

THOUGHTS TO BE SHARED WITH FRIENDS

It's been nine weeks now since John Christian drowned. The need to put these thoughts in writing has been burning in my heart since a few days after he died but the hurt has been too great. On two occasions I've forced myself to make a few notes but on neither occasion have I been able to carry through to completion. But I feel two driving needs. The first is to try to respond to the many friends who have reached out to us so unselfishly. The second is to record my experiences before the anesthesia of time dulls too much the sting of pain I feel at losing John Christian.

If you haven't experienced the kind of loss we've experienced, it is simply not possible for you to appreciate, nor should you expect to be able to appreciate, the empty darkness we've been cast into, and in fact are still trying to see our way out of. But having come to the edge of our darkness, you have experienced at least a glimpse of the mystery we've been thrown into. And to the extent you have been drawn into our darkness, somehow, in this awesome mystery of this great God of ours, you have helped us beyond imagination. Just as importantly, in reaching out to help us, you have helped yourself. In simply allowing yourself to be touched by the darkness we've been thrown into, in reaching out to us in love, you have served God, and God will never forget this.

It was about one o'clock in the morning. Molly, Jeni, George, and I had cried ourselves into a restless sleep. I awoke and wandered aimlessly downstairs to find a very dear friend sitting alone in the family room. Now it would never have occurred to me to stay close by a friend in grief but this friend had some idea of what we were going through and his presence there that night was a great source of comfort. (If you ever have a friend in need, take advantage of the opportunity to stand by him. You don't have to say a word. Your quite presence will give him all the strength he needs.)

I felt a strong drive from within to seek God's help. Though I really didn't know what I was looking for at the time, I opened my Bible to Revelations 3:15-22 and, with the help of our friend, worked through the thoughts in these verses. It quickly became clear to me that God was telling me and my family to be serious about our lives and to be sure that we be aware of his purpose for our lives on this earth.

The first thing our family did on learning that John Christian was dead was turn to the Lord with every ounce of consciousness we had to seek his help and commit ourselves to trust in Him to see us through this darkness. On our knees in the neighbor's front yard we cried out through tears to God, "God show us clearly your purpose for us in this awful darkness we're now engulfed in and we will commit our lives as never before to do your will for us in this life." At that moment our Lord began to comfort us and to answer this prayer. In directing me to Rev. 3: 15-22, God was reminding me, early in the ordeal, of my commitment.

A very real darkness stands out in my mind as I think back on the events of that night. The house had suddenly filled with friends. Every light in the house could have been on but I can remember only darkness. A friend came to me and with a quiet gentleness I shall never forget told me about Romans 8:28. Hang on to that with all your might, it's a strong reassurance that God is in control of your life no matter what you happen to be going through. A young lady read I Thessalonians 4:13-18 to all of us in the room that night. This bit of Scripture was the first bit of reassurance from the Lord that John Christian was in fact, at that very moment, in the presence of God in Heaven. Let me tell you that this reassurance was critical at that moment.

A thousand thoughts race through your mind. Your complete being, mind and body, has been shocked and now all the thoughts normally stored neatly away in an orderly manner are flashing back and forth through your mind, completely out of control. And somehow through it all

a small nagging question begins to manifest itself - "What if all this joy and salvation we profess isn't real?" You know, it's easy to claim to be a Christian when everything in your life is going well. But when you're suddenly plunged into the darkness, when the carpet of your life is yanked out from under you, when you get slammed in the gut with a sledge hammer, that question starts to nag. The big test of your faith comes, not in good times, but when disaster strikes. And the Greene family was now entering the most awful test of our lives.

Actually two terrible needs were suddenly tearing at me. The first was the need for reassurance that John Christian was in fact engulfed in perfect glory in the presence of God in Heaven. The second was the need to respond to the terrible sense of loss we were all experiencing. The second I had some ability to deal with, with the help of God. The first however, I had no way of dealing with, short of a revelation from God himself.

Molly, Jeni, and George were upstairs. I was downstairs surrounded by dozens of friends who had suddenly appeared. In desperation, I tried to express the fear I had and the need for reassurance that John Christian was indeed in Heaven. And I asked for prayer. Everyone in the room that night prayed that God would give us some reassurance that John Christian's short life had not been for naught and that the beliefs we hold and profess are real - that John Christian was at that moment with Jesus, in Heaven.

At that moment, though I didn't know it until the next day, Molly had a vision of four angels lifting John Christian up and carrying him into Heaven.

Did you get that? She saw four angels - not one but four. What an honor for John Christian. And what a joy John Christian's life on earth must have been to God to warrant such an escort.

Of course, those of you who knew John Christian can appreciate that. John Christian was so full of life, and it seemed he never slowed down. What a joy he was to us and to those his life touched. And if to us, then of course to God who created him and blessed our lives with his life.

With the assurance of John Christian's eternity we were left only with the need to deal with the loss and the "why" question.

A submarine captain showed up that Monday and shared Ps 30:5B. Then several friends shared Isa 40:28-31. And the quiet love and encouragement of other dear friends established an initial strength which, when I look back on it, was so essential. And let me tell you also about the cards and notes and phone calls and people coming by to share in the grief. All this from folks we see frequently, folks we haven't seen in years, and even folks we didn't know before. It takes an effort to even write a note (I know because I have yet to be able to respond). And yet the support is so very important.

Five days later, the "why" was answered for me, again by our Lord speaking through a man of God. This man was speaking to about 300 people. He didn't know me and had no idea I was there, but he couldn't have spoken more personally to my needs if I had gone to him for personal counselling. He spoke about the reason for adversity in our lives. He used Job as an example of adversity in the life of a man who loved God. These are the thoughts that developed from this man's talk, the book of the life of Job, and II Cor 1:3-7.

Bad things, that is adversities, are brought into our lives by Satan. God does not bring adversity upon us. While God is in complete control of every single universal event, our lives included, he does allow Satan to bring adversity upon us. When adversity hits we have one of two choices. We can become bitter and turn to ourselves for help. Or we can admit our helplessness and turn to God for help. God allows Satan to bring adversity into our lives to give

us the opportunity to turn to God for help. So, if we allow it, God will use adversity to strengthen us and better enable us to use our lives for the particular purpose we were put here in the first place. It is through adversity that we have an opportunity to draw closer to God and store up treasures in heaven for ourselves. (In reaching out to us, I believe that each of you have in fact stored up treasures in Heaven.) These are heavy but important thoughts. They might be unsettling for you but they completely resolved the "why" question for me.

For me, it is a tremendous comfort to know that, from the beginning of time, God had a purpose for a little boy named John Christian. He intended to use him on this earth for 2 1/2 years to do his will and then to reward him with eternal life in his presence and bless him for a job well done. And when I think of it in those terms, I praise God for putting John Christian in my life for 2 1/2 years. And I also praise God for what ever effect John Christian's life has had and is having on your life.

And when I can praise God and thank him for John Christian, and for you, the darkness begins to fade and the light continues to grow stronger in our lives.

God has used you to begin to build in us the strength and reassurance we so desperately needed. He has also used this disaster to build stronger bonds between the members of our family and to stir up a new awareness in some of us who had perhaps begun to be a bit complacent and to draw our whole family closer together. Perhaps most importantly, God has used this disaster to break my heart. And with my broken heart, I look forward to being able to reach out to each of you now to give you back, in some small way, some of the love God has given me through you.

Thank you for allowing me to share these thoughts with you. Even more, from the bottom of my heart, thank you for allowing God to work through you to love and strengthen us in the darkest moment of our lives.

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