn to 1 Corinthians 10, and verse 13, it says – this is oftentimes misquoted as saying, "God won't give you more than you can handle." It doesn't actually say that. But actually God does say He won't allow us to be tempted beyond what we can bear, and that He always provides a way out. But that's not the same as God not giving us more than we can handle. He sometimes will allow more and more.

In 2 Corinthians, chapter 1, verses 8 through 9, he says:

**2 Corinthians 1:8-9** – *For we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about the troubles we experienced in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we thought we had received a sentence of death, but this happened that we might not rely on ourselves, but on God who raises the dead.*

God doesn't expect us to handle this alone. He wants us to hand this over to Him. If we keep walking around thinking God won't give us more than we can handle, we set ourselves up to be suspicious of God. We know we are facing things that are too much for us. We can go it alone for a while and try to convince ourselves into thinking we can muscle our way through it ourselves, but there will be an eventual breakdown, because we weren't created to do it alone. For Keri, that point came as we were nearing the one-year mark of finding Chloe seizing, holding her while the life drained out of her face, and burying our sweet girl. Those were all such awful things to face – again, especially when she was feeling so far from God. Now granted, she's always made prayer requests and pleas for others to help. Sometimes, when you can't find your footing with your own faith, you just have to go stand on someone else's for a while.

But when it came right down to it, her relationship needed to be repaired – desperately. Finally, she hit pretty close to rock bottom, She told me she felt like she was wrestling demons, and she cast them out on several occasions over the span of a month. She couldn't figure out what was going on. She said the only time her head didn't feel like it was going to explode and felt peace was when she had suicidal thoughts. So she talked to people we consider our encouragers. That helped, but still, something wasn't right. She finally set an emergency appointment with our grief counselor, Renee. God has definitely placed Renee in

our life. God has used her to help save her life – therefore saving my life – and gave her a priceless tool to bring her out of the depths.

So Keri wants me to share this so, hopefully, it will help others. Keri had brought up many times before, in therapy, that she wanted to be able to trust God again, but just didn't know how. Renee reminded her that trust will never look the same again and would just move on. Well, this time she picked up on how serious Keri's faith issue was and had her do this exercise. She asked Keri to name three things about me, her mother, her dad, and God *before* Chloe died. So, of course, she did that easily. Most of us know that our view of a godly Father is strongly built upon our relationship with our earthly father. So then she asked for three things about God *after* Chloe died. She found it extremely difficult to say, especially out loud. Then she asked, "What if your dad had something to do with losing your child?" Of course, Keri teared up and said, "He would never ever do that." She started to sob at that point and said, "I truly thought God would never let my little girl die." She said, "I never thought I would leave the hospital without her."

So where does someone even begin to start trying to repair such a damaged relationship with God? Keri has been keeping a gratitude journal for some time now. So Renee asked her to start writing down one thing every day that made her feel like she mattered to God and one thing that she *needed* from God. Obviously, that is a difficult assignment. However, God started answering immediately. She started out with really small things, because she was afraid to be disappointed again. He has been so faithful in helping her rebuild that trust. Do you know what the hardest thing was for her to write down? That she needed and wanted another baby. Originally, I was supposed to tell you that He had answered that prayer. However, for some reason, He decided to say, "No," at this time. One thing that Renee reminds us of is that there has been a serious breach of trust and we should expect backslides. It's not a sitcom journey, like I mentioned before.

We live in a broken world where broken things happen, so it shouldn't surprise us that things get broken in our lives as well. But what about those times when things aren't just broken, but shattered beyond repair – shattered to the point of dust? At least, when things are broken, there's some hope that you can glue the pieces back together. But what if there wasn't anything to pick up – the pieces were just way too small? You can't really glue dust, probably because it's so hard to hold. What was so precious is now reduced to nothing but weightless powder. Even the slightest wind can carry it away. So we feel desperately hopeless. Dust makes us want to believe the promises of God no longer apply to us – that the reach of God falls short of where we are, and the hope of God has been snuffed out by consuming darkness around us. We want God to fix it all – edit the story so it has a different ending, repair this heart-rending reality. But what if fixing, editing, repairing isn't at all what God had in mind for us? What if, this time, God desires to make something completely brand new? Right now, on this side of eternity, no matter how shattered our circumstances may seem, dust is the exact ingredient God loves to use. We think the shattering in our lives could not possibly be for any good, but what if shattering is the only way to get the dust back to its basic form so that something new can be made?

We can see dust as a result of unfair breaking, or we can see dust as a crucial ingredient. Of all the things God could have used to make man, guess what He chose? He used dust. If you turn to Genesis, chapter 2 – you remember this verse – in verse 7:

**Genesis 2:7** – *Then the LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.*

Jesus used the dust of the ground to restore a man's sight in John 9, verses 5 and 6. It says:

**John 9:5-6** – *Jesus said, “While I am in the world, I am the light of the world. After saying this, He spit on the ground, made some mud with saliva, and put it on the man’s eyes. And after the man washed in the Pool of Siloam, he went home seeing. And it was all because of dust.*

And when mixed with water, did you realize that dust becomes clay? Clay, when placed in the potter’s hands, can be formed into anything the potter desires. Isaiah 64 is a good example of this, in verse 8.

**Isaiah 64:8** – *Yet You Lord are our Father. We are the clay. You are the potter. We are the work of Your hand.*

In Jeremiah 18, verse 6, it says:

**Jeremiah 18:6** – *“Can I not do with you, Israel, as the potter does?” declares the LORD. “Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in My hand, O Israel.”*

Wise potters not only know how to form beautiful things from clay, but they also know how important it is to add some of the dust from previously broken pieces to the pottery – to the new clay. This type of dust is called *grog*. To get this grog, the broken pieces, known as potsherd – spelled P-O-T-S-H-E-R-D – must be shattered to dust just right. If the dust is shattered too finely, then it won’t add any structure to the new clay. And, if it’s not shattered enough, the grog will be too coarse and cut the potter’s hands. But when shattered just right, the grog dust added to the new clay will allow the potter to form the clay into a larger and stronger vessel than ever before, and it can go through fires much hotter as well. Plus, when glazed, these pieces end up having a much more beautiful, artistic look to them than they would have had otherwise.

I’m sure some of you are wondering what a potsherd is. A potsherd is a broken piece of pottery. Interestingly enough, a potsherd was also mentioned in the story of Job when he was afflicted with an awful disease. In Job, chapter 2, verse 7 – as we work our way through verses 7 through 10 – it says:

**John 2:7-10** – *So Satan went out from the presence of the LORD and afflicted Job with painful sores, from the soles of his feet to the crown of his head. Then Job took a piece of broken pottery and scraped himself as he sat among the ashes. His wife said to him, “Are you still maintaining your integrity? Curse God and die!” He replied, “You are talking like a foolish woman. Shall we accept good from God and not trouble?” In all this, Job did not sin in what he said.*

A broken potsherd can lie on the ground and be nothing more than a constant reminder of brokenness. It can also be used to continue scrape us and hurt us even more when kept in our hands. Or, when placed in our God’s hands, the Master Potter can be entrusted to take that potsherd, shatter it just right, and then use it in our remolding to make us stronger and even more beautiful. It’s *our* choice whether we stay stuck in our hurt, or get renewed in our hearts.

In Psalm, chapter 40, verses 1 through 3, it says:

**Psalms 40:1-3** – *I waited patiently for the LORD. He turned and heard my cry. He lifted me out of my slimy pit – out of the muck and mire. He set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand. He put a new song in my mouth and a hymn of praise to our God. Many will see and fear the LORD and put their trust in Him.*

I don’t know about you, but I want the new song promised here. Did you notice, though, what comes before the psalms promise of a new song? It’s the many cries to the LORD for help. The most powerful

praise songs don't start out as beautiful melodies, but rather they start out as deep cries of pain. But soon, the process of pain turns into the promise of praise like no other.

In Job 42, verse 10, it says:

**Job 42:10** – *After Job prayed for his friends – these were great friends. They were the ones who misjudged Job, didn't tell the truth about him, added so much to hurt him on top of all of his pain. With friends like those, who needs enemies? You know the story. ...the LORD restored his fortunes and gave him twice as much as he had before.* Imagine that. Job did what he thought was right – which was, he did not sin, he did not curse God – and the Lord blessed him with twice what he had. In verse 12, it says:

**V-12** – *The LORD blessed the latter part of Job's life with more than the former part.*

It's one of those very difficult lessons that we can all still learn – and it's an example in your Bible.

I'd like to share this blog a friend of ours shared with Keri and I think it speaks for itself as an example:

*“Five weeks after Dorothy died, my nephew was born. When I went to therapy that week, I shared the news with our therapist. Of course, she wanted to know how I was feeling about his arrival. I replied that I was so happy that he was safely here, but I was also happy that he lived across the country so I didn't have to see him yet. ‘And?’ she replied. I looked at her puzzled, so she continued, ‘‘And’’you're happy that he is here, ‘and’’you're happy that you don't have to see him right now. Rachel, you don't have to choose.’ After we left our session that day, I couldn't stop thinking about that one little word. Ever since Dorothy's death, I had found myself trying to separate my reemerging feelings of happiness from the steady depression I was in. Much like a child trying to keep their peas from touching their mashed potatoes, I wanted my feelings of devastation to be untouched by any glimmers of joy I might be feeling. I didn't think it was possible for them to coexist. Three simple letters changed that. So I began testing out this powerful little word. Whenever I had been feeling differing emotions, I had just the word ‘but’ to keep them distant. But, if I used the word ‘and’ to bring them together, would that work? ‘That new picture of my new nephew is adorable ‘and’’ it reminds me of how much I miss Dorothy.’ ‘I'm looking forward to seeing my family ‘and’’ I'm anxious to be around them.’ ‘And’ was slowly changing my world – that little word. That word was giving me the freedom to experience the storm of emotions that had been quietly raging inside. I didn't have to wait for each feeling to pass over me completely. I could start feeling them in connection. Before ‘and,’ there had been so much guilt about the happiness that was sneaking its way back into my life. Now I had permission to let that happiness start to color the darkness of my grief. Over the next weeks and months, I exercised the power of the word ‘and’ with the recent birth of my nephew. I found many opportunities to use my new magic word. ‘I'm so happy that my sister-in-law is a mother ‘and’’ I wish that was me.’ ‘I'm so excited to be an aunt ‘and’’ I'm so worried that Dorothy is going to be forgotten.’ It wasn't a solution or a remedy, but it was a tool. The burden of Dorothy's death was a heavy one. I was struggling under the weight of the emotions I had been trying to ignore and I needed help. My grief for Dorothy was never going away, but I needed something to help me carry that load throughout my life. Without a tool, I was going to be crushed. So that little word ‘and’ helped alleviate some of the pressure. I felt like I could breathe again.”*

In the book of James 1, verses 2 through 4, it says:

**James 1:2-4** – *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 the perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.*

This verse is easy to pull out when your worst issue is that the Starbucks you got today was wrong. To slap some “we should be joyful about this” verse on top of the truly hard things feels cruel. It’s like a bad joke about something that is excruciatingly painful. It’s just too soon for that kind of nonsense. That’s why I’m glad that these verses don’t say, “Feel the joy,” but instead, “Consider where some glimpses of joy might be, even in the midst of all the hurt.”

So, if you’ve gone through a faith-crushing trial, you have a choice to make. Faith is not something you lose. It’s something you choose or reject.

I’m sorry to say that anyone who has lost a child has a very long and hard journey ahead of them. Grief is exhausting. It’s messy and it’s misunderstood. Anger and confusion are normal and healthy, except if you get stuck there. If you’ve lost a child, be patient with yourself. You are still in mourning. Keri and I are still in mourning. In fact, we started again today.

So please, wrestle well and capture the lies Satan tells you. Remember, feelings matter, but don’t let them decide what you believe. Look ahead – way ahead. What kind of life do you want? What do you want to be? Who do you want to be?

By the way, there’s a book titled, *It’s Not Supposed To Be This Way*, by Lysa TerKeurst. A lot of content of this message was taken from it. It’s been such a healing book for Keri, she highly recommends it to anyone who is struggling with grief, disappointment and, yes, loss.