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Introduction

The day I began writing this book, my kitchen looked a mess! The walls and cupboard fronts were covered in scraps of paper, dusty and curling at the edges. For the last four years, I had been sticking them there at the rate of several a week. I started the habit on the day that I still think of as the worst day of my life. I had often said a prayer that sounded something like this: ‘Lord, I could cope with anything—except that. If that worst fear of mine were ever to happen, I would be finished, finally and completely.’

But it happened. My worst fear became an ugly, messy reality. After that black day, I experienced all the bizarre stages of the grieving process—the shock, rage, depression; the ‘why’s, ‘what if’s and ‘if only’s, the panic attacks, the loneliness and that awful longing for death and oblivion. Surprisingly, though, I wasn’t ‘finished, finally and completely’! In fact, I discovered that God never allows us to go through our worst dread without giving us the strength to cope with it. More than that, he can actually use the experience to bless us profoundly. (Of course, I would have hit anyone who told me that when the mess was at its worst!)

As a trained counsellor, I understood all those ghastly stages of grief. Yet knowing what was happening to me did not help me much at all. It was those scraps of paper on my kitchen wall that kept me plodding along through my grief journey.

God has hidden, throughout the entire Bible, little phrases, promises and statements that I call the treasures of darkness (Isaiah 45:3). Reeling with shock and positively ill with grief, there was no way I could read long passages from the Bible.

But, when I woke early in the morning, feeling utterly lost and far too afraid to face the day, I would get up, make a mug of tea and sit in my rocking-chair. I couldn't concentrate enough to pray, I couldn't feel God's presence, but I used to sit gripping my Bible as if it were God's hand. Whenever I opened it and took a short peep inside, he seemed to cause one of these 'treasures of darkness' to catch my eye. It was uncanny the way they always seemed to speak directly to me about the way I felt that particular day. Because my brain was unable to hold on to anything for more than two minutes, I used to scribble them down on scraps of paper—and so they arrived on my kitchen wall. As I waited for the kettle to boil or the microwave to ping, I would read that day's acquisition over and over again, often feeling like a drowning man clinging to a lifebelt.

At first, of course, I did not realise that it is not enough to decorate the place with comforting little verses and nice promises from God; you actually have to believe them! For me, the 'crunch' came after several weeks of verse collecting. It was late at night and I was huddled under my duvet, on the sofa, quite overwhelmed by fear and an awful sense of desolation. I was too afraid to go to bed because there was a mouse in my wardrobe! That morning a friend had written to me saying, 'Take a look at Isaiah 54.' At that moment, reading the Bible was about the last thing I wanted to do, but anything was better than lying there, stiff with anxiety. So I found the place, and suddenly, this verse jumped right off the page.

Your maker is your husband.

ISALAH 54:5

In other words, God was telling me that he was taking on the responsibility of caring for me, providing, protecting, cherishing and meeting all my needs, both practical and emotional.

I remember lying there, curled up tight as a ball, and realising I had a choice. I could either take God at his word and abandon myself to his love completely, or I could turn my back on him in disbelief.

‘Take it or leave it!’ I thought as I slowly crept out from under the duvet. I found a pen and paper and wrote the verse out, adding another from further down the page:

‘Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor my covenant of peace be removed’, says the Lord, who has compassion on you.

ISAIAH 54:10

It felt as if I was making a very special pact with God as I stuck the paper in the place of honour over the kitchen sink. When I think back, I realise that the decision to believe it was the turning point in my recovery.

When I decided to write a book for people who are recovering from all kinds of loss, I realised that the best I could do was to share my ‘scraps of paper’ with them, hoping they would find them as much help as I had done. As I began pulling these scraps off the walls and cupboards, I remembered I also had a bundle of cards and letters that friends had sent me. I had stored them carefully away in the bottom drawer of my desk and soon I was sitting on the floor, with piles of paper laid out all around me. I felt as if I had discovered a gold mine!

Many described their own experiences or shared verses, quotations or coping strategies that had helped them. After making this discovery, I remembered all the other ‘treasures of darkness’ I had collected when my life had exploded into painful fragments on a previous occasion. Back in the 1980s I had been seriously ill with a brain virus that had left me

in constant pain and, for eight long years, dependent on a wheelchair. God had undoubtedly mended my life that time, too, and soon another ‘gold mine’ of cards, verses and slips of paper was unearthed from a tea chest in the attic.

I finished this book four years after my worst fear became an ugly reality. Reading it again for this updated version, I realised what a long way I have come since then. I was obviously feeling so raw and vulnerable when I wrote it, and still needing a lot more healing. Perhaps if I were writing it now I would do so rather differently—but that would actually be such a pity. Books that are written by people years after some life-shaking event can often feel rather threatening to those still trudging through the rubble and ruins of their own catastrophe. When a writer is looking back from a distance, they can easily give the impression that God always felt close and that it was easy to overcome doubts, fears and regrets. Perhaps it is just very easy to forget how wounded, lost and confused we can feel at first. So, for that reason, I have resisted the temptation to make too many changes.

Yet, as I reread the book I remembered with a shudder just how difficult it had been to write, and how many times I had almost given up the struggle. Since it was first published, however, I have received shoals of letters from people who told me they had found it a help during their own ‘grief journey’. Many said it felt like a friend walking along beside them. Those letters have made the pain of writing the book totally worthwhile.

My life has changed so much since those early days: I have founded a charity called Beauty From Ashes, which brings me into daily contact with thousands of other people walking the same ‘valley of the shadow’, and knowing them has enriched my life beyond description. God really is in the business of mending broken hearts and, although it is very difficult to

believe this during the darkest times, it is possible to be happy again. Now, 13 years on from my own major loss, I find that I am happier and more fulfilled than I have ever been in my entire life. I live alone and my children are scattered all over the world, but real happiness does not depend on other people, what we possess, or even good health. I believe it comes from knowing you are loved by God right down in the core of your being—and revelling in the fact that he will never ever go away.

If your life has been shattered by some destructive experience, or you have lost someone you love, all I can say is, again, ‘God is in the business of mending people.’ He has done that for me twice now, and I’ve seen him do it for too many others to doubt his ability. The only thing he needs is for us to give him all the pieces of our broken hearts and lives, and to trust him to put us back together again in his own way and at his own pace.

— SECTION ONE —

The early stages



— Day 1 —

Where are you, God?

Who is among you who reverently fears the Lord, who obeys the voice of his Servant, yet who walks in darkness and deep trouble and has no shining splendour in his heart? Let him rely on, trust in, and be confident in the name of the Lord, and let him lean upon and be supported by his God.

ISAIAH 50:10 (AMP)

This was the very first verse to go up on my kitchen wall and I slapped it up there late in the evening of that dreaded day when I lost the person I love most in this world. I had rung a friend with the news long after her bedtime, but she had jumped straight into her car to bring me the verse written out on a card.

Some people say that they feel wonderfully ‘carried’ by God during those first few days or even weeks of loss, wafted along high above the earth and its horrible realities, on a golden cloud. I didn’t. I felt nothing at all. There was no ‘shining splendour’ in my heart—or anywhere else for that matter. I spent my time mindlessly clearing out the garage, tidying the attic and sorting endless cupboards, late into the night. I did not cry, rage or worry about the future—until later!

When we are injured physically and pain becomes unbearable, the body has a way of sliding into unconsciousness. Perhaps that numb feeling I experienced (and even the ‘cloud nine’ euphoria reported by others) is rather similar.

Our subconscious mind needs space to work through the implications of what has happened, so it switches off the emotions and renders us incapable of feeling anything.

This strange, detached state carries us over the worst part of our trauma but, while it saves us from feeling the bad emotions, it also cuts out the good ones. That is why it is often so hard to feel close to God after our lives have exploded. Prayer feels unsatisfying, reading the Bible is boring, and when we do pluck up enough courage to walk into church we might as well be singing nursery rhymes as hymns or praise songs to God.

When we realise that the ‘shining splendour’ in our hearts is missing, we panic. ‘Just when I need God most, he’s vanished,’ we mutter furiously. But here’s another of my kitchen verses:

Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.

HEBREWS 13:5

That is a promise. We will always have his presence with us, but nowhere does he promise that we will always feel it. It is the fact of his presence that matters.

On a cold, grey, foggy day in January, no one doubts that the sun is shining up there in the sky, beyond the wintry clouds. We can’t see it or feel its warmth but, even though our teeth are chattering and we have to switch the lights on at midday, we are still sure the sun is there, simply because it always is!

A prayer

Lord, I feel desolate. Most of what I valued is gone. Loss surrounds me—loss in all directions—leaving me cut off, alone, unprotected. All I can hear are the echoes of familiar voices and laughter from the past. The memories of all the things I wanted to do, places I

*wanted to visit, people I wanted to meet, merely mock me now.
Worst of all, I feel I've lost you too, God. Where are you?*



God himself has said, I will not in any way fail you nor give you up nor leave you without support. I will not, I will not, I will not in any degree leave you helpless nor forsake nor let you down (relax my hold on you)! Assuredly not!

HEBREWS 13:5 (AMP)

— Day 2 —

The Cinderella syndrome

The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners... to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion—to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.

ISAIAH 61:1–3

These verses meant so much to me that I put them up in the loo as well as in the kitchen. They were written 700 years before Jesus was born, yet they describe his mission so exactly that when he preached his first sermon he used them as his text, saying, ‘Look, folks, this is me!’ Well, not in quite those words! But he meant, ‘I’m the hope of everyone who feels shattered, crushed, trapped and bereft. I can turn your tears into laughter.’

There is nothing so useless, bleak and dead as the ashes of yesterday’s fire, and in the Bible ashes symbolise a sense of wretched desolation and loss. When something terrible happened, people would rip up their clothes in a great gesture of grief, wrap themselves in an old sack and scoop up handfuls of ashes to rub all over their heads.

Job, covered in painful and revolting sores and reeling from

the loss of all his ten children, not to mention his business and reputation, crawled off to sit amid the rotting debris on the town's rubbish dump, telling his friends, 'I am reduced to dust and ashes' (Job 30:19).

Princess Tamar, King David's daughter, was little more than a child when she was sexually abused by her half-brother. In her distress, she put ashes on her head to express her inner desolation (2 Samuel 13:19–20).

On the other hand, brides and grooms both wore lovely crowns of flowers on their heads, and colourful clothes. So when God says he will give us a garland of beautiful flowers instead of ashes, he is promising to create a wedding dress from funeral black and a ballgown fit for a princess from Cinderella's rags.

We just have to go on handing him the ashes, handful by dismal handful, day by day—in naked faith, even when we can't see the beautiful garland he is holding, ready for us, behind his back.

One of the most precious cards I received during that early time came from an elderly friend. She told me how much this little poem had meant to her during many difficult years. When I look at her, I can definitely see the truth and reality contained in her poem.

*'Beauty for ashes!' can He, can He give
When life's best years have gone—have passed away?
When cherished hopes, long held, no longer live,
And life seems now a drear monotony?*

*'Beauty for ashes!' Ashes! Yes indeed!
Ambitions, dreams and hope all shattered now:
Dearest ones gone, and none to care or heed:
Beauty for ashes? Can it be? And how?*

*'Beauty for ashes!' Can we thus exchange
These now cold embers of life's burned-out past
For beauty—beauty heavenly, wondrous, strange—
A beauty which throughout life's way can last?*

*Yes, for our ashes, He would have us take
Beauty—His own—each passing day to wear,
Till, in His likeness, satisfied, we wake,
And find new beauties, everlasting, there!*

J. DANSON-SMITH

A prayer

Lord, right now I don't have the energy even to try to believe you can transform the blackened, charred ruins of my life into anything new or beautiful. But I want to want to believe it!