

Transcript for Episode #6, Desperate for Hope Podcast with guest Tim Challies

Vaneetha:

Tim, welcome to the Desperate for Hope podcast. Thank you so much for joining me today.

Tim Challies: Of course, thanks for having me.

Vaneetha: Yeah, absolutely. So we, we have never met, but we might be speaking together halfway around the world in Tasmania in the fall, which I'm very excited about. And I have to tell you, my husband reads your blog every day and you, mentioned it a few, maybe months ago on something, and my husband decided that I had arrived because Tim Challies mentioned me on his blog.

So that was very exciting for me. So I thought I'd mention that you're my claim to fame with my husband, so,

Tim Challies: And, if you're excited about flying halfway across the world, maybe you haven't flown halfway across the world to speak at a conference before. It sounds glamorous, but, oh man. Is it tiring?

Vaneetha: Oh, is it? Okay. Well we were thinking we'd go early, but yeah, I, I read about how long the flight is, so that's, that's gonna be quite the [00:01:00] thing,

Tim Challies: Mm-hmm.

Vaneetha: We'll see. So, well, Tim, I was wondering, if you could orient our listeners, maybe just where you're from, what your day-to-day life looks like.

Tim Challies: Sure. Yeah. So I live just outside Toronto, Ontario, Canada. I'm, an elder slash pastor at Grace Fellowship Church, which is a church about 23-24 years old now. And, really interesting church and an interesting part of the world. I'm married to Elaine. We will be coming up on our 25th anniversary this summer.

And, the Lord blessed us with three children. We have Mikayla, who is just about to turn 17 and just about ready to head off to college in the fall. We have

Abby, who is, in her junior year at Boyce College down in Louisville, Kentucky, and she's married to Nathan. They've been married for almost a year now.

And then the Lord blessed us with Nick as well, who, passed away a couple of years ago and he was 20 years old. Also a student at Boyce College and at, the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Vaneetha: Wow. Well, I know a lot of your story about [00:02:00] loss is around Nick, so could you just tell us about that? I'm so sorry. I just finished reading your book Seasons of Sorrow, and you beautifully described just what you've been through, which I think would be so helpful for other people to hear.

Tim Challies: Sure. Yeah. so Nick was a college and seminary student down in Louisville, Kentucky. And in November of 2020, he was, just newly engaged to a sweet girl named Wren. And, he and some of his friends, the hall mates at at the college there, were just off playing a game at a nearby park. And, for reasons that still remain really unknown to us he collapsed and passed away and, people who were there tried to revive him. There was nothing they could do. He was taken to a hospital. Nothing they could do either. And so we were at home here in Canada, got the news, got the call, and that entered us into this, this season of sorrow that I describe in the book.

Vaneetha: Yeah. Wow. I'm sure talking about it makes you relive it, which I'm, I'm sure is very hard every time you do these [00:03:00] interviews. But because I think losing a child is every parent's nightmare and, and what wrestlings came for you with that loss of your son?

Tim Challies: Yeah, it certainly, it is the, the nightmare that all parents face. You know, we, we all have these little. Flash forwards or something to what might, how we might respond if that were to happen to us. And, I'm not a particularly fearful person, so I'd never given it much thought. Elaine is much more of a fearful person, so she had lived in dread of, of something like this happening, and then just lo and behold, it swept in upon us.

And, and so I think the. What, what faced us immediately was whether we were going to now enact all the theology that we had been studying or we had been talking about, or we had been learning for all these years. And, you know, I was raised in a Christian home and so, had grown up around creeds and catechisms and memorized big chunks of the Heidelberg [00:04:00] Catechism and the Westminster Shorter Catechism and so on well grounded in doctrine. Elaine came to Faith later in life when she was about 18 and didn't have any church

background. I mean literally had never set foot in a church before and you know, but then had been learning doctrine as well and, and so it was just, okay, here we were now faced with this loss.

Were we in this moment going to say everything we believed is true now, or were we going to to change our theology on the basis of our experience?

Vaneetha: Yeah. Yeah. That's such a hard thing. Cause I think often we have these ideas that we memorize, these catechisms, we know that God is good, but we really don't expect suffering to land on our doorstep. What questions did you ask God in the midst of that? Or you and Aileen together?

Tim Challies: I think we certainly didn't ever question the existence of God or the goodness of God or anything like that. Which I'm very grateful and I know many [00:05:00] people find themselves going there in their losses, and I think God protected us from those sorts of questions. I think more the questions we were grappling with were, well, what I just said, are all these things true?

And are we just going to enact our theology? And we, we know this temptation to, allow our feelings to dictate our beliefs rather than the other way around. And so the question was, are we going to allow the truth to shape our response or to shape our emotions. I think that was the, the big one. And then I think fairly quickly, at least speaking for myself was, what is God asking of me in this?

Because if God is truly sovereign, then his sovereignty extends even to this. This, in some way is his will, his plan for, for me, for my family. And so what is he asking of us? What's his, what's his plan in this for us as, as individuals and as a family?

Vaneetha: Mm. And when as you asked [00:06:00] that question, what is God asking of us? what kind of answer did you, or what did you sense God was saying in that?

Tim Challies: I guess what I thought, came of it and what I've concluded has come of it is just what God asks of all of us and our suffering in our sorrow, which is to prove before a skeptical world and to prove before a wondering church if we can suffer and suffer deeply and, and remain joyful before the Lord. To remain confident in Him, submitted to Him, and even then to live a life of, of joy, before Him. Not to allow this one thing to either define our lives, to become our identity.

Or to be the one thing that causes us to so radically change our view of God that we no longer love him or trust Him or, or follow Him. And I think this has been the, the challenge for every Christian who suffered is, will I suffer in a way that that maintains my joy? And, you know, I think oftentimes we, we suffer [00:07:00] for this reason, so we can prove to the world that no, this, this will not destroy my joy.

I will continue to, to love and serve the Lord even with a broken heart.

Vaneetha: Hmm. That's beautifully said. I think I was thinking when I heard the news that would be so hard to have to suffer in such a public way because you have a public blog, you have a ministry. And there is this difficulty, I think when we have big ministries or people you know are watching us. I feel like so many people were watching your response and it was beautiful, but very honest, which I really appreciated sort of the tension between, talking about what was hard and, your questions as well as being grounded in the goodness of God.

And, continuing to go back to that, like even though I'm struggling and wondering, even where you are in this moment. And I love this couple of lines from your book. You said early on, after Nick's death, "I should pray, shouldn't I? But I don't find anything to say. I should open my Bible, [00:08:00] right? But I can't focus on the words.

My eyes flip about skimming over chapters and verses, but never pausing long enough to absorb a thing." And that really struck me because I have a son who died, when he was an infant. And that was very much how I felt like I would open the Bible and I couldn't really focus on anything. And what would you say to the person who's listening right now who is feeling that way after a big loss?

Tim Challies: I think when we're in those times of just overwhelming sorrow, our capacities are vastly reduced and so we simply can't learn much. We can't understand much, we can't deal with much, and that's just because we're human. We are little weak creatures and great losses, great sorrows, I think display that to us in a really profound way.

And so in those early days, especially, they talk about the brain fog or whatever it is, you know, where you, you just can't function as you normally do. And [00:09:00] so granting yourself a lot of grace and granting yourself a lot of patience to, to get through that. That initial stage anyways. And, you know, you have to understand that the Lord loves you. Your, your relationship with Him isn't dependent upon the amount of prayer, the amount of scripture and so on. So, you don't need to worry that God is going to abandon you because you can't

maintain your devotional habits or anything else. You, you have to understand that God is your father and He loves you, and He's there with you and He's weeping alongside you.

And all of these, all these truths we believe. And, you know, you were talking earlier about. The, the public nature of grief, in some ways, our grief, everyone's grief is public. Whether it's before a small number of people or a large number of people. And I think it's really important in our grief that we don't perform.

We don't need to put a, a better version of ourselves forward, or a worse form of ourselves. Cause I think there's this, this kind of notion in the Christian world that we should shake our fists at the sky and be [00:10:00] angry at God. And that is authentic. And so maybe we're almost tempted to, to doubt God or to be angry with God.

But at first I don't think that's a righteous reaction, but it's certainly not a necessary one. But then, you know, on the flip side, we also don't have to present ourselves as being much better than we are or to pretend that we're stoic when really we're, we're broken and we're weeping. And so I think just being authentically...

Well, just being authentic in our grief and allowing people around us to see that is, is helpful to them. And, just one of the ways we can serve in our grief.

Vaneetha: Yeah, that's a great point, Tim. I know after my son died, I was teaching bible study in our church. Not even a big church, but I felt like all the eyes were on me and I felt like I really couldn't grieve authentically. So I, I sort of divorced myself, like saying all the right things, but my heart started growing away from God.

Which God really brought me back and helped me see that authenticity is really what, what God needs from us because that's really what shows who He is. And I [00:11:00] think I felt like I needed to defend God and have this sort of very stoic, buttoned up theology, even when I was brokenhearted. And I think that often leads people to walk away from the church sometimes because they feel I can't keep up that impression that they want everybody else to have. That they've tried to put out. So I, I've appreciated your honesty in that.

Tim Challies: Thank you. Yeah.

Vaneetha: Is there a time even through this grieving process of turmoil or darkness that stands out to you above the rest where you felt maybe desperate, maybe even abandoned by God?

Tim Challies: Yeah. I, I wouldn't say we ever felt abandoned by God. Well, you put that question in the realm of feelings, and I think that's helpful because in our grief, our feelings are one thing. Facts are another thing. And I think what we really need to battle for in our grief is to bring our feelings in line with the facts.

So we may feel abandoned by God when we've suffered the [00:12:00] loss of a child. But the fact of the matter is, God hasn't abandoned us and wouldn't abandon us anymore than you or I would abandon our child if they were going through a loss. We would rush to their side. We would be there for them, we would comfort them.

And God responds much the same. He's attentive to our cries and to our tears. And so we may feel abandoned, but that's where I think if we, if we really just look at who God is, we, we look into the word we call Christians to minister truth to us. We'll see that God is, is present with us. But then also sometimes God does interesting things.

He arranges His providence in certain ways. And so there are two times I can think of, I was really just in, in deep despair. And so I went to the cemetery where, where Nick had been buried. And I went there to weep and two times the two times I was most brokenhearted when I went there. There, you know, air quote, just so happened to be people I knew who were there at that exact same [00:13:00] moment.

Now, this is not a popular cemetery, et cetera. It's not like this is a hangout spot. God had just clearly arranged circumstances in my life and these people's lives, so they could be there at that moment. And so even when I was feeling as low as I could be, and, you know, maybe wasn't focusing on the truth. And God arranged providence in such a way to give me that. That just tangible sense of, okay, God is with me in my sorrow.

If I doubted it before, how could I doubt it now, when I show up at the cemetery, and it just so happens that one of the deacons from my church is there. Just to visit Nick's grave, you know, at that, just at the right moment.

Vaneetha: Wow. Yeah, I love that. You said that God sort of rushes to our side and our suffering and, but sometimes we don't see it. We don't feel it. Obviously

we don't see it, but sometimes we don't feel it. But I love keeping our eyes open. For the ways that he's showing us that. Like the deacon at your church.

Just, he puts people in circumstances in our lives, I think, to show us [00:14:00] that He is there and he does care. Even when, sometimes when we're surrounded by darkness, we just can't feel His presence, even though he is as near as He has ever been.

Tim Challies: Yeah, yeah, absolutely. Our feelings are, are always unreliable to varying degrees, but I think when we're at our most brokenhearted we really have to doubt our feelings, and that's, that's part of why it's so important to have Christians around you who can speak truth, who can speak facts about who God is and how he relates to us.

So, so no matter what we're feeling, we can subject our feelings to those facts and, and see them change.

Vaneetha: Mm-hmm. Yes. What are the, facts that, you just brought that up, what are the things that you go back to, the truths that maybe you rehearse to yourself when your feelings are going in a different direction?

Tim Challies: The two big ones for me, and I think for my family as well, were, were God's sovereignty and God's goodness. And so, knowing that, you know, in the words of Heidelberg catechism [00:15:00] question and answer, one: I am not my own, but belong in body and soul, both in life and death to my faithful savior Jesus Christ. That that was true of me.

That was true of Nick. It's a, it's a profession of God's sovereignty over all things. And it's so interesting to me that this catechism, this collection of questions and answers about theological truth, begins with that. It could have begun with the creation of the world or the creation of man or the preexistence of God.

It begins with what is your only comfort in life and death? That's the right place to begin. And it talks about God's sovereignty. So there's that. And then God's goodness, so God is, Sovereign, but He's also good in His sovereignty. He sovereignly displays His goodness in the circumstances of our life. So if that's all true, then God was sovereign over Nick's life and death, and God was good in Nick's life and Nick's death.

So then it just fell to us to believe those things and just look for, for evidences of them. And again, to subject whatever we felt [00:16:00] to the absolute facts of those two things.

Vaneetha: Hmm. That's great. I love the Heidelberg Catechism that first question. so I would encourage anybody listening to memorize that. Because those truths will carry you through suffering. I have a good friend who, passed away recently of ALS, and she had that written on her wall because she wanted to remember that every night when she went to bed and every day when she was, you know, she was in bed a lot just looking at that. And reminding herself, these are the truths that that will take us through life and death. So thank you for that reminder. What a solid thing for us. And I would say the same thing for me. God's sovereignty. And God's goodness, are what the truths that carry me through suffering as well.

Well, for many listeners and even for me sometimes, heaven feels like a far away idea. And, and it is mentioned in the, in this catechism that we were just talking about. But what are your thoughts about heaven and how have they changed since Nick's death?

Tim Challies: As Christians, we, [00:17:00] we have this promise of heaven. But heaven can be very, very far off and very distant from our imagination or from our, our desires even. And, you know, we shouldn't pretend like this world is only terrible. This world can be and often is very good. We enjoy many true pleasures and many true joys here.

And, you know, we can cling to those things. And it's not even wrong in a sense to really enjoy those things or to, to cling to them. Even to desire to see your, your children and grandchildren. These are good desires. You know, they're held out as you know, in the Old Testament as promises. These are promises in the sense of this is what we should expect, that people who live a good life, they get to see their children's children and so on.

So this world is very good and yet it's also very broken and very painful. And, It seems to me that through our suffering and then perhaps, especially through losing loved ones, this is what God uses to show us that this world isn't as good as we would otherwise make it. And just [00:18:00] to, to shift our affections, if you will, or our desires from this world to the next.

And, I'm only 46 years old. I've got presumably a ways to go and I expect in the, the years left to me, more and more of my people will be taken to heaven. And over time, more and more of my heart will be shifted to heaven as well

then. And I expect that by the time, you know, I'm advanced in age, I'll be even more ready to go just because so many of my people will be there waiting for me.

I think that is how God just pries our fingers off the world that really can be very, very attractive to us. I'm looking forward to heaven. I'm, and in that sense, I'm not being all fatalistic about it. I'm not just, you know, praying every day for the Lord to take me. Or anything, but when the time comes, I feel I'm more ready than ever to go.

Vaneetha: Hmm. Do you feel like you think about heaven more now?

Tim Challies: Yeah. Yeah. Certainly heaven has become more real. And you know, just before Nick died, my dad died as well. And so there were the generation before [00:19:00] me and the generation after me that were both there together now. And so yeah, my thoughts are on heaven. And the people, the people who are there, the people who are awaiting my arrival.

Vaneetha: Mm. Well for, for a lot of people, Heaven for their loved ones isn't a certainty, and I think that can be very difficult. I know you've said one of your greatest comforts is knowing that Nick is in heaven with the Lord. But I'm sure there are people listening who have people who have died that they don't know if they knew the Lord.

What would you say to them right now who are grieving that loss?

Tim Challies: That's so difficult. And it's, yeah, if, if heaven is real and hell is real, all of these things, we, we have to think about these things and, we, we can't make light of it. I would say first, we rarely, or never really know with absolute certainty where our loved ones are. Because if the thief on the [00:20:00] cross could repent and among his last gasps, then so could the people we know and the people we love.

And so we entrust them to the Lord in that sense. But then even more so, our joy is not primarily in where our loved ones are, even if we're convinced they're in heaven. Our joy is in the Lord and in His promises. So God promises that all will be made right. God promises that for those of us who go to heaven, we'll be fully satisfied and fully joyful forever.

There will be nothing that drains our joy. And so ultimately our hope isn't fixed on the location of, of our loved ones. It's fixed on the Lord Himself. And so I think that's, that's ultimately what we need to be focusing on, is Him.

Because it's His promises that will be proven true. And yeah, that's all I know to do is to shift our gaze to, the Lord himself and to again, his sovereign goodness.

Vaneetha: Now, what a great word. I, think [00:21:00] that that is such a great way to remember it, is that we need to think about what heaven will be like for us, and that our joy isn't about where other people are, but our joy is in Christ now and forever.

Tim Challies: Mm-hmm.

Vaneetha: But I know it, it is hard for, for listeners who are wondering, you know, I don't have that comfort, but, but knowing as, as you mentioned, the thief on the cross, committed his life to Christ and, and asked for forgiveness or asked Jesus to remember him, that our loved ones might have done that as well.

So that is a comfort.

Tim Challies: Yeah. And that you often hear that the great surprise in heaven will be who is there and who isn't there, right? And so, you know, We're not universalists here, et cetera. So we really do believe in the existence of heaven and hell and, the importance of, in this life, commit yourself to the Lord Jesus Christ.

You know, repent and belief. And yet ultimately God is sovereign and He will save his people even if it's at their, their dying gasp.

Vaneetha: Mm-hmm. Amen. Well, you [00:22:00] made a statement in Seasons of Sorrow that, Has really made me think. You said, if God called me to suffer this blow of losing Nick, why not another? Who else might He take? When I'm honest with myself, I admit that it is God I'm afraid of. I'm afraid of what else He might called me to do. so how do you deal with those fears?

Tim Challies: As I expressed that in the book though, these were in the relatively early days and I think for, for most of us, our life is sort of going in a direction where we assume that we're going to live. We assume our children are gonna live. We assume there's gonna be a certain level of stability in our health and our lives in general, and then something can come outta a left field like this and just rock our world.

And I, I think it's in those times when we've been completely rocked that these questions kind of arise. And over time, I think our fears tend to be quelled again because we tend to come back to a more [00:23:00] normal stretch again. But

all I know how to do in, in those times when fears arise is to just entrust them to the Lord and to just keep looking to God, to keep rehearsing what's true about God, that God is Sovereign that He has purposes and that His purposes are better than we can know, and his purposes will be in the end, proven to be the absolute best and absolutely just, and none of us will complain. Neither you nor I, nor anyone else, is gonna spend eternity saying, God, you asked me things that were just so unreasonable.

You had no no right to ask me that. We will just praise His name and say, yeah, that was a light momentary affliction compared to this great weight of glory. So, so rehearsing what's true about God and just really doing our best to believe those things and to live by faith that, that these things are true.

Vaneetha: Yeah, I think, I completely agree with that. And I think one of the things that helped me with my questions of sort of this, what if the worst happens? Like what if it gets worse? [00:24:00] And for me, a lot of it was realizing like I've been through a lot of suffering and God has never left me. So when we think, okay, it might get worse and God might choose to take another child or might choose to do anything, Ultimately remembering, wow, God brought me through that God was with me, God was faithful.

And kind of back to your, earlier kind of anchors of God is sovereign and God is good. And remembering those things so that when our fears maybe do come true, that we, we know that God will be just as present and sovereign and good as He was through whatever we've been through, I think is the way that I have dealt with them.

but I, yeah, I appreciate, I think at the very beginning of suffering, something happens very difficult. I think we really jump to the worst thing, like we can't trust God because suffering takes us by surprise. And so I think the surprise element makes us think nothing is safe anymore.

Tim Challies: Yeah. And God also gives us [00:25:00] these powerful testimonies among other brothers and sisters. So we have, I'm sure a mutual friend in Joni Eareckson Tada, we can look at her as an example of someone who's had a lifelong debilitating disability, and yet I don't, not many of us know somebody who's as full of joy.

And so we can look at someone like that and say, well, she can suffer this long and this joyfully. Then I know it can be done. This is the power of testimony and why God gives us these examples. And then for any of us who suffer, to whatever degree, it falls to us to do the same. To provide an example, not to

nearly the number of people that she has, but within our own family, within our own neighborhood, within our own church, to say, I've suffered, but it hasn't taken my joy.

It hasn't stolen my joy. I'm still living for the Lord. I'm still joyfully submitting to Him and yeah, living for His purposes.

Vaneetha: Yeah, it's funny, I actually interviewed, Joni, last week and talked about the same question about [00:26:00] fear and, and what our fears are and, and what do we tell ourselves in the midst of those fears. And I agree with you. There's no one who has the kind of joy that Joni does, especially with this kind of sorrow and suffering she's been through.

So she has been an example for me for years so. Well, Tim, for you, you just mentioned, we are an example within our families. All of us. And grief really impacted your entire family. You know, your wife lost her son and your daughters lost their brother. What has it looked like for you to help your wife and your children kind of walk alongside them in their own pain?

Tim Challies: We've learned that pain manifests itself very differently, or grief manifests itself very differently from person to person. And that's based on personality type. That's based on position in the the person's life. It's based on any number of factors. And so each of us has grieved differently [00:27:00] and we've had to allow each other to do that.

I think our natural tendency as simple human beings is to assume we're the most normal ones in the world and that other people are righteous or virtuous, to the degree that they look like us. And so my way, my natural tendency would be to think that my way of grieving is the right way. And if you're taking longer or your period of grief is much shorter or it's much more tears, or whatever it is that's wrong and I should get you to conform to, to my view.

And so we've had to, to realize that we're all going to grieve differently. And be willing to do it that way. And that can come down to how often we visit Nick's grave. It can come down to, just when we're ready to resume some sort of new normalcy after those early days or, or months. I had a gentleman reach out to me, shortly after Nick died and he, he essentially gave me a, an instruction manual of sorts.

He had gone through the same loss. About 10 years [00:28:00] prior, and one of the things he said was, I expect you'll be feeling like you've hit your new normal in four to six months. I expect it'll take your wife probably closer to 18 months.

And that's just the difference between men and women, difference between father, mother, and so on.

And that was very helpful and and proved to be very true. It was much longer for Aileen. And so that just prepared us, both of us prepared me to say. It's gonna take her longer. So I need to be patient with her, prepared her to say it's gonna take him shorter, so I can't assume, oh, I guess he didn't really love Nick as much as I did because he's got his, his bearings again, a little bit faster.

It's just, we're different people and, you know, I didn't carry Nick inside my body and I didn't nurse Nick at my breast and all these things that, that come to a mother. And then sisters, you know, one sister who is present and witnessed Nick's death right up close. Another who was far away, but had to live in a home with grieving parents for months afterward.

Their experience is very different as well. So granting grace to one another [00:29:00] has been so, so crucial.

Vaneetha: Hmm. What a great friend to, to come and tell you that, cause that is often one of the hardest things in marriage is we're kind of, people are looking at each other thinking you're not grieving the right way either you're too emotional or you're not emotional enough. And so to have someone sort of go before you.

It is a huge gift.

Tim Challies: Yeah.

Vaneetha: Yeah. Well, in your book you, you sort of talk about this, in terms of returning to to normal in some way, if there even is that. But you say, we learned to live with grief to develop a new semblance of normalcy that involved its constant presence. Eventually we had to learn to live this new life God had called us to.

We now needed endurance, the fortitude to carry a heavy burden through a long journey. So, what does living with grief look like for you now in this season?

Tim Challies: We're about, I guess two and a half years in. And so we still consider ourselves very young, very, [00:30:00] just still children in grief. Knowing that it's, again, if we live in a normal lifespan, we'll probably have to carry this for another few decades before we get to, uh, go and be with the Lord and go and be with Nick and have this, this sorrow taken from us.

It certainly has become easier, and I think that's hard to hear in the early days because you think that it'll become easier only if you stop loving the person or you start, becoming hardened to that person. But that's, that's not our experience. In fact, I think our, our love for Nick has actually grown, since he died.

He's more precious to us than ever. So our love doesn't diminish, but time does heal wounds. You know, don't wanna be flippant about it, but time really does have, its way of helping us cope with things. And eventually that person we love starts to become more associated with a past than the present.

And you no longer expect the phone to ring and see the, their name on the call display and all of these things. It just does become easier to [00:31:00] cope. And so the tears become a little less and the stretches between cries become longer. And maybe you find you don't need to visit the grave quite as often or these other things that we do to cope.

And so I think we're in that stretch now where we're, we're just learning to cope, learning what it'll be like for the long haul now. So we still dearly miss and, dearly love Nick and don't think that'll ever change. And yet, what are we gonna do? But go on living. We're not gonna be identified by this.

We're not going to drop out of the race and become useless to the Lord or his purposes. We're committed to living for His glory, carrying this well, and continuing to to serve the Lord and His people.

Vaneetha: Thank you. So you are in, you know, sort of the season of, just living with the memory of Nick and, really being able to, to carry on back to the life that, that you maybe had before he passed away. But there's probably people listening right now that are early on in the season of sorrow. What would you say to them?

What would you want them to know just as your [00:32:00] friend came to you?

Tim Challies: Yeah, I suppose I would say you won't go back to normal, but you'll create a new normal. So it won't ever be the way it was before in that sort of innocence or naivety or whatever it is. It's just, you can't go back to that. There was a certain, yeah, there's a certain way of living before you suffer deeply that you can't, you can't go back to.

But you will discover a new normal and it'll still be full of joy. You'll still, you'll laugh again. You'll have pleasures again. That that loved one won't ever be far

from your mind. But he also won't completely dominate it the way he does in those early days. So I would want somebody who's in the early days first to hear you can do this.

God equips you for these losses, and He will. He will be with you. He is with you. He's present with you. He cares about you. And He'll see you through it. This isn't, this isn't the end of, of your usefulness to God, not the end of your purposes that He's got mapped out for you. And then also just to, to really [00:33:00] make a as, as much as you can, make a deep study of the character of God, who is this God?

Who is this God who's even called you to suffer this loss? If we believe that God is sovereign over the number of our days and is ultimately, God's will that somebody is born and somebody has died, then study the character of that God and see who He really is. See, see what His heart is towards you.

And I think as you do that, you'll come to see that He truly is good and He truly does love and He truly does care. And I would want you to know that you can endure this loss, and on the other side, find that you love God even more than you did before, that this doesn't diminish your love for Him. It actually enhances it. God will be so close to you and, and help you through this so much that you'll just come to love and treasure that relationship with Him even more.

Vaneetha: Well that,takes me sort of to my next question, which you've sort of answered, which is, What would you say to someone who's in a season of wrestling with these truths about God [00:34:00] and. Asking the question, why would God allow such pain and loss?

How would you answer them?

Tim Challies: I don't know that we can ever get satisfactory answers to the why questions. So speaking personally and really just with my family, we've not put a lot of effort into why would God do this and what answer would ever be satisfying enough. You know, if, we found out that God had saved people because of this, you know, people who witnessed this or people who heard his story or read the book, so God saved how many people would be enough to say, okay, that balances out the life of my son.

So now, I'm satisfied or all these good things. God doesn't give us the answers to our why questions. I think God just points us to Himself and that that's the story of Job, you know, job wanted to know why, why God did this happen?

What? What were you doing to me in it? He never got his answers. Instead, God just told him about Himself and pointed Job to the character of God.

And [00:35:00] that's what God does for us as well. And so if we can make that study of the character of God and just really focus our eyes on him, I think we can set aside the why questions. And you know, Corrie Ten Boom would talk about that, tapestry of God's providence that all we see on this side of eternity as the knots, the, the backside of that tapestry, you know, which looks all messy.

You might see some vague shape there. But it's only an eternity that God will turn it over and show us what He's made, what He's been, the, the, the work of art that He's been creating. And, so we need to have faith. You know, our faith in God saves us, of course, but that faith also sustains us through life's losses.

We, we can set aside the why questions and just submit ourselves to the Lord, submit ourselves to His providence and, and rejoice in His goodness and just wait with faith that someday this will all make sense. And not only that, but someday we'll bow the knee. We'll raise our hands in worship and we'll say God has done all things well.

Vaneetha: Yeah, I like, what you [00:36:00] said about Job. Ron Deal in this book I read said, God does not defend Himself. He defines Himself for Job.

Tim Challies: Mm-hmm.

Vaneetha: And that was enough. and I think that's true for all of us. And the tapestry analogy is wonderful. Just we aren't gonna understand it. We we're finite and this side of heaven, we really won't be able to fully understand why.

We may see little pieces of it, but, John Piper has the saying, God is doing a thousand things in everything he does, and we may see one or two of them, or three or four of them. So we can't really fully answer the why because we're not God. So we really don't know why.

Tim Challies: And we have to be okay with it. And really, it's better that way because again, we couldn't, we couldn't see answers that would really make us content enough, I don't think. And, you know, so I, wanna say, look for evidences of how God is using this situation. And so if God does save someone through the funeral of your loved one, absolutely rejoice in that and give God praise and glory for that. [00:37:00] But don't make the leap to, oh, so this is why God did it.

Vaneetha: Because I think that feels like, as a parent who people told me, you know, that my son's life, sort of strengthened their faith and it feels like, then it feels a little cruel. Like, God took my son so that you would have a stronger faith. And, and we know that God would not do that. There's so many facets to what God is doing, but I think when we try to explain it by one thing, it, it seems to trivialize it in in some way.

Yeah, absolutely. And, uh, yeah, exactly so.

Hmm. So what do you know about God now that you didn't know before this pain?

Tim Challies: Yeah, I think I, I know in a different sense now, so I knew that God was faithful to His promises before because I had read about it and I had read it in biography and so on. But now I know it by experience. And I think that's a, a different form of knowing. And so I've really [00:38:00] seen that God is true to His every promise.

I think I know now that, you know, precious in the eyes of the Lord is the death of His saints. I think it took the death of my son to see how precious it is for, for God to take our children and how, how we can then almost be be honored by that. Or, it sounds a little weird, but somehow it just feels like it's such a privilege for God to take our children young and then He's giving us something very precious.

A father wouldn't take a child as, as God did without it being very significant and meaningful. So maybe that's the way of saying it. So then we can receive that as something very precious from the Lord and something to treasure, to steward faithfully and carefully and well. And yeah. So I think those are, some of the things I've learned anyways.

I, I think the other thing that's just been so encouraging to me is to see my wife and daughters come through this so well. You know, my girls were young [00:39:00] when this happened to them. They had an immature and a young faith, but I've seen them just embrace the Lord with greater tenacity.

And even with Aileen, this was her greatest fear. If she could have listed all her fears in the world. It would be tornadoes and the death of a child. These are her, the things that keep her up at night and, pandemics or her three things. So we haven't had a tornado, but we had the death of our son during a pandemic.

Which, I mean, literally, this is the sort of thing that could really knock her out of the race. But instead she, she's born down in her faith and God's been very kind and true to her, and she's, she's been very, very faithful. And so God is just really impressed upon me just how, how we can even grow through our losses and through our sorrows.

Vaneetha: That's wonderful that Aileen's Faith has grown through this because you are right. Some people, you know, especially your daughters too, you know, some people really stay in this place of questioning God and grief [00:40:00] and, and yet when we lean into God and can grow in our faith, there's such a, a beauty and a depth to our faith that I think we don't have when we haven't gone through suffering.

Tim Challies: Mm-hmm. Yeah, absolutely.

Vaneetha: So what would you say are the, ways that people came alongside of you that were helpful and what are some ways that weren't helpful that people, maybe intersected you or things that people did or said that were difficult?

Tim Challies: In the very early days, I, I, you have to understand how incapacitating it can be to suffer a very extreme and very sudden loss. And so the, the help people gave us then was just very, very tangible help. It was bringing us meals or even making decisions for us. I found my decision making capacity was almost nil. So I had friends that said, I'm just gonna, I ask you either to make the decisions or I'm not gonna make any significant decisions without bouncing it off you. Cause I, looking back, I can see I would've made some poor decisions just cause my [00:41:00] mind was so scrambled and I was so emotional and everything else. So just in the early days that very, very, tangible help. Some dear friends of ours as time went on said, we'd just like to get together with you once a month so we can just ask how you're doing. And that was very precious to get together with them. And they would just, just ask us questions and give us an opportunity to talk. And then having friends who would say, I'm with you for the long haul on this one, so don't don't ever be concerned that you'll come to me and start talking about Nick and I'm gonna roll my eyes and be, oh, just get over it. You know, it's time to move on. I will never be that. I will, I will always be here for you. And I'm always willing to talk. So I thought having people come alongside us and say, that was so, so important and precious.

On the not so helpful side.

You know, I think saying things that are untrue, we were able to mostly roll with those things, but I don't want you to come and tell me that Nick's an angel in heaven, or that he's a star in the sky, or things like that. That's not [00:42:00] helpful. And, you know, maybe not so much in the helpful, unhelpful, but less helpful, more helpful category.

We found this, the best thing in the world was people bringing us hot meals at dinnertime. Rather than a frozen lasagna that we, again, we were so incapacitated early on, we couldn't think two hours ahead to, to get it outta the freezer and put it in. So people just being really aware of our, our inability at that time.

And then specifically ministering. So that was, you know, Uber eat gift cards or something where we could just pick up the phone or, you know, jump on the app and get some food there, et cetera. Those things were so precious and so helpful to us.

Vaneetha: Hmm. Yeah, Uber Eats is such a wonderful gift because for people who don't like to cook and don't really wanna bring a meal, that is a wonderful way to serve people. Yep. Absolutely. appreciated that. Well, I, just have a few closing questions. Um, one thing is, I think maintaining a sense of humor in suffering is important.

[00:43:00] is that something that has helped you?

Tim Challies: Eventually, yeah. There wasn't much room for humor, of course, in the first stretch of time. But over time, yeah, we've had to laugh at ourselves and we've been able to look back and laugh at nick or our relationship with Nick and his eccentricities and those sorts of things. So, yeah, yeah, we've certainly learned to laugh and been able to laugh and found some joy in laughter.

But again, I, I'd want to distinguish between the early days, obviously, yeah And then beyond that, but yeah, I think it's been healing for us to learn to laugh together again and even to, to laugh. I guess it would be laughing with Nick, not at him, but just remembering what made him zany and just finding joy in those things again.

Vaneetha: Mm-hmm. And is there anything you would like to share that I haven't asked you about that you would like to just add to our conversation?

Tim Challies: Hmm. I don't know. I think I would just want to circle back [00:44:00] to, to the sovereignty of God and just keep pushing people there. I

know it's a bit of a, Calvinist cliché or something, but it's, I think we talk about it so much because it's in our griefs that it's just so, so important. If we can acknowledge God's hand in our suffering, it equips us then I think, to, to truly embrace them as God's will for us.

And so there may be secondary causes, there may be evil people or evil circumstances involved in that suffering, but ultimately we know that somehow it must be God's will for us, that we endure this suffering, and then it just falls to us to endure it responsibly and well.

And in a way that, that, honors him and brings glory to his name. So that gives us the challenge then of what am I going to do with this suffering? I'll receive it from God and I'm going to honor Him and serve others through it.

Vaneetha: What a great reminder. Well, last question is, this podcast is called Desperate for Hope. What is one practical way you found [00:45:00] hope when you felt most desperate for it?

Tim Challies: Well through, through the word of the Lord. And that came to us by picking up our Bible and reading it. It came probably even more, especially early on by people just speaking to us and bringing us those words. You know, you don't, you don't hear a voice booming from the sky in your sorrows, but you do have God's own people, His blood bought children coming to you.

And speaking truth to you and, and just ministering to you. And then just the, the wonderful collection of songs we have available to us as 21st Century English speaking Christians. We have tens of thousands of songs full of truth that we can draw upon. And so that combination of getting in God's word and being with God's people and singing God's songs was such a wonderful way to be ministered to by the Lord Himself.

And yeah. God. God gave us such hope in those ways.

Vaneetha: Yeah, I think it's so important, [00:46:00] especially this post pandemic sort of era that we're in, to be back in church because church worshiping with God's people and getting to sing just really is a, a precious gift. And I think in suffering we really, really benefit from that so greatly rather than watching it on a screen.

just being with God's people and singing, I think is, it does something really unique for our souls.

Tim Challies: Mm-hmm. Oh, it does. Yeah. We found it very hard to sing in church for the first stretch of time, and it's really been months before I could sing without just, just weeping. Because it just so powerfully stirs our hearts. And, and the best of our songs are ones that, that they have a progression to them.

And so as you sing, you're moving from often humanity's, sinful state, all the way to the glories of, of a future heaven. And that's, that can be profoundly moving when your heart is broken. And then the song is fixing your heart on the time when everything will be made new. [00:47:00]

Vaneetha: Mm. Amen. Well, thank you so much, Tim. I have so enjoyed our conversation and just yeah, just the insights you have into, suffering and, and suffering well, and, and how God is really, God's sovereignty and God's goodness really ground us in, in the hope of the future because we know that God is, is in our suffering.

So thank you.

Tim Challies: Yeah. Oh, thank you for having me.