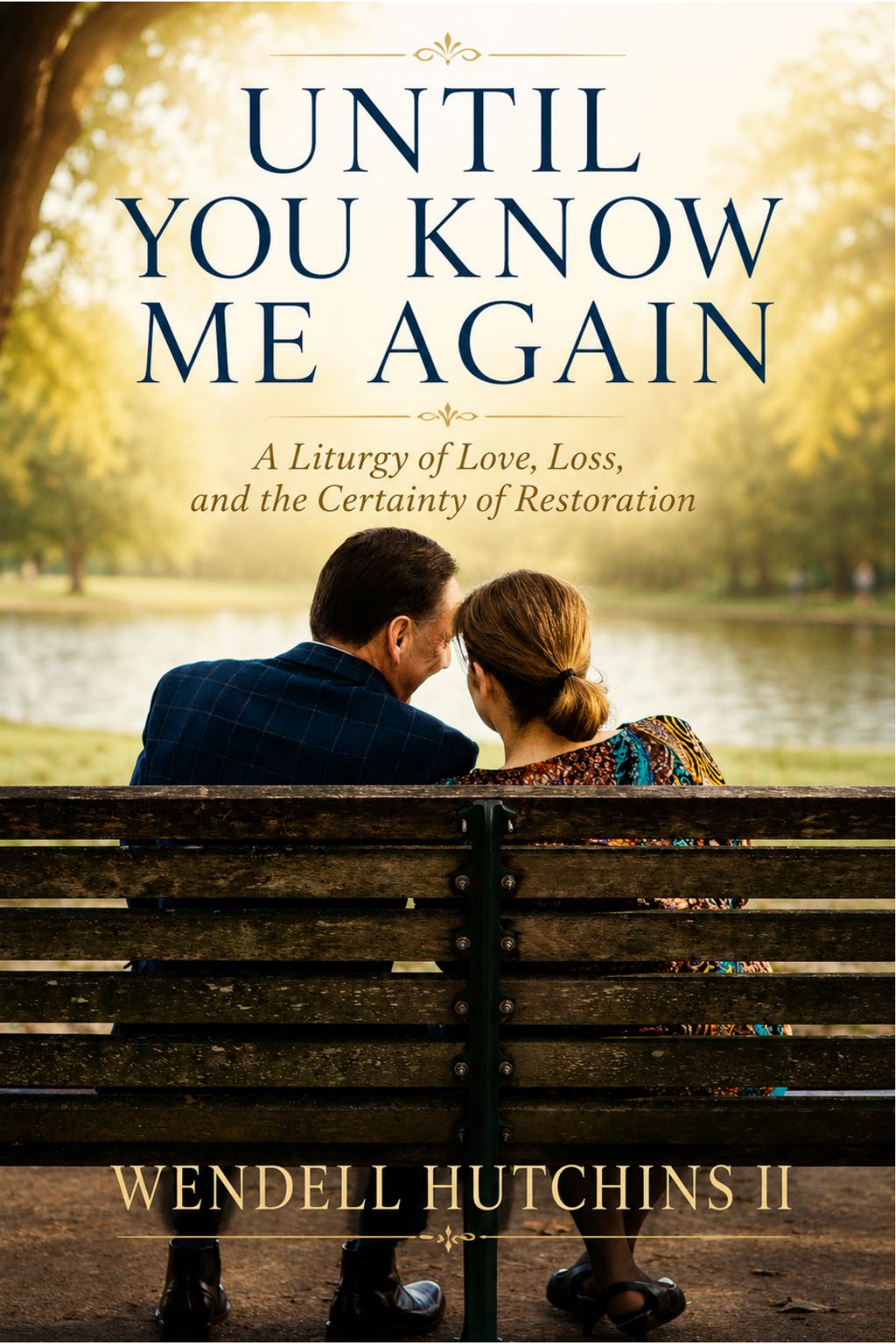




UNTIL YOU KNOW ME AGAIN

*A Liturgy of Love, Loss,
and the Certainty of Restoration*

WENDELL HUTCHINS II

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This book is a work of personal reflection, Christian faith, biblical teaching, and lived experience. It is written from the perspective of a husband walking beside his wife through advanced progressive Alzheimer's disease. It is not intended to provide medical diagnosis, treatment, psychological counseling, or individualized healthcare advice. Readers should consult qualified healthcare professionals regarding medical conditions, treatment decisions, medications, caregiving needs, or changes in cognitive or physical health.

The experiences described in this book are the author's own. Alzheimer's disease and other forms of cognitive decline may present and progress differently from person to person, and nothing contained in these pages should be interpreted as a prediction of another individual's medical course or outcome.

Biblical and theological reflections contained in this work express the author's Christian faith and interpretation of Scripture. They are offered

for spiritual encouragement and reflection and are not intended as a substitute for professional medical, psychological, legal, or other specialized care.

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are taken from the King James Version of the Bible, which is in the public domain.

The author has written candidly about experiences arising within marriage, family, caregiving, grief, and illness. Certain identifying details concerning persons other than the author may have been omitted or limited in order to preserve personal and family privacy without altering the essential truth of the experiences described.

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Prologue

I Did Not Choose This Vocabulary

For forty-nine years, I have loved the same woman.

That sentence contains more life than its nine words can possibly carry. It contains youth and age, beginnings and endings, laughter and disappointment, children and family, arguments we survived, prayers we prayed, places we traveled, dreams we shared, burdens we carried, and the innumerable ordinary days from which a marriage is ultimately made. Forty-nine years is long enough for another human being to become woven so completely into the fabric of your existence that remembering your life without remembering hers becomes almost impossible.

She has never been a witness standing somewhere near my life; her life has become inseparably woven into mine.

For most of our forty-nine years, I thought I understood what it meant for two people to become one. I had preached the language of covenant, studied the ancient words of Scripture, stood before couples and spoken of the mystery of *basar echad*, one flesh. I understood covenant intellectually, theologically, pastorally, and experientially.

But I have found that suffering has a way of taking truths we thought we understood and carrying them into depths where definitions are no longer sufficient.

Over the course of the last five or so years, those of us who love my wife began noticing things we could not easily explain. At first they were small enough to dismiss, the kinds of lapses almost everyone experiences and therefore hesitates to make larger than they seem. A forgotten detail, a repeated question, something misplaced, a moment of confusion that could be attributed to fatigue, distraction, age, or any number of ordinary explanations.

But the moments continued. And then they multiplied.

Those of you who have walked this road will understand one of its earliest difficulties: the person experiencing cognitive decline may not recognize what everyone around them has begun to see. For several years, we could not persuade my wife to submit to the kind of medical evaluation that might explain what was happening. We loved her, worried about her, watched carefully, encouraged gently, and lived within that strange territory between suspicion and certainty where you know something is changing but have no name with which to call it.

Eventually, with the help of our incredible medical team at Optimal Family Care Clinic, we prevailed upon her to allow neurological specialists to evaluate her.

Last year, the uncertainty acquired a name: Advanced Progressive Alzheimer's Disease. I do not know whether anyone is ever prepared to hear words like those spoken about the person with whom they have shared nearly half a century and whom they have loved with all their heart. A diagnosis can require only a few

syllables to pronounce and still possess enough force to divide a life into before and after.

Suddenly, the small things were no longer small. The forgotten details had context. The repeated questions had context, and the confusion had context. The changes we had been watching without understanding now belonged to a disease whose trajectory we did not want to contemplate.

But something else happened that no medical diagnosis could adequately describe: I became a husband standing at the border of a world I could not enter. The woman with whom I had spent a lifetime building a common language was beginning, by degrees, to inhabit an interior world whose geography I could neither see nor comprehend. The familiar rules of logic do not always apply. Time can rearrange itself. Memories become vivid or inaccessible without warning. Things that seem obvious to me become uncertain to her, while things long buried in the past can suddenly become present again.

And love does not fix it, which may be one of the hardest admissions a husband can make. There are few things more painful than discovering that the depth of your devotion cannot, by itself, restore what is changing in the person you love.

I have spent my life believing in the power of prayer, the faithfulness of God, the authority of Scripture, and the possibility of miracles. I believe those things still, unequivocally. In fact, I believe them more fiercely now than I did before.

But I have also learned that faith does not exempt us from standing in rooms we do not understand.

There are moments when a husband discovers that love cannot reason his wife back into the familiar world they have always shared.

You begin learning a different language. Patience becomes a language, repetition becomes a language, touch becomes a language, and presence begins speaking where explanation no longer can. Eventually, even silence acquires a vocabulary of its own.

This book was born inside that silence.

It is not written from the comfortable distance of observation. It has been born from the experience of watching the woman I have loved for forty-nine years begin experiencing, by degrees, a world whose contours increasingly lie beyond my comprehension. It was born from the strange agony of missing someone who is still beside you, from answering the same question again, from carrying memories that once belonged to both of us, and from discovering that a heart can shatter into a thousand pieces without making a sound loud enough for anyone else to hear.

There is a loneliness peculiar to the spouse in this journey.

People understandably ask about the person who has been diagnosed. They want to know how she is doing, what the doctors

have said, whether the disease is progressing, whether she recognizes people, whether she is comfortable. They should ask those questions.

But somewhere beside the person whose memory is becoming increasingly uncertain is often another person quietly learning how to survive being remembered differently: a husband or wife, a son or daughter, a grandchild or caregiver, someone who remains after everyone else has gone home and discovers that prolonged grief does not always come with funerals, flowers, condolences, or casseroles.

Sometimes grief sleeps beside you. Sometimes you prepare its breakfast. Sometimes you hold its hand. Sometimes you kiss it goodnight. And sometimes you weep and whisper, "I miss you," while the person you miss is still in the room.

This book is for those people. It is for the husband who increasingly carries memories once held by two, for the wife who repeats a beloved story because the man who once helped tell it can no longer remember how it ends, and for the children watching one parent change while trying to remain strong for the other parent who is witnessing those changes from inches away.

It is for the caregiver who feels guilty for being tired, ashamed of moments of frustration, and frightened by a future he or she never imagined having to face. Most of all, it is for everyone who has grieved profound changes in someone who is still alive and

wondered whether they were allowed to call what they were feeling grief. They are, and this is grief.

But this book will not end there.

Because somewhere along this road I have discovered that grief, if left unanswered, will attempt to become a theologian. It will begin interpreting God through pain. It will tell you that what is changing is being lost forever, that what has been fractured can never be whole, and that what you see today possesses the authority to tell you what tomorrow must become.

That is where my faith refuses to bow. Not because I have mastered this grief, and certainly not because I possess answers for everything this journey has asked of us, but because somewhere beneath the sorrow I remain convinced that suffering must never be given more authority than God has given it.

These pages are not the observations of a man standing safely beyond the experience he is describing. I am writing from somewhere inside the journey, while the questions remain questions and while some days require more grace than others. There are days when faith rises magnificently, and there are days when all I know to do is hold my wife's hand, hold to God's unchanging hand, and trust Him to understand the prayers for which I cannot find language.

This is why I needed to write this book. Prolonged suffering has forced me to search for words I never imagined needing, and along

the way I have discovered that Scripture is not frightened by the places where ordinary language fails. It gives sorrow permission to speak without allowing sorrow to become sovereign, and it teaches love how to remain when circumstances have changed the language through which love was once expressed.

This is the story of learning that language while loving the woman with whom I once thought I already knew the entire vocabulary of love. It is the story of grief and covenant, memory and faith, sorrow and hope, written not from the other side of the journey, but from somewhere along the road.

And because we are still walking it, this story is not finished.

Introduction

When Goodbye Takes Years

Prolonged suffering produces its own vocabulary. Not because suffering makes us more articulate, but because eventually the familiar words become too small for what the heart is being required to carry. Grief, sorrow, loneliness, fear, exhaustion: these remain true words, but after enough nights, enough bewildering mornings, enough repetitions of the same question, enough moments when the eyes of the person you love search your face as though searching an unfamiliar room, language itself begins to feel impoverished. The words still possess meaning, but they no longer seem capable of bearing the enormous weight placed upon them.

There is a region of human suffering where language begins to fail because the suffering does not happen and then end. It continues. It takes up residence, enters your rooms, sits at your table, follows you into the bedroom, awakens with you in the morning, and slowly rearranges the furniture of your memories. Eventually it teaches you something you never wanted to know: grief is not always the consequence of someone leaving. Sometimes grief is what happens when the person you love remains near enough to touch while becoming increasingly difficult to reach.

This is the strange sorrow known by the husband or wife who watches a beloved spouse become increasingly difficult to reach through progressive Alzheimer's. There is no single moment of departure, no clean demarcation between before and after, no

funeral around which sorrow can organize itself. There are instead a thousand alterations to the familiar, each one small enough to escape public notice, yet intimate enough to fracture the heart of the one person who understands precisely what has changed.

A name becomes difficult. A familiar story loses its sequence. A question is answered, then asked again...and again...and again. A place once navigated without thought becomes strangely unfamiliar. A memory carried together for decades may suddenly require one spouse to assume the greater responsibility for preserving it. What remains *our history* increasingly becomes *my responsibility to remember*, as I carry for both of us what disease has made more difficult for her to hold.

This is how a husband discovers one of the cruelest paradoxes of prolonged grief: goodbye can seem to take years, while every evidence of change must still be lived in the present tense. She is still here, still breathing, still sitting across from you, still close enough to touch; yet dimensions of the life you have shared are changing in ways neither of you chose and only one of you may fully comprehend. And because there is no funeral for what changed today, you carry its weight quietly and awaken tomorrow knowing that love may ask you to carry something different again.

And yet, this is not a book about Alzheimer's disease. It is about what happens to love when loss enters the room and refuses to leave. It is about watching someone you love travel into a country you cannot see, cannot fathom, cannot comprehend, and cannot enter. It is about becoming the keeper of memories once held by

two people, enduring the peculiar loneliness of being forgotten by the person who knew you best, and discovering that covenant possesses a vocabulary deeper than cognition.

Most importantly, this is a book about what grief cannot take. The Christian is permitted to grieve without being required to surrender the ending, because loss may be real without being sovereign, disease may be terrible without being eternal, and what is happening today does not possess the authority to determine everything that tomorrow may yet reveal.

This is where my faith must rise and answer my sorrow. Pain may describe the present with terrifying accuracy, but pain does not possess the authority to prophesy the future. Grief may testify concerning what has happened to us, but grief will not be permitted to render the verdict concerning what ultimately becomes of us.

And therefore, even here, hope speaks.

Chapter One

The Grief With No Funeral

Death and disappearance are not always the same thing. Death possesses a terrible clarity. There is a moment before and a moment after, a final breath, a pronouncement, a funeral, a grave, and a gathering of people who understand that something irreversible has occurred. The world recognizes the event, surrounds the bereaved, gives sorrow a socially recognizable place to stand, and acknowledges that the life of those remaining has been permanently altered.

But what happens when there is no moment? What happens when the person you have loved across decades remains beside you while dimensions of the life you have shared change by degrees, and the terrible work of grieving those changes stretches across years? What happens when loss refuses to become an event because it insists upon becoming an environment?

There is no funeral for the first forgotten memory, and no one brings flowers when a familiar story becomes confused. No church gathers when your spouse begins losing the sequence of the life you built together, and there is no obituary for the afternoon when you suddenly realize that a memory you have carried together for forty years now requires you to carry more of its weight. Yet something has been lost, and before you have fully grieved what changed yesterday, tomorrow arrives carrying something else you were not prepared to carry.

This is why prolonged suffering develops its own vocabulary. Ordinary grief can speak comfortably in nouns: death, loss, absence. This grief requires verbs: fading, receding, forgetting, searching, wandering, repeating, disappearing. Nothing seems finished enough to place safely in the past tense because everything remains in motion. You are not grieving what happened; you are grieving what is happening.

Researchers have described one dimension of this experience as “ambiguous loss,” a condition in which someone remains physically present while becoming psychologically altered or increasingly inaccessible. The phrase is useful because it explains why this form of grief resists closure, why the mourner can feel suspended between caregiving and bereavement, and why sorrow never receives permission to complete its work.

But when the person is your wife, the word *ambiguous* can feel almost offensively restrained. There is nothing ambiguous about the pain because the ambiguity belongs to the condition of the loss, not to the wound it produces. I know exactly where it hurts: it hurts where our conversations lived, where her recognition of me lived, where shared memory lived, and most of all, where *we* lived.

Chapter Two

The Sanctuary Where We Kept Us

A marriage of decades does something extraordinary to two human beings. We do not only accumulate years beside one another; we accumulate meaning with one another. We construct an invisible world composed of glances, unfinished sentences, disagreements survived, children raised, prayers whispered, illnesses endured, victories celebrated, disappointments forgiven, bedrooms shared, funerals attended, private jokes repeated, journeys taken, and ten thousand apparently insignificant moments that eventually become the architecture of belonging.

Somewhere along the way, two autobiographies begin producing a third story. There is still a *you*, and there is still a *me*, but something sacred has arisen between them called *us*, and that *us* develops a language all its own.

After enough years, your spouse can answer a question you have not finished asking. She knows what a particular silence means, detects something in your voice everyone else misses, and recognizes the almost imperceptible movement in your face that announces what words have not yet confessed. You can look across a crowded room and conduct an entire conversation without moving your lips. A raised eyebrow contains a paragraph, a touch carries a history, and a familiar laugh opens a door into decades neither of you needs to explain.

This is intimacy after time has performed its sacred work.

The Hebrew imagination gives us language for this mystery. In Genesis, when the woman is brought before Adam, he does not encounter her as an accessory to his existence. He recognizes correspondence, kinship, and covenantal belonging: *"This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh."* Scripture then declares that a man shall cleave unto his wife, and *"they shall be one flesh."*

Basar echad: one flesh.

We impoverish the phrase if we confine it to physical union. Covenant gradually weaves two lives into a shared existence. Two histories begin inhabiting one promise, two futures become braided together, and memory itself acquires a communal character. There are things I remember because they happened to me, but there are other things I remember differently because they happened to *us*.

That distinction becomes painfully important when memory begins to fail, because Alzheimer's does not trespass only upon the private neurological archive of the one who is suffering. In a marriage of decades, it enters territory held jointly by two people who became one.

It enters the sanctuary where *we* have been keeping *us*.

At first it may take things so small that you almost feel foolish for noticing them. A misplaced name, a forgotten appointment, a question asked twice. You answer gently because everyone forgets

things. Then the question comes again, familiar sequences become uncertain, stories change shape, names detach themselves from faces, and yesterday becomes inaccessible while something from fifty years ago suddenly shines with astonishing clarity.

Eventually you begin living with a painful asymmetry: you increasingly carry memories she can no longer always retrieve. Without ceremony, appointment, or consent, you become the keeper of two histories.

You carry the first meeting, the early years, the laughter, the private disasters that became funny with time, the places you traveled, the people you loved, the prayers God answered, the battles you survived, and the ordinary afternoons that seemed completely forgettable until you became the one increasingly responsible for preserving them. You become the custodian of a museum that once had two curators, and increasingly you walk its galleries alone.

The exhibits remain, and you still know precisely why each one matters. But the only other person on earth who completely understood their meaning can no longer always tell you.

There is a loneliness for which ordinary language was never designed.

Chapter Three

The Agony of Being Forgotten

We speak frequently about the terror of forgetting, but we speak far less about the agony of being forgotten. The former is the suffering of the person whose memory is becoming increasingly uncertain; the latter names a quieter sorrow known by the person standing beside them, wondering whether his familiar place within that memory is becoming more difficult to find.

To be loved by the person whose knowing helped constitute your world, while watching aspects of that knowing become less certain, is a grief unlike ordinary loneliness. A stranger does not know me because we possess no shared history. My wife knows me within the context of nearly a half century of shared life. She knows the younger man I was before the world knew the man I became, and she carries within the history of our marriage versions of me no biography could ever recover because she alone has lived beside them.

She knows what makes me laugh and what can make me irritated. Across the years, she has known what frightens me, what disappoints me, what I pretended does not hurt, and what I sometimes cannot adequately explain to anyone else. She knows the difference between the public voice and the private silence, between the face the world encounters and the man who remains when the door closes behind us. Some of those recognitions may

now require more effort than they once did, but the history from which they were born has not ceased to exist.

She knows me with the familiarity only time can purchase, even as this terrible disease sometimes places a fog between what the heart has known and what the mind can presently retrieve. And that is the more precise description of this sorrow: I am not mourning a woman who is gone. I am grieving the intrusion of a disease into dimensions of knowing that have belonged to us for most of our lives.

This is one of the deepest wounds inflicted by progressive Alzheimer's: to be profoundly known by another human being for most of your adult life and then watch that familiar knowing become increasingly difficult for her to reach. The person remains. The covenant remains. The history remains. Love remains. Yet some of the familiar ways that shared history once passed so effortlessly between us have become uncertain, and it is within that uncertainty that grief quietly enters the room.

So the question is not, "Who remembers the younger version of me now?" She is still here, and I will not speak of her as though she is not. The more painful question is this: What happens when the one person who has carried that younger version of me through nearly a half century can no longer always reach the memories in which he lives? What happens when stories no child, friend, photograph, journal, congregation, or biography could

ever fully possess become increasingly dependent upon one spouse to preserve their details?

There are conversations only we have heard, looks exchanged across crowded rooms whose meaning belonged exclusively to us, private interpretations behind public stories, laughter whose origin requires decades of context, and ordinary moments no camera captured because neither of us knew they would someday become sacred. These things still belong to *us*. Yet increasingly, I am called upon to remember them for us, to become the steward of memories whose ownership remains plural even while their retrieval becomes painfully singular.

This is where prolonged suffering begins inventing words the dictionary has never printed. You discover loneliness while holding the hand of someone you still deeply love. You discover that missing a dimension of someone requires no geographical distance. You discover that presence and grief can occupy the same room without contradiction, because you are not grieving the death of the person before you; you are grieving changes occurring within a living relationship that remains precious, present, and profoundly worthy of protection.

That distinction matters to me. My wife is not an absence. She is not a memory. She is not someone about whom I am prepared to speak exclusively in the past tense.

She is here. She is my wife, and I am her husband.

What I grieve are the incursions of a disease that sometimes makes our shared world more difficult for her to access. I grieve the conversations that no longer unfold as effortlessly as they once did, the memory that may require prompting, the familiar sequence that suddenly becomes confusing, the moment when recognition takes longer than my heart is prepared to endure. These are the real losses, and refusing to call my wife lost does not require me to pretend those losses are painless.

Then comes the cruelest paradox of all: throughout our marriage, the person to whom I have instinctively carried sorrow has been my wife, yet now some of my deepest sorrow arises from watching what this condition is doing to her and to dimensions of the life we share.

For most of our married life, when the world has wounded me, I have gone home to her. When someone has misunderstood me, she has understood. When I have been weary and worn, she has heard what exhaustion does to my voice. When life became too heavy, marriage has been the place where the weight could be divided because covenant gives us another pair of shoulders upon which to rest what one heart was never intended to carry alone.

And now I find myself confronting a sorrow I cannot place upon those shoulders in the way I once might have. How does a husband explain the breaking of his heart when what is breaking it is not the disappearance of his wife, but the disease that is changing how the two of them inhabit the life they still share? How does he speak about his grief without making her sound absent, mourn what has

changed without dishonoring what remains, and acknowledge what has been diminished without allowing disease to define the woman he still loves?

This is why so much of this grief becomes silent, not because there is nothing to say, but because the husband is searching for a vocabulary precise enough to hold two truths at once: something precious is changing, and someone infinitely precious is still here.

That is the tension in which I live. I will grieve what changes, remember what becomes difficult for her to remember, and carry what love asks me to carry. But I will not speak of my darling as though she has already left the room. She is here, she is my wife, and while she is here, love will remain in the present tense.

Chapter Four

The Silent Casualty

People ask how she is doing, and they should. She is the one afflicted by the disease and deserves every measure of tenderness, dignity, patience, protection, prayer, and compassionate care we know how to give. Nothing about the suffering of the spouse should ever diminish the profound vulnerability of the one enduring the disease.

But there is another question that sometimes needs to be asked: How are *you* doing while so much of the life you have known together is changing? Not because your suffering competes with hers, for love has no interest in such arithmetic, but because disease rarely confines its suffering to the body in which it resides.

Disease moves through relationships. It enters marriages, reorganizes families, redraws futures, alters expectations, and changes the meaning of mornings, nights, conversations, vacations, anniversaries, bedrooms, and plans once spoken confidently in the future tense. A diagnosis belongs medically to one person, but its consequences can move through an entire household.

The spouse often becomes the silent casualty who remains standing because someone must. So you answer again, reassure again, redirect again, and learn not to correct every error because factual accuracy is sometimes less important than peace. You discover that arguing with a wounded memory accomplishes nothing, and you

learn forms of patience the younger version of yourself never possessed because love now requires disciplines you never imagined having to learn.

Then, late at night, when the house becomes quiet and the responsibilities of the day have loosened their grip, you finally permit yourself to remember what no one saw you lose that day. It may have been the way she looked at you, something once precious to both of you that she could no longer retrieve, or an old story you began telling only to realize halfway through that you were now telling it *to* her instead of remembering it *with* her. That distinction is almost impossible to explain to someone who has never experienced it. One is recollection shared between two people who still inhabit the same memory; the other is a story now requiring one of them to carry more of its weight.

And tomorrow morning you will rise and love her again, carrying the grief of what has changed without confusing those changes with the loss of the woman who is still beside you.

Chapter Five

The Covenant of Remaining

This particular kind of suffering has taught me something about love that romance alone could never teach. We speak beautifully about love when love is reciprocal, when affection returns affection, memory answers memory, desire responds to desire, and the person to whom you say, “I love you,” knows exactly who is speaking and reaches back.

But covenant possesses a deeper vocabulary because covenant was never built upon reciprocity alone. Covenant says that my love for you is not dependent upon your neurological ability to return it in the form I once knew. When the story becomes difficult for you to remember, I will help carry it for both of us. When you have difficulty locating me within the familiar world we have shared, my heart will still locate you. If this road carries you into a country I cannot enter, I will walk as close to its border as love permits and make my home there for as long as you need me.

The Hebrew Scriptures give us a magnificent word for this steadfast covenant devotion: *hesed*. No single English word exhausts its meaning because *hesed* gathers within itself faithfulness, loyalty, steadfastness, mercy, kindness, and enduring covenant commitment. It is not fragile sentimentality, nor is it affection sustained only by favorable circumstances. *Hesed* is love with endurance in its bones.

It is love that keeps its address when circumstances have changed.

There are seasons when love is laughter, touch, conversation, intimacy, adventure, desire, partnership, and dreams shared across a pillow. Then there are seasons when love becomes staying present. Love becomes answering the same question without allowing irritation to become cruelty, protecting dignity when dignity has become vulnerable, and entering the same conversation repeatedly as though it were the first time because, for the person you love, it is.

This love is quieter than romance, but I am no longer convinced it is smaller. This is love stripped of every reward except the privilege of loving. It is covenant reaching one of its deepest expressions when one person looks toward another and says through action what words can no longer adequately express: I will carry what you can no longer carry, remember what you can no longer remember, protect what you can no longer protect, and remain steadfast when remaining costs me everything.

This is not the disappearance of love, but it is love approaching one of its purest forms.

Chapter Six

When Jesus Wept Knowing Resurrection Was Coming

Eventually, there comes a point where grief and faith appear to collide, and the believing heart begins to encounter terrifying questions it may be afraid to say aloud. If I really believe God, why does this hurt so badly? If I believe in resurrection, why am I grieving what is changing? If faith is the substance of things hoped for, why can hope inhabit the same heart that sometimes feels as though it has been shattered beyond repair?

I have come to believe that we have sometimes asked faith to do something Scripture never required it to do. We have asked faith to anesthetize grief, to silence lament, to suppress tears, and to make believers feel guilty for bleeding in places where Jesus Himself was willing to weep.

The answer to this tension is not found in a theological abstraction. It is found outside a tomb in Bethany.

Lazarus had been dead four days when Jesus arrived. Martha met Him with words that have been spoken in a thousand different forms by suffering people ever since: *“Lord, if thou hadst been here, my brother would not have died.”* Mary came later, fell at His feet, and spoke the same anguished sentence. Beneath both confessions was the question grief still asks when heaven seems late: Lord, where were You when this happened?

Jesus knew something the sisters did not know. He knew what He was about to do.

He knew the stone would move. He knew Lazarus would hear His voice. He knew death was about to relinquish a man it had held for four days. He knew that within minutes the sound of mourning would be interrupted by the footsteps of a dead man walking out of his grave.

Resurrection itself was standing outside the tomb wearing human flesh.

And still, Jesus wept.

Those two words may contain one of the most important revelations in this entire journey. Jesus possessed perfect knowledge of the coming miracle and still permitted Himself present sorrow. He knew what *then* would bring, yet His certainty about *then* did not make Him dishonest about the agony of *now*.

Therefore grief cannot be the opposite of faith, and tears cannot automatically be evidence of unbelief. Jesus has forever destroyed the false choice between believing and grieving because He stood at the grave knowing resurrection was imminent and allowed tears to run down His face.

That gives me permission to tell the truth. I can know resurrection is coming and still weep over what deterioration is doing now. I can believe in the ultimate restoration of all things and still admit that

this afternoon has broken my heart. I can trust God completely and still whisper through tears, “I miss her,” while the woman I miss is sleeping in the next room.

Jesus has sanctified that contradiction with His own tears. There is, however, another revelation at Bethany that grief must hear. Jesus wept, but He did not remain weeping at the tomb. Eventually the One who cried lifted His voice.

“Lazarus, come forth.”

The tears were real, but they did not possess the final word.

This is the boundary faith places around grief.

Faith does not demand that grief stop weeping. Faith demands that grief stop writing the ending.

I will give grief permission to describe what hurts, but I will not give it authority to declare what is eternal. I will allow sorrow to tell me what I have lost today, but I will not permit sorrow to tell me what God cannot restore tomorrow, whether tomorrow comes in this life or in the eternal world to come.

Jesus wept, and then Jesus spoke. When He spoke, death had to listen. That is where my faith stands: not in the denial of tears, but in the conviction that tears will never possess the final word.

Chapter Seven

The God Who Remembers

There is something deeper than my ability to remember her and infinitely more secure than her ability to remember me: the remembrance of God.

The language appears throughout Scripture with such consistency that it becomes one of the great covenantal rhythms of the biblical narrative. “*God remembered Noah.*” God remembered Abraham. God remembered Rachel. When Israel groaned beneath Egyptian bondage, Exodus declares that “*God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob.*”

We must understand what Scripture means when it says that God remembers. The omniscient God does not suddenly retrieve information He misplaced. He does not search the corridors of eternity attempting to recall a name that temporarily escaped Him.

The Hebrew word *zakar* reaches beyond mental recollection. Within these covenantal contexts, divine remembrance means that *what God has bound Himself to has come actively before Him*. God remembers Noah, and the waters begin to recede. God remembers Rachel, and barrenness gives way. God remembers Israel, and redemption begins moving toward Egypt.

Divine remembrance is covenant refusing to abandon what it has claimed, and suddenly that ancient Hebrew word becomes very personal. Human memory can fracture; divine remembrance cannot.

A neurological disease may damage the pathways through which a person retrieves names, faces, places, events, relationships, and stories. Alzheimer's may interrupt the mysterious neurological processes through which yesterday becomes available to today, but no pathology can invade omniscience. Disease can touch her memory, but it cannot touch God's.

Isaiah gives this revelation extraordinary tenderness. Zion cries, "*The LORD hath forsaken me, and my Lord hath forgotten me.*" – Isaiah 49:14.

That is the theology of pain speaking.

Notice that God does not condemn Zion for saying it. He does not answer wounded people with embarrassment over their honesty. He answers anguish with *revelation*.

"Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb?" – Isaiah 49:15

Then comes the divine answer: "*Yea, they may forget, yet will I not forget thee.*" – Isaiah 49:15

And then God gives suffering an image: *“Behold, I have graven thee upon the palms of my hands.”*

The imagery is astonishing. Zion fears she has disappeared from divine consciousness, and God answers by describing her as inscribed upon His hand.

I need that God now. There are days when I feel I have become the keeper of her memory. I remember the names, the dates, the places, the stories, the laughter, the people, the journeys, the prayers, and the thousand details from which our life together has been constructed. I remember because there are things she can no longer always retrieve for herself.

But Isaiah reminds me that I am not ultimately the keeper of her. God is.

Before I remembered her, He knew her. Before she knew my name, He knew hers. Before we ever met, before vows were spoken, before children, before houses, before photographs, before anniversaries began accumulating into decades, God knew every day our life would contain.

David understood something of this mystery when he wrote in Psalm 139, *“O LORD, thou hast searched me, and known me.”*

The Hebrew word *yada* is deeper than intellectual awareness. It is relational knowing, intimate knowing, the knowing of the person

rather than the accumulation of information about the person. God does not possess a file containing facts about us. God *knows* us.

“Thou knowest my downsitting and mine uprising, thou understandest my thought afar off.”

That verse sounds different when you love someone who can no longer always make sense of her own thoughts, because God does. When she cannot organize the world around her, God is not confused. When chronology fractures for her, eternity does not fracture for Him. When she cannot locate herself inside the story, God still knows every chapter. When she cannot remember yesterday, the God who inhabited yesterday has not forgotten a second of it.

And when I look into her eyes and silently ask the question that has broken my heart more times than I can count, *“Where are you?”* there is never a moment when God asks the same question. He knows where she is, He knows who she is, and nothing about the world she inhabits has become inaccessible to Him.

This may be one of the greatest consolations available to the spouse of someone whose memory is becoming increasingly fragile: the person I love is not ultimately held together by the strength of her cognition. She is held in the knowledge of God.

Her sickness may make her inaccessible to me in ways I cannot understand, but she has never become inaccessible to Him. She

may lose the thread of our story, but the Author has not lost the thread of hers.

She may forget. And I may sometimes be unable to reach her, but she has never been misplaced in the mind of God.

Chapter Eight

I Refuse to Call This the Final Version of You

Faith does not require me to deny what my eyes can see. Biblical faith has never been the discipline of pretending that what hurts does not hurt, that what has changed has not changed, or that deterioration somehow becomes less real because the person witnessing it believes in God. Faith is not the falsification of evidence; it is the refusal to grant visible evidence ultimate authority. That distinction has become increasingly important to me because I cannot love my wife truthfully if my theology requires me to deny what is happening to her.

Abraham teaches us something profound about this tension. Romans 4 places him before circumstances that appear to contradict the promise of God: his own aging body carries one testimony, Sarah's barren womb carries another, and both seem to argue against the future God has spoken. Yet Paul tells us that Abraham "*against hope believed in hope*," and that he "*staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief*." Abraham does not manufacture faith by pretending his body is young or Sarah's womb is fruitful. He looks directly at the evidence and nevertheless refuses to allow the evidence to become sovereign over the promise.

That is an enormously important distinction for those of us living beside the diagnosis of advanced progressive Alzheimer's. Faith does not require me to call confusion clarity, nor does it ask me to rename deterioration as restoration before restoration has

occurred. I can acknowledge what Alzheimer's is doing without granting Alzheimer's theological sovereignty. I can admit that memory is difficult for my wife without declaring that the memory is eternally lost. I can grieve changes in our life together without speaking of the woman I love as though she herself has disappeared.

This is where pain must be watched carefully, because prolonged pain develops a theology of its own if we permit it. Pain tells us that what hurts now will hurt forever. Grief whispers that what has changed can never be restored. Disappointment suggests that divine silence means divine absence, that delay means denial, and that the condition confronting us today possesses the authority to dictate what God will do tomorrow. None of these conclusions necessarily arise from the circumstances themselves; they arise when suffering is allowed to interpret the future without submitting its interpretation to Scripture.

And the Bible interrupts that theology.

Ezekiel is carried by the Spirit into a valley filled with bones, and God asks him an almost unreasonable question: "*Son of man, can these bones live?*" Everything available to Ezekiel through sense and reason argued against the possibility. His eyes beheld only bones, his reason understood what bones represented, and the valley offered not one empirical argument for life. The bones are not diseased bodies awaiting treatment, nor weakened bodies requiring rehabilitation. They are the remains of lives long departed, and

Scripture adds the devastating observation that “*they were very dry.*” Death had held the valley long enough for every visible argument for restoration to disappear; nothing available to sight, reason, or human possibility suggested that life could ever inhabit those bones again.

Yet Ezekiel refuses two equally dangerous responses. He does not surrender to despair and declare that because he cannot imagine restoration, restoration must therefore be impossible. Neither does he manufacture a triumphal answer and pretend to possess knowledge God has not given him. Instead, standing amid evidence he cannot reconcile with possibility, the prophet answers, “*O Lord GOD, thou knowest.*”

There is extraordinary theological maturity in those four words. Ezekiel does not know how, but he knows *Who*. He does not possess the mechanism of restoration, but he stands before the God whose authority exceeds the condition of the valley. His faith is not located in his ability to explain what God will do; his faith rests in his refusal to make human limitation the boundary of divine possibility.

I am learning to stand in that same place.

I do not know what tomorrow will bring. I do not know how much of what this disease has changed may be restored on this side of eternity, nor will I manufacture certainty where God has not given me certainty. I will pray, believe, hope, love, and receive every lucid

moment as a gift, every recovered memory as mercy, every familiar expression as something sacred. Yet when I reach the limits of what I can understand, I choose to place what I cannot explain into the hands of the One who knows.

“O Lord GOD, thou knowest.”

Those words allow me to occupy the difficult ground between denial and despair. I do not have to pretend that the valley is not a valley, but neither must I mistake the valley for the destination. I do not have to deny the diagnosis in order to believe the promise, nor must I diminish the seriousness of disease in order to magnify the sovereignty of God.

This is why I refuse to call what I presently see the final version of the woman I love.

That declaration must be understood carefully. I am not saying that the woman before me is somehow an inferior version of herself, nor am I withholding recognition from the person she is today while waiting for the person I remember from yesterday. She is my wife now. She is loved now. Her dignity does not rise and fall with cognitive capacity, and her value has not diminished because neurological pathways have become fragile. This disease may change the way she remembers our stories and take her places that I cannot follow. It may make familiar memories distant strangers, or familiar words harder to find, or even the certainty with which she recognizes what has surrounded her for years. But it cannot change who she is to me. She is still the woman whose hand I took,

whose life became inseparable from mine, and whom I love in this present tense. Alzheimer's may change what she can remember, but it will never be given the authority to define the woman I remember, the woman I know, or the woman I still long to hold beside me.

So I will honor her here. I will love her here. I will meet her within the day God has given us rather than continually demanding that she return to some previous version of herself in order for me to recognize the woman I married. I will treasure the smile that comes today, the hand that reaches for mine today, the conversation we can have today, and whatever fragments of our shared world remain accessible today.

At the same time, faith gives me permission to believe that what I see today is not the final measure of what redemption intends.

I have read the rest of Ezekiel's vision. The valley that appeared to contain only evidence of irreversible loss became the theater in which God demonstrated that human finality and divine finality are not the same thing. The Word of the Lord entered a place where no human argument for restoration remained, and what appeared beyond recovery discovered that it had never traveled beyond the jurisdiction of God.

That does not give me permission to force Ezekiel's vision into a promise of a particular medical outcome for my wife. It gives me something more durable: a biblical revelation of the God before whom apparent irreversibility does not constitute ultimate

authority. It reminds me that my inability to imagine restoration does not establish the limits of His power, and that the present condition of a mortal body does not possess jurisdiction over the resurrection future of the redeemed.

So when my mind reaches the edge of what it can comprehend, I do not have to invent an answer. I can stand where Ezekiel stood, surrounded by realities I would never have chosen, looking at circumstances I cannot repair, loving someone I cannot heal by the force of my own devotion, and entrust the unanswered question to God.

“O Lord GOD, thou knowest.”

That is faith at its most mature. It is not always the thunderous declaration of a man who understands what God is about to do. Sometimes it is the trembling confession of a husband who does not understand at all, but who has lived with God long enough to know that mystery is not the same thing as abandonment.

And from that place, I can know this much: Alzheimer’s does not get to tell me who my wife is. I know the woman whose hand in marriage I took nearly a half century ago, the woman with whom I have built a life, raised a family, carried burdens, celebrated victories, survived sorrows, whispered prayers, shared laughter, and accumulated more memories than either of us could ever count. I know the sound of her voice, the warmth of her presence, the history carried in her touch, and the thousand quiet ways her life has become inseparable from mine.

So when this disease makes it difficult for her to speak, to reach a memory we once shared, I will remember for both of us. When her words are harder to find, I will listen more patiently. When the familiar becomes strange and uncertain, I will meet her there with a tenderness that does not demand she find her way back to where I am. I cannot control what this disease may change, but I can decide what it will never be allowed to take from me: the way I see her, the dignity with which I will honor her, and the love with which I will hold her.

She is not a diagnosis to me. She is my wife. She is the woman I love, here, now, in this moment, and I refuse to measure the meaning of her life by what she can remember today. Medicine may describe what disease is doing; grief may describe what those changes are doing to my heart; but neither medicine nor grief has been given authority to write the final chapter. I leave the final chapter where I leave everything I cannot understand, in the hands of God.

All authority belongs to Him, and until He writes the final chapter, I will love her in the present tense.

Chapter Nine

The Prognosis and the Promise

There is a difference between knowing what may happen next and knowing how the story ultimately ends. I have come to appreciate that distinction because the physicians caring for my wife are tasked with helping us understand the first, while Scripture alone can reveal the second. One prepares us for the progression of a disease; the other places that progression within Scripture's much larger story of creation, corruption, redemption, and resurrection.

This is where Romans 8 has begun to speak to me differently. Paul does not describe suffering as a collection of isolated tragedies happening to unfortunate individuals. He hears something larger: *"the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now."* The language is almost audible. Paul listens to a creation that is not functioning according to its final intention, and beneath all of its beauty he hears a groan.

I hear that groan differently now. I hear it when something that once came easily to my wife suddenly requires enormous effort. I hear it in the bewilderment of families who watch strength become weakness, independence become dependence, and familiar rhythms of life become increasingly difficult. I hear it in hospital corridors, memory care communities, rehabilitation centers, and quiet bedrooms where one spouse lies awake beside another wondering what tomorrow may bring. These are not separate

sorrows scattered randomly across human existence; Paul gathers them beneath one enormous biblical reality. Creation itself is groaning because something has happened to the world God made.

Then Paul gives that condition a name: *“the bondage of corruption.”*

That word, *corruption*, carries us somewhere this book has not yet gone. In Scripture, corruption is not merely moral failure. In passages concerning mortality, it describes decay, deterioration, perishability; the terrible tendency of mortal existence to move toward dissolution. The body ages. Strength diminishes. Eyes grow dim. Systems once dependable become fragile. And sometimes the magnificent human brain, capable of carrying a lifetime of names, faces, songs, places, promises, Scripture, laughter, and love, becomes increasingly unable to retrieve what it has spent decades storing.

Paul does not ask us to pretend this corruption is beautiful. He tells us that creation groans beneath it.

This matters to me immensely because the very existence of the groan tells me that something is not as it finally should be.

The groan is itself a witness that deterioration is not destiny. Creation aches because it remembers, in the deepest theological sense, that corruption is an intruder into the purposes of God. The suffering body is not proof that God designed humanity for deterioration; it is evidence that creation still waits for the redemption God has promised.

Paul says precisely that. We who possess *“the firstfruits of the Spirit”* also *“groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body.”* Christianity does not teach us to make peace with deterioration as though deterioration were sacred. We care tenderly for the body as it weakens, we honor the person whose capacities change, and we refuse to diminish human dignity at any stage of dependence, but all the while we are waiting for something Scripture dares to call *“redemption.”*

The Christian hope is not escape from the body, but the redemption of it, and that distinction is magnificent. The person God created will not finally be discarded because disease has damaged too much. Scripture points instead toward redemption, toward God reclaiming mortal existence from everything corruption has done to it. The body is not abandoned as an unfortunate shell from which the real person finally escapes. Resurrection declares that God has not surrendered His claim upon what mortality has touched.

That is why Romans 8 eventually carries us to 1 Corinthians 15.

Paul asks a question there that humanity has been asking beside graves since death first entered our experience: *“How are the dead raised up? and with what body do they come?”* His answer does not minimize what happens to mortal flesh. Instead, he takes the language of deterioration itself and places it inside the architecture of resurrection: *“It is sown in corruption; it is raised in incorruption: it is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory: it is sown in weakness; it is raised in power.”*

Paul's repeated phrase arrests me: *"it is raised."*

The thing touched by weakness is not beyond God's redemptive reach. The life that passes through corruption is not surrendered to corruption. Paul places two realities beside each other without confusing them: *what is sown* and *what is raised*, what belongs to mortality and what belongs to resurrection, what corruption can touch and what God ultimately intends.

Then he writes words whose force I had never fully appreciated until deterioration entered our home: *"For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality."*

The theological weight falls upon *"must."*

Paul is not expressing a wish. He is announcing the *consequence* of Jesus' resurrection. Earlier in the chapter he calls Jesus *"the firstfruits of them that slept."* The agricultural metaphor matters because firstfruits are not an isolated miracle; they announce the harvest that follows. Jesus Christ's resurrection is therefore not only something extraordinary that happened to Jesus. It is the beginning of what God intends for those who belong to Him.

That changes the horizon against which I understand what is happening in our home.

Alzheimer's belongs to the world Paul describes as groaning. It belongs to corruption, to the painful vulnerability of mortal existence in which something as precious as memory can become

fragile. But resurrection belongs to God's answer. The disease can participate in the deterioration of mortality; it cannot participate in determining what God will raise.

This is where the prognosis reaches the boundary of its authority.

A physician can tell me, with compassion and expertise, what Alzheimer's commonly does as it progresses. I need that knowledge because love should prepare wisely for the road it may be required to walk. But when medicine has told me everything it knows about progression, it has reached the edge of the question Scripture is answering. Medicine can trace the course of deterioration with remarkable precision; but there comes a horizon beyond which its instruments cannot see. Scripture carries us beyond that horizon, where mortality does not have the final word and resurrection becomes the promise of God. There, corruption is answered by incorruption, weakness by power, mortality by immortality, and the grave itself by resurrection.

This does not make tomorrow less serious; it makes tomorrow less ultimate, and that is the distinction I need.

I do not need faith to tell me that the road ahead will necessarily become easier. I need Scripture to tell me that the road ahead, however difficult it becomes, does not possess the authority to determine the destination. I need to know that deterioration can be real without being final, that mortality can accomplish everything mortality is capable of accomplishing and still eventually encounter a word it cannot overcome: resurrection.

This is why Paul ends this great chapter not with resignation, but with defiance: *“O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?”* He can taunt death because Jesus Christ has changed its status. Death remains an enemy, but it is a defeated enemy. The grave remains a reality, but it no longer possesses final custody of those who belong to Jesus. Resurrection has transformed the grave from a final destination into a doorway cut in sod.

Then comes Paul's thunderous conclusion: *“Thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”*

That is the promise standing beyond every prognosis.

The prognosis deserves my attention because I love my wife and want to care for her faithfully through whatever lies ahead. But the promise possesses my hope because I know that no prognosis, however accurate, can see far enough to behold what Paul sees.

Medicine can see progression; Scripture sees resurrection. And when I am forced to stand between those two horizons, I will listen carefully to the first while fastening my hope to the second. The prognosis may help me understand the road we are walking, but only the promise can tell me where the road finally leads.

Chapter Ten

The Tyranny of Now and the Promise of Then

Paul places the suffering believer between two enormous words in 1 Corinthians 13: “*now*” and “*then*.” “*For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face.*” The entire Christian life is lived somewhere between those two words, between what can presently be seen and what God has promised will one day be revealed.

“*Now*” belongs to partial sight; “*then*” belongs to unveiling. “*Now*” contains unanswered questions, incomplete understanding, interrupted stories, and mysteries we cannot reconcile from where we presently stand. “*Then*” belongs to a fullness we cannot yet comprehend because we are attempting to imagine from inside the limitations of “*now*” what only God can see from the vantage point of eternity.

That distinction has become deeply personal to me. I am living beside the woman I love inside the demands of “*now*.” I cannot skip this day in order to reach the day for which I hope. I cannot hurry through this season because another season sounds more bearable, nor can I love some future restored version of my wife more faithfully than I love the woman whose hand is within reach today.

There is, however, a hidden danger in longing for “*then*.” If I am not careful, my hope for what God will ultimately restore can become an escape from the sacred responsibility of loving what God has entrusted to me now. Biblical hope never gives me

permission to abandon the present. It gives me strength to inhabit the present without believing that the present is all there will ever be.

Paul continues, “*Now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.*” We should handle those words carefully. Paul is speaking about the partial character of our present knowledge in contrast with the fullness that is coming. I do not need to force Alzheimer’s into the text to hear what this passage teaches a husband living inside circumstances he cannot fully understand: partial understanding is not spiritual failure. There are things I cannot know from here because “*here*” is not the place from which the whole story can yet be seen.

That realization releases me from an exhausting demand I have sometimes placed upon myself. I do not have to understand everything that is happening in order to remain faithful within it. I do not have to know why one memory remains vivid while another becomes almost impossible to retrieve, why one day seems clearer than another, or why the woman I have known across nearly half a century at times cannot remember that we are married, or why she experiences the world in ways I cannot enter. Love does not require complete comprehension before it can remain present.

This is where “*now*” becomes more than something to endure: it becomes the only place where I can love her today.

I can hold her hand now. I can speak gently now. I can protect her dignity now. I can listen now, even when the story does not unfold

as I remember it. I can laugh with her now when laughter comes, sit quietly with her when words do not, and receive whatever this day allows us to share without demanding that it resemble another day from another season of our marriage. This is not resignation. It is presence.

There is a profound difference between surrendering to a circumstance and surrendering ourselves to the responsibilities of love within that circumstance. I do not surrender my hope for restoration, but neither will I sacrifice the holiness of today upon the altar of my longing for tomorrow. If I spend all of “*now*” grieving what was or reaching desperately for what may yet be, I will fail to recognize the sacred life still unfolding directly in front of me.

John gives us another expression of this tension when he writes, *“Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is.”* John does not apologize for the unfinished character of the present. He places “now” beside “not yet” and teaches us that both can be true at once. Something is already ours, while something greater remains unrevealed.

My grief needs that grammar. I can be grateful and grieving at the same time. I can treasure who my wife is today while missing dimensions of our life that once came more easily. I can pray for tomorrow while receiving today. I can acknowledge that something is changing without declaring that everything is gone. I can live inside an unfinished story without demanding that God show me

the final page before I agree to remain faithful in the chapter He has given me.

That is why I must resist the tyranny of “*now*.” The tyranny is not that the present exists; the present is a gift. The tyranny begins when present pain persuades me that what I can see today is all that can ever be true. “*Now*” becomes tyrannical when it demands the authority to interpret *then*, and Scripture does not give it that authority.

What we presently see is not the completed revelation of what shall be. There are mysteries I cannot reconcile from inside this moment, and Scripture does not require me to resolve them before I trust God. It asks me instead to recognize something both humbling and liberating: the present is unfinished.

So I will not construct my final theology from an unfinished chapter.

I will live here without believing that here is forever. I will love my darling wife in the present tense without demanding that the present tell me everything about our future. I will receive the grace God gives for “*now*” while entrusting “*then*” to the One who already inhabits it.

This is how faith teaches a husband to live between these two enormous words. I do not escape “*now*” in order to believe in “*then*,” and I do not surrender “*then*” in order to survive “*now*.” I

hold them together, allowing the promise of what shall be to give me courage to love faithfully what still is.

Chapter Eleven

More Than Conquerors, Even Here

There comes a place where grief must be permitted to speak, but it must never be permitted to become God. I will listen to grief when it tells me I am hurting. I will listen when it tells me I miss dimensions of the woman I love even while she is sitting beside me. I will listen when it tells me that something precious has changed today and that I need to weep. Grief has earned the right to describe the wound, but it has not been given the authority to determine what the wound ultimately means.

I will not allow grief to tell me how the story ends. Grief was not there when God spoke creation into existence, nor did grief counsel Him when He formed humanity from the dust and breathed into it the breath of life. Grief was not present when covenant was conceived in the heart of God, and grief did not stand outside Joseph's tomb when Jesus Christ walked out carrying the keys of death and hell. Sorrow may be an intimate companion in this chapter of my life, but it is still a creature of time. It does not know eternity, and therefore it cannot be trusted to interpret what only eternity will reveal.

This is why Paul's words in Romans 8 have begun to sound less like theological poetry and more like survival language to me. After acknowledging groaning, weakness, suffering, and the painful travail of creation, Paul asks a question that reaches into every room

where suffering has attempted to convince someone that it possesses the final claim: *“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?”*

Paul does not answer the question with abstractions. He names realities capable of making human beings wonder whether they have somehow fallen beyond the reach of God: tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, sword. These are not hypothetical inconveniences. They are conditions under which the goodness of God can become difficult to reconcile with the experience of the person who is suffering.

Those of us who live in other valleys could add our own words to Paul’s list. We could name the diagnosis we never expected, the cognitive decline we cannot reverse, the exhaustion that accumulates quietly, the fear of what tomorrow may require, the loneliness that can exist inside a loving marriage, and the heartbreak of watching familiar things become difficult for the person with whom we have shared a lifetime. The vocabulary changes from generation to generation, but the question beneath it remains the same: can anything that happens to us finally separate us from the love in which God holds us?

Paul’s answer is astonishing: *“Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us.”*

For years I heard the language of conquest and imagined victory as escape. I imagined that being more than a conqueror meant the enemy retreated, the circumstance changed, the prayer received the answer I desired, and the testimony could be told from the safe

distance of a battle already won. Victory belonged to the other side of suffering, after the tears had dried and the reason for them had disappeared.

But Paul does not say we become more than conquerors *after* these things; he says we are more than conquerors *in* them. That single preposition has changed my understanding of triumph.

There must be a form of victory available before the circumstance changes. There must be a conquest that can occur while the unanswered question remains unanswered, while the body remains tired, while the heart still aches, and while tomorrow remains uncertain. Otherwise, Paul's words have no meaning for the person still standing in the middle of the thing from which he desperately wants deliverance.

So I have begun asking a different question. Instead of being tempted to ask questions like, "*When will this suffering end?*" I am learning to ask the proper question, "*What will this suffering be permitted to do to me while it is here?*"

That question is deeply personal because prolonged grief threatens more than happiness. If left unattended, it can begin reshaping the person who carries it. Exhaustion can harden into impatience. Repetition can become irritation. Fear can become control. Loneliness can become resentment. The relentless demands of caregiving can slowly tempt a spouse to begin seeing their loved one primarily through the needs their condition creates rather than

through the history, dignity, tenderness, and covenant that make those needs a sacred privilege to carry.

This is where some of the most important battles are actually fought. If this disease cannot be immediately removed from our story, then I must decide whether I will allow it to remove tenderness from me. If I cannot control what tomorrow may take from my wife's memory, I can still guard what tomorrow will find in my heart. I can refuse to allow exhaustion to make me cruel, repetition to make me dismissive, confusion to make me impatient, or grief to make me emotionally absent from the woman whose presence still deserves mine.

This is not heroic language to me. Some days it is painfully ordinary. Victory may look like answering the same question yet again, and answering it with kindness. It may look like refusing to correct a detail that does not need correcting, choosing peace over the satisfaction of being right. It may look like sitting beside her when there is nothing to say, helping with something she once did without assistance, or receiving a moment of laughter without immediately grieving how different another moment may be tomorrow.

These victories will never make headlines. No one may see them except God.

But heaven measures conquest differently than we do.

Paul gives us another grammar for this kind of victory in 2 Corinthians 4: *"We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed."* Paul refuses to erase either side of the sentence. Trouble is real, but it does not become total. Perplexity is real, but despair does not receive ownership. Being cast down is real, but destruction is denied the final claim.

There is a sacred resistance hidden inside those words. The believer does not conquer by pretending the first half of the sentence is untrue. He conquers because suffering is prevented from completing the sentence in its own image.

I understand that differently now.

I can be heartbroken without becoming hopeless. I can be tired without becoming indifferent. I can admit that I do not understand without surrendering what I know of God. I can grieve what has changed without withholding myself from what remains. I can miss what once came easily between us while still receiving with gratitude what love allows us to share today. That is the victory available to me here.

I do not conquer Advanced Progressive Alzheimer's by refusing to acknowledge its presence. I do not conquer grief by refusing to cry, nor do I conquer fear by pretending tomorrow does not frighten

me. I conquer when none of these things is permitted to determine the kind of husband I will be today.

That is a victory I can choose every morning.

Lord, help me to do so. Help me to choose tenderness, patience, and presence. Help me to protect her dignity.

I can choose to remember that before there was a diagnosis, there was a woman I loved, and after the diagnosis there is still a woman I love. I can refuse to let the demands of caregiving become so loud that they drown out the quieter language of hearts that are one.

This is what covenant looks like when it becomes costly. It is no longer sustained by what I receive in return; it is sustained by who I have chosen to be in relationship to the person I love. The vows spoken decades ago acquire a vocabulary we could not possibly have understood when we first spoke them. *"In sickness and in health"* sounds different when sickness stops being a phrase in a ceremony and becomes a chair pulled up beside your bed.

Love is not proven by how passionately it begins; love is proven by how tenderly it remains.

That is why I no longer measure triumph solely by whether the circumstance changes. I certainly pray for change. I pray for healing. I pray for clarity, strength, mercy, and more time. There is nothing spiritual about pretending I do not desire those things. I would welcome them with gratitude beyond my ability to express.

But I am rejoicing in another victory that does not have to wait.

If I can walk through prolonged grief and still love, grief has not conquered me. If I can become exhausted and still choose tenderness, exhaustion has not conquered me. If I can watch familiar capacities become fragile and still see the woman rather than allowing the disease to obscure her, Alzheimer's has not conquered the way I love my wife. If I can stand inside unanswered questions and still refuse bitterness, then suffering has wounded me deeply without possessing me finally.

This is not the triumph of a man who has escaped suffering. It is the triumph of a man who is learning that suffering does not get to decide who he becomes.

This is what I now hear in Paul's declaration that *"in all these things we are more than conquerors."* The conquest occurs inside the circumstance because the circumstance discovers that there are territories within the human soul it cannot possess without our surrender. Pain may enter the house, but it does not have to become master of the house. Grief may sit at the table, but it does not get the head of the table. Fear may accompany me into tomorrow, but it does not get to choose how I will love when tomorrow arrives.

And this brings me back to the woman beside me.

My victory is not over her condition as though she were the battlefield. She is not the problem I am trying to conquer, nor is

she the tragedy around which my story is organized. She is my wife. The battle is against everything suffering would attempt to do to love while I walk beside her.

I will not allow this disease to make me forget what I am asking God to help her remember.

I will remember “us.” I will remember covenant. I will remember tenderness. I will remember that the hand I am holding belongs to the woman whose hand I chose long before either of us knew what roads those joined hands would someday have to walk.

And if I can continue walking beside her with my heart still tender, my faith still breathing, and my love still present, then I am beginning to understand what triumph looks like from inside the valley.

Yes, my heart will break, but thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord, love can remain. My understanding may sometimes fail me, but covenant can remain, and when my strength wanes beneath exhaustion, the Lord remains the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

Jesus remains.

And because He remains, I do not have to wait until the suffering is over to know that suffering has not won.

Epilogue

Until You Know Me Again

For forty-nine years, I have loved the same woman, and I still do. After everything I have written in these pages, that is the most important truth I can leave behind. Before there was a diagnosis, I loved her. Before we knew the name of what was happening, I loved her. Before memory became something we thought about instead of something we simply possessed, I loved her. And now, here, inside a season neither of us would have chosen, I love her still.

This book began because I needed language for a sorrow I did not know how to name. I searched the Scriptures, examined grief, wrestled with covenant, and tried to understand what happens inside the heart of a husband when the woman with whom he has shared nearly half a century begins experiencing their shared world differently. Yet after all the words I have found, all the theology I have explored, and all the questions for which I am still waiting, I have returned to the word that was here before any of this began: love.

I understand that word differently now. This is not the uncomplicated love of younger years, when we imagined growing old together without knowing what growing old might ask of us. It is not confined to photographs, anniversaries, vacations, celebrations, or the memories we accumulated without ever imagining that remembering them might someday become sacred work. This is love that has traveled far enough to discover that

covenant is sometimes most beautiful when it becomes most costly, and that devotion can remain whole even when the life surrounding it has profoundly changed.

Tomorrow morning, if God gives us tomorrow, I will wake up beside my wife. I do not know what kind of morning it will be, what she will remember, what may be difficult, what conversation we will have, or whether some familiar expression will suddenly cross her face and carry me backward through decades in an instant. I am learning not to demand tomorrow's mercies before tomorrow arrives because tomorrow has enough mysteries of its own, but I know what I will do when it comes: I will love her.

I will love the woman who is here. I will not demand the return of an earlier version of her before I give myself permission to be grateful for the woman whose hand I can hold today. If she remembers, we will remember together. If she does not, I will carry the memory without making her feel the weight of having forgotten it. If she tells me something I have already heard, I will receive another opportunity to listen. And when I fail to do these things as tenderly as love requires, because there will be moments when exhaustion outruns patience, I will ask her for forgiveness and ask God for grace to begin again.

I am not writing these words as a husband who has mastered this journey. I am still walking it. There are mornings when faith comes easily and mornings when I have to reach for it before my feet ever touch the floor. There are days filled with gratitude and days when sorrow seems to find every unguarded place in my heart. Sometimes both arrive together, and I am learning that the human heart can somehow hold gratitude and grief without betraying either one.

This is why Jeremiah's confession has become so precious to me. He wrote from inside devastation, surrounded by a landscape that no longer resembled the world he remembered, and there, from the interior of lament, he said, "*The LORD is my portion, saith my soul; therefore will I hope in Him.*" The Hebrew word *cheleq*, portion, speaks of one's share, allotment, inheritance, that which ultimately belongs to someone. Jeremiah looked upon a world in which so much had been taken and discovered that his deepest inheritance was still standing: the Lord is my portion.

Those words have become more than theology to me. There are things I desperately want to keep: every memory, every familiar expression, every conversation, every private story, every sound of laughter, every invisible treasure accumulated across forty-nine years that no one thinks to call treasure until something threatens it. I make no apology for wanting any of them, but beneath everything I am afraid of losing stands the One I cannot lose.

That realization has relieved me of a burden I was never created to carry. I cannot carry tomorrow today, remember enough to prevent another person from forgetting, love with enough intensity to force a wounded mind to become whole, or reason my way into every place my wife sometimes inhabits. I cannot be God to her, and I was never asked to be. I was asked to be her husband, and that I can still be.

I can take her hand and speak her name. I can protect her dignity, pray over her, sit beside her, laugh when laughter comes, remain quiet when words are unnecessary, and stay when staying asks more of me than I thought I possessed. I can receive the day we have been given instead of spending it mourning a day that has not yet

been taken from us, and I can trust everything beyond the reach of my hands into the hands of God.

I still pray for her healing, and I still believe in miracles. I believe God can restore what disease has touched on this side of eternity, and if He does, no one will celebrate more loudly than I will. I will receive every recovered memory, every lucid conversation, every unmistakable recognition, and every unexpected return of something we feared had become inaccessible as mercy placed directly into our hands.

But faith has taught me something deeper than demanding a particular ending before I call God faithful. I know where my wife is held, I know where I am held, and I know Who holds tomorrow. That does not remove the pain, nor does it require me to pretend there will not be nights when grief becomes almost too large for language. It means that when my strength reaches its boundary, God does not reach His.

So I will not spend whatever days God gives us rehearsing a funeral that has not happened. I will not bury my wife in my language while she is still here for me to love. I will not allow anticipatory grief to steal the sacredness of presence by persuading me to mourn tomorrow so completely that I fail to receive today.

She is still my wife, I am still her husband, and this is still our life. Whatever this disease may alter, it does not get to decide whether tenderness survives between us, or whether I will continue to recognize the immeasurable worth of the woman beside me. Alzheimer's does not get to reduce our marriage to caregiving, because long before I became someone who helps her remember, I was the man who promised to love her, and I do.

I do not know everything the road ahead will ask of us, and I no longer require myself to know. I know only that I will walk as much of it beside her as God gives me strength to walk, believing for restoration here and trusting Him with everything that lies beyond the horizon I can see.

I will not pretend Scripture answers every question my heart would like to ask about eternity. But I know enough about resurrection to know that redemption does not move us toward less wholeness, and I know enough about Jesus to trust that nothing placed into His hands reaches the other side of His promise diminished by the corruption He came to defeat. Because of that, I have hope.

I believe a day is coming when everything that now obstructs knowing will no longer stand between the woman I love and the fullness God intends. Whether that mercy comes beneath the roof of our home or reaches its completion in the great restoration beyond everything mortality can touch, I trust the God who has carried us this far to carry us all the way home.

Until that day, I will not wait to love her. I will love her now, through the questions asked again, through stories that sometimes lose their sequence, through mornings that feel familiar and mornings that do not. I will love her when memory serves us well and when I must carry more of our remembering, because love has never required perfect memory in order to remain covenant.

And if the day comes when the woman with whom I have built nearly half a century of life looks into my eyes with perfect clarity, whether here or beneath the endless morning of God, I believe my heart will recognize the moment before a word is ever spoken. I will know that look because I have spent a lifetime knowing the woman behind it.

Then she will look into my eyes and say:

“I know you.”

And I will take the hand I have been holding all these years, the hand I promised long ago I would not relinquish when the road became difficult, and with forty-nine years of love gathered into one answer, I will say:

“I knew you would.”