

MAKING THE MOST OF THE DARKNESS

*How To Keep Trusting In God
Even In The Face Of
Significant Loss*

ERIC ELDER

Making The Most Of The Darkness
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DEDICATION

*To those who have prayed us through
this first year of grief, thank you. Your love,
prayers and practical acts of kindness
have truly sustained us.*

Eric Elder

INTRODUCTION

Let me start off by saying, “I’m sorry.” If you’re about to read this book, chances are good that you’ve probably lost someone or some thing that was very precious to you. And for that, perhaps the best thing I can say to you right now is simply, “I’m sorry.”

I wish there were something more I could do for you, or say to you, that would help to take away your pain or to ease your burden, even just a little. Although it may not seem like much, perhaps saying, “I’m sorry,” is just enough for right now.

Sometimes it’s just enough to know that there are other people who care, that there are other people who are aware of your pain and that there are other people who have walked through the darkness as well. I wish I could say I know what you’re going through, but I don’t. No two losses are the same. But still,

sometimes it's nice just to know that other people have walked through the darkness and found something special along the way, something they may have never noticed when they were walking in the light. Stars, for instance, shine brighter when there are no other lights around.

I'm not saying it's easy, or altogether wonderful to walk in the darkness. It's not. But if you read through the words on the following pages, you'll find that there *are* beautiful lights along the way, glimpses of heaven and riches that glisten that you may never have noticed had you not walked this way. Samuel Rutherford, a Scottish pastor in the 1600s, said:

"Jesus came into my prison cell last night, and every stone flashed like a ruby."

On the pages that follow, I'd like to share with you some of the rubies I saw as I walked through my own period of darkness—my first year of grief after losing my precious wife, Lana. I wrote these 12 messages *while* I was walking through the darkness, not *after* the fear and danger were gone, which always seems to make things look brighter and more

obvious than before. I wrote them in the midst of the pain and heartache that I was experiencing, both as a way to help me stay focused on the One who was walking through it with me, and as a way to give hope to others who were walking through their own times of darkness.

At the beginning of my journey, I read a book called *Getting to the Other Side of Grief*. As I was just getting started, I honestly didn't know that there *was* another side of grief and, if there was, if I'd ever get there myself. The pain was just too intense. But the authors of the book had both lost their spouses and they made a compelling case for the fact that there *is* another side of grief, and if I was willing to work through it—and in my case, to walk through it with God—I could get there, too.

I took their words to heart and I began to walk with intentionality, trusting that their words were true. More than that, I had the promise of God's Word in the Bible that says that He will work all things together for our good:

“And we know that in all things God works for

the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose” (Romans 8:28).

I knew this to be true from the previous 26 years of following Him. But I had never had to put it to the test more than in this first year after losing my sweet wife. She was, after Christ Himself, the greatest gift God had ever given me. And losing her was like losing part of myself, too.

On the pages that follow, you’ll get to know a little bit more about me and her and my family and our faith in God. Even though we may not have gone through what you’re going through right now, I hope that something of what we’ve gone through will be of help to you. There’s something about walking with others through their pain that helps to ease our own pain, even if just a little bit.

On the other hand, you may be hesitant to walk with me through these 12 messages for fear that they might open up some of your own wounds in a deeper way. If that’s the case, let me encourage you to keep reading on two fronts:

- 1) When I decided to put these 12 messages into this book, I was even fearful myself

to reread them at first. Having just walked through an entire year of grief, I didn't really want to relive it. Yet as I reread each of the messages, I was surprised at how hopeful I felt after reading each one, and to see that God was indeed walking with me every step of the way—even when I sometimes couldn't see it for myself.

2) There's something cathartic about walking through someone else's pain that brings healing in our own. That's one of the reasons people love watching good movies so much, even sad ones, because people are able to release some of their own emotions as they watch others go through similar struggles, even if they're not exactly the same.

I remember one night some friends invited me to watch a movie with them when I was stopped for the night at their house on a long trip with the kids. This was before Lana had died, but after I had discovered that she may not live much longer. My friends said the movie was about some guys who bought a zoo and that the kids and I might like it.

I had no idea that the movie was about a husband who lost his wife to a serious illness and dealt with the aftermath of that tragic

event. As I realized what the movie was about, I started to boil inside, thinking that I would have never watched it if I had known what it was about, and I wouldn't have had my kids watch it either. I didn't want to think about Lana dying, let alone what life might be like once she was gone.

But somehow I stayed in my seat, for as the movie unfolded, I was drawn into the story, drawn into the way the main characters walked through this loss in their life. Although it wasn't all peaches and roses, it wasn't without hope, either. Many of the thoughts and emotions they expressed were the same thoughts and emotions that had flitted through my own mind but never wanted to entertain. Watching now, however, in the context of someone else's pain, somehow seemed to ease my own.

As the movie came to a close, I was so thankful I had watched. It didn't end all neat and tidy, but it *did* end with hope. And while the movie itself wasn't about God, it gave me hope that *with* God somehow He would be able to work it all out in the end. So perhaps reading our story will give you that hope, too.

I also want to let you know you can read

these messages at your own pace. I wrote these over the course of a year, so I was at a slightly different place in my grief with each message. One of the books I read on grief during this past year was one that was timed to be read over the course of a year, not all at once (called *Journeying Through Grief*). Grief is a process, and we can't walk through every stage right away, even if we wanted to. In fact, sometimes it can be better if we don't try to rush grief. Bob Deits, the author of several books on grief, said:

"Grief is the last act of love we have to give those who have died."

If you're just trying to avoid pain, you might be tempted to rush through your grief as fast as possible. But if, on the other hand, your grief is a way to express your last act of love to one who has died, you might rather take as much time as you need to make sure you express it well.

There's no hurry or timetable with grief. But I can say there is another side of it. As I mention in the final chapter of this book, I'm thankful now to be able to see it for myself.

There is another side of grief. As Jesus said to His disciples just before He died:

*“You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy”
(John 16:20b).*

That may have sounded like an outlandish promise to the disciples at the time, except for the fact that it was Jesus who was saying it—the same Jesus whom they had seen heal the sick, walk on water and raise the dead. If anyone could make a promise like that and live up to it, Jesus could.

So with that hope in mind, and with my heartfelt condolences for the loss that you’ve experienced, I invite you to read the 12 messages that follow. I pray that they give you hope for your future—and that they help you to see the stones along the way flash like rubies.

In Christ’s love,
Eric Elder

P.S. Throughout the book, I’ll be talking more about Lana and our 6 kids. As a way of introduction, here’s one of my favorite pictures of our

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family, taken at Christmastime in 2009. I'm 2nd from the left and Lana's 2nd from the right. The kids, from left to right, are Karis, Kaleo, Josiah, Bo (in front), Lucas (in back) and Makari.



Eric Elder

2 STORIES AND A CONCLUSION

Dear friends, thanks so much for your thoughts and prayers and kindnesses since my sweet wife Lana passed away on November 15th. It's been 4 months now and I wanted to share some thoughts with you on Lana, healing and God's will. I apologize in advance for the length of this message, but if you've been discouraged or having trouble trusting God, especially in the face of significant loss, I hope you'll read this message. This message is really just 2 stories, with some follow-up comments to help you bring them together and apply them to your lives.

I haven't shared these stories publicly until this week, as they are so personal and intimate that I've just been treasuring them in my own heart. But I feel they're important to share as a way of testifying to what God is doing in

my life, and hopefully encouraging you at the same time.

The first story started on the day of Lana's funeral, on November 20th, 2012. Before she died, Lana had asked me to preach at her funeral if it ever came to that. She said I didn't have to do it if I didn't think I could, but if I could, she wanted me to be the one to do it. I did get up and preach, but not without seriously considering backing out several times, even a few times during the service just before I was about to speak. I just wasn't sure if I could do it.

One of the reasons I felt so unsure, apart from the sadness I felt in my heart from already missing her, was that I felt like I had lost so much in the days leading up to her death. I had not only lost my best friend, my encourager, my partner in ministry and, apart from Jesus, the greatest source of joy and delight in my life. We had also depleted all of the money in our bank account during those final months of her battle with cancer. On the morning of her funeral, we had \$26.45 in the bank. I felt like I had lost everything. (I hadn't, but I felt like it.)

The morning of the funeral, I prayed that

God would give me the strength to do what I wanted to do and needed to do. I also prayed, more as a wish than anything else, that God would give the kids some kind of inheritance from Lana from the gifts that came in. I knew that no amount of money would make up to them for losing their mother, but I wished I had something I could give them as an inheritance from her. \$26.45 wasn't going to go very far among the 6 kids.

So I prayed that God would provide enough from the memorial gifts to pay for the funeral and still have some left over for the kids. From past funerals, I knew that the gifts that are received are sometimes just enough to pay for the funeral and that's it, so I wasn't expecting much. But then in my heart, I prayed, "God, if there's any way to give the kids \$1,000 each as an inheritance, that would be great." But then from deeper still in my heart, I thought that what I would *really* like for them is if I could put \$5,000 into each of their bank accounts. I quickly did the math and \$5,000 times 6 kids would be \$30,000.

There's no way, I thought. With \$26.45 in the bank, I knew it was an outlandish request. But I laid it out before God anyway. Later

that day, I got up to preach at Lana's funeral. (If you haven't watched it yet, I'd encourage you to watch it online at lanaelder.com. It was like no other service, funeral or otherwise, that I've ever been to before and I think you'll find it both inspiring and helpful. So please watch it if you can!)

Starting that day and the days that followed, people *did* begin sending in memorial gifts for our family in honor of Lana. Some gave \$5, some gave \$15 and some gave \$20 or \$100. A few gave \$1,000 and some even gave \$5,000. By December 4th, just 2 weeks and 1 day after the funeral, we had received just over \$30,000 from over 200 different people, none of whom knew about my private prayer to God!

Now keep that date and that astounding answer to prayer in mind as I tell you the 2nd story. For it was on December 4th, just one year earlier, that we had first discovered the lump in Lana's breast, our first indicator that anything was even wrong at all.

It was on that day that we had heard a missionary talk about their work in Kenya, teaching women how to do self-exams for breast cancer. Later that night we checked and dis-

covered the lump. We thought it was probably nothing serious, as is often the case. But over the next few weeks, and after a mammogram, then an ultrasound and finally a biopsy, the doctors confirmed that the lump really was cancerous. At that time, the doctors had no reason to think that the cancer had already spread. They felt that with treatment, they could remove it and all would be fine. We were shocked but felt this was beatable.

A few days later, Lana was listening to a podcast on her phone of a sermon that gave her some encouragement. When she was done listening, she handed her phone to me so I could listen to it, too. But as she handed me her phone, I felt God speak to me as loud and clear as any time I'd ever heard Him speak in my life. Although He didn't speak in audible words, the effect of what He was saying was, "This *is* a good message, Eric. But it's not *My* message for you in this situation. This time I have something else in mind."

As I listened to the message, I found it was all about praying "bold prayers," that we shouldn't just pray for a "C" on a test, but for an "A." That we shouldn't just pray that we would survive a difficult marriage, but that it

would thrive. That we shouldn't just pray for a sickness to go away, but for a long and healthy and abundant life instead. It was the kind of message I would normally believe and receive and be encouraged to pray with all my heart in whatever difficult situation I faced.

But if God had really spoken to me, then what was He saying in regards to Lana's healing? With a great sadness in my heart, I felt He was saying, "Eric, I know you have the faith to ask for the moon and get it. But not this time. This time I have something else in mind." God brought to my mind Psalm 23, reminding me that He would be with me, even in the face of death:

"Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me..." (Psalm 23:4).

I felt that verse was a little extreme. This cancer was beatable. It didn't have to end in death. Then why was God telling me this? But the following week I found out why.

A few days later, Lana went in for a few more tests. She had started having some other symptoms, some unexplainable bleeding

and intense lower back pain. The tests showed that it was worse than the doctors initially thought. The cancer had already spread to her lungs and liver and spine. In addition, the cancer was in a special category called “triple negative,” which meant that it wouldn’t respond to normal treatments that worked for other types of breast cancers. There was no cure, the doctors said. The best they could do was to treat the symptoms and try to keep her as comfortable as possible for as long as possible, but that the cancer would eventually take her life. Statistically, the doctors said she had about 1 to 3 years to live, depending on how she responded to treatment. The majority of women with Stage 4, triple-negative breast cancer don’t make it past 5 years. And only 1 in a hundred ever make it to 10 years.

We were devastated. But having heard God speak to me the week before, even before the doctors told us what was going on, somehow gave me great faith. Not faith that Lana would be healed, although I believed God *could* still heal her in an instant, but faith that He would be with us through it all. This was no news to God. He had already revealed

it to me before we, or even the doctors, had an inkling about what was coming.

Knowing that God was with us gave me great peace in my heart. But as comforting as this was, I still didn't know how to walk forward in a practical way, given what I felt God was saying to me. If God had told me that Lana was going to be healed, and to walk in faith and stand on the promise of the words He had spoken to my heart, I knew how to walk that out: read and reread the Scriptures, fast and pray, gather others to fast and pray, and look for answers from any doctor or person of faith who could help us beat this disease. But if I had really heard right, and God was really saying, "I know you have the faith to ask for the moon and get it, Eric, but not this time," how could I walk that out? How could I stand on something that I didn't *want* to believe and didn't *want* to be true?

Was I supposed to just give up on the possibility of healing? Not bother praying at all for her? Not ask others to join us in fasting and prayer? Not go to the doctors to try to get whatever help we could find? I felt that taking any of those paths would be utterly wrong. Lana wanted to live and I wanted her

to live! And who knows? Maybe I had heard wrong. Maybe the doctors were wrong. And even if I had heard right, and the doctors were right, maybe God would still heal her miraculously! God's default position on healing is that we *should* be healed, as evidenced by the many ways He has created our bodies to heal themselves, to automatically seal up cuts, fight off infections and repair damaged tissue. God has demonstrated His desire for our healing throughout the Bible, performing miraculous healings from cover to cover. God loves healing and wants us to be healed! There's no doubt that God is a healing God!

So I tried to remember what other biblical characters when they received a word from God that they didn't want to believe either.

I thought of Hezekiah, who was sick and dying when God spoke to him through the prophet Isaiah, saying that Hezekiah's sickness would end in death. Hezekiah wept bitterly and pleaded with God for a different outcome:

“Remember, O LORD, how I have walked before You faithfully and with wholehearted devotion and

have done what is good in Your eyes” (2 Kings 20:3a).

God heard Hezekiah’s prayers, healed him and gave him an extra 15 years of life.

I thought of King David, who got a word from God through Nathan the prophet saying that the child born to David and Bathsheba would die. But David didn’t give up and didn’t give in. He fasted and prayed and wept before God every night saying:

“Who knows? The LORD may be gracious to me and let the child live” (2 Samuel 12:22).

In David’s case, however, his child still died after 7 days, but not without David pleading with God for a different outcome.

Then I thought of Jesus, who, when faced with His own imminent death, knelt down and prayed so earnestly that His sweat fell like drops of blood:

“Father, if You are willing, take this cup from Me; yet not My will, but Yours be done” (Luke 22:42).

Jesus knew what His Father was asking of Him, yet still He pleaded for another way, that the cup He was about to drink would somehow be taken from Him. Yet Jesus yielded to His Father's will, even over His own.

From these 3 stories of Hezekiah and David and Jesus, I felt I was in good company that even if I *had* heard right from God, I could still plead with Him, in fasting and prayer and tears, and pour out my heart to Him for what Lana and I both wanted: that she would be healed completely and gloriously and continue to live a long, healthy and abundant life.

So we fasted and prayed and called others to join us in fasting and prayer. We talked to doctors and nurses and researchers and nutritionists, both locally and globally, to see if God had an answer through them. We called the elders of our church, and 2 of our former churches, to anoint us with oil and pray for Lana's healing. We held prayer meetings in our living room and drove and flew to get prayer from some of the most faith-filled men and women of God we knew.

As time marched on, however, the tests continued to come back blacker and bleaker. Either what God had spoken to me at the be-

ginning was true, or God was preparing the way for one of the most miraculous turn-arounds of all time. Either way, we felt good about the steps we were taking, about doing everything we could possibly do to bring about her healing and about trusting in God completely, whatever the outcome.

As much as Lana and I, and many of you, wished that the outcome had been different, I can say that when it came time to say our final goodbyes, we had no regrets. We had done everything we could think of doing to keep her alive, and God had kept His promise to be with us through it all.

Let me tie these 2 stories together for you by sharing 2 journal entries from December 4th, 2012, the first of which was written early in the morning as I was remembering the one-year anniversary of finding the lump that took Lana's life, and the 2nd of which was written at midnight that same night, after receiving the checks in the mail that put us over \$30,000 in memorial gifts in her honor.

"12/4/12 - Father, thank You for revealing to me and Lana the lump in her right breast one year ago today... Lord, any thoughts about this being

the one-year anniversary of the day You revealed this lump? I've given you a great gift, Eric. A chance to see into the future, and to make your plans accordingly. I have not hidden what is to happen from My prophets. I warned Abraham about the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah before it happened, just as I told him that he and Sarah would have a child in a year, and just as I told you, Eric, that your friends would have a child in a year. Although I didn't tell you an exact date [regarding Lana], I did tell you what the outcome would be, both by showing you the lump, and by confirming that while you could pray for healing, this wasn't My will in this case. I wanted you to know, Eric, because I wanted you to have time to plan, prepare and say goodbye properly. And you have done marvelously. Your kids, your friends, your family, are all living testaments to that fact. I also gave you test after test, and doctor after doctor, to confirm this to you, for you wanted the truth, and you knew the truth would set you free. They were hard truths to hear, and hard to watch you hear, but they were necessary to help you absorb and understand what I was saying. I've given you a gift Eric, both in what I revealed, and in the fact that I do reveal My knowledge to My children. Lana wanted to live and not die, and she was right

to do so, for that's My will [He wants all of us to live forever!]. But I wanted you to know so you could plan, prepare, and say goodbye properly. I wanted you to care for her and love her and be with her to the fullest extent possible, so when she passed through the veil, you would have no regrets, nothing left undone, nothing more you could have done, but love her thoroughly. I did this for you, yes, but also for Me, for I wanted you to be able to care for her on earth as I cared for her from heaven. You were, and still are, My hands and feet and voice to many on earth. You will be sad, no doubt, for to lose the one you love, when you have loved so deeply, is sad. But you will rejoice as well, for you have been given a great and wonderful gift."

"12 midnight - Father, thank You for helping us reach the \$30,000 mark that I had asked You for, to give \$5,000 to each of the kids as an inheritance from Lana. Lord, we only had \$26.45 in our bank account the day of the funeral. It was an outlandish prayer, and within a few weeks, You've brought the full amount I extravagantly asked for. 'Open your mouth wide, Eric, and I will fill it.' Thank You, Lord! I love You. By the way, the sunset looked delicious tonight, like

rainbow sherbet, and I wanted to lick it. 'Thank You.' Thank You, Lord."

Yes, life can be extremely hard. But it also offers sunsets that look like rainbow sherbet! The trick is to not let the hardest parts of life overshadow the best parts about it. God is at work in both. The Bible says:

"Friends, when life gets really difficult, don't jump to the conclusion that God isn't on the job. Instead, be glad that you are in the very thick of what Christ experienced. This is a spiritual refining process, with glory just around the corner... So if you find life difficult because you're doing what God said, take it in stride. Trust Him. He knows what He's doing, and He'll keep on doing it" (1 Peter 4:12-13, 19, The Message).

Friends, God loves you and has a unique calling and purpose for your life, just as He had a unique calling and purpose for Lana's life. Don't be discouraged when life doesn't work out the way you think it should. God is still on the job. Keep putting your trust in Him. He knows what He's doing, and He'll keep on doing it.

Eric Elder

Thanks for reading these 2 stories, and thanks again for your prayers and kindnesses you've shown to me and my family, especially during this past year. It means so much, and is yet one more reminder of all that's good in life. May God bless you and keep you as you keep putting your trust in Him!

KEEPING YOUR EYES OPEN

Last week I shared 2 stories and a conclusion with you about how God has been helping me to keep the hardest parts of life from overshadowing the best parts about it. Based on the responses I've gotten, it was one of the most significant messages I've ever shared.

This week, I'd like to follow up on that message and share a few more stories to help you keep trusting in God even in the face of significant loss. I know you may not have lost a spouse like I have, but you may be facing something just as challenging in your own life, whether it's a divorce, a broken relationship, a wayward son or daughter, a job loss, a change in health or the loss of a dream that meant the world to you.

In any case, I want to encourage you to keep your eyes open to what God is doing all around you. Even though you may not see

God doing what you expect Him to do in one particular area, if you can see God at work in other areas, it can help you to keep putting your trust in Him.

I believe this is what Jesus did for John the Baptist when John was in prison and facing the very real possibility of death. Up to this point, John had thought that Jesus was the one who was going to save God's people. But perhaps it was something about being in prison that seemed to make John wonder if what he had previously thought was true. John sent his followers to Jesus to ask, "Are You the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" (Matthew 11:3) After all, didn't Jesus come to "set the captives free" (Luke 4:18)? And wasn't John a captive, in desperate need of freedom?

But Jesus sent a message back to John, saying,

"Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of Me" (Matthew 11:4-6).

It's as if Jesus was reminding John of all the things that God was doing all around him. And even if God didn't do what John may have thought He should do, John could still trust God to do what was right. When Jesus said, "Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of Me," it's almost as if Jesus was saying, "Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of what they *think* I should or should not be doing." Sometimes we're so focused on one area of our lives that we miss what God is doing in other areas.

It turns out that John wasn't set free, even though others in the Bible were, like Daniel when he was rescued from the lions' den (Daniel 6), or Peter when an angel led him out of jail (Acts 12), or Paul and Silas when an earthquake loosened their chains and caused the prison doors to fly open (Acts 16). In John's case, he only lived long enough to hear back from Jesus that God was indeed still on the job and working in the world.

I believe it was just what John needed to hear in order to face what he had to face: his own imminent death.

It may have seemed like John had lost his

faith there at the end. But by coming to Jesus with his doubts, that didn't mean he *lost* his faith. That was an *expression* of his faith. It showed that John still looked to Jesus for answers, even in the face of circumstances he couldn't understand. If this was a test of John's faith, I believe he passed it with flying colors, as Jesus later said of him:

"I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist..." (Matthew 11:11a).

I don't know if the trial that my wife Lana just went through was a test, or simply the result of living in a world that's been subjected to sin and sickness and decay. But if it was a test, I believe she passed with flying colors, keeping her faith in Christ to the end. Now I'm praying that I'll be able to pass with flying colors, too.

One of the ways I'm trying to do that is by doing what Jesus told John to do: to keep his eyes open to the work that Jesus was *still* doing in the world and not to base his conclusions on what he *thought* Jesus should or should not be doing.

Let me share just a few brief stories of what I've seen God doing lately, some of which may seem trivial, but in the face of the loss that I've had, even the smallest glimpse of God is worth more than gold to me.

A few weeks ago I was helping my kids do some late-night craft projects: tie-dying a dress with my daughter and making rubbery, squishy bugs with my son. I was already worn out from the day, and going back and forth on these 2 projects was wearing me down further. I wanted to help them, but I was definitely missing Lana and the help that she would have been in moments like these.

At one point, I went upstairs to take a break and, as I passed a mirror, I noticed that I was still wearing some old reading glasses, as I had lost my new pair a few weeks earlier. As I looked in the mirror I decided it was time to order another new pair, as I hadn't been able to find mine. On the way back down the stairs to the basement where my daughter was tie-dying her dress, I paused on the steps and reached my hand up to heaven. I said, "Lana, help me!" (I know it's God that helps us, but I still find myself talking to Lana in heaven,

especially at times like these.) Then I continued on down the stairs.

As I got down on my hands and knees on the cold cement floor of the basement to help with the tie-dying project, I happened to look to my left and there, under the basement sink, hanging on some bottles of soap and shampoo, were my reading glasses that had been missing for weeks! Had I *not* been doing these projects with the kids, down on my hands and knees on the cold cement floor of the basement, I never would have found them! And had I *not* remembered the conversation with myself in the mirror upstairs just a few minutes earlier, and my quick call for help from heaven as I walked down the steps again, I wouldn't have put my prayer and the answer together either. My whole outlook on helping the kids for the rest of that night changed in that instant. It was as if a little reward had been dropped out of heaven and was dangling on the bottles of soap in front of me.

That may not seem like a God-moment to you, and it may not have seemed like one to me, either, if this was the first time something like this had happened. But just a few weeks

earlier, when I was recovering from the flu and getting ready to start back into homeschooling our 3 youngest kids for the first time since Lana died, I had reached up to heaven as well. After gathering up literally dozens of books from around the house that the kids use for school, we were still missing 2 books. In an act of desperation more than anything else, I looked up to heaven and said, “Lana, help me!” Within minutes we found the 2 missing books. They appeared practically out of thin air.

But more than that, after we found those 2 missing books, one of my sons wanted to take a break and do some kind of “outside project.” Even though it was the middle of winter and the temperature was literally below freezing outside, I said, “OK, let’s fix that broken pole on the trampoline.” It wasn’t a very practical idea, as it was too cold to actually jump on the trampoline anytime soon, but it was the first thing that came to my mind that would be quick and easy enough to get outside and back inside before we froze.

So we went out into the freezing cold to start working on the trampoline pole and I happened to look up into the net above us.

There, hanging at the top of the net, were my daughter's prescription glasses that had been missing since Lana's funeral more than 2 months earlier! It was as if they had been dropped down from heaven and had gotten caught in the net for us to find!

How they had survived the cold and the wind and the snow for 2 months, I didn't know. But what I did know was that within minutes of calling out to heaven for help, I had found 2 missing schoolbooks AND a pair of missing glasses! All the while trying to help my kids, which was something I needed to do and wanted to do, but was having trouble working up the strength to do. The moment I saw those glasses in the net, my whole perspective on the day changed. I *knew* that God was at work and that I was doing exactly what I should be doing. It gave me the strength to go on.

Just this past week, as the weather has started to get nicer here in Illinois, I was walking around the yard with a friend who's spent years in the landscaping business, asking his advice about where and what kind of trees we could plant around the house. This was a project that Lana and I had been wanting to

do for some time. To be honest, it was hard to even think about planting trees, as sometimes it feels like the dreams and plans I had with Lana died when she died. But I have to remember that I didn't die, and that God might still want me to keep some of those shared dreams and plans alive, too.

So there we were, walking around the yard and sharing ideas, when my daughter reached down and found a charm on the ground for a charm bracelet. Then she found another a few feet away, and then a 3rd a few feet from that. They still had the tags on them, as we had bought them for her birthday party the month before, but we had lost them somewhere between the store and the house during a snowstorm that night. Now here they were, out in the middle of the yard, hundreds of feet from the house, as we were trying to plan and continue the dream of planting more trees in the yard!

Again, it may seem trivial to you (and perhaps makes you wonder about us and why we keep losing so many things!) But to me, it was as if God was saying, "Yes, this is exactly what I want you to be doing, walking around the yard and planning where to put trees for the

future! Keep moving forward on the dreams that you and Lana shared, and keep going on with all that I have called you to do in your life! You'll be blessed as you do these things, just as will others when you're done doing them!"

I feel like Jesus keeps telling me, as He seemed to be telling John the Baptist, to keep my eyes open to the things that He's doing in the world, and to keep on trusting in Him, even in the face of all that I've lost.

I could share a dozen more stories from the past 4 months since Lana died where I've seen God at work in such small ways that it's changed my outlook on everything else going on around me, but I'll let these suffice to encourage you to keep *your* eyes open to the things God is doing in *your* life and the lives of those around you.

It reminds me of a grandfather who was out fishing with his grandson one day when the grandson asked if his grandfather had ever seen God. His grandfather gazed out across the lake where they were sitting and answered, "The older I get, the more I see Him everywhere I look."

Don't be discouraged when you don't see

God at work in your life the way you *think* He should be working. Don't give up on Him because things don't always go your way. Don't think for a minute that He doesn't love you just because you've lost something precious in your life. As the Bible says,

"He who did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all—how will He not also, along with Him, graciously give us all things?" (Romans 8:32).

As we head into Passion Week, this week before Easter when Jesus experienced some of the most intense pain and suffering that this world has to offer, remember that you're not alone. Jesus knows what it's like to suffer and die. He knows what it's like to lose those who are close to you, like He did when He lost his good friends Lazarus and John the Baptist. In the case of Lazarus, Jesus raised him back to life. In the case of John the Baptist, Jesus spoke words of encouragement so John could face death with faith. Regardless of the outcome, Jesus never left them alone.

In all things, remember that God really

Eric Elder

does love you and has a unique calling and purpose for your life. Keep your eyes open. The more you do, the more you'll see Him everywhere you look.

HAVING FAITH IN THE RESURRECTION

Happy Easter from our house to yours! We could all use a dose of faith, and Easter Sunday is a great day to get one. If you're struggling with trusting in God, even in the face of significant loss, this message is for you.



It's been almost 5 months since we took

this picture of me and my 6 kids, not knowing that just 2 weeks later my wife Lana would pass on to be with the Lord (she was inside resting when this picture was taken, as we were in the middle of a 10-hour filming session for a project to give hope to other families facing loss). Since that day, we've had to celebrate 7 major holidays without our beloved Lana: Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Year's Eve, Valentine's Day, 2 birthdays, and now Easter.

Each of these "firsts" without her this year could have easily overwhelmed me with grief if it weren't for my faith in Jesus Christ and the prayers of people like you.

But when Christmas rolled around, God reminded me why we celebrate the holiday at all: Christmas is the celebration of the birth of the baby who would one day defeat death forever! While celebrating Christmas was still hard without Lana, God's reminder of the reason we were celebrating it helped me to keep a balanced perspective on her life and her death...and her new life with Him.

The same holds true for Easter. While there's no doubt it's been hard to go through our Easter traditions this year without Lana,

God keeps reminding me of the purpose of *this* holiday, too. Easter is the day we remember that Jesus rose from the dead and, because He rose from the dead, we can be assured that all of us who have put our faith in Him will be raised from the dead, too, including my dear wife, Lana. Without Lana here with me this week, it's already been a different kind of holiday. I found myself videotaping the kids during an Easter egg hunt so that I could come home and show her the tape, only to remember that she wouldn't be there when I got home. But then God reminded me that it's quite likely that Lana's not missing a thing. The Bible says that we are surrounded by "a great cloud of witnesses," witnesses who have kept their faith to the end and who remind us to do the same.

"Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the

throne of God. Consider Him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart” (Hebrews 12:1-3).

As sad as it is that I’m having to celebrate Easter without Lana here with me in the flesh, the truth is that without Jesus, there would be no holiday to celebrate at all, and there would be no hope of Lana being raised from the dead either. So in the midst of my heartache, God keeps reminding me of the *whole* truth: not just the truth that she’s gone, but the truth that she’s gone to be with Jesus, and has been raised to a new life in spectacular glory. And having the *whole* truth in mind brings His peace to my heart. As the Bible says:

“Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men who have no hope” (1 Thessalonians 4:13).

We do have hope. True hope. Not a desperate clinging to the mere idea that maybe there’s some kind of life after this life, but a firm faith in the reality that there really is a

heaven, and that Jesus is really there, with my beloved Lana right alongside Him.

I don't want to try to prove to you today that Jesus rose from the dead, but I would like to remind you of the fact that He *did* rise from the dead and that His resurrection was witnessed by many here on earth. Not only that, but there were others in the Bible who were once dead who were also resurrected to new life and who have also appeared afterward to people here on earth, too!

As for Jesus' resurrection, and His appearance to people on earth, listen to some of these verses from the Bible:

"When Jesus rose early on the first day of the week, He appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom He had driven seven demons" (Mark 16:9).

"Afterward Jesus appeared in a different form to two of them while they were walking in the country" (Mark 16:12).

"Later Jesus appeared to the Eleven as they were eating; He rebuked them for their lack of faith

and their stubborn refusal to believe those who had seen Him after He had risen” (Mark 16:14).

“Afterward, Jesus appeared again to His disciples, by the Sea of Tiberias” (John 21:1).

“This was now the third time Jesus appeared to His disciples after He was raised from the dead” (John 21:14).

“After that, He appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all He appeared to me [Paul] ...” (1 Corinthians 15:6-8a).

What’s even more amazing to me and that I’ve been reminded of since Lana passed on to be with Jesus, is that I keep reading verses that I’ve read before, but that strike me now in a new light: that Jesus wasn’t the only one who died and rose again and appeared to people here on earth. Listen to this!

“And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, He gave up His spirit. At that moment, the

curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook and the rocks split. The tombs broke open and the bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. They came out of the tombs, and after Jesus' resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many people" (Matthew 27:50-53).

Not only was Jesus raised from the dead, but many others were raised as well who appeared to many people in Jerusalem. Even Peter, James and John saw people raised from the dead while Jesus was still living, when they saw Moses and Elijah standing on the mountaintop, talking with Jesus:

"After six days Jesus took with Him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. There He was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light. Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus" (Matthew 17:1-3).

Moses and Elijah were so real that Peter asked Jesus if he should build a shelter for each one of them, even though they had been

dead for thousands of years! It was a reminder to them, and to me, that God is not the God of the dead, but the God of the living, as Jesus once told the Saducees, the group of religious leaders in Jesus' day who didn't believe in the resurrection of the dead. Jesus said:

"Now about the dead rising—have you not read in the book of Moses, in the account of the bush, how God said to him, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not the God of the dead, but of the living. You are badly mistaken!" (Mark 12:26-28).

I share all this as a preface to what I'm about to share next. As with some of the other stories I've shared with you recently, I do so with hesitancy as I don't want you to think I've lost my mind. I'm also not sure what to think of them myself, for I realize I'm still in the midst of grief, and perhaps the grief is clouding how I think and see spiritual things right now. Then again, perhaps it's during our most difficult times that we're apt to be the closest to God and that we're able to best see what's really true!

On New Year's Eve, I was praying on my knees during a time of worship at a large Christian conference, celebrating the New Year with over 20,000 other believers. As I knelt there on the floor, I felt as if Lana was leaning down next to me. She whispered in my ear, as she had done many times before in my life: "I love you, Eric Elder." Her voice was as clear and soft and sweet as at any time I'd ever heard her say that to me before. I could almost feel her breath on the side of my face.

The next night I felt her presence again, this time as I lay in bed. I wrote in my journal the following morning:

"Father, thank You for Lana's love for me and mine for her. I miss her Lord. But how can I be anything but grateful to You for giving her to me to be my wife for so many years. This morning I woke up and literally felt her arms around me and heard her voice talking to me. I couldn't move for several minutes, it was so real, her touch and her words. I even thought I saw her when I turned my head. Thank You, Lord, for her continued presence, even if it is in my dreams, or in that state

between dreams and wakefulness. Thank You, Lord, and thank you, Lana."

I've reached up to heaven many times in the last few months and have taken hold of Lana's forearm and felt like she's taken hold of mine, only to find the arms of Jesus taking hold of both of us, as He promised that He would never leave us nor forsake us. He promised us that death would not separate us, for we had put our faith in Him. He promised us that we would live forever, not just at the end of time, but right now, in abundant life.

As Jesus told Martha in the Bible, after her brother Lazarus died:

"Your brother will be raised up."

To which Martha replied:

"I know that he will be raised up in the resurrection at the end of time."

To which Jesus replied:

"You don't have to wait for the End. I am, right

now, Resurrection and Life. The one who believes in Me, even though he or she dies, will live. And everyone who lives believing in Me does not ultimately die at all. Do you believe this?" (John 11:23-26, The Message).

Martha said she believed it. Lana said she believed it. And I can say I believe it, too.

As I shared at the celebration of Lana's life back in November, a good friend of mine sent me this text which helped me to see the reality of Lana's new life in heaven:

"It is so hard to be in this place, but it is good to know Lana is seeing our Father and Jesus face to face. She is touching them and hearing their voices, and talking to them about anything and everything she wants to. Somehow you, because you are one, are part of that. It takes my breath away."

When I think about it, really think about it, it takes my breath away, too.

This is the great hope that we have in the resurrection, not only that Jesus was raised from the dead, but that all of us who have put our faith in Him will be raised from the dead as well.

As Jonathan Edwards, the great evangelist, said at the funeral of David Brainerd, the great missionary:

“True saints, when absent from the body, are present with the Lord” (quoting from the Apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:8).

As Jesus Himself said to the thief on the cross who was dying next to Him and who had just put his faith in Jesus:

“I tell you the truth, today you will be with Me in paradise” (Luke 23:43).

Jesus really did rise from the dead. And those who put their faith in Him really will rise from the dead, too.

If you’ve never put your faith in Christ, let me encourage you, as Lana would encourage you, as Jesus Himself would encourage you: put your faith in Him today. Believe that He died for your sins. Believe that He’s forgiven you of your sins. And believe that He will raise you to new life with Him, starting right now and forever. As the Bible says:

Making The Most Of The Darkness

“That if you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved” (Romans 10:9).

As we close, let me share one more picture with you. This is a picture we took later on the same day as the picture I shared earlier, when Lana came out to join us again for the filming session. Although her body was weak, her spirit was as strong as ever.



At Christmastime I had a hard time deciding which picture to send out with our Christmas letters. I couldn't imagine sending out a

Christmas picture from now on without Lana in it. But when I looked at the picture of just me and the kids, I couldn't help but be thankful for all the blessings I have in my life because Lana's been a part of it. So I decided to send out both.

I share these 2 pictures today because they remind me that I have a choice to make every day. I can either look at what I've lost and be sad, or I can look at what I've been given because Lana's been a part of my life, and be glad. It's the same choice we all have to make, every day.

It's not a matter of looking at the glass as half-full or half-empty, but trusting God that He will provide us with just what we need when we need it. Zig Ziglar, a fellow Christian and famous motivational speaker who died just 2 weeks after Lana, once said that He teaches advanced math:

$$You + God = Enough$$

As the Bible says:

"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13, KJV).

During the last few weeks of Lana's life she was still helping me edit a book that we had been working on together on the life of St. Nicholas. After Lana died, I looked at the edits she had made in the margins of the book. In the story, one of our characters said:

"Don't cry because it's over. Smile because it was beautiful."

And in the margin of the book, Lana had written: "Amen!"

I felt like she was speaking to me again, and it was another reminder to me that we really are surrounded by "a great cloud of witnesses," including Lana, who are cheering us on.

Yes, I still cry. But I can smile, too. That's the great hope we have because of the resurrection.

I pray the Lord will bless you richly this Easter and in the days ahead. He really has risen! He has risen indeed!

REAPING A HARVEST

I'd like to share an incredible story with you today about something that happened to me just last week.

As many of you know, I run a website called *The Ranch* (www.theranch.org) to encourage people in their faith. On the day of Lana's funeral, the computer that runs our website happened to crash, too, and it's taken the past 10 months to completely rebuild it from scratch.

To be honest, I wasn't even sure if God wanted me to rebuild them. When Lana died, I laid everything down at God's feet, telling Him I was only going to pick up what *He* wanted me to pick up again. It was a good time to re-prioritize my life, to see what was important to Him and to me and to start over again with so many things.

But after a few months of contemplating

all of this, I was convinced that I was to keep pressing on with our online ministry.

One of the notes that convinced me came from a Jewish woman who had visited the website several years ago. On May 25, 2010, she wrote:

“I was sent to your site by accident, and have been reading the stories, and the one about Capernaum has me confused even more. The more I read, the more questions I have. I’ve never seen Jesus portrayed as this site does. I should tell you that I’m Jewish and I believe in the one true G-d of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

“I’ve read some of the stories on your site and have to wonder how they could be true, but I can’t stop reading them either, something just feels right about them. My heritage has ingrained in me that Jesus isn’t for my people. I can’t explain why, but I find some of the stories making me cry and I’m not one that cries easily. It doesn’t make sense. I don’t even know why I’m writing. I’m just really confused. How can this G-d of yours, be the G-d I’ve grown up with? Would Jesus love someone

who hasn't been faithfully reading the Torah for a long time?

"I'm sorry, I know this doesn't make any sense, and I've always been told that Jesus doesn't love Jews. But after reading some of the stories I just don't know what to believe. Is it possible he might love a Jew?"

After corresponding with her a few times over the next 3 years, I received this note from her on May 4, 2013:

"Dear Eric,

"I don't know if you will remember me or not, but I'm feeling led to tell you what's happened since we first communicated. I wrote you about 3 years ago, about completely believing in the G-d of my ancestors, but not so sure about the Christians claiming Jesus was the Messiah we've longed for all these millennium. Someone had accidentally forwarded me one of your Daily Thoughts. I couldn't get it out of my head....

"In the time that life has moved on for both of us, I've learned that I can believe Jesus is the Messiah.

He truly is the Son of G-d. I've also learned that I don't have to give up my Jewish heritage or traditions. I can be fully Jewish and a believer. I've found a wonderful Messianic Synagogue where I've accepted the Messiah Yeshua (Jesus Christ). I'm learning to read the scriptures and see them in a whole new way. I'm amazed how much of the Tanakh is in the New Testament, and how they complement each other.

"I was telling a friend at lunch today, when I'm quiet I can hear G-d speaking to my innermost being. I see Him working in my life in ways I could have never imagined. It is the most wonderful thing in the world. I truly believe the email that was sent to me by mistake was Divine appointment and no mistake....

"Thank you for your ministry and commitment to the L-rd. You truly have touched lives and made a difference. I'm living proof."

Reading her note made me cry and rejoice at the same time. I wrote back to tell her that her note, along with several other clear indications from God, had helped me to decide to

bring the website up again. Even if I never wrote another message, or added one more thing to it, I felt it was important to bring all of the content back online for people to read in the future and have their lives changed, too.

So I began rebuilding the website from the ground up, going back 15 years to when I first broadcast my first live message over the Internet, from my house in Illinois to a friend's house in Texas, back in the days before Skype, before Facebook, before Twitter and Pinterest and Instagram.

When I did my first live webcast, CNN, ABC and FoxNews had all just started doing their first live webcasts, too. The pope started broadcasting his weekly prayers from the Vatican the month before, and Billy Graham started broadcasting his evangelistic crusades the month after.

I just read this week that Google is celebrating their 15th anniversary this month, too, having launched their little startup company to index the web the same month that I launched *The Ranch*.

I tell you this to say that a lot of life has passed in the past 15 years, and I had a lot of content to convert, restore and bring up to

date from those early days 15 years ago. But as I've been reading the stories and messages I've posted over all these years, and watching the videos from even those earliest days, I've found myself crying, touched by the way God spoke through those messages to people back then, and how He could still speak to me through those messages today.

To my amazement, my old self was able to minister to my new self, because both of my "selves" were simply sharing and receiving words of life from the Word of God.

In those very first broadcasts, which you can now watch online again on our [Video Archives](#) page, I shared about keeping your eyes fixed on the goal, and that we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.

Well, this past year, I've been able to start reaping a harvest from all those years of planting. Notes like the one above from the Jewish woman are glimpses. On my 15th anniversary, I posted [another video](#) on my website, sharing another glimpse, this time of several trees that Lana and I have planted over the years which astoundingly have all begun to produce fruit just this year. And last week, I

got a glimpse of another harvest of another kind.

For 15 years, I have been producing content to put on *The Ranch* website, including books, music and videos. From the beginning, I felt it was important to offer these resources to people around the world on our website, free of cost, so they could access them anytime night or day.

But along the way, I've sometimes wondered if I've been shooting myself in the foot financially, *paying* to put these things online, and paying annual fees to keep the music and messages and videos streaming 24/7/365 days of the year when I could possibly be charging for them instead.

In an effort to expand our reach to as many people as possible, I've also started posting our books and music and videos other places online, on places like Pandora and iTunes, Amazon and Barnes & Noble, Spotify, Twitter, Tumblr and Facebook.

About a year and a half ago, some of these services have actually begun to pay *me* for streaming my content on their sites. On Pandora, for instance, every time someone creates a radio station (by typing in my name) to

listen to some of my music, I'm paid .00017 cents per "listen." It takes a lot of listens to earn a full penny! But over the past year and a half, I've been getting checks for \$20, \$30 or \$40 every 3 months, meaning my songs are being played over 70,000 times a month!

I've also helped other people record their music and put it on our website over the years. One of these artists is actually doing phenomenal on Pandora now, and is getting a check for over \$2,000 every 3 months. Their songs are being played nearly 5 million times a month!

I've been thrilled for them, and at the same time, just as happy to get my check for \$30 or \$40 every 3 months for my music, too.

But last week, when I opened my email from the company that pays my streaming royalties, there was not just 1 statement, but 2. In the first statement, they said I had earned \$38 from my songs for the quarter, and I said, "Thank You, Lord." But when I opened the 2nd statement, they said they were paying me an additional \$14,305!

Apparently, every time this other artist who is doing phenomenal was being paid as the performer of their songs, I was supposed to

be paid also as their record label, as I had helped them to record their music and publish it online. So the royalty company was catching up and paying me the royalties for all the time that this artist was being paid as well!

It couldn't have come at a better time, too, as I felt I was being squeezed on every side financially in the past 2 months. I hadn't been able to write any messages while I was rebuilding the website, and I hadn't been able to let anyone know of our financial needs either. At the same time, I felt God was clearly leading me to keep rebuilding the website, keep converting and restoring all of the content, and to continue making it all available free of charge to anyone who came to the website, day or night.

The Bible verse that the kids and I have been memorizing the past 2 weeks happens to be Matthew 6:33, which talks about not worrying about what you will eat or drink or wear, but to seek God first in all things:

“But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (Matthew 6:33).

I just kept putting that verse at the forefront of my mind, and kept rebuilding the website. As I was putting some of the final touches on the website on Thursday, that's when the surprise email came. The check was deposited in my bank account overnight. When I woke up early in the next morning, I couldn't believe the money was actually in the bank. What surprised me even more was what happened next.

I had decided to use the money to refill the bank accounts of my kids, as they had been having to use some of their inheritance money from Lana to pay for bills for college. If you'll remember, they had each miraculously received \$5,000 in answer to my seemingly impossible prayer on the day of Lana's funeral. As I began to transfer the \$14,305 into each of their accounts, I was astounded that I was able to fill their accounts back up to \$5,000 each, to within \$3.74! It made me cry again, not just the significance of receiving such a large check, but receiving the exact amount needed to bring each of their accounts back up to where they were 2 weeks

after Lana's funeral. Of course the money is helpful, but what was even more helpful to me was to know that God was still answering my prayers. After going through such a significant loss, it's easy to wonder sometimes if God even hears us. But this was one more reminder to me that He does hear us...and answers, too. Just because He doesn't answer every prayer the way we hope, we can trust Him and know that He hears us and does answer, sometimes in ways that go off the charts.

I just wanted to share this incredible story with you as encouragement to you to keep planting. Keep watering. Keep investing in people and projects and activities that bring glory to God. As the Bible says:

"Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up" (Galatians 6:9).

I wish Lana were here to see the blessings of what we're reaping right now, such as the Jewish woman who came to Christ or the fruit trees that are now bearing fruit or the music

we've recorded being played before millions and blessing us back at the same time.

But I have no doubt she's seeing, enjoying and perhaps even playing a significant role from her new home in heaven in bringing part of heaven to earth as we go along.

Thank You, Lord, that even out of tragedy You're able to bring fruit that lasts. And thank you, friends, for continuing to pray for us, believe in us and minister to us so we can keep on ministering to others.

I truly appreciate it, and I'm truly looking forward to this next season of planting and harvesting, as long as the Lord allows.

KEEPING JESUS AT THE CENTER

I spoke Thursday night at to a group of people at our church who gather each week and encourage one another through some of life's toughest struggles.

I shared with them how God had helped me to keep my life from spinning out of control during some of the toughest times as I was in the process of losing my sweet wife, Lana, to cancer last year.

One of the ways God helped me was by reminding me to keep Jesus at the center of my life. I'd like to share with you today what I shared with them on Thursday night. I hope you'll be encouraged to keep Jesus at the center of your life, too, no matter what you may be going through today. Here's the message as I shared it live with our group.

Thanks, Jason, and if you don't know me, my name's Eric Elder, and I've been a part of Care Groups before. I haven't been here for

this current season of Care Groups, but I used to lead, 2 years ago, a group for people overcoming homosexuality, and helping them with struggles with same-sex attraction and just how to walk through that.

Last spring, I was unfortunately in a group called GriefShare because my wife passed away last November from breast cancer.

And so I'm back again tonight just to share with you a little bit about my walk and keeping Jesus at the center of my life, even through some of these difficult times.

Let me just encourage you to open your Bible, if you have a Bible with you, and just read along with me. We're going to look at First John, starting in chapter 2. John says, in verse 15:

"Don't love the world's ways. Don't love the world's goods. Love of the world squeezes out love for the Father. Practically everything that goes on in the world—wanting your own way, wanting everything for yourself, wanting to appear important—has nothing to do with the Father. It just isolates you from him. The world and all its wanting, wanting, wanting is on the way out—but

*whoever does what God wants is set for eternity”
(1 John 2:15-17, The Message).*

Keeping Jesus at the center, for me, this past year and a half since we found out my wife had cancer and then she died about 9 months later, you know there were a lot of times when I felt like my world was spinning out of control.

She’s been more than just essential to my life. And this is wrong to say this, but in many ways she was my savior. Of course, Jesus is my Savior. He’s the One that redeemed me, saved me and is the One that’s going to carry me into heaven when I die.

But because I came out of homosexuality, back 28 years ago, really through an encounter with Christ, but it was also through the help of my wife, who was my girlfriend at the time. We had started dating and I had actually been involved with someone else at the time and I had to confess to her that not only was I involved with someone else at the time that I started dating her, but I was involved with another man.

That was an excruciating 2-hour conversation, of me not saying anything, and her won-

dering if I was an ax-murderer, or what I had to confess that was so terrible. But as I shared that with her, she loved me so unconditionally, and she was so gracious to me, and she just treated me with such kindness and gentleness. Just the way she walked me through that, and through temptations and through life, I can really say she saved me from a lot.

So I know that Jesus is the center of my life. He has been since I put my faith in Him. As one of my friends said about her husband, she said, “Jesus is like my cake, and my husband is the icing on my Jesus cake.”

I said, “Oh, that’s really nice. That was Lana for me. Jesus was my cake, and Lana was the icing on my Jesus cake.”

But as she started going through cancer and the doctors were saying that it was incurable, and they didn’t know how long she had to live, but it wasn’t long, I started seeing that maybe Jesus and Lana had sort of merged roles in such a way that the thought of losing her felt like I was losing my cake, too.

I don’t know if it’s right or wrong, because I know we’re supposed to be so intertwined—you know, it would be sad if she died and I

felt nothing—so I know God gives us those kinds of relationships for a reason. But there was a time there, just a few months before she died, where we were having some of these hard conversations about what the future would look like, and what I was going to do if she did pass on.

She was talking to me about remarriage and things like that, and I didn't want to hear it. That was the farthest thing from my mind. I was not interested in even entertaining the thought. I just wanted her, and I wanted her alive.

And yet a few weeks into that cycle of conversations, somewhere from the back of my mind, as my life was spinning out of control, and what I thought was my center was being taken away from me, I started gravitating in my mind back to some other things that gave me some peace and some happiness and some comfort, and that included former homosexual relationships from over 25 years earlier.

And I just thought, you know, I have no interest at all in getting married again. But there was a part of me that said, "But if there was a man that came along, what would I do then?" Because it didn't involve the same kind of

commitment, the same kind of relationship, the same kind of work, it just was sort of fun. At least that was my memory of it from long ago.

For about 2 weeks, this just really puzzled me and it just weighed on me, because I was like, “This has been over 25 years since I’ve had any serious consideration to that at all.” God had just broken that off of me in a wonderful way and given me a wife and 6 children of our own. So to have these thoughts again and go, “Wow, why would I even be going there? Why would I go back there?”

I had a conversation with Jason and he said that it makes some sense, that when your life is being threatened in these ways and something’s being threatened to be taken away from you, you sort of gravitate towards what brought you peace and comfort in the past. And I knew he was right, but it bothered me that it was even on my mind and was even—do you know what I mean? I mean it was like, “Oh, my gosh, I don’t even want to have that thought again.”

It was about 2 weeks of struggling with this and just trying to work it out in my brain.

Then I woke up one Sunday morning, and

I just started reading Romans chapter 1, and I read the passage that really changed my life, where Paul talks about homosexuality and talks about how the end of that is not going to be good for us. That is a passage that changed my life, and it was a hinge and a turning point in everything regarding my faith, as well as my sexuality.

So to read that passage again, I was just like, “OK, that’s right. That’s right. This was in my past. This is not going to be part of my future.”

Then I came to church, and Pastor Baker was talking about the topic again that morning, and he just was talking about it and he said, “You can justify it, you can rationalize it, you can go through all kinds of arguments about it”—and I’m paraphrasing him here, I don’t want to put words in his mouth, but if you’ve heard him speak on this, you know where he stands—but he said, “You know, the bottom line is that if God says it’s not good for you, then it’s not going to go well for you.”

He says, “If there’s anything in the Bible, whether it’s adultery or fornication or sex outside of marriage or before marriage, or any

topic in the Bible, if God says this is not good for you, the bottom line is: it's just not going to go well for you."

That was like number 2 that day where I was like, "Whew. That's right, I don't even have to think about this. The Bible is very clear, and it's been very clear in the past."

And then later that night, I had a conversation with a friend and his wife who had a similar diagnosis a few years ago, and he was worried that she might die. He said something that shocked me, he said, "I was wondering if maybe, if God took her, that He was then releasing me and I could go and pursue homosexuality."

And I was like, "You can't do that!" Somehow hearing it from someone else, the very thoughts that I was considering, but hearing them speak it as if that was what God was really going to say and I was like, "Now I know it's wrong. I just didn't care." You just get to the point where, "God, I know this is wrong, I understand it's wrong, but I don't care. I just want to do what I want to do," which is what John says:

“The world and all its wanting, wanting, wanting...”

You just want to do what you want to do. But if you do what *God* wants you to do, that’s when you’ll have eternal life. That’s when things will go well for you.

So those 3 things for me: just reading the Word that morning and finding Romans chapter 1 again, just hearing the pastor and coming to church and getting reminded again, “You know, it’s just not going to go well for you.”

And then hearing my friend just speak the words that I was thinking. Just to verbalize those and say, “Wow.”

After 2 weeks of just being perplexed about this, it just cleared up. It totally cleared up and it’s not come back again. I just needed that though, I needed to hear from God in some very clear ways.

Then when Lana did pass away, I didn’t have that struggle. I didn’t have that wrestling anymore, because I had invited God in, and I said, “God, I want to do what *You* want, and I really want Your will more than anything else. And as bad as this hurts, I am not going to go

back into something that would hurt me even more, because You don't want me to do that. You want me to have life, and life abundant."

And sometimes, as we've learned in GriefShare, when someone close to you dies like that, it puts a wall up between you and people around you, because they don't really know what that relationship was like.

They don't know, for instance, this is the first time I've ever shared this publicly, how Lana has been so vital, not just my best friend, my lover, my everything to me, mother of my kids, my homeschool teacher of all my kids. Not just all those important things, but how she helped me in this area of sexuality. And then to lose that, it's hard for me to explain to other people.

And so there's this wall that sort of goes up between you and other people to where you're not really able to let them in, and they're not able to enter in, because they don't know what that has meant to you and what you have lost.

But in GriefShare they said that God knows what it's like to lose someone close to Him. And God lost a son. God knows what it's like to weep. And Jesus lost his best friend

in Lazarus. And *they* can enter in with you. And even if other people can't, you can still invite God in, and let Him come into your life. Let Him be with you and fill those lonely places.

God really has done that. I still miss Lana terribly. I wish she was here. I would take her back in a heartbeat. But God has really come in. He really has walked me through this. He really has helped me in so many ways.

I want you to look at another passage with me. Then we'll go to a song, where you can just meditate on what it means to you to keep Jesus at the center. This is in Hebrews, just back a few pages, Hebrews chapter 12, starting in verse 2. The writer of Hebrews says this:

“Keep your eyes on Jesus, who both began and finished this race we’re in. Study how He did it. Because He never lost sight of where He was headed—that exhilarating finish in and with God—He could put up with anything along the way: cross, shame, whatever. And now He’s there, in the place of honor, right alongside God. When you find yourselves flagging in your faith, go over that story again, item by item, that long litany of hostility

He plowed through. That will shoot adrenaline into your souls!

“... My dear child, don’t shrug off God’s discipline, but don’t be crushed by it either. It’s the child He loves that He disciplines; the child He embraces, He also corrects. God is educating you; that’s why you must never drop out. He’s treating you as dear children. This trouble you’re in isn’t punishment; it’s training, the normal experience of children. Only irresponsible parents leave children to fend for themselves. Would you prefer an irresponsible God? We respect our own parents for training and not spoiling us, so why not embrace God’s training so we can truly live? While we were children, our parents did what seemed best to them. But God is doing what is best for us...”
(Hebrews 12:2-3, 5b-10a, The Message).

I felt like, as my life was spinning out of control, that God had to sort of correct me, discipline me, bring me back in. And it was a discipline that I welcomed. I didn’t *want* Him to leave me alone. I needed Him. And the truth is, we all need Him.

Maybe you’re at a place where you feel like you’re either being crushed by God because

He's either giving you more than you think you can handle or you feel like you're being disciplined by Him or maybe you feel like you're being punished. I want you just to not think about it that way.

If there's some path that you're not on a good path, God can come in and correct you, if you're willing to let Him, and just let Him help you get back onto the good path.

God has so much for us. He wants us to live. He wants us to live an abundant life. He has great plans and purposes for you and for me. I just want to encourage you to keep Jesus at the center of your life.

Let's pray:

Father, thank You for these words, God, and allowing me to share some of the crazy things that have happened to me over the last year and a half. God, I just thank You for walking me through it. I thank You for keeping me on Your path. I thank You, Lord, when I was tempted to veer, that You brought me back. God, I pray for each person listening to this tonight (and reading and listening later!), that You would keep them on Your good path, Lord. Help them to keep walking with You, Lord. Help them to keep their eyes

fixed on Jesus, the Author and Perfecter of their faith. Lord, help them to know Your great love for them. And I pray most of all You'd help them to overcome the world, Lord, and not let the world overcome them. We pray this in Jesus' name, Amen.

P.S. You can visit [The Ranch](#) and search the website to listen to my son Lucas sing [Jesus at the Center](#).

LIVING A LIFE WITH NO REGRETS

We had a wonderful “Night of Worship” here at *The Ranch* last night! Thanks to those of you who came and to those of you who prayed for the night to be a blessed one. It was!

Thanks, too, for your gracious notes from places like the Philippines and South Africa, saying you wish you could be here. We hope to make this an annual event, so perhaps in the future we can meet many more of you in person as well.

During the night I shared 3 video clips of my dear wife Lana that were filmed last year on November 1st, 2012, just 2 weeks before she passed away. She had a message that I felt was perfect for the evening.

So as we were worshipping outside by the bonfire, under the stars and with a half-moon shining, we projected the video of Lana onto the side of the barn and enjoyed hearing what

she had to say to us about “living a life with no regrets.”

I’d like to share those 3 clips with you today as well. I believe they’ll be particularly helpful to you if you’re wrestling with a big decision and don’t know what to do, or if you’re just wondering how you can make the most of the life God has given you.

This video was shot by a film team who heard about our situation and offered to spend the day with us at our home, just to capture some memories for us and to offer hope to others who might face a similar loss in the future. Lana agreed, and we spent an amazing day with Drew Waters, Josh Spake and by Skype, Josh’s wife Candice.

Although the film team will be putting all the footage they shot that day into another format, editing it for their own purposes as background for an upcoming movie called *Nowelle Vie* (which means “new life” in French) they’ve graciously allowed us to use the raw footage for other purposes like this.

I’ve posted these 3 clips in 1 video on our website called [*Lana Elder - Living Life With No Regrets*](#), the entire transcript of which follows...

CANDICE: A lot of people in your position are very fearful, very scared, very worried, but you have come at this from a whole stance of hope, which is very, again I use the word profound. Because it's unusual, and it's so—you can just see how God is working and continues to work in your life. And so, describe what that peace is like for you and how it's helped you battle fear, anxiety, being scared and stuff like that.

LANA: Well, I've always tried to live my life with no regrets. And so, whenever I had a big decision to make, I would think—obviously I would pray about it and ask God what's best, and then I would just have to say, "Will I regret having made this decision?" Especially ones like—I went to college, I met my husband Eric in college and we got married shortly after college and I was pregnant with my first child and had to decide whether I would stay at home or work, and staying at home meant a severe cutback in pay. But I wanted to live a life of no regrets, so I decided I would rather stay home and be with my child, than have the money and have some other luxuries. And it's a decision I've never regretted. So I've been a stay-at-home mom

all my life—or since college. I know at times some people would wonder why I would get a college degree and then not even use it and stay home. But I remember thinking, even as I was making that decision, if something were to happen to me or one of my children—a death—I would have regretted going to work. So I was really glad—I mean, not glad, but when I found this out—it just made me glad that I hadn't taken my life to go to work and missed seeing my kids grow up. It just changes everything. My kids, I just love to be around them. And so, having made that decision gives me great hope for situations like this that I made the right decision. It made some impact on our finances, but the other impact is, I think, much greater—the impact it had on my kids' lives, because I wouldn't have been able to take them to a lot of the programs like AWANA scripture memorization. I would have been too busy. And my kids, I love them, and they have great hope in God as well and love Jesus, and I think that's because of the way they were brought up.

CANDICE: How do you describe the peace that passes all understanding in your

life? What does that feel like? Describe that from your perspective.

LANA: The peace that surpasses all understanding is just really being with God. And when you're reading scripture, or in worship, it's so wonderful to have that peace. And even having made decisions, and seeing how they impact your life over the years, how that decision that impacts your life, and you know that it's a good decision, that just gives you great peace, knowing that you did the right thing.

ERIC: Can I just have her clarify one thing, too, that not everybody chooses to stay home, if she just could talk about that, that this was the vision for what you [Lana] wanted to do, but other people are called to do other things, because she believes that strongly. I just don't want to give the wrong impression. So maybe you could just say something about that.

LANA: Absolutely. Yes, I do want to clarify that. Not everyone is called to stay at home. There are certainly many instances where women are called to go to work, or both parents can go to work, but for me, it was really just what I was called to do. That's

just how God created me, just to be a mother and stay home with my kids.

CANDICE: I think that's wonderful. The reason it's wonderful is because I think you mentioned a couple things: One is that you would have been too busy to go to AWANA or scripture memory class and that greatly impacted your kids, and 2, you mentioned that, in situations like this, you've been able to spend your life with your kids. That's what you wanted. And I think it just makes it perfect the point that you *are* in God's will and right where you need to be, where He has you in this pursuit of what you've dedicated your life to, and so I commend you for that. I think that you have fulfilled that calling beautifully. Another question I had for you is, I wanted to see what some of the messages are that you have for Eric and your kids, so let's start with Eric. What is something that you would like to share with him? What is a message you have for him?

LANA: Eric is just incredible. He's incredibly talented and can play the piano, write music, do carpentry work, he knows everything about the computer, and he's incredibly gifted. So I just want him to press on, keep going

with a lot of the projects he's already started. I know he has a couple that he and I have been working on together—the St. Nicholas project, talking about the life of Christ and how much he [Nicholas] was a believer in Jesus and that's how he became so famous as St. Nicholas, our Santa Claus right now. So I just want him to continue to press on with things. I know he will and God will use him greatly. I love him incredibly much. He's my prince and he takes incredible care of me and the kids. So I'm not worried. That's another thing that makes passing into heaven at this time just so peaceful, because I know the kids are going to be in great hands, with Eric taking care of them.

CANDICE: Thank you for sharing that Lana. What about for the kids? What message do you want to tell the kids?

LANA: My kids have been just wonderful. I was blessed, again, to be able to homeschool, and Eric encouraged me to do that as well [because Lana wanted to try it]. He was a great encouragement, and my kids, I just know that they love Jesus. That's been great comfort to know that they're going to do great in life in whatever God has called

them to do. I don't know what they're called to do, each of them yet, but I just know that they'll do well, because everything they do, they do so well. I have no fear of anything going wrong, I just know they're going to be blessed for the rest of their lives. I had 6 blessings. They're awesome. I'm going to miss them.

CANDICE: What dreams do you have for your kids?

LANA: My dreams for my kids is just that they would love the Lord with all their heart, soul, mind and strength. And they do that, and so whatever dreams that they have, I know that God will help them fulfill them, whatever it is. Because if they keep seeking God, they're going to be on the straight path. They'll do what God's called them to do and so that's my dream, that they would do that, they would just keep loving Jesus, and loving each other and loving their neighbors.

CANDICE: Lana, what dreams do you have for Eric?

LANA: Pretty much the same thing. Like I said, he's incredibly talented, and gifted and can do anything, and he has great dreams for some projects that he's working on, and I just

pray that he can just continue to fulfill those dreams and do what God's called him to do. I know that God has a unique plan for my family, but for everyone, God has a unique plan, and I know that if they just keep following Jesus, and asking Him for direction, they'll do well. And your dreams [Eric] will come true.

ERIC: They have. They already have.

LANA: I know. Love you, buddy.

DREW: I've got a question for you. What do you hope that people watching this get from it?

LANA: I would hope that the people that are watching this, that they would know that they have a unique calling in life. Everyone God created so uniquely, like everybody has different fingerprints, just so unique. So I would hope that people watching this would know that God created them uniquely, that He has different dreams for them as well. But if they keep following God, or asking God for direction, that God will show them what their unique place is in the world, what they're uniquely designed or created to do, that they would just keep seeking God, and keep seeking the answers to what they feel called to do.

DREW: Lana, I've got another question

for you, and this is a very direct question, so I apologize for it, but you don't seem fearful of death. Why is that?

LANA: I'm actually not fearful of death and I believe, the only thing I can attribute it to, is just having followed God for so long, waking up and talking to Him each day, throughout the day, He's helped me through many things. And since I am talking to Him all the day long, death will be just like meeting Him and talking to Him all day long—but without my kids and family [laughter]. I don't know why I don't fear death, but God has been such a loving God to me and I feel like I've been so blessed throughout my life, like I said earlier, about living my life with no regrets, and just doing everything I've wanted to do. Even the past years, I've gone everywhere I've wanted to go. I wanted to go to Israel and see the Holy Land and I got to go there 5 years ago, and then miraculously got to go 2 years after that. So I've been to Israel twice and I'm so blessed to have done that. So I've done everything I've wanted to do, and I don't have—there's not like one place I'd like to go see still or anything that I still need to accomplish. So I feel like I've done everything, and

I can go see Jesus at any time. It would be fine. But I know it's hard for people who I'm leaving behind. Since my diagnosis, I've tried to live my life like I'm going to live. I didn't want to live like I'm going to die. I wanted to live like I'm going to live. So that's all I've done, just keep going on with the normal day. But I know it's hard for the people that are left behind, because I feel their pain. I feel sorry for them, because I would like to be with them as well. But also, I just love Jesus, and I'm looking forward to that day, too.

ERIC [later that day]: They just asked me to say a few words to you, and there's just not enough words to express what you've meant to me. I remember on our wedding day, I just said to you that you were a gift from God to me and I wanted to treat you as a gift. You've been just a super gift, and I feel like I've unwrapped layer after layer of you. You've just given yourself to me in everything. You have sacrificed so much for me, for the ministry, for the kids—just everything. You're a giver, and you've just given your life away. And I can't think of anything better you could do with your life. You don't just live your life, you give your life. That means so much to

me, and I know that's going to mean a lot to our kids, just to know that your life was not lived in vain, and that your death won't be in vain if you do die. If you're healed, hallelujah! That won't be in vain, either!

I gave this to Lana—it's a little plaque—for our anniversary back in April this year, and it says, "And they lived happily ever after." It just reminds me of the joy that we've had together. You know, I'm going to cry a lot if you pass away. But I felt like God said, "Tearfulness is OK. Fearfulness is not." So I think it's OK to be tearful, but I'm not fearful, either.

And this just came in the mail today. I just got 2 more tiles for your collection here and I just wanted to unwrap this with you. This is a quote from Alfred Lloyd Tennyson. It says:

*"If I had a flower for every time I thought of you,
I could walk through my garden forever."*

It's so true. I'm sure there won't be a day that goes by that I don't think about you. And this is really from me, and the kids and from everybody that knows you, and it just says, "You are loved." And you are.

LANA: You're really good at expressing your love to me all the time. You're just always so kind and so generous. He [Eric] makes it easy for me to love him because he's so much like Jesus, always thoughtful and kind and he puts me above himself all the time. He wants to make sure I'm taken care of. So I just appreciate these things, too, his gracious, kind gifts, thoughtful gifts, just incredible.

ERIC: Thanks. And I'm not like Jesus, but I was thinking just last week as you were just laying in bed and the pain was on you, and even in your pain you were writing a message to our subscribers in different countries and giving them hope and encouraging them with your hope. And I was just thinking of Jesus on the cross, just going through the pain and suffering for each one of us, and I thought, "Wow, *you're* like Jesus! I'm married to someone like Jesus!" So I'm just so thankful to you and I just love you so much.

LANA: Thanks, thanks a lot. I love you.

JOSH: Let me ask you a couple questions. To your children, what is your wife's legacy?

ERIC: For my children, just to say what Lana's legacy is, I think her heartbeat is to give. She wants to give, give and give some

more. And I think it's hard for her to do. I think she's struggled with it because we have so many needs. We all have needs. The kids have needs, and Lana has needs, and yet she's just given so much. We give money away and we give things away and she gives food away and she just gives away. I feel like she's a giver. I know that's her heart, even for some of the projects we're working on now, just to tell, for instance, the St. Nicholas story, of a man who gave his life away, too, because he was following the One who gave His life for all of us. So I think that's her legacy. I feel like she's following Jesus and that she denies herself many times so that she can give, and I don't think that you can get better than that.

JOSH: How long have you all been married?

ERIC: We've been married 23 years, and we've known each other 28 years, and they've been super, all super. I have no regrets. I can't complain that she's being taken now. How could I complain to God and say, "God, why did you take her?" All I should be able to do is say, "God, thank You! How could You possibly love me so much that You would give me 28 years with her?" So I'm sad. I'm dis-

appointed if you go. But I cannot complain, for one single day.

JOSH: How is she not replaceable?

ERIC: How is she not replaceable? I can't think of how she *is* replaceable. I can't imagine anything—I mean there is nothing that could replace her. She's a unique creation of God—one of a kind. There's no replacing any one of us. We're all here for a reason, we're all here for a purpose, just like Lana. There are lots of people that we love, lots of people that are friends, lots of people that do a lot for us and we're really close to, and I don't think any of us are replaceable.

JOSH: I'm going to ask one more question. So the heart of the story of *Nouvelle Vie* is finding life. And we don't know what's going to happen, right? You know God is a miraculous God and God could really pull through, or He may choose not to, and whatever it is, He's glorified in all things. If God chooses to take your wife from you, how do you persevere? How do you go on?

ERIC: *Nouvelle Vie* means “new life,” and for me, as a Christian, I've already been given a new life. And some people say, even if Lana dies, we're going to pray and raise her from

the dead. And I love that. I would love to do that. I have prayed that for some of my friends in the past, too. But the truth is, I know what being dead is like, and I've already been dead, and Jesus has already raised me from the dead. I've now got a new life and now I'm going on. I'm going to have a new life forever because of Jesus and what He's done for me. So we could pray that Lana would be raised from the dead, and that might happen, but the truth is that she's already been raised from the dead. She knows what a dead life is like and she's been given a new life already, and that's going to continue on for eternity. So to me, that's part of the hope of *Nouvelle Vie*, that it speaks about the new life that we can have right now, today, starting this very day. You don't have to wait till you die to be raised from the dead. You can be resurrected. You can be redeemed. You can be restored, anytime you choose to just put your faith in Christ, to ask Him to forgive you of your sins. He will take you to be with Him forever in heaven, and give you a whole new life here on earth. So that's the hope that I have, and the courage that I have, that your passing [Lana] really is "passing." As the

Bible says, it's a sleeping, you fall asleep, then you'll be woken up by Jesus when He comes back for us. It'll be a short sleep for you, and maybe a long few years for us, but in the light of eternity, it'll just be a blink of an eye. And I can't wait to see you again.

BUILDING A SAFETY NET

You might think that walking across the grand canyon on a tightrope without a safety net is crazy. But there's something crazier still, and that's doing life without a safety net.

I recently spoke at one of our former churches about how you can build a safety net in your own life to keep from losing your faith in God, even in the face of significant loss. I've posted the audio of that message I gave that morning on our website called *Building A Safety Net*, the transcript of which follows...

Thanks, Tony. I made it through the first hour, but I'll tell you, I had to grab a box of Kleenex to do it.

This is the first time I've stood up and preached on a Sunday morning since 10 months ago when I preached at my wife's funeral. Just putting on my suit this morning—

this is the same suit and shirt I wore preaching her funeral—and just putting it on again today, I said, “OK, God, I think I’m ready.” But can I ask you to pray for me, too, because I need all the help I can get. Let’s pray.

“Father, we thank You so much for walking us through the tragedies of life and just being there for us. Thank You for other believers, and especially for people in this room who have walked our family through this as well. I just pray that You would speak to each one of our hearts, Lord, that You would just help remind us that You are there, that You are with us, and that You can walk us through anything we go through. In Jesus’ name, Amen.”

When Ron asked me to preach and to join in this series that you’re doing on “Who We Are,” and he asked me in particular to preach on *this* message, “Who We Are As The Church,” I was very happy to say yes. Because I am a strong believer in the church. And the church of course is not just the building and the bricks and the place where we gather, the church is the body of believers,

the church is you and me, doing life together, that is the church, and that is who we are.

So I just want to talk to you today about the value of the church, the power of the church, and of course, you're here this morning, so that means you're already reaping the benefits of being part of the church. But I also want to encourage you this morning to get involved in a deeper way with some of the people around you. Because when we do life together, with close friendships, that's when we really grow the most, that's when we can support each other the most, and that's when we can be supported when we need help as well.

We're all going to go through losses. You might not have had a loss like I had this past year, but we all suffer losses in all kinds of ways: loss of job, loss of relationship, loss of health, loss of finances, or as in my case, loss of someone that I dearly love. It's a part of life and we're all going to go through it. So my encouragement for you today—this is my bottom line of the whole thing and then I'll expand it—my bottom line is just get plugged in to some other believers so you can be there for them and they can be there for you. And

that way you can get through these tragedies without losing your faith in Jesus. OK? Let's start off.

Do you recognize this guy [showing photo of a man walking across a tight rope]?

It's Nik Wallenda, who 3 months ago walked across a gorge near the Grand Canyon, live on international television—without a safety net underneath him.

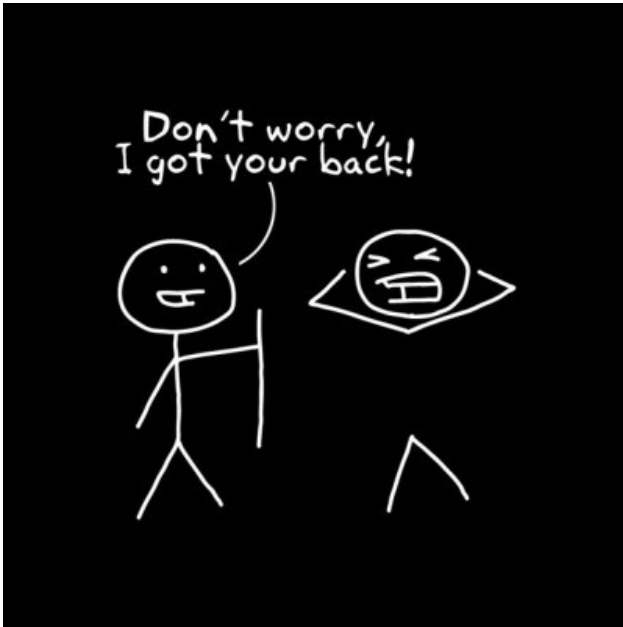
Just last week, [the video clip of his walk](#) was voted the number one moment on TV for 2013. Of all the different—the final episode of “The Office,” or whatever other moments there were—this was the number 1, the moment that people most were riveted by—as they watched this man, live on television, walk across a tiny wire—never been done before—across the Grand Canyon, without a safety net below him.

And you might say, “That guy is crazy.” And you would be right! But I'll tell you, there's something crazier, and that's doing life without a safety net. And I want to talk to you this morning about how you can build a safety net under you. Because the truth is, even though he had no physical net, that man had a lot of people around him.

As you watch him do that, and you watch the tape of it, there are people on one side of the canyon, people on the other side, he's been training for years, there were people talking to him in his headset, warning him about the wind, making sure things were going all right, talking to him the entire way. He's talking to God. He's talking to his team. This man was prepared. He did not do life alone, and *you* cannot do life alone. It's even crazier, if you think you can do life on your own, and I'll tell you some stories about me over these last couple years, particularly this last year and a half of walking through and how I just could not make it on my own.

A lot of things helped me through, my faith in Christ being the chief among them, but the believers in the body, coming around me was right up there and really helped make this so that I didn't lose my faith as well.

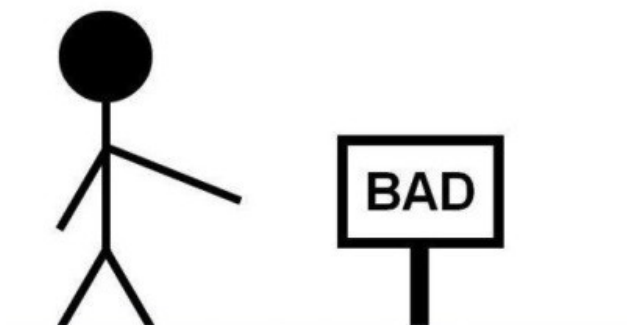
This reminds me of a little cartoon. My kids love these cartoons and show them to me. I love this one.



This shows 2 stick figures and the one says, “Don’t worry, I got your back,” and he’s holding the other stick figure’s back in his hand.

Who’s got *your* back? And whose back have *you* got? That’s what we’re talking about today. When we were searching for these, I found a few others. I just throw these in for your entertainment.

**Well that's not a
good sign.**



The next one says, “Well, that’s not a good sign,” and the sign says, “BAD.”



The next one: “Stop, you’re under a rest!”
If you’re not a musician, that’s a quarter-note rest, and he’s under “a rest,” so as a musician, that’s actually funny.



And you might not like this, but I found this humerus. This is your humerus [pointing to forearm].

Anyway, when I talk about grief and death, it can sometimes be a heavy topic, so I hope you don't mind if I lighten it up at some moments.

Let's open our Bibles, and I would like you to look at 3 scriptures today. The first one is in 1 Peter chapter 2. It's in the New Testa-

ment near the very end, 1 Peter chapter 2. We're going to look at 3 different passages that talk about doing life together. This first one in 1 Peter chapter 2 is talking about coming together as "living stones." This is, to me, the picture of the church. It's not the brick and mortar that we see, it's us as a people, we are living stones. 1 Peter chapter 2, verses 4 and 5, says this:

"As you come to Him, the Living Stone [that's Jesus]—rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to Him—you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 2:4-5).

We are living stones. We are the church, not a building, but a people.

Let's look at Hebrews, chapter 10, verse 25, also in the New Testament there, towards the end. This is a verse that talks about the importance of gathering together—being with other believers. Hebrews, chapter 10, verse 25, says this:

"Let us not give up meeting together, as some are

in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching” (Hebrews 10:25).

It’s very straightforward. Get together with other believers so you can encourage each other. Don’t forsake the assembly of the believers. Keep plugging in to other people’s lives.

And the 3rd verse is in Ecclesiastes, back in the Old Testament, Ecclesiastes chapter 4, verses 7 through 12. This is a passage that’s often read at weddings because it talks about 2 people coming together and helping one another, but I think it also equally applies to us as believers, coming together. That’s why I want to read it to you. Ecclesiastes 4, verses 7 through 12:

“Again I saw something meaningless under the sun: There was a man all alone; he had neither son nor brother. There was no end to his toil, yet his eyes were not content with his wealth. For whom am I toiling,’ he asked, ‘and why am I depriving myself of enjoyment?’ This too is meaningless—a miserable business! Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their

work: If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up! Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken” (Ecclesiastes 4:7-12).

And when people read this at weddings, they talk about the 3 strands being a couple, the husband and wife, and God being the 3rd strand, and that is not easily broken. It applies just as well to us, as a body of believers—2 or 3 or many of us gathered together—are not easily broken. We can help each other. We can help each other up. And we can walk with each other through this thing called life.

I just want to tell you what’s helped me through. As I mentioned, it’s been 10 months since I preached at Lana’s funeral. And I can say that over all my years—I’ve gone to church all my life, and church is wonderful and I still go to church every week—but I have grown the most, and I have been loved and supported the most and I have been encouraged in my faith the most, when I have gotten involved in a small group.

When I get together on a weekly basis with a few—6, 8, 10, 12—other people and study the Word of God, pray with each other, share with each other, that is by far the place I have grown the most in my faith, where I have been most encouraged, most supported and I have been able to use my gifts to encourage others as well.

If you're not in a small group right now, I encourage you to consider doing it—and not just consider it, but do it! But at least consider it. Give it a thought.

I want to walk you through some of the ways that small groups have helped me. And your small group might be a structured thing that gets together. It might be one of your best friends who is a believer that you talk to across the country or around the world by Skype. I'm not limiting the church to just what's here, but what you've got here is awesome. And there are people that are glad to lead you and walk through life with you here, That one-on-one, right-here-in-person connection is so wonderful. So I want to encourage you to do that as well.

At first, when Lana and I discovered the lump on her breast, she wasn't going to get it

tested. She had had this before, and different kinds of tests, and she would go and the doctors would have her tested and tested again and it never turned out to be anything—just false positives, no big deal. And so this is what she felt like again, she felt “no, this probably isn’t anything.” But to me it was different. Something had changed and this was a different thing. I was very concerned about it but she wasn’t wanting to go talk to anyone about it.

We went to our small group one night and we split up—the guys went into the kitchen to talk a little bit and the ladies stayed in the living room—and as I left for the kitchen, I leaned over to her, and the ladies were sitting there, and I said to Lana, “Now are you going to share with them what we’re praying about?” And all the ladies turned and looked at her.

She said, “I wasn’t, but I guess I am now!” I left and she shared with them, and they really encouraged her, just through their life experiences and some friends of theirs, to just at least do it, “for our sake, just go do it.” And I’m so glad they did, because they discovered it *was* cancerous. They discovered it had already spread throughout her body, that

it was Stage 4, triple-negative [breast cancer], and in their words, “incurable.”

Having that knowledge ahead of time could seem like a terrible death blow to your life and your faith, but it was a gift from God, to be able to know that and walk through this, knowing that there was not a good chance that she was going to make it through.

But it started with our small group. You may think, “You know, I can do this on my own.” But we can’t. We help each other. We need each other.

That small group walked us through. They cried with us, they helped us at doctor’s appointments and they were there at the funeral. They helped participate in the service. And they’ve been there for our family since.

After she died, I got in another small group. It was called GriefShare, which you have here at the church, too—a terrific program. And I was so hungry for this program. I couldn’t wait, every week, to go to GriefShare, where we were with about a dozen other people. We just watched a video. You could talk if you wanted. You didn’t have to talk if you didn’t want to, which was perfect,

because some days I wanted to talk and some I didn't want to say a thing.

It was hard. It was extremely hard. One of the lessons was to go home and write down all the things that you've lost with the death of your loved one. And I just got so choked up. I thought, "I would fill up *pages* of what I've lost. I do not want to do this, God! I can't take it." Just to sit there and list out every single thing I lost when I lost Lana. A homeschool teacher of my kids, my wife, my best friend, my intimate lover. I thought, "God, I can't do this."

But the next day I went home and I said, "OK, God. They said to do it. They said this is good for me. I'm going to trust them." And I did. I started writing down the things that I mentioned to you.

I got to the end of the page and I was actually done. There were some big ones on my list. But I looked at it and I said, "This is what I've lost. I still have my kids. I still have my health. I still have my ministry. I still have my friends. I still have my faith." The list of things I still had was huge. And it just helped me to go through that exercise.

It was hard work. But every week I was

like, “OK, give me more God.” Because if you don’t deal with your grief now, it’s going to come out later and probably in ways you don’t want it to.

You can go through GriefShare any time. You can go through it several times. There were people in our class, one had lost her mother years ago and she was just now starting to process it. She said, “I need to deal with this, because it’s coming out in the way I treat my kids, the way I treat my work, the way I treat my bosses and friends. I just need to deal with it.”

Recovery doesn’t mean that you’re going to “get over it.” Rick Warren—some of you may know him and he wrote *The Purpose Driven Life*—he lost his son to suicide earlier this year. He has done an excellent series on grief, and whatever you think of the man, I’d say set it aside, and watch this series on grief. It is so powerful and so right on. You can go to saddleback.com or you can download an app [called simply “Saddleback”] and watch it streaming on the Internet. But he says that you don’t get over a loss, but you can get through it. You can get through it.

So I want to encourage you: you can get

through it. If you haven't dealt with a loss in your life—some kind of grief in your life—it's going to come out in bad ways. I want to encourage you: do the hard work.

About a month ago, I felt like I really turned a corner, to where it was no longer heart-wrenching to think about Lana, but actually heart-warming. They say in recovery, that's a huge step, to where you can look back and think with fondness of the memories, without that searing pain that, for me, accompanied me for so many of the last 10 months.

I'm so glad now to reap the harvest of our garden. Lana always planted tomatoes and peppers and onions and we would make salsa in the fall. We just did this a few weeks ago with the kids and made Lana's Sweet Salsa recipe. We videotaped it so we would remember how to do it and how to make it. You can watch it online if you want to go to [The Ranch](#) and look up [Lana's Sweet Salsa](#).

But just to do that with the kids and actually have that be a fun thing, an enjoyable thing, and say, "Yeah, this is what we were doing last year with Mom, and this is so good that we learned how to do this and I want to keep doing it." Without that terrible pain. I

feel like we've turned a corner and I'm able to say, "All right. We're going to make it. We're going to make it. With God's help, and with people around us, we are going to make it."

I also want to say, when you're in a small group, people show up. They're able to help you. They're able to bring a meal. Rick Warren said, when he was standing outside his son's house and they were waiting for the police to come and take care of all the things, that his small group was there on the driveway with him. They showed up in those first moments. He had been in the same small group for years. He was there for them when they needed it. And now, they were there for him. He said, and I'm paraphrasing, "You don't even have to say much. In fact, the greater the loss, the less you have to say." So if you're worried about what to say, don't worry. The less say may even be better! Just show up. Just be there.

Rick also mentions that people sometimes say, "Let me know if I can do anything. Give me a call if you need anything." But he said that's not really helpful to someone who's grieving because their world is so befuddled. To me, people would offer that, but I didn't

know what I needed. I didn't have any clue. I didn't even know how to get through a day. Rick said, "Just say: I can bring a meal. Do you want it Tuesday or Wednesday?" A simple choice. A simple offer of what you can do. And I would say, "Wednesday." And I would be happy. They would be happy. And we would get a meal.

So if you know people who are going through grief, show up. Then offer something of service, just a practical, simple help. Give them a choice. If they say no, you can walk away. Or if you know the person well, you might have to just press through and just do it anyway. But show up, and then serve them.

If you're not involved with some other people in your life, you're going to have to do it alone, and I'll tell you that's terrible to do.

We homeschool our kids. I've got 3 in college and my youngest 3 are here in the service this morning: 10, 13, and 15. Lana wanted me to continue homeschooling as much as I could. I work from home, so it's possible—it's conceivable at least. But whether I *could* do it, I didn't know. She died in November, so we had another spring to go through, January

through May. And I didn't know if I could do it. I didn't know what to do.

But we tried to keep everything as much the same as possible because so much had already changed. I said, "I'm going to do it." But I had 2 ladies that offered to help—Christian friends of ours—and they said, "Can we come in once a week and just help with their math or play a game with them or anything?" I said, "Perfect, thanks."

I knew I could do it then because I didn't have to bear it all myself. They would come and I was glad they could learn their conjunctions and I can't even think of everything they learned this year. But I really was happy just to have someone there helping, just to come in and I could go sit in my room for awhile, write a message or do something else.

There are ways that people have stepped in and helped. I've had personal friends that have said, "Just call me anytime, day or night," and I've done it.

There were times when I was overwhelmed and I was like, "I don't know how I'm going to take it." Even before Lana died, thinking about her dying, I would be like, "I cannot take this." And my brain would start going in

circles and I would think I was going crazy and I would call somebody and I'd say, "Can you just sit on the phone with me. I don't even know what to say. But if you'll just sit on the phone with me, I think I'll be all right." Then after a few minutes, it would pass and I could say, "OK, thanks." And I could hang up and I could go on.

If you need help, ask for it. You would think, in my position—I've walked many people through the death of their friends, their loved ones, their spouses and I've preached at their funerals—I should know this. I should be able to get through this. I should be able to speak to myself and talk myself through anything.

But I heard from another friend, who worked at a cemetery out in Denver, and he said that the manager of the cemetery—who's been doing this for years and walked thousands of families through their grief process — when *his* dad died, a few weeks later he was driving down the street and his wife was sitting next to him and she said, "All right, pull over. I'm going to drive."

He said, "Why? What's wrong?"

She said, "That's the 3rd red light you've

gone straight through.” He had no idea. Of all people, he should have known what to do and how to help himself through it. But we don’t. None of us—none of us—none of us are super men, super women.

Let me encourage you today: get involved in a small group so that you can help others. And when you need it, they can help you, too.

I have one more slide here I want to show you.



This is not a drill. It’s a hammer. My kids hate that I explain the jokes, but sometimes people miss the obvious. This is not a drill.

This life is so serious. Our faith is so important. Your role in God's kingdom is so important.

I really struggled. Not really in questioning God, but questioning His plan. My kids don't question that I love them, but sometimes they question my wisdom. They question whether I really know what's best for them. And I'll tell you that goes through my brain sometimes. I still have faith in God, but I do wonder sometimes, "Are You sure this is the best?"

And one of the questions I had was, and that God had for me was: "Do you still believe I can heal someone that has cancer?"

And I said, "Yes, God. I've seen it before, and I believe I'll see it again."

And then He asked me: "Do you believe I can heal someone who has triple-negative, stage 4, terminal breast cancer?" which is what Lana had.

That was a harder one. But I said, "Yes, God. You can do anything, absolutely, anything."

And God asked a 3rd question: "What will you do if you see someone healed of triple-negative, stage 4 breast cancer?"

You know, part of you just wants to be mad. But the other part says, “I will rejoice. You give and You take away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.” And so I just said that to God: “I will rejoice.” And I truly will. “You give and You take away. I will praise Your name forever.”

I believe that prayer broke something, and helped me reach a turning point in my life, to come back and say, “God has a unique purpose and plan for every one of our lives. He had a unique purpose and plan for Lana’s life, and her death, and what we’re going through now.”

And He has a unique purpose for yours. Don’t take what happened to Lana as any indication of what God has in mind for you. She would hate that, because you have your own life. She would want you to keep believing, and she said this in her video before she died: “I want no one to lose faith over this. I want you to keep having faith in the same Jesus that I put my faith in, and hope to see very soon myself.”

Keep your faith. Keep trusting God no matter what. We are the church, His people. Let’s pray.

Eric Elder

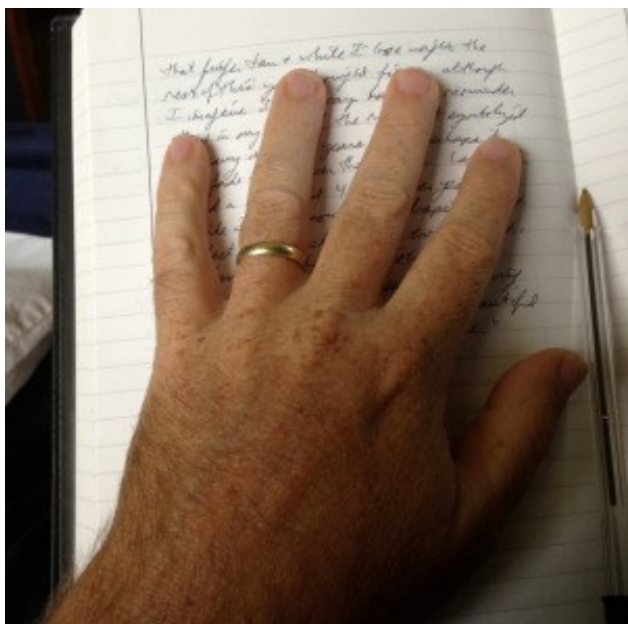
Father, thank You for this time again. Seal these things in our heart, that we can serve You even better. In Jesus' name, Amen.

LOOKING FORWARD: 3 STORIES OF HOPE

I'd like to talk to you this morning about HOPE—capital H-O-P-E—HOPE. I know you don't want to hear about heartache today. We all have enough of that. You want to hear about hope, and I do too.

So I want to share 3 stories with you about how God has given me hope over the past year. I pray they give you hope, and then you can pass it on to others. The 3 stories I'd like to share with you have to do with a ring, an apple and 3 emails.

The first story is about a ring. Several years ago my wife, Lana, lost her wedding ring one day. She had already been up and going for awhile before she realized that her ring was missing from her finger. She never went without it, so she was surprised and disturbed that it was missing.



So we started looking all over the house. We looked by the kitchen sink where she did the dishes. We looked in the bathroom where it might have come off. We looked everywhere we could, but we couldn't find it all day.

By the end of the day, we were going back to bed and she thought to look under the bed. There was her ring on the floor. She said, "You know, I remember waking up this morning and hearing this 'clink, clink, clink.'"

I said, “Well, that would have been good information to know as we were searching for your ring all day!”

She went on to say that at night, when she put her hand under her pillow, she would sometimes play with her ring, spinning it around and taking it on and off. The night before, she must have taken it off and fell asleep, and then it must have fallen to the ground in the morning when she got up.

So that became a little joke between us over the years. Whenever something would go missing, one of us would say, “Did you hear anything go ‘clink, clink, clink?’”

So a few months ago I was sitting with a couple at our dining room table. At one point in the conversation, I looked down at my hand and noticed my ring was missing. I’ve always worn my wedding ring, too, and even though Lana passed away about 8 months before this, I still wore my ring every day. I couldn’t bring myself to take it off. Even though I knew there might come a day when I *would* take it off, I couldn’t imagine ever *wanting* to take it off. And honestly, I was dreading that day.

So when I noticed my ring was missing, I

panicked. I thought, “Where’s my ring?” I felt naked and embarrassed in front of this couple, wondering if they noticed it, too. I wondered what they might think of me—if I had taken it off because I wanted to start dating again or something, which I definitely didn’t! All these thoughts started racing through my mind, all the time wondering, “Where could my ring be?”

Then I remembered something. Earlier in the year, I had decided to start losing some weight. I’m a stress eater, so when I get stressed, I eat. By January of this year I had gained more weight than I had ever gained in my life. I knew that I needed to stay healthy, for myself and for my kids and I wanted to start losing weight again, but I just didn’t have the fortitude to do it at the time. As the year went on, however, I decided to do it, and began losing weight, week by week. The night before I had met with this couple, I was laying in bed and noticed that my ring was loose and could come right off and go back on again. So I laid there in bed, spinning it around and taking it off and on, and then must have fallen asleep with it off.

As I was sat there at the dining table with

this couple, I thought to myself, “You know, I do remember hearing this ‘clink, clink, clink’ when I woke up!”

After saying goodbye to my visitors, I went upstairs, looked under my bed, and there was my ring on the floor. I looked to heaven and said, “OK, Lana, now I get it. Now I can see how you could have overlooked hearing that ‘clink, clink, clink’ when you lost your ring years ago.” And so I had a little smile in that moment in my mind with Lana.

Although I was dreading the day when I would have to take off my ring, having that little smile with Lana made me think: “Well, today’s as good a day as any. At least I can look back on it with fondness and a smile, rather than with sadness. So I’ll try and just leave it off.” So I left it off. I still felt naked for the rest of the day, and even today when I look down and see that it’s missing, I feel like part of me is missing, too. But at least I can look down and think about it with a smile now, and with thankfulness for the time that I did have with Lana.

I tell you that story to say that sometimes God gives us those little moments of grace. Moments that we may have been dreading in

the future, but when they come, God gives us the grace to get through it—sometimes even with a little smile that says, “It’s going to be OK. I love you and I’ll walk you through this, too.”

In one of the books I read on grief, called *Decembered Grief* by Harold Ivan Smith, I read a quote that has helped me through this new season of my life. The quote is from an unidentified woman and says:

“It has taken me many months to get to the point where I can say, ‘All right, the future is not going to be what you thought it was. It’s gone, and you’re not going to have it. You just will not have it. Your future went with him. Now you’ve got to build a new one.’”

I didn’t like reading those words at first, but over time I knew they were true for me, too. I’ve come to realize that the future is not going to be what I thought it would be, either. It’s gone, and I’m not going to have it. I just will not have it. Now I’ve got to build a new one.

Many of you know what this is like in your own life. You’ve reached those points in your

life where you've had to say, "This isn't the direction I thought my life was going to take." And at some point you've had to let it go and say, "It's not going to happen; they're not coming back," just as I've had to say, "OK, she's not coming back."

And she's not. As much as I hate to say that, I know that God still has a future for me. It reminds me that I just need to keep "fixing my eyes on Jesus, the Author and Perfecter of my faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross..." (see Hebrews 12:2).

As much as I wish I had my old life back, I know the best thing I can do now is to keep moving forward—to keep saying, "God, I'm going to fix my eyes on You. I'm going to trust You, no matter what, because I know You'll work it all out somehow for good in the end." And I know He will.

The 2nd story I want to tell you today has to do with an apple. There's a quote I read years ago that I thought was profound and beautiful. It said:

*"The best time to plant a tree is 20 years ago.
The second best time to plant a tree is today."*



I thought of that quote this spring as I looked at 2 pine trees in our yard, one of which I planted this past Christmas in honor of Lana, and the other which Lana and I planted 19 Christmases ago, almost 20 years now. The tree I recently planted is only about a foot tall, but the older tree is one of the largest in our yard. We had bought the tree from a nursery that winter and had brought it into our house for a few days at Christmas to

decorate it and put presents underneath it. Then, after Christmas, we took it out to my dad's farm and planted it, not knowing that one day we would eventually be living there ourselves. Over the years that tree has grown and grown, and now it's one of the tallest that we have.

So over the years, I've taken this quote to heart about planting trees, and every year we plant a few more, and a few more, and few more trees. We don't have a forest by any means, but we do have more trees than we would have had otherwise, had I not stopped from time to time and just said, "OK, I'm going to stop at Big R and pick up a tree and we'll put it in the ground."

For some reason, this has been an amazing year for fruit trees, and for all the trees that Lana and I planted with the kids over the years. This is the first time any of them have produced an significant amount of fruit. And not just one tree, but nearly all of them have started bearing fruit, even those we planted just a year or 2 ago, when normally they should take 5 or 6 or 7 years before they produce any fruit. So this year we had apples from 4 different trees, cherries, peaches, and

even 2 little plums on a new plum tree! All these trees started bearing fruit—just this year.

When I saw all these trees bearing fruit, part of me was tempted to be really sad and wonder, “How could Lana have missed all that fruit?” But the other part of me said, “Lana would be thrilled to know that all her hard work has paid off and is now bearing fruit—fruit that will last.” And that made me so glad that we just kept planting and planting and planting, because the Bible says:

“Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up” (Galatians 6:9).

Even though Lana is gone this year and can’t enjoy it herself, we’re all enjoying the fruit of all that she’s done.

And picking up an apple tree from Big R is hardly a big deal, but Lana’s investment in my life, and our 6 kids’ lives, and your lives and many other people’s lives—whether it was at home or in her writings or recordings or any of the number of things she invested in—

those things are bearing fruit now in so many wonderful ways.

I was preaching at a church last week and took an apple with me from one of the trees that Lana and I had planted. And because it was a smaller congregation of friends that we knew and loved, my kids and I baked some pies for them from the apples off the tree, too, so they could enjoy some of the fruit from Lana's life as well.

I told them what I'm telling you today: just keep planting. Not all the trees we planted have taken root. Some of them have died—in fact, several have. But not everything we do in life takes root, either. Jesus spoke very clearly about this when He told the parable of the seeds. He said:

“A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path; it was trampled on, and the birds of the air ate it up. Some fell on rock, and when it came up, the plants withered because they had no moisture. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up with it and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up and yielded a crop, a hundred times more than was sown” (Luke 8:5-8a).

So not everything we plant will bear fruit. But I want to encourage you to keep planting and planting and planting because at the proper time you *will* reap a harvest, too, if you do not give up.

I had a friend who seemed to turn everything he touched into gold. He was a great businessman and a great supporter of missions. When people would say to him that everything he touched seemed to turn to gold, his response was, “No, but I do touch a lot of things—and when those things that do bear fruit come to fruition, they bear a *lot* of fruit.” Sometimes in order to bear a lot of fruit, we just need to plant a lot of seed. So I want to encourage you to keep planting. Keep watering. Don’t give up. One day, you *will* reap a harvest, if you do not give up.

The 3rd story I want to tell you today is based on 3 emails I received recently.

If you’ve been reading along with me through this series, you’ll remember my story about a Jewish woman who emailed me 3 years ago after “accidentally” receiving one of our daily emails when a co-worker sent it to her by mistake instead of another co-worker.

She started reading the stories about Jesus on our website, and began wondering if He really was the Messiah they've been waiting for for so long. She eventually put her faith in Christ and wrote to me back in May to tell me about her new-found faith (see chapter 4).

Well, was I ever surprised when we hosted our "Night of Worship at The Ranch" a few weeks ago here in Illinois and she came up and introduced herself to me as we were gathering to get some food before the time of worship! Here she was, someone in "real life" who had been touched by something we posted on our website many years ago, and which she had just discovered 3 years ago. As a result, she had a complete change of heart and complete change of life as well. I shouldn't be surprised, because we hear regularly from people who say how important our messages are to them, but there's something about meeting people in person who have been touched by what we've done that gives us an even greater glimpse of what God can do through our lives when we're willing to live them for Him.

I tell you that again to say: keep investing in people's lives. Don't give up. Don't become

weary in doing good. At the proper time you will reap a harvest, too, if you don't give up.

In that same message (in chapter 4), I mentioned that some of the music that we've put on our website has begun to pay dividends in a big way, with a surprise royalty check that came a few weeks ago from Pandora. And the check came at a time when things were becoming tighter and tighter for us financially, as I haven't been able to write or do the fundraising that I normally would have done in the time since Lana's passing. And it came the same week I had finally finished putting all of our books and music on *The Ranch* website for free, so people could listen day or night without charge, from anywhere in the world.

As I said before, I was concerned I was shooting myself in the foot by not pursuing a publishing or record label for these books and music, but I just kept hearing Jesus' words in my head, saying:

"So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and

all these things will be given to you as well” (Matthew 6:31-33).

Well, to follow this up, I received another email from Pandora 10 days ago saying that they had accepted my most recent piano CD, *Soothe My Soul*, to play on their Internet radio stations! This was a huge breakthrough for us, as they’re actually only playing a dozen songs that we’ve produced over the years, which they accepted early on when they were just a small company. But in the years since then, we’ve produced a dozen whole CD’s, and have submitted each one, but they’ve declined each one, saying they simply receive more music submissions than they can include in their catalog. But each year, we keep submitting our latest recordings, and each year, we keep getting rejected. But after 10 years of rejections, last week they accepted our most recent submission and will begin playing it on-line within the next few weeks!

In case I haven’t mentioned it enough today, let me say it again: keep planting!

And I’d like to mention one final email today—this one came just before I stood up to preach last Sunday at a local church. It

came from a grade school friend of mine who is now a missionary in another country. She had reposted a link to my sermon from last week for her Facebook friends to read. Her note, that I just read this morning, said:

“I am begging you....PLEASE take a short time out of your day to listen to this message from my dear friend Eric Elder. It will touch your heart and give you the tools we all need in life!”

She had written me earlier to say how much she enjoyed the message, and I see now that she is passing it along to others. But I have to tell you, the day I stood up to preach that message last week was one of the hardest days I’ve had to walk through yet. It had been about 10 months since Lana died, and was the first time I stood up to preach at a Sunday morning service since I preached at her funeral 10 months earlier. I had only had 4 hours of sleep at best, and when it was 6 in the morning and I was getting my 3 kids ready to go and drive 45 minutes to preach 3 services in a row, I still wasn’t sure what I was going to say. As I was getting everyone ready that morning in the house, I said to myself, “I am

never going to say ‘yes’ to preaching again. This is the stupidest thing I’ve ever done, to say ‘yes’ to preaching again. There’s no way I can do it.”

If I hadn’t already said ‘yes,’ and the services weren’t about to begin in just a few hours, I would have cancelled if I could have. I truly didn’t know what I was going to say, and I truly wondered why I was doing it at all. Plus, I had already accepted several other preaching engagements for the following weeks at other churches as well. Even though I thought I was ready when I said ‘yes,’ now I wondered if I could ever do it again.

But I did. And God helped me through it. And even more amazing, He spoke to people and touched their hearts through what I had to say. So much so, in fact, that people like this friend in another country is now pleading with her friends online to listen to the recording as it touched her so much. It reminded me of a passage from 2 Corinthians, chapter 4, about how God can shine through the broken places in our lives in ways so people see His glory, even though we ourselves are nothing more than cracked clay pots. Here’s

what Paul says to the Corinthians, in The Message translation of the Bible:

“Remember, our Message is not about ourselves; we’re proclaiming Jesus Christ, the Master. All we are is messengers, errand runners from Jesus for you. It started when God said, ‘Light up the darkness!’ and our lives filled up with light as we saw and understood God in the face of Christ, all bright and beautiful.

“If you only look at us, you might well miss the brightness. We carry this precious Message around in the unadorned clay pots of our ordinary lives. That’s to prevent anyone from confusing God’s incomparable power with us. As it is, there’s not much chance of that. You know for yourselves that we’re not much to look at. We’ve been surrounded and battered by troubles, but we’re not demoralized; we’re not sure what to do, but we know that God knows what to do; we’ve been spiritually terrorized, but God hasn’t left our side; we’ve been thrown down, but we haven’t broken. What they did to Jesus, they do to us—trial and torture, mockery and murder; what Jesus did among them, He does in us—He lives! Our lives are at constant risk for Jesus’ sake, which makes Jesus’ life

all the more evident in us. While we're going through the worst, you're getting in on the best!

"We're not keeping this quiet, not on your life. Just like the psalmist who wrote, 'I believed it, so I said it,' we say what we believe. And what we believe is that the One who raised up the Master Jesus will just as certainly raise us up with you, alive. Every detail works to your advantage and to God's glory: more and more grace, more and more people, more and more praise!

"So we're not giving up. How could we! Even though on the outside it often looks like things are falling apart on us, on the inside, where God is making new life, not a day goes by without his unfolding grace. These hard times are small potatoes compared to the coming good times, the lavish celebration prepared for us. There's far more here than meets the eye. The things we see now are here today, gone tomorrow. But the things we can't see now will last forever" (2 Corinthians 4:5-18, The Message).

I just want to encourage you, God is glorified through what you do, too. Maybe there are days when you don't feel like getting up,

you don't feel like going to work, you don't feel like going to a Bible study, you don't feel like leading a small group, you don't feel like preaching, you don't feel like teaching, you don't feel like whatever it is that you have to do.

Can I just encourage you not to give up? Keep planting. Keep reaching out. If you need time out, take time out, but then get back up and go at it again. With God there's always hope. He's given it to me this year, and I hope I've given a little bit to you.

Let's pray:

Father, thank You that You can use the weak clay pots of our lives and our brokenness to let streams of Your light shine through it. I praise You, God, that somehow You give us the strength to keep going. I thank You, Lord, for the people who have prayed for us and kept us going, and held our arms up when we couldn't do it ourselves. Lord, I pray for each person reading this today, that You would give them hope for a very specific situation in their lives—that thing which they're facing that they struggle to find hope for—I pray You would give them hope, kindle a new flame in them, encourage them to keep going on, keep pressing

through and keep planting seeds, for at the proper time I know that they will reap a harvest, and generations down the road—even when we're gone—will reap a harvest from what they plant now. We pray this all in Jesus' name, Amen.

MAKING THE MOST OF THE DARKNESS

Some of the scariest times in my life have not been those where things are swirling all around me, but actually in the pitch black, in the silence of night. But I've also found that some of the most amazing things in life can best be seen when it's dark.

Here's a transcript of a message I shared this week on how God can help you overcome fear with His love. It's one of the most important lessons I've learned this past year as I've been walking through my own times of darkness...

Good evening and if you don't know me, I'm Eric Elder. The quick snapshot of my past year has been in some ways some of the darkest times of my life, and in other ways, some of the most enlightening times of my life.

My wife passed away a year ago next week and Jason was here and helped me conduct

the service here at the church. She died quickly after 9 months of breast cancer. I've got 6 kids, 3 still at home with me and 3 in college, so it's been—as you can imagine—a difficult year, but an amazing year at the same time.

I just wanted to encourage you tonight that God's love never fails you. God's love never leaves you. Even in your darkest hours, I want to encourage you that God is still with you, and I can tell you He's been with me. I have preached that and taught that for years. Knowing that going into this, I still get into those dark moments and I wonder how it's going to turn out. Then I remember God's great love for me and I just know it's going to be all right. He's going to work all things for good for those who love Him and are called according to His purpose (see Romans 8:28).

So I just want to continue tonight in the series that Jason has started in 1 John chapter 4. This is a passage that talks about God's great love for us, that the only reason we can love others is because He loved us first and sent Jesus to die for us. It is out of His love that comes down to us that we can then extend that love to others.

I'm not going to read the whole chapter to you, but if you need some encouragement that God loves you this week, I encourage you to read 1 John chapter 4. That's not the gospel of John, not the book of John, but later in the Bible, 1 John. It's a letter that he wrote, and I'm going to look at verses 17 through 19.

“God is love. When we take up permanent residence in a life of love, we live in God and God lives in us. This way, love has the run of the house, becomes at home and mature in us, so that we're free of worry on Judgment Day—our standing in the world is identical with Christ's. There is no room in love for fear. Well-formed love banishes fear. Since fear is crippling, a fearful life—fear of death, fear of judgment—is one not yet fully formed in love. We, though, are going to love—love and be loved. First we were loved, now we love. He loved us first” (1 John 4:17-19, The Message).

As I said, the scariest times in my life have not been those where things are swirling all around me, but actually in the pitch black, in the silence of night. I was at an amusement park and went on an attraction where you just sit in a seat in a theater and they swirl all kinds

of things around you. They had little fake rat tails that ran across your feet under the seats and they sprayed water at you and all these things went by you on the screen.

But the scariest time of that whole attraction was when they shut off all the lights completely, and it was totally silent, and you had no idea what was coming next. You didn't know where it was coming from. You couldn't see anything. And I'll tell you, for all the other things that came at me that day, that was the moment when I panicked. Even though I knew I was in a safe environment and they were going to take care of me—I was going to be fine—I just had this moment thinking, “What's it going to be?” because it was pitch black and it was totally silent.

Sometimes that's the way we feel in life. Take kids, for instance. When are they most scared? At night, in their beds, even though there's nothing there. Nothing's going to happen. But because they can't see, they don't know.

And we're the same way, it's when we don't see what's going on, when we don't know what's going to happen, that we can become consumed with fear. And that's when we

most need to remember: God loved us first and His love is still there for us, even in the darkness.

I want to encourage you, in those dark times, to make the most of the darkness. Because the truth is, there are some things that can be seen better when it's pitch black outside.

If you've ever walked past a house during the day and you look in the windows but they've got a curtain up, a curtain like this [holding up a curtain], it's really hard to see anything that's going on inside because of the daylight. You can't really see.

I don't know if you can see me behind here [stepping behind the curtain]. Can you tell how many fingers I'm holding up? No? Nothing?

You can't see in. But if you walk by the same house at nighttime—and Jason if you want to turn the lights off—if you walk by the same house again at nighttime and the lights are on inside, it's amazing, especially with sheer curtains like this. When the lights are on in the house, can you see me now? Can you tell how many fingers I'm holding up now? [the people can see and start to respond

I hold up different number of fingers: 5, 2, 3, 1.]

Quite a difference, isn't it?

I'll tell you, when Lana died, for those first few days especially, I felt like I could glimpse into heaven like I'd never seen before. It was so dark on my side, but it was so bright on her side. When we were married, we became one, and even death doesn't separate love. And I felt like I could see into heaven, and she was dancing with Christ, and because, in some supernatural way I was one with her, I was there with *Him* as well.

It was dark on my side, but I could see into the windows of heaven better than I could ever see before. Thankfully, I was able to keep my eyes open and say, "OK, I'm going to make the most of this darkness and I want to learn everything I can about heaven while I'm here." And I looked at passages about heaven and when exactly you go there? Is Lana there right now or is she dead in the ground? Is she dancing with Jesus or is she in some waiting zone?

The conclusions I came to may not be the same ones you come to, but I have no reason to believe that Jesus was saying anything other

than the truth when He told the thief on the cross:

“Today, you will be with Me in paradise” (Luke 23:43).

Whatever “today” is to God, because He is outside of any constraint of time, Lana is there with Him *today*. She was there the moment she died. She was there with God. God loved her, and God loves me, and all of this reminds me that God is with us all the time. But again, it was *because* of the darkness that I could actually see.

There’s another story I want to tell you, too. This was when I was driving in California last year. It was September and we dropped our daughter off in Northern California for school. So our whole family took a road trip and went to see my brother and my sister who live out west. Lana and all of us, we took a big drive.

We dropped my daughter off and then we drove down the coast, down Highway 1 that winds along California along these cliffs with hairpin turns. I had been there before—with its beautiful scenery, it’s incredible—so I

wanted to take the family on this drive, a couple hour drive to where we were going to spend the night.

But we got a late start for the day and it was getting closer to nighttime. Then the fog rolled in, some rain came up, and all of a sudden it was pitch black. We were practically alone on this road of hairpin turns, because no other car would dare drive on it, except someone random from Illinois who didn't know any other way to go.

I was amazed how dark it was. There were no cities. There were no streetlights. There were no gas stations. We were out in the middle of a desert and mountains, so there were no houses, nothing inland. It's just ocean on the other side, so there was nothing out there—it was pitch black. And it was terrifying. It was probably the most terrifying drive of my life.

It was probably also the longest “2-hour” drive, which actually took 8, I've ever made in my life and just took us forever to get there. My wife was in a lot of pain from the cancer. We were just trying to get to the hotel. I had given up on the “scenic” idea a long time ago

but this was still the quickest way that we knew to get there.

Every once in awhile I would have to pull off to the side of the road. It was so tense. It was so difficult for me to drive and to see. And when I did, the first time I pulled off, I got out of the car and I just sort of “shook off.” I said, “OK, God, You’re going to have to help me.”

Then I looked up. Even though the fog was all around us, it was totally clear above us! The sky was full of stars—more stars than I had ever seen in my life. I live in the country here in Illinois and I thought we had the place that could see the most stars of any place on the planet Earth. But this place had 10-fold—100-fold—what I had ever seen before because there were simply no lights anywhere for miles and miles around. The sky was just filled with stars.

And I thought, as I was driving earlier in the car, that if I just riding and not driving, I would have closed my eyes in fear. But after I stopped and looked up into the sky, I saw a sight I had never seen before. It was incredible. Even though the drive didn’t get any bet-

ter, my attitude sure did! I was actually driving through a wonderland.

I've heard when you're down in a well—even in the daytime—if you go down in a deep, deep well, you can see the stars up above. Of course, normally, you can't see any stars when the sun is shining—except 1 star, the sun—but you can't see any of the others. But down in a well you can see the stars. In fact the deeper you go in the well, the more stars you see.

It's one of those natural phenomena, just like the curtain here, that veil that I showed you, it actually because of the darkness that surrounds you that you can see things you never saw before.

A 3rd story I want to tell you is about a cocoon.

Imagine a cocoon for a caterpillar—my kids and I were walking down the road this morning and we saw a little caterpillar—imagine all those hundreds of legs or however many they have, and they're grounded for life, or so it seems.

They're walking along, as slow as a snail's pace, literally, and then they crawl into here [this cocoon] to die, or so they think. They

spin this little cocoon. This is their last hurrah. And they come in here thinking this is it, this is the end.

But the changes and the transformations that take place inside this dark, claustrophobic place are amazing. When that caterpillar comes out again, it doesn't have those hundreds of legs. It's not grounded. Now it can fly, it can flit, it can float. It can go faster than it could have ever gone before. It can go higher than it could have ever imagined.

This is certainly an analogy for our transformation into heaven. In an instant we will be changed, the Bible says. We'll get new bodies. We'll be like the angels, the Bible says (see 1 Corinthians 15:35-58 and Mark 12:25). I can't even imagine what it's going to be like.

But this is also, I think, an analogy for our life here on earth, for the ones who are left behind, as in my case, or for you if you're in a dark place right now.

I read about a woman who had gone through a similar grief. She had lost her mother. And she said she went into like a cocoon-like state for about 2 years. She said it was dark and terrible for her.

But she said that when she came out, she

couldn't believe the transformation that had taken place in her while she was inside that cocoon. She said she felt more alive, more radiant, more compassionate, more gracious and more loving than she had ever felt before she had entered that cocoon. She learned that God was able to make the most out of her darkness.

It wasn't necessarily the things that *she* did, but what *God* did in her, and what God can do in us, if we allow Him to, during those dark times.

C.S. Lewis' wife died of cancer, too. He married her knowing that she had cancer. They said it was terminal, but they still hoped she would be healed. He married her, anyway, and she died. He wrote several things about this, but here's one of the quotes that he wrote that I really love. It says:

"Grace grows best in winter."

Grace grows best in winter. Sometimes we grow more gracious and loving in the winter seasons of our life than we do when the sun is shining. There are a lot of things that grow well in the summer and in the light. But there

are certain things that seem to just grow best in winter, in the darkness.

I want to read one more passage for you, and this is from Romans chapter 8, because maybe you're in a dark place right now, or maybe when you go home tonight, you're going to feel like you're in a dark place.

I want to encourage you that God still loves you. In fact, He may be doing a transformation in you that you're not even aware of. Don't give up on Him, because He's certainly not given up on you. So this is Romans chapter 8, near the end of the chapter. Paul says:

"I'm absolutely convinced that nothing—nothing living or dead, angelic or demonic, today or tomorrow, high or low, thinkable or unthinkable—absolutely nothing can get between us and God's love because of the way that Jesus our Master has embraced us" (Romans 8:38-39, The Message).

Paul says nothing—nothing—absolutely nothing can get between us and God's love, because of the way that Jesus our Master has embraced us.

I want to pray for you, that God would em-

brace you with His love—that you would feel it and that you would make the most of the darkness.

Whether it's the illustration of the veil, and seeing into heaven, or whether it's the illustration of the well and a starry night with fog all around, or the cocoon, where it may be dark, but you can trust that a huge transformation is taking place, I just want to encourage you and remind you just to let God embrace you with His love. Let Him make the most out of your darkness.

Let's pray.

Father, thank You for carrying me through this past year, even those darkest nights, and even those that may be yet to come. I pray that You would help me to remember how much You love me. I pray for those reading these words, God, that You would help them to know that You love them, too. God, I know You're embracing them with Your love. Your love never fails. Your love has been demonstrated in Jesus when He first loved us and came to die for our sins, so we could be free of them. And Lord, that same grace that saved us is the same grace that sustains us. God, I pray that You would embrace each person in this room, and

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each person reading this later, that You would embrace them with Your love, a love that can overcome fear, a love that never fails, and a love that can never separate us from You. In Jesus' name, Amen.

LEAVING A LEGACY

This is one of my all-time favorite pictures. It's a picture of my wife, Lana, giving our oldest daughter, Karis, one big last kiss before sending Karis "off to school" for the first time ever...at age 19!



Since Karis was homeschooled from kindergarten through high school, we had never sent her off to school before. But when Karis decided to move 4 states away to Virginia for her sophomore year of college, we finally got to experience it.

Karis and I had gotten up early in the morning to start the 12-hour drive to drop her off in Virginia, but Lana called me after we had been on the road for about 30 minutes. Lana was crying because, even though she had said goodbye to Karis, she realized she hadn't given her a goodbye kiss. I said I could turn around and meet her half-way if she wanted. Lana said, "Would you?"

So I turned around and drove back towards home. Lana met us half-way, still crying, and pulled over on the side of the road. She jumped out of the van and ran to give Karis one big last kiss. It was one of the sweetest moments I've ever seen in my life.

Looking back on that picture now, I'm so thankful I turned around that day, and so thankful that Lana wanted me to. I had no idea that 18 months later Lana would be diagnosed with terminal cancer, and 9 months after that she would be gone.

As hard as it's been to lose Lana, memories like these remind me of the legacy Lana left us. Her life was filled with love for me and for the kids and for those around her, and that love still helps to fill the holes in our hearts that were created when she passed away.

Some people, because of their great love for others and the investment they've made in their lives, leave a legacy when they die. Others, because of their lack of love or the abuse they've doled out over the years, simply leave a vacancy. It's much easier to fill a hole in your heart that's already been filled with love, than to fill a hole in your heart that's been empty for years.

Thankfully God can fill both kinds of holes! His love is limitless! But I'm thankful, too, for Lana's love, as it has helped me through so much of this past year without her. It inspires me to want to leave a legacy when I leave this life as well.

As we come to the end of the calendar year, and as I come to the end of this first year without Lana, I can honestly say I'm looking forward to the new year ahead. I feel that God has many more things for me to do

in my lifetime, and I want to make the most of the days I have left.

Two weeks ago, my daughter Karis turned in her final paper and graduated from college with a 4-year degree in biblical studies. Two weeks before that, my 2nd oldest, Lucas, walked across the stage at his college graduation, graduating with a 3-year advanced diploma in worship in leadership. And next May, my 3rd oldest, Makari, will graduate with a 2-year certificate in transformational ministry.

As much as I wish Lana were here to see these milestones herself, I can't help but be thankful for all the fruit that her years of labor and love have borne.

When Lana left, she left a legacy, not a vacancy. And that inspires me to want to leave a legacy as well. How can I do that? I believe the best way is to do what Lana did, which was the same thing that Jesus called each of us to do: love God and love others as we love ourselves. Jesus said:

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments” (Matthew 22:37-40).

I want to leave a legacy in the future, not a vacancy. Of all the goals I could set for myself in the New Year, this one inspires me the most. I pray it inspires you, too.

Will you pray with me?

Father, thank You for helping us through 2013, and I pray that You'll help us through 2014 as well, with love in our hearts for You and for those around us, so that we can leave a legacy of Your love everywhere we go. In Jesus' name, Amen.

HELPING OTHERS REACH THEIR GOALS

As you head into a new year, I'd like to encourage you to consider making one of your goals to help someone else reach one of their goals. That way if one of you succeeds, you'll both succeed at the same time! And you may just help someone do something they never could have done on their own.

About 8 years ago, I came to the realization that my wife had some goals for her life that she may never achieve without some help. There were 3 in particular I was concerned about: 1) She wanted to go to Africa and help orphans in need. 2) She wanted to go to Israel and walk where Jesus walked. 3) She wanted to make a movie about St. Nicholas to inspire others in their faith at Christmastime.

Lana had talked about wanting to do each of these things from time to time, but was never able to move forward on them. Raising

our kids and helping me reach some of my goals had become her full-time focus. She was happy to do these things, but I felt that some of her dreams got shelved in the process, and I didn't want her to miss out on anything that she felt called to do herself.

So I began to pray to see if there was anything I could do to help her reach her goals. And I'm so glad I did.

The Bible says that each of us has different gifts, and we're to use those gifts for the common good (see 1 Corinthians chapter 12), so God began to show me how I could use my gifts to help her with her goals.

First, I talked to her about her dream of wanting to go to Africa. I asked if she would want to go on a missions trip if we could find one with a reputable group that we could trust was doing good work there. She said that would be great. The very next day, I was in a bookstore looking for a book that I had been waiting to come out for months. The publisher had contacted me a year earlier to ask if the author might mention one of my stories in his book, but I never knew what he decided to do.

That very next day after talking to Lana

about going to Africa, I happened to find the book in the bookstore! It had just been published and I quickly began to skim through it to see if there was any mention of my story. There wasn't! But I was enthralled by the vision of the author. After skimming through the first 100 pages, I got to a line that stunned me: the author said he was trying to recruit thousands of American volunteers to come to Africa the following year!

I bought the book and brought it home to Lana. I said, "How would you like to go next year?" Within 24 hours, we had found a reputable group! She said, "Yes!" and we began to save money and raise money for both of us to go to Africa along with our 2 oldest kids and one of their friends.

Even though it seemed impossible, a year later, all 5 of us were on the plane and headed to Africa to do what Lana had dreamed of doing for a lifetime. Here's a picture of Lana holding one of the orphans there as he slept on her shoulder.



There's a great 5-minute video on our website that you can watch about our trip called *Planting Hope In Swaziland*.

Having seen one “impossible” dream come true, the next year I began to pray about her desire to go to Israel. We decided to put together a study-tour of some of the places she most wanted to visit and invite others who might want to come along with us, too. We knew it would take a couple of years to save enough money for even one of us to go, but we decided to start making plans. But before we even got started, God provided another answer.

A woman who was staying at Clover Ranch for a few months and helping us to renovate it told us she was going to Israel at the end of her stay with us. She asked Lana if she'd like to come along and be her guest! Two months later, Lana was walking where Jesus walked! When Lana came back, she said she was so inspired by the trip that she wanted us to still plan our own study-tour and bring some of the kids and anyone else who wanted to come along with us.

So we continued planning and saving for our own trip to Israel, and 2 years later both of us went, along with 4 of our 6 kids and several friends who wanted to join us! (My 2 younger kids want to go now, so I'm hoping to take another trip over there in the next year or two if you want to join us! Start planning now!)

Here's a picture of us in Israel with the hills of Jerusalem in the background.



You can also still read a devotional book on our website that we put together when we came back, along with 30 minute-long video devotionals you can watch to see for yourself the places you're learning about. It's called *Israel: Lessons from the Holy Land*.

Two of Lana's dreams had come true now, and I had already been praying about the 3rd: a movie about the life of St. Nicholas to inspire others at Christmastime. It seemed like a long-shot, but the first 2 seemed impossible and they came true, so maybe this one could, too! But I had no idea what I could do to help her.

As I prayed, I read about a project called the *National Novel Writing Month*. It was started by a group of writers who wanted to encourage other writers to “write that novel they’ve always wanted to write.” It didn’t cost a thing—just a commitment to try to write a 50,000-word novel in 30 days, and they would walk alongside you and encourage you along the way.

I don’t know how to make a movie, but I do like to write. So I asked Lana if it would help if I tried to write down some of the highlights of what we had learned about St. Nicholas and put them together in a compelling story of his life. Then, once we fleshed out the story, maybe we could try to find someone who could help us turn it into a movie. So we outlined our ideas for a book and I dedicated time each day during the month of November to write a chapter of the story. I went a little over the 30 days, going a few days into December, and went a little under on the word-count, writing just 35,000 words instead of 50,000. But in the end, we felt like we had a book captured the essence of the story and, most importantly, the essence of what Lana wanted to share.

We still had some changes we wanted to make to the story, so we set the book aside and began to pray about what to do with it next. One day we were able to get in touch with a Hollywood scriptwriter who said he was willing to take a look at the project and wanted to see our book when we were done. Ironically, that was the very same day we got the call that Lana was diagnosed with cancer.

Our life and focus shifted dramatically that day, and by the end of the year, Lana was gone. But during those final weeks of her battle, Lana took out the St. Nicholas book again and made her final edits and suggestions, asking me to take it the rest of the way. So for Christmas this year, I made the changes she suggested and published the book online in the weeks leading up to Christmas. On Christmas Eve, I submitted the final copy to our print-on-demand service to create [a beautiful paperback edition](#).

It makes me cry to think about it, but not just with sadness for missing her. It makes me cry with thankfulness that God would have prompted me 8 years ago to help Lana fulfill each one of these lifelong dreams. Had

I not followed those promptings, she may never have had a chance to do any of them.

I say all of this to encourage you to consider making one of your goals this year to help someone else reach one of their goals.

Maybe your husband or wife has said something to you over the years about a dream that's been on their heart. Or maybe your children or parents have wanted to do something that may seem to be impossible. Or maybe your friends or family or co-workers have talked with you about something they've wanted to do for years, but have never gotten around to doing it. Perhaps the only thing they're waiting for is you!

The Bible says that God has given each of us different gifts for the common good. None of us are given all of the gifts, but working together we can accomplish all that God has called us to do. As the Apostle Paul said to the Corinthians:

“Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. To one there is given through the Spirit the message of wisdom, to another the message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to

another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues. All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and He gives them to each one, just as He determines" (1 Corinthians 12:8-11).

Paul then goes on to describe people who have all kinds of gifts, but makes note that no one has all of the gifts:

"And in the church God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, also those having gifts of healing, those able to help others, those with gifts of administration, and those speaking in different kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret?" (1 Corinthians 12:28-29).

We need each other to help us accomplish all that God has put on our hearts to do. And that means that others need us to help them accomplish what God has put on their hearts

to do. Helping others is also a great way to help ourselves as we deal with our own losses. As we invest in the lives of others, we can begin to see that God is not finished with us yet.

A good friend of mine, Kent Sanders, sent me a small key this year along with a note that read:

"I am enclosing a little something as a reminder of the incredible power you have to unlock the God-given potential of others."

Thinking back on Lana's goals and how God helped me to fulfill them, plus Kent's note about unlocking the potential of others, helps to remind me that God's not finished with me yet, and to be on the lookout for other ways I can use my gifts to help others accomplish their goals, too. Perhaps they'll encourage you to do the same.

Let's pray:

Father, thank You for giving us a brand-new year with a clean slate and a wide open calendar. Help us to accomplish all that You've put on our hearts to do this year, and help us to be on the lookout for

Making The Most Of The Darkness

*how we can help others accomplish what You've put
on their hearts as well. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

STORING THE MEMORIES

One of the things I look forward to at the end of each year is to look back. I'm often surprised at all that's happened during the year, and it gives me hope for the year to come.

This past year has been no exception. As I was writing my year-end letter for my family and friends this week, I was amazed at all that God helped me to do this year, even though I felt like so much of it was just absorbed in my grief of losing Lana. As God reminded me of all that He has done in my life this year, I was reminded of the words of Jesus:

"But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you" (John 14:26).

As I looked through my journal, as I

looked through my Facebook posts, as I looked through pictures on my phone and in albums, I was reminded of all that God was doing in my life, even when I wasn't aware of it at the time.

This time of looking back truly has given me hope for the future. I'm in a different place now after a year of grief than I was last year at this time. And in many ways, I'm in a different place now than I've ever been in my life. Things will never be the same.

That's a statement that has often brought a flood of tears. But as I've looked back over all that God has done in my life this past year, I can see that statement in a different light. From here on out, things *will* never be the same. And I praise God for it. It reminds me of the lyrics to a song by Stephen Schwartz called, "For Good," from his popular musical, *Wicked*:

*"It well may be
That we will never meet again
In this lifetime
So let me say before we part*

*So much of me
Is made of what I learned from you
You'll be with me
Like a handprint on my heart
And now whatever way our stories end
I know you have re-written mine...
Who can say if I've been changed for the better?
But because I knew you
I have been changed for good."*

In the weeks before Lana died, she asked me to put together a picture book of all the work we've done on the house here at Clover Ranch and send it to a friend who helped us so much with the project. As I looked through pictures from the past 7 years, I was amazed at the transformation that I saw had taken place from year to year. It was a lot of work and it took a lot of time, but it was beautiful in the end.

I put together the book and sent it to our friend as Lana had asked. But it was so helpful to me to look back, and gave me such hope for the future as I look forward, that I bought an extra album for myself and printed out an extra set of pictures so I could keep a

copy, too. It's filled with memories I'll treasure for the rest of my life.

As hard as it was to look back at the past, I've been encouraged by it as I look forward to the future. Perhaps you'll find it encouraging, too.

In closing, I'd like to share with you the year-end letter I wrote to my family and friends this week. As you've been with me on this journey, I certainly consider you my family and friends, too! It's a summation of some of the things you've already read in these messages, but written from the vantage point of one-year down the road. I pray it encourages you that with God's help, whatever your loss, He really can help you get through it. There really is another side to grief, and I'm thankful now to be able to see it for myself.

With that introduction, here's my year-end letter.

January 18th, 2014

Happy New Year to you! I wanted to send you an updated picture of our family, along with an update on how we're doing. I was

Eric Elder

torn again this year between which Christmas picture to send you, so I'm sending you both.



We took these on Christmas Eve at the Lexington Cemetery, about 7 miles from our home, where we installed a memorial bench for Lana this fall. One picture seems to highlight Lana's beautiful memorial and the other seems to highlight the beautiful faces of our kids. I think Lana's spirit is clearly evident in both!

I kept the first few months of last year as low-key as possible: doing school with the 3 younger kids, finishing projects around the house and working on some behind-the-scenes things for the ministry. I wrote a few messages for *The Ranch* website and spoke at a few churches, but overall it was nice to spend some time out of public view for awhile after our whirlwind year.

In April I drove to Houston in a friend's truck to pick up the granite bench for Lana's memorial. My cousin Joan had found it at a craft shop there and sent us a picture just a few days before Lana passed away. Lana loved it and I did too. It turned out to be cheaper to pick it up myself than to ship it to Illinois, and the road trip gave me some extra time on my own to think and pray.

While I was in Houston, I visited the

church where we were married. Of course I cried as I knelt at the front of the church where I said my vows to Lana: “You are a gift from God to me and I plan to treat you as a gift.” As I walked through the empty hallways that day, I felt like I was reliving a scene from the *Titanic*. My mind filled in the empty hallways with people and dancing and private moments with Lana (and the photographer) from 24 years ago. I don’t think I needed a photographer to remember anything from that day.

We tried to keep things the same as much as possible around the house this year because so much had already changed in our lives. We planted a garden as usual in the spring, and we made Lana’s favorite salsa with all the tomatoes and peppers and parsley that we grew. The rest of the garden was overtaken with weeds when our tiller broke, just so you’re not left with some picturesque but false view of our life in the country—although we all still love it out here!

The rest of our summer was filled with fun things like Kaleo’s dance recital in May, Josiah’s week at Boy Scout camp in June, and music festivals and a camping trip to the sand dunes on Lake Michigan in July and August.

In the fall I drove Makari back out to California (in her 1993 convertible 240SX...the best way to head out west!) to start her 2nd year at Bethel College in Redding where she'll finish a 2-year certificate in transformational ministry in May. On the last day of our trip, driving through the mountains with the top down in the beautiful sun, I somehow felt that everything was going to be all right.

It was a turning point for me and, by the time I flew back to Illinois and started school with the 3 younger kids again, I felt like my heart was really on its way to healing. The deep pain of losing Lana was starting to be replaced with so many beautiful memories, and it's just been getting better and better ever since.

In December I flew to Australia to spend 2 weeks with Lucas and watch him graduate after 3 years with an advanced diploma in worship and leadership from Hillsong International Leadership College. It was great to meet Lucas' friends and teachers, see a ballet at the Sydney Opera House, spend a day at the Taronga Zoo and see *The Hunger Games 2* at the world's largest IMAX theater.

Two weeks after Lucas graduated, Karis

texted me to let me know she had just turned in her final paper to finish her bachelor's degree in biblical studies from Liberty University Online. She'll have a graduation ceremony in Virginia in May, but as of now I have 2 college graduates! I'm so proud of both of them, and I know Lana would be so pleased at the fruit of all her labors of homeschooling the kids from kindergarten through high school.

We were all together for 2 weeks at Christmas before Makari had to fly back to California for her 2nd semester at Bethel. We're starting to get back into the swing of school here at the house, too, happy to have Lucas home for awhile after being so far away for much of the last 3 years. Last weekend we had a movie night here at the house with all the kids (minus Makari) to watch the first of the *Lord of the Rings* movies as Bo had just finished reading the first book.

And that brings us up to today, January 18th, 2014. It's a new year and a new season of life. Psalm 5:3 has become one of my daily prayers:

"In the morning, O LORD, You hear my voice;

in the morning I lay my requests before You and wait in expectation.”

I never could have made it without God’s help and without your love and prayers. Thank you! I appreciate you all so much.

*Love,
Eric*

P.S. Here are a few more pictures of Lana’s memorial bench. If you’re ever in Illinois and would like a quiet place to think and pray, Lana’s bench is a perfect place to do it. She would love to know that you were taking time to think and pray, not about her, but about anything in your life that you’d like to think and pray about!

You’ll find the bench in the northeast corner of the Lexington Cemetery in Lexington, Illinois, just off Highway 55 at the Lexington exit. I think it’s a beautiful memorial in a beautiful spot to a beautiful woman.

Eric Elder



Making The Most Of The Darkness



Eric Elder



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Eric Elder is an author, speaker and contemporary pianist with a passion for sharing Christ with others. Eric is also the creator of *The Ranch*, a faith-boosting website which touches thousands of lives daily at WWW.THERANCH.ORG.

Here are a few of Eric's other inspirational books:

Two Weeks With God

What God Says About Sex

Exodus: Lessons In Freedom

Jesus: Lessons In Love

Acts: Lessons In Faith

Nehemiah: Lessons In Rebuilding

Ephesians: Lessons In Grace

Israel: Lessons From The Holy Land

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