

FINDING HOPE IN YOUR GRIEF

Interview with Stephen

'My best friend was diagnosed with cancer at the end of last year. We heard finally on a Wednesday that the cancer's back and there's nothing we can do. He was dead by Friday. That was a bit of a smack in the head.'

Celia: This is Messages of hope and I'm Celia Fielke. Today we're talking with Steve about what going through grief and tough times means for him and what sustains him in the midst of grief. Is God really present in these times?

Steve, you've been through some pretty tough times in your life, one of them quite recently, can you share with us what that was like for you?

Stephen: Well, my best friend was diagnosed with cancer at the end of last year and had surgery. They thought that they'd got what they needed to. It was a difficult cancer, but he just wasn't really rebounding. We heard finally on a Wednesday a month or so ago that the cancer's back and 'there's nothing we can do.' He was dead by Friday. That was a bit of a smack in the head. So yeah, tough, but God was very active and present in that. And so grieving but also feel deeply honored to have had that experience at that time and the way things panned out. So yeah, difficult, but God showed up.

Celia: What do you mean God showed up?

Stephen: On the Wednesday night when we found out he was in hospital, we went around to his wife's place and just rocked up and we didn't really know what to say. It was a 'what the?' moment. So we prayed and we kind of gave God three options. We thought that it would be good, you know, to give the almighty some options! Option 1 was just come back and finish this and be done with it and take everyone. You know finish it, the end of the world sort of thing like that.

Option 2 was for a miracle but we said another miracle cause his life was full of miracles. All of our lives are but we would love a miraculous healing and it would have been a miracle. That was option 2.

Option 3 was: look if it's going to happen, then don't let it linger and make sure that your presence is felt over the next days. Well God skipped option 1 and 2 but he answered option 3 in spades. It was just an amazing time.

I had the privilege of being there on the day that he died, in the hospital, early in the morning, a few hours before he died. I had some precious time just with him, one on one and I'll never forget that. It was like holy ground. So that's helped with the grieving process. Still tough but God is good

Celia: Steve, earlier you were telling us about how God was there at the end with your friend, and how even in the midst of your grief you felt God showed up - can you give me a bit more of an insight into what that was like?

Stephen: Yeah, so Mike was on some pretty strong drugs in the lead up, so palliative care. He was not able to ring or anything like that but that Friday morning somehow he managed to ring his wife and say 'I think this is it. Can you come in and can you get Steve to come in?' So I got a call at 5.30am. She said 'Can you come into the hospital.' Because we'd only found out a day or so beforehand that the cancer was back I said 'yeah, yeah, sure, when?' When she said 'No, now!' 'Oh okay Sure.' So I was in the car and down there by 6.30am.

It was just a precious time and there was time for us to talk about those things, to laugh. There was time for me to be able to actually verbalise how deep a friend he was, because I'm a male you don't do that, you know. So I was given that opportunity to actually verbalise that and say what he meant to me and for him to do the same. Yeah, look he was a footloose, fancy free kind of guy. A real character and an amazing man. When I just reminded him again that Jesus was going to come and take him soon, he was wearing these bed sock things and he kind of wrestled and threw them off. And we just chuckled and said 'looks like you're going into heaven barefoot.'

There's a lot more to that but it's that holy ground experience where you know that there's death, there's dying, there's human weakness but also the strength of God. So in a blink of an eye, he was going to transition from someone who was wasting away to someone who would be leaping and bounding and yeah, that was precious.

Celia: Experiencing the death of someone close to you, or a traumatic event like that can either strengthen your faith or shake your faith. Have you ever questioned if God was real?

Stephen: Many years ago, as a late teenager I really was struggling. I've never had a moment in my life when I haven't believed in God but at that point I wasn't convinced that God believed in me! I really struggled with that. So it was like, 'God I need a sign that you care for me.' I went out in the middle of country Victoria, looked up at the night sky and I said 'okay God just give me anything. You know a falling star, bird, I don't care, just something.' And I got nothing, not a thing. You know not a satellite. I don't think it's even possible to look at the night sky for any length of time in the outback and not get anything!

Well, I got nothing and so I just walked back devastated, thinking 'No God, what do I do with that?' You know God doesn't believe in me. And I went back to the dorm and it was like an audible voice from God, it wasn't but it was like an audible voice saying 'you idiot.' It wasn't quite the affirmation I was needing! But right next to my bed was the Word, the Bible and here I am standing outside looking up at the sky for a sign that I could actually interpret any way I like. I could have got a satellite, a falling star, a comet, you know an alien come down. I could have had any number of different things but then it would still have been subjective.

And God's going 'You're looking at that, I've actually told you what I think of you. I've written it down so there's no mistaking it.' So for me that was like a turning point, a real love of the Word. You want to know God, you want to know what he thinks in any situation, then read the Word. Get to know the Word, you'll get to know God. And that's the other side of that, it's not just me giving God a list of demands. It's God just affirming 'This is who I am, this is what I'm about, this is what I think about you, I think about the world, I think about everything. Here it is.' So each, I just keep exploring that and that's a lifelong conversation.

Celia: Earlier when you found out about Mike's cancer being back - you said you all prayed together for Mike - that's something I'd like to know a little bit more about. I know in the moments when you're in the middle of a crisis you might pray to God - but you made it sound that it was just such a natural thing to do.

Stephen: I think we all go through that stage of thinking that we've got to come up with the right formula for prayer. And so if it's the right words, the right time, the right position, you know all of these sorts of different things but prayer is not a formula. I get back to that relationship and so prayer for me is doing life together with your God. We talk in our marriage about doing life together with all of its ups and downs and its moments and so doing life together with God.

Celia: So it's kind of like a relationship? Like a conversation?

Stephen: It is a conversation and it's natural to you. You don't have to be someone else, present someone else to God. I'm not going to try and imitate someone else; I'm just going to pray like Stephen because that's who I am. I'm fearfully and wonderfully made, and God knows me and so he can fill in the blanks. If I start turning it into a performance, then he's going to go 'What's with that?'

It's that relationship. God knows us, He made us. So walking through life with God is an amazing thing because you know sometimes I see the way things work out and I go 'Ah that's what you're up to' and it's kind of cool. And there's other times when I go 'I have no idea what you're up to' but that's kind of cool too. So be it, that's the journey.

Celia: So how did that thinking work out when your friend Mike passed away?

Stephen: So I can look at my friend, he could have been miraculously healed. Some people would say 'Oh that was an amazing miracle of God' and other people would say 'Oh you know that was just health, it happens sometimes.' And so you could go well God didn't show up, did he. Well he did show up and the guy died. So in both of those instances our first choice of prayer mightn't have been answered but God's still there because he's not just a God that you put a coin in and press this button and this is what comes out. He's a relational God and he's there in the good, the bad, the ugly.

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