

Preparing for Living Again as an Unmarried Person: Begin Now

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Several years have now passed since my very precious wife of 48 ½ years, Carol, went home to be with the Lord. She faithfully endured a long struggle with what was diagnosed as an atypical form of Parkinson Disease. She never complained; the most she would say, on days when the going got especially tough, is “I wish I didn’t have PD.”

Her death has impacted my life in a **huge** way. She still is, and always will be, very much a part of me, and no one can ever take her place. I feel as though half of me is missing, including many of the best parts of me/us; yet I can only be grateful to God. I could not have asked God for a more wonderful wife; Carol was all that and much more, including being an excellent mother to our children, grandmother, partner in life and ministry, and, humanly speaking, my best friend.

My greatest loss, however, is rooted in the very unique relationship we had as husband and wife, described in the Bible where a man leaves his father and mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh. (Genesis 2:24-25; Matthew 19:4-6; Ephesians 5:31) That psychophysical and spiritual bond constitutes a oneness that is significantly unlike any other human relationship and is eminently profound and extensive. If a couple has had a good marriage for no matter how long, when separation occurs in that bond a huge transformation occurs with severe pain, and especially so after a long and successful marriage where each partner was committed in love to the other until death they part.¹

Carol was 18 and I was 19 when we met, and it was a short time after that we began seeing each other regularly. We had much in common from the beginning, and we grew closer together as our relationship developed, deepened, and strengthened. I was 23 and she was 22 when we married; she truly was the wife of my youth in whom I rejoiced and continue to rejoice. (Proverbs 5:18) One reason I rejoice is that we remained faithful to God and to each other; our oneness in Christ provided the strongest bond of fulfillment in our marriage.

Our oneness also strengthened in our shared history; we grew old together. As the years came and went we had countless experiences as husband and wife and as mom and dad with the precious children God gave to us, both names, Janet and Jonathan, meaning gift of God. My love for Carol resulted in her having an immense influence in my life; I wanted to be the person she wanted me to be in Christ and vice versa. Of course, neither of us wanted the other to do something of which God would disapprove, but we wanted to please each other, to meet each other’s expectations as much as possible. In other words, we wanted to please each other within

¹ The focus of this article is on preparing for and coping with the death of a spouse and adjusting to life as one who is again unmarried. After spending many years working with singles ministries in Chicago and for over 45 years with singles who have been never married (by choice and not by choice), divorced, and widowed, it is clear that while some of the following can also apply to the separation of divorce, divorce has many other dimensions and complicated issues that require addressing in different ways. “A long and successful marriage” does not mean one where there have been no disagreements, conflicts, or arguments. When two mentally healthy sinners are together for a significant length of time, such difficulties will occur; nevertheless, those maturing in Christ have what they need to cope with, manage, work through, and overcome those difficulties and maintain their commitment to God and to each other to remain together “until death do we part;” i.e., to have a successful marriage.

the parameters, within the realm, of what pleases God. We never lost our God-given uniqueness, but we each had great pleasure in calling each other “my wife” and “my husband.” This is just one reason why it is crucial that believers in and followers of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ make certain that the one they choose to be their spouse is a fellow believer in and follower of Christ, which is clearly God’s will for his people throughout the whole Bible. (Genesis 26:34-35; 27:42-28:1; Exodus 34:16; Ezra 9:1-2; Nehemiah 10:30; Malachi 2:11; 1 Corinthians 7:39; 2 Corinthians 6:14)

As I’ve reflected on my experience since Carol died, I’ve learned a lot that I’d like to pass along to my family, friends, brothers and sisters in Christ, and others everywhere. For one member of most married couples will go through what I have, this is just part of life that we’ve long known since childhood would be coming, yet I observe that there is much that can be done ahead of time to come through this, one of life’s greatest challenges, for me the greatest, as well as possible. I’ve found that the following will help greatly in the transition to living again as an unmarried person.²

What follows are the principles. I tried to follow them carefully, but sometimes I didn’t do so well; I, too, am sinful, limited, and make mistakes. Yet the fact that I am recovering from the loss of such a wonderful wife, and am functioning as well as could be expected, is a testimony to God’s marvelous grace and the effectiveness of the principles that follow. The only reason I am doing as well as I am and not laying on the floor in a fetal position is due to God’s grace. Even when we mess up, with God’s help these principles enable us to cope with, manage well, and overcome this great challenge and function to accomplish what God is calling us to do for the rest of our days in this phase of our lives.

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Throughout Your Life Together as a Couple before and during Marriage

Begin now...even if you’re young and not yet married. Develop and nurture your relationship with God in Christ Jesus. In so doing you’ll be equipped to encounter well whatever comes your way in life!

² I use the term, unmarried person, in the sense that the apostle Paul uses it in 1 Corinthians 7. I am not single in the sense usually employed by that word in common parlance today. One connotation of the term single means available, if not actively looking, for a romantic relationship that could lead to marriage. I am a widower who has no intention of ever again being in a romantic relationship, much less being married to someone else. Since I cherish so greatly my marriage with Carol, the memories of the special relationship we had for 53 years, and she is still and always will be such an integral part of me, I can’t imagine being married to anyone else. We were, as the singles say, “very married.” In addition to doing what God is leading me to do in his service for the rest of my life here on earth, I want to spend the rest of my time here cherishing the precious memories of all my time with Carol, memories which flow from my heart to my cognitive consciousness countless times every day. However, this decision, which others have agreed is the same for them, should not be normative for you. God’s will for you in the question of remarriage will become evident to you over time, especially as you read his Word and ask him.

You can't start too early. Recall the wisdom of the teacher in Scripture, "Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come and the years approach when you will say, 'I find no pleasure in them'—" (Ecclesiastes 12:1) Those who overcome the greatest challenges in life are equipped to do so by developing and nurturing their relationship with God and maturing in Christ over a lifetime. They never ask in times of trouble, "Where's God in all this?" They know with a certainty in a peace which transcends all understanding that God is right there with them, their refuge, strength, and ever-present help in trouble (Psalm 46:1; cf. Philippians 4:5-7) as they've recognized and experienced his love and all-sufficient help in countless ways for decades!

Very importantly: *read the Bible and pray every day*. This is no cliché. Set aside some time when you can read and pray in solitude without interruption and without distractions as much as possible. As you begin to pray, take a few moments to contemplate the One with whom you'll be communicating, the triune God: Father, only begotten Son Jesus Christ, and Holy Spirit, and sense that you are talking with the greatest living Being who loves you. Because of your faith in Christ, you can enter his presence, and you can converse with your heavenly Father! This is why Christ Jesus came, to provide the means for us to be heard by and enter in the presence of God who is Most Holy. (John 14:6)

Keep in mind that he is Most Holy, gracious, sovereign, and the core of his being is love, so begin by asking him to forgive you of anything of which you need his forgiveness. Having confessed your sins, and asked him to help you to not repeat them, remember his comforting words that assure you, and all believers in and followers of Christ Jesus who repent, that you are forgiven. Read again such passages as 1 John 1:9. As you hear this good news, think about what Christ did to make that possible, that great gift, and thank him! Take time to pray for others as well as yourself. As you pray, think carefully of the meaning of your words; i.e., don't rattle off rote and hackneyed expressions that you don't even think about.

Before reading ask God to illuminate your understanding of his Word. As you read meditate on what you're reading and its applications. (Psalm 1) After you've read the Scripture, pray asking God for further insight into his Word, how you should apply it in your daily life, and for the motivation and all else you need to do so. I sense that it's much more meaningful to read through a book of the Bible at a time, rather than skipping around. Don't feel you have to read any particular number of verses or chapters at a time. Read what you can and then meditate on it and pray, which is much more important than reading many pages and doing nothing with what you've read.

Some organizations have produced daily Bible reading guides for reading the whole Bible in a year. If you would like to follow such a guide, one method I like has readings each day from both the Old and New Testaments. *Discipleship Journal* has produced a good one. An online example is this one: <http://www.biblestudytools.com/bible-reading-plan/classic.html>. Another is here: <http://www.arcamax.com/ttb-yr.html>.

For a special blessing *begin memorizing passages of the Bible*. Some of Carol's and my favorites that have been greatly helpful and especially meaningful are 1 Samuel 16:7; Psalms 1;

23; 46:1; 121; John 3:16; 14:21 (one of the verses the outstanding pastor and theologian John Stott said every Christian should memorize); 15:8; Romans 8:28; 10:9; 2 Corinthians 4:16-18; Ephesians 2:8-10; Philippians 4:4-9, 13; 1 Peter 2:9-12; 1 John 4:1-2.

Walk closely with God. Trust and obey his Word, for he is your and my greatest resource through all the challenges of life, including the greatest, and in any time of trouble. (Psalms 46, 121) Don't be like so many people who ignore God and live as though he doesn't exist and then years later when a life-affecting challenge arises ask "Where's God in all this?!" The fact is he is present and has been so all along and is blessing them (Matthew 5:45), but because they have not been walking closely with him they don't recognize him!

Develop the discernment that enables you to see the good in countless ways that God the Father is doing for you each day. (James 1:17) As you notice something good in your daily activities, mention a brief prayer of thanks, such as, "Thank you Father!" Or, "Thank you Most Holy and Most Gracious Father!" Of course, if you are driving at the time, do so without closing your eyes! ☺ This is one way to pray unceasingly, as the apostle Paul urged us to do. (1 Thessalonians 5:17) One of the many benefits of such continual contact with God is the constant awareness of his presence and never being alone, which lifts your spirit.

I experience this reality every day. For many years I've been praying in this manner and in other ways throughout the day as well as at the beginning and the end of the day. As a result, I have a very keen sense of God's presence and immediate and all-sufficient help that enables me "to be content whatever the circumstances" (Philippians 4:11)—content, not problem-free or without concerns, but content—I can function, attending to other matters I need to address, and sleep well. This contentment doesn't come immediately or overnight; it takes time.

Over time, walking daily with the Lord, trusting and obeying him, and in the process drawing closer and closer to him will not only help you face the daily problems of life but equip you with what you need when the greatest challenges of life occur, even suddenly. He'll be there for you, because he will not ever have left you. You'll have this experience, because you'll have nurtured your relationship with the Lord, sensing ever more clearly his constant presence and caring for all your needs. You never need to ask where someone is when you're talking with him throughout the day.

When a big crisis occurs in life, those who scream, "Where's God in all this?!" usually are those who have ignored God, or at least have not walked closely with him each day, or they would recognize him right there ready and fully able and willing to help. In fact, he's not only able to help, he is helping, even though that person doesn't see him doing so or admit it; and yet, he'd do even more if the person asked. We know God blesses all people, even those who are unjust and separated from him. (Matthew 5:45)

Nurture your relationship with your spouse in Christ. Daily read God's Word and pray together and as a family. If you haven't already, find a church home where the Bible is proclaimed truly and where Jesus Christ is at the center and focus of the church's ministry. Worship regularly, at least weekly with the church and daily at home with your spouse and family.

Engage your relationship with a church home. In addition to regular worship, participate in a small or large group Bible study. Volunteer to help in one of the church's ministries where you have an interest. Talk with your spouse about doing so together with him or her. Don't be the first out the door after a worship service. Enjoy meeting members of the congregation over coffee or another beverage, coming to know and developing relationships with them. You'll soon be blessed as you receive, and give, encouragement. You'll experience many joys in the church, which is the body of Christ and the primary means through which God is accomplishing his redemptive purposes in his creation.

Talk about being part of something great! As you become more and more firmly grounded in the church, your faith will grow and become increasingly stronger, preparing you to face up to and overcome the challenges of life as you and your spouse age. And you'll be able to help others do so...a great blessing in itself.

Cherish your spouse. Let him or her know each day, in word but especially in deeds, that you love him or her. Neither of you know how much time you yet have together. Add this reality to your worldview and perspective on life. Then notice how that perspective improves your relationship!

Jesus said, "Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him." (John 14:21 NIV) Jesus also said, "This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples." (John 15:8 NIV) His point is that words are not enough; God expects us to act in accord with his will and our words. This expectation is a major theme that we see throughout Scripture.

Here is one way that Christianity is different from all other religions. Our salvation is by grace alone in Jesus Christ; we do nothing to earn our salvation. But deeds are essential—not as a way to earn salvation—but as an expression of gratitude to God for his loving acceptance of us in Christ, as a means of testifying to the genuineness and authenticity of our faith in the Lord, and as a way to realize the high and holy calling he has given us to participate in his redeeming of his creation. (Ephesians 2:8-10)

The necessity to put words into action is true in other relationships, and it is especially true in the husband-wife relationship. Words come easily for many of us, but it is the concomitant actions that make the words real, trustworthy, significant, and life-shaping.

Since we don't ever know when we'll draw our last breath, as much as possible *resolve all conflicts ASAP*. As we read in God's Word, "Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry." (Ephesians 4:26) Some conflicts take longer than a day to resolve, but with God's help you can release your anger before the end of the day, and that will go a very long way toward resolving the conflict sooner rather than later or, much worse, not at all. Many benefits flow from following this precept, including much stress reduction, joy in life, a stronger marriage, and providing a good model for children and others. One other blessing that comes from eliminating anger and resolving conflicts quickly is the greatly reduced likelihood of having to live the rest

of your life struggling with enormous guilt and sadness if the last words to your spouse were said in anger and harshness.

When your first child is on the way, *begin a conversation with each other about wills and trusts*. Obtain the counsel of a competent and trustworthy attorney who is a Christian. DO NOT select one from the Yellow Pages online or off line; if you live a long way away from your family, ask your pastor or a wise elder for a recommendation. While it's not pleasant to contemplate, it is important to put into place a plan whereby in case both you and your spouse die prematurely, your child(ren) will be raised by a member of your extended family, or someone else of your choosing, who is a mature Christian and who will bring them up in the Lord; you don't want them to become wards of the state and be raised by a non-Christian whose values are 180° different from your own. Carol and I decided to ask one of her brothers and his wife to raise our children should we both die at once, so on a visit to their home one day I asked him if they would consider doing so, and I said that, if they would like, we surely would be pleased to do the same for them if their family ever had such a need. Providentially, we were always close with them and on the same page with all the most important matters, and they said yes immediately. Our children have made the same arrangement.

Discuss from time to time as a couple how you wish other end-of-life matters to be settled, e.g., whether you will be buried or cremated. If you wish to be buried, what kind of casket and where will internment be? If you prefer cremation, what will be done with the ashes? Regarding the option of a casket and your stewardship of the Lord's money that he has enabled you to have, consider what Carol and I have done, selecting the cheapest casket, subtracting its cost from one of the more expensive ones, and donating the difference to the church for the Lord's work. It's a way your spouse, and you, can continue to serve the Lord, and it's a great feeling at a time when it's a blessing to have a good feeling; it also speaks volumes. Carol and I always preferred to have as much of our money as possible go for the Lord's work rather than a substantial amount of it decaying in the ground. My family knows that this is what I want for myself as well, just the same as with Carol, when my turn comes.

Do you have a funeral home preference? Do you want life support, and, if so, what kind and how long do you wish to have it? With Carol and me, knowing what is ahead of us in Christ, we chose to have no extraordinary measures taken once it can be ascertained by the medical professionals that there is nothing more that can be done. For many, such matters are hard to discuss, which is one reason why these and related questions, inserted briefly in conversations, are much more easily considered when you are younger and they seem far off in the future. For most that will be so, but for those whose lives end earlier, it will relieve a great burden for all involved to have the questions already answered.

As you age, update your trust and/or will. As you and your spouse think of important matters you want done, and as children indicate specific items they would like to inherit, add these wishes in writing to your estate plan. Your survivors will be very glad and relieved to have these decisions already made and in black and white so memories during a time of stress need not be relied on. I was, and am, very grateful to God that he led Carol and me to have these discussions and to finalize them in our trusts. When she died unexpectedly, our decisions had already been

made; our family knew her wishes and implemented them expeditiously. And they already know mine.

Seek the advice of a trustworthy financial planner. Don't select from the yellow pages. Ask your pastor, especially if he or she has been in the community for a significant amount of time, or another trustworthy, knowledgeable, and experienced person, whose opinion you can count on, for a recommendation.

Construct a realistic worldview that is positive. As we grow older, many people become discouraged and develop a jaundiced and jaded perspective that is quite negative. Certainly there is much going on that is sinful, evil, and condemned by God. Yet, God's very involvement in the world gives reason for optimism that is based on reality. Many who think of themselves as realistic, meaning by that that they are aware of all the darkness in the world, fail to include in their worldview that greatest reality: God's presence and who he is. Forming a worldview without God in it is not only wrong; it is totally inadequate, unhelpful, and most unrealistic!

God's Word reveals him as being both immanent (e.g., Psalm 113:7-9, present among us and therefore totally aware of all our needs) and transcendent (e.g., Psalm 113:4-6, including sovereign and therefore fully capable of meeting all our needs, overcoming all problems). Thus, we can answer the old question, "Do you see life as a glass half empty or as a glass half full?" As believers in and followers of Christ Jesus, we can say, "Neither. With King David, I see my cup running over!" (Psalm 23, esp. v. 5)

This most realistic view of life enables you to cope with and overcome any difficulty, whether you are a care-giver or the one receiving care. Further, it makes you attractive to others (as they sense they would like to have what you have), resulting in what educators refer to as an approach tendency rather than an avoidance tendency. They are inclined to want to be with you as much as possible. Most people have so many problems of their own that they tend to avoid whatever makes them feel "down" or more burdened. What a great opportunity you and I have as either care-givers or the ones needing care to use our circumstances as opportunities to witness for Christ with great power, even if we're confined to bed! Let's help people see and obtain the Source of our greatest hope and help: The Lord Jesus Christ!

During a Time of Caregiving

Reassure your spouse you are there for him or her all the way until death you part. Repeat that part of your marriage vows. Reassure with deeds as well as with words. Spend time, much time, together. Ask what you can do to help; then do it. Try to be sensitive to and anticipate needs before being asked. Let your spouse know that he or she is always a blessing never a burden. Regularly remember what first kindled your love for him or her; it's still there, though maybe covered over with many cares and concerns over many years. Look deeper. Recall all he or she has done for you over the years. Especially view the one being cared for as God's son or daughter, for whom he has given you the privilege of caring. As I said earlier, Carol never complained, but when she on occasion would lament the loss of certain skills and abilities, and so much she could no longer do, I would look her in the eye, tenderly caress her, and say, "Even

though you have lost some abilities, you have not lost one tiny part of your preciousness! And you never will!”

Listen carefully to what your spouse tells you and for what he or she is not saying. Ask how he is feeling. Put yourself in his place and think about how you’d feel; then ask if he would like to talk about it or about anything else. Don’t rush to fill in any silence or move to another subject.

When frustration and anger occur *say you’re sorry and ask forgiveness*. Remember that the ability to apologize is a sign of strength. It’s people who struggle with a weak ego and a low sense of self-worth who find it very difficult if not impossible to apologize. Consider whether the anger is actually directed toward the condition your spouse has and not your spouse personally. On those occasions assure her, by word and deed, that you are *not* upset *with her* but are frustrated with the *circumstances* and that your love for her will never wane. Remember again, “Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry.” (Ephesians 4:26)

As you both try to make sense out of life in general, and this setback in particular, *turn to God’s Word and to prayer*. The Bible informs us as to how and why God’s original creation was corrupted and what he is doing about it. In that perspective we understand the cause and existence of all unpleasantness and how many people suffer including those who have done nothing to bring on that suffering.

Neither is it God’s fault; he is perfect, (Deuteronomy 32:3-4; Matthew 5:48) and he warned Adam and Eve what would occur if they disobeyed him. (Genesis 2:15-17) Many people direct their anger toward God. This is wrong for several reasons. First, doing so fails to respect God; he is ***not*** our peer! He is God, and he deserves our respect; humans mistreat him at their peril! Second, we must remember who God is and acknowledge and respect his attributes, his characteristics, that govern all else in time and eternity. This is why in [historic Christian systematic theology](#), the summary of what the Bible teaches about the triune God, human beings, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, the church, and the end times and eternity, we begin with the study of who God is and what he is like. There we see that he is the only owner of all his creation; he is all-knowing; he is patient; he is unlimited; he is perfect; and, in addition to much else about God, he doesn’t make mistakes. Third, I am imperfect and limited in my understanding, as are all humans. Therefore, when he does, including allows, something I don’t understand, it is up to me to begin my reasoning with this premise about who God is and what he is like, contrasted with who I am and what I am like. I’m the one who has to change, not God, who is perfect and does not change.

Thus, it is wrong, sinful, and counterproductive to become angry at God. First, if we allow ourselves to become angry toward God, we have lost sight of who he is and what he is like and who we are and what we are like. Second, he doesn’t deserve anger; he has done nothing wrong—that is contrary to who he is. He never does wrong; we need to proceed from these premises in our attempt to understand reality. Third, he clearly indicates that human anger toward him is wrong. Notice what he told the Prophet Jeremiah, who became angry at how people treated him after God called Jeremiah to be a prophet. (Jeremiah 15:15-21) In his patience, God listened to Jeremiah vent his anger toward him, and then he said to the prophet,

19 Therefore, thus says the LORD,

“If you return, then I will restore you—
Before Me you will stand;
And if you extract the precious from the worthless,
You will become My spokesman.
They for their part may turn to you,
But as for you, you must not turn to them.”³

Our loving God allowed Jeremiah to express his anger toward him, but when the prophet was done, God required him to return to him, a clear indication that the prophet was out of line and had sinned, and in so doing had separated himself from God in expressing anger to God. At the same time, notice also that God is willing to forgive him, but the prophet has to not only return to God but also make the necessary changes, specifically in this case to stop such disrespectful and counterproductive behavior. It is not OK to treat God like one does to human beings.

The whole rest of Scripture also lets us know how God is going to help us get through this great challenge of life, keeping our focus on him, and the glorious future that he has prepared for us, his people in Christ, who also suffered greatly so we could have that future. It helps to recall that God knows everything, including experientially knowing what we’re going through, having provided for our redemption at such great cost to himself in the most wonderful demonstration of love ever in Jesus’ suffering and death. And while we’re recalling that reality, it is most helpful to remember Jesus’ resurrection, the first fruits of our own resurrection yet to come.
(1 Corinthians 15:20-23)

As the literature emphasizes, *arrange for a time when you can have a periodic brief break* from your caregiving. As with breaks at work you’ll return to your loved one refreshed, strengthened, and renewed for more effective caring. Such breaks can be arranged with relatives, helpers from church, neighbors, or a friend of your spouse while you get a haircut, do some shopping, talk with someone, or just take a walk. Another break time may be after you help your spouse go to bed and to sleep.

Memorize Scripture with your spouse. At bedtime, and on other occasions, recite the passages you’re learning and pray together. Each night when going to bed I’d ask Carol which of the passages we were memorizing she’d like to recite. One of the passages that most comforted her and me, and which she liked to say together, is 2 Corinthians 4:16-18. After the apostle Paul has recounted some of the mighty acts of God in Christ Jesus, he says

Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. (NIV)

What a strong basis to structure your worldview and realistic hope! (If you are inclined to think the apostle Paul didn’t have much of an understanding as to how

³ *New American Standard Bible: 1995 update*. (1995). (Je 15:19). La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation.

difficult problems can be in this world, take a closer look at the Book of Acts and his own letters, starting with 2 Corinthians 11:13-12:10.) Truly, Paul was well acquainted with the troubles of this world, having personally experienced horrific ones himself, yet with his worldview in Christ Jesus he could see them as “light and momentary” and even having great value!

With this perspective shaping her understanding of reality Carol found great comfort, as did I, in the difficulties she experienced and which we dealt with together. It is also why she could and we can look forward to the future with joy in Christ. This text is a sure and firm foundation on which to thank God for a spouse being in paradise with the Lord. Carol now does see what was unseen, and she now is experiencing that eternal glory that far outweighs anything here on earth. You can say the same for your spouse in Christ.

...we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you in his presence. All this is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God. Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. (2 Corinthians 4:14-18 NIV)

For the One Who Remains Here for Now

Thank God the Father, not only *in* everything (Philippians 4:6) but also *for* everything (Ephesians 5:20). This thanksgiving to him is what I do whenever the tears come and whenever I feel sad at the loss of my precious Carol. In so doing I immediately experience God’s help!

In such circumstances as the death of a precious loved one, some wonder for what to thank God. First of all, thank God for himself, for being with you, for his love for you, for knowing what you are going through, for being willing to help you, and for being all-capable of helping you, that there is nothing he cannot do that is within his will. Then thank him for his gift of your loved one.

Here are some of the words I say. I thank God the Father, the Giver of every good and perfect gift, for Carol; for her being with him pain free with no more suffering forever and for the countless blessings she’s experiencing in glory in God’s presence; for her being the most wonderful wife I could ever have desired, for his exceedingly great answer to my fervent prayers for her that she would marry me, and for all the other good that was in our marriage, being specific; for all the time I had with Carol, for every nanosecond, including the three years before we were engaged when we realized we had a special relationship, where we were more than just friends, and the year of our engagement—for all 53 years—I count them all joy, even though we had some painful experiences; for all the blessings that our family enjoyed with her; for the

multitude of ways he has blessed us before, during, and after her death, again mentioning specifically some that come to mind; that this time apart is temporary, that we'll be together again, thanks be to God, with the rest of our family and all of his other people, the next time forever; and for the constant stream of other good deeds that God does daily. Thanking God in this way immediately pulls me out of my sadness!

My thankfulness for Carol instantly reminds me where she came from...from God's loving hand, which awareness moves me greatly to thank him, and a powerful feeling of joy and a profound sense of gratitude to God wells up from deep within me as I do. How can I think about and be anything other than grateful for my wonderful wife and not thank God who gave her to me? How can I fail to thank him for all his other blessings to us, to our family, and to all his other people? Indeed, every time I think of Carol, my heart erupts in gratitude to God for her, and I'm deeply moved to thank him for her! Doing so transforms my perspective and my emotions, giving me the peace from God that transcends understanding and guards my heart and mind in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:7)

Speaking of perspective, this perspective shapes my rational and emotional orientation by enabling me to look at the matter from Carol's perspective instead of being stuck in my own. If we could talk together, she surely would be saying, "Ed, because you love me, be glad for me; this is so wonderful! It's everything God told us in his Word it would be and much, much, much more! Remember, we'll be together again before long, and then we'll have eternity together; in the meantime, rejoice with me that all my pain and suffering are gone...and forever!"

Loving her as much as I do, and forever will, how can I not only affirm but rejoice with Carol that she is with God and all his other people, including family members and other loved ones who are already there with him *in his very presence*? How can I not be glad for her (though temporarily sad for me) that she has unending and unmitigated joy with no more worry, sadness, or stress, caused by and so characteristic of this world, which is so thoroughly influenced by and engaged in the spiritual warfare with Satan and his demonic followers, both spirits and humans?

Think about it! Especially think about it from early in life, or right from the time you become a believer in Christ, in order to prepare for the death of your spouse. Those of us who've been believers in Jesus Christ all or most of our lives have professed countless times how great the future with the Lord will be and how he'll get us through the problems of this life in the meantime. We even sing about it with loud and cheerful voices. We need to take these words seriously and not speak them as platitudes. Think about, and reflect on, them again. If we truly believe what we have professed even for many years, and still profess, we'll have the ability to not only survive in these times of trauma, but with God's help thrive, in such painful circumstances in the temporary time apart from our cherished spouse. This outcome is especially true the more we keep walking closely with God each day by reading his Word, meditating on his Word, praying, and worshiping him with the church, the body of Christ. (1 Corinthians 12:27)

Of course, we'll feel great pain at the time of parting, and there will be times of sadness from time to time in this period apart. Nevertheless, we won't be shaken to the core of our being. Recall what David experienced:

⁵Find rest, O my soul, in God alone; my hope comes from him.

⁶He alone is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will not be shaken.

(Psalm 62:5-6)

Truly, we grieve, and we grieve deeply. It hurts; but yet, in Christ we don't grieve as those who have no hope. (1 Thessalonians 4:13) For indeed, he helps us constantly in countless other ways as well, especially when we keep him in our consciousness and turn to him for his succor that he so readily and immediately offers.

I also thank God the Father for our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, for his making it possible for us to enter his presence, as Carol has, and also right now for being able to come to him in prayer with the assurance he hears, listens, and acts on our prayers. I thank him for the faith in Christ whereby God credits to us Jesus' righteousness. (Romans 4:24) Nurturing this mentality of thankfulness provides immediate succor.

Many times throughout the day I'll lament missing Carol. For example, while making the bed we shared for all those years, when I straighten the pillow and bed covers on her side, sad thoughts will burst out audibly, "Oh Carol, I miss you so!" yet immediately those words are followed by these: "But I thank you dear triune God that it's only temporary!" And then I feel better instantly!

I thank God for his presence, which is palpably observable through all the evidences of good surrounding me and is thus from him. (James 1:17) True to his Word, he does not ever leave or forsake us. (Deuteronomy 31:6; Psalm 37:28; 94:14; Matthew 28:20; Hebrews 13:5) I thank God that I can see clearly so much of the good he has done and is doing in all I've been experiencing; he is faithful to his Word, e.g., "in *all* things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." (Romans 8:28; emphasis mine) Of course it is God's grace which has enabled me to see these blessings, and the main reason why they are easy to see is that Carol and I were reading his Word, praying, desiring and trying to obey him for many years. My mind and heart are being shaped by the Word and the Holy Spirit, as one pastor said would occur as a result of doing what he wisely urged in a sermon with this title: "Saturate Yourselves with the Scriptures." I also hasten to say that not only I but many others, to whom and with whom I've ministered in over five decades, share this testimony.

I sometimes sense I'm the only person in the house, that now has a cavernous emptiness, but then I also immediately realize I'm not alone. Neither am I lonely; God supplies my need for companionship first of all directly with his presence and indirectly by bringing me together with others in countless ways beginning with and topped by his Providential care through my family. This awareness does *not at all mean* that anyone ever takes Carol's place; that is not God's intention and thus it could never be. It is to say that at those times when my awareness of Carol being gone is especially intense, I can sense God saying, "It's OK; I'm right here." I cannot tell you how comforting that reality is! The realization that he is never apart from me and that my time apart from Carol is just temporary is an immense comfort that transcends full comprehension.

All the time Carol and I invested in our family with God's help over many years, he is now using to bless us all. Our precious daughter has me over for supper together with her family daily, and I talk and/or text on the phone often with our precious son who lives several states away; we visit at least two or three times a year.

God also supplies my social needs by visits with friends in person, digitally via the Internet, and by phone, fellowship at church, interaction with neighbors, and volunteer service, especially in the church, locally, nationally, and globally. Friends can help, but friends in Christ offer much more than those who don't know Christ. Fellow believers in and followers of the Lord Jesus alone offer what you need most. Keep close to the church, including hearing God's Word faithfully proclaimed and applied to your daily life each week.

Yet none of this help in any way is meant to replace Carol; she can *never* be replaced. As soon as I begin thanking God for these and other realities, *immediately* my spirit soars! Needless-to-say I miss my wonderful wife greatly, hugely! Yet, this thanksgiving is the most helpful way by far that has enabled me to daily overcome my times of sadness, including those when my eyes moisten and begin to ache and it becomes hard to see and to swallow.⁴

...at those times when my awareness of Carol being gone is especially intense, I can sense God saying, "It's OK; I'm right here." I cannot tell you how comforting that reality is! The realization that he is never apart from me and that my time apart from Carol is just temporary is an immense comfort that transcends full comprehension.

Why does it help to thank God the Father?

First of all, it helps because he tells us to do so. (Philippians 4:6; 1 Thessalonians 5:18; Ephesians 5:20) We know that everything he tells us to do is in our and others' best interests. He knows how we are built, because he made us. Careful science continually discovers why what God commands we do in the Bible is good for us and others. Brain research has revealed many benefits of gratitude.⁵

Because I love my precious wife so much, and because I remember how much she suffered, I can say that as much as I always only wanted to be with her, I can only thank God for taking her to be with him in glory. It helps to continually recall that I'm not the only one who loves Carol; most of all God loves her, and his love is perfect and without any selfish sin interfering with his perfect decisions and actions. She belongs to him. He saw the suffering she was enduring. At

⁴ In addition to the ways I've mentioned that God immediately helps when thanking him, I've added others in the accompanying video clip, "Managing Grief: Thanking God in and for Everything," in the Marriage page on my Web site (www.fromacorntoak12.com). This testimony was recorded at Immanuel Lutheran Church in Loveland, CO and presented as an illustration during Pastor Glen Schlecht's sermon, "Giving Thanks in ALL Circumstances," on November 23, 2014. The audio of my testimony and Pastor Schlecht's fine sermon can be accessed at this URL: <http://church.immanuelloveland.org/worship/sermon-podcast>. (Accessed 12/17/14)

⁵ Alex Korb, "The Grateful Brain: The neuroscience of giving thanks," <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/prefrontal-nudity/201211/the-grateful-brain> (Accessed 12/15/14)

one point, out of his great love for her, he mercifully reached down and took her out of her suffering and into the glory he has for his faithful people.

And yes, he didn't forget about me. He knows of the sad times I have that Carol and I are apart...for a while...and he is supplying me with all I need in this interim. Some of the ways he is doing so are the subject of this essay.

God doesn't make mistakes! And when it is best in his sight, this interim that Carol and I are apart only being an instant from an eternal perspective, he'll also take me to himself, and to her!

Jesus said we should not love this world. (John 12:25) One of the benefits of not loving this world, is we are freed to keep our focus on and value of our eternal relationship with God, and to serve him, first and foremost in our thinking and acting. Doing so enables us to put in perspective, understand, accept, and especially rejoice in the transition of our loved ones and ourselves from here to heaven! We neither fear going to the place where we most want to be, nor do we become angry that our loved ones get to go there. That stands to reason doesn't it?! It's a lot easier for us to look forward to being with Christ Jesus and all his people in glory, including our loved ones, when that is where our heart is, than if we think this world as it is now with its corruption (which in the apostle John's writing is included in the meaning of the Greek word for world, *κόσμος kosmos*) is the be all and end all, a very sad disillusionment!

I always wanted what is best for Carol, and I tried to give it to her. Since I still want what is best for her, I'm at peace with God granting her wish to be with him, which is far better. (Philippians 1:23) Moreover, my premise must be that which his Word reveals, that he knows much better than I, and with pure motivations in contrast to mine, what Carol most needs. (Isaiah 55:8-9; Psalm 51:1-17; 139; Matthew 5:48)

Expressing thanks to our Father in heaven reminds me that Carol and I, indeed all others in Christ, belong to him. This gratitude causes me to recall who he is, including the reality that owning the cosmos and beyond and being the only one who is all-knowing as well as all-loving, God has the right to do what is best in his mind. He gave Carol to me, and he took her to himself when it was the right time in his sight. (Job 1:21)

I can tell you this for sure: knowing Carol and the pain and suffering she endured, now that she has entered paradise, heaven, she is not wishing she were back here...not after being with God, Father, only begotten Son Christ Jesus, and Holy Spirit, three in One! She is with God and in the unimaginably perfect bliss he has planned for all his people. She knows I, the rest of her family, and all her other loved ones in Christ who are yet here on earth will be with her in God's perfect timing, and it won't be long!

Thanking God the Father immediately reminds me that I'm not unconnected and alone; that he hears me; and that there is a future of joy without sadness coming...indeed it has already begun in part. (Luke 17:21) Thanks to Christ Jesus, I know I am, and feel, connected with the Father and the rest of the triune Godhead and sense the immanent help I need. I'm expressing these thoughts in the first person singular to emphasize my experience of these realities, but they can be yours as well in Christ.

Expressing gratitude to God for Carol's going home to him reminds me that she told me, and a friend, a couple of weeks earlier that she wanted to go home to be with the Lord (assuring me of no intention to do anything to hasten that occurrence) where she would be with him and free of her pain and suffering. Knowing of the eternal joy ahead, she was ready to experience the greatest of all the promises in God's Word. (See e.g., Revelation 21 and 22.)

The preceding is not an exhaustive explanation of why it helps to thank the Father for the (in Christ temporary) loss of our loved one. Add reasons that come to your mind and heart as you thank him not only in but also for all things. (Philippians 4:6; Ephesians 5:20; 1 Thessalonians 5:18)

When we have problems in life we tend to develop tunnel vision, focusing so much on the problem that we lose sight of the broad perspective, including eternity. When we neglect to include God in the picture we perpetuate and foster the situation, by failing to draw on God's unlimited resources and his all-sufficient help, and we extend our sadness and other negative emotions. We need to remember that God is not only in the picture but, as Carol's brother Alan added when I mentioned what I've just said, that God is holding the picture! Thanking God for these blessings lifts my sight to *include the whole picture, the broad perspective*, including what God discloses in his Word about eternity, and in Christ it is great!

I was prepared to spend the rest of my life as Carol's primary caregiver as long as God would give me strength. I sensed God modifying my call. I put several writing projects and some teaching I wanted to do on hold. By God's grace I gladly elevated Carol's needs to the top of my priority scale, figuring if God willed that the writing and teaching be done I could work it in somehow in what I thought would be many years yet to come here on earth for both of us. Knowing of the actuarial tables which show the husband usually dies first and that people with Parkinson Disease typically die with, not because, of it—even the atypical form she had that we learned about toward the end of her struggle—I never seriously considered that she would die before I, though knowing how much she suffered at the end, it is clear that it's much better for her that I was able to be with her the whole time before she died. How enormously difficult it would have been if I died first, leaving her in the condition she was. *How very good of God that he called Carol home first!* Where do you think Carol would rather be? I know the answer to that question; she told me before she died. Indeed, every believer in and follower of the Lord Jesus Christ, who is maturing in him, is looking forward to eternity in his presence...and Carol is already there with him! More of the countless blessings I offer thanks for to God!

Would I rather she be with me now? Yes, truly, truly, but only if she were well and we could do what we talked about doing in retirement. But since I love her greatly, how could I want anything else for her than that she is with God in glory?! Since our time apart is only temporary, we'll be together again, and God is supplying all my needs and much more in this rapidly fleeting interim period, how can I be anything other than grateful to God?! With that perspective, my mind and heart are transformed from sadness to a resurgence of joy!

Sometimes I hear of a husband and wife who die together or within a close timeframe, such as a couple in our church recently, and I think how good that was that they could go home to be with

the Lord together. Simultaneously I somewhat wistfully wonder why I couldn't go with Carol at the same time she did. Again, it would have been good for Carol and me but not so for our children, grandchildren, and others. In the time since Carol's passing I've been catching glimpses, and even much clearer understanding, of what God has for me to do yet here on earth before I can rejoin Carol. Yet more reasons to thank God surge to the forefront of my consciousness and burst forth in prayers of gratitude. Oh yes, and my spirit again soars out of its sadness!

I never think that I remain here for a while because God needs me here; he doesn't need me, but he does love me, and he has more work for me to do in and for his Kingdom, which he daily shows me, mostly through other people who need help I can offer thanks to what God has given me. God has no needs. (Acts 17:25; John 2:25; Luke 19:40) If God had needs, he would be imperfect, and we know God is perfect. (Matthew 5:48) Because he has no needs, and because he is all-sufficient, independent, without any flaw and fully capable of doing all that is within his perfect will, he can supply all we need, which gives us great comfort, security, and joy.

While considering the importance of maintaining the broad perspective, *remember the Scriptural dimension of time*. Especially as we read the New Testament we are impressed with the sense of urgency to serve God with dispatch; we are in the end times (which in the Bible is that time between Christ's First Advent and his Second Advent), and we're told that Jesus will be coming soon.⁶ "What I mean, brothers, is that the time is short. From now on those who have wives should live as if they had none; those who mourn, as if they did not; those who are happy, as if they were not; those who buy something, as if it were not theirs to keep...." (1 Corinthians 7:29-30; cf. Romans 13:11-12; Hebrews 10:37; James 5:8-9; Revelation 1:1; 3:11; 22:7, 12, 20)

In a second sense, we'll be meeting Jesus again soon individually, likely even before he returns in the corporate manner referred to in the preceding paragraph. We don't know how much longer we have on this earth, so we should make the most of it. (Colossians 4:5)

Thus, *don't let too much time pass before making yourself available to serve the Lord* in whatever way he leads you to do. You've heard of "work therapy;" work out your grieving in the Lord's service. He and the others you're serving will help you grieve well. Your pastor will be glad to help you find where God would have you serve him and any resources you require to do so.

Don't compare yourself with others. I have never envied any other person; I still don't; and I never will. God has given, is giving, and will give me all I need *and much more* than I need!

⁶ The Greek word translated "soon" in Revelation 1:1 and related texts is *τάχος tachos*, referring to God acting quickly with decisiveness, clarity, and assuredness but when the time is right in his omniscient sight. *Complete Biblical Library Greek-English Dictionary, The - The Complete Biblical Library Greek-English Dictionary - Sigma-Omega*. Walter W. Wessel, an associate editor of *The NIV Study Bible*, in his commentary on Romans 13:12 explained well the New Testament concept of time and the soon coming of Jesus' return. "These texts do not mean that the early Christians believed that Jesus would return within a few years (and thus were mistaken). Rather, they regarded the death and resurrection of Christ as the crucial events of history that began the last days. Since the next great event in God's redemptive plan is the second coming of Jesus Christ, 'the night,' no matter how long chronologically it may last, is 'nearly over.'" *The NIV Study Bible*, Kenneth Barker, General Editor, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: The Zondervan Corporation, 1985), p. 1727.

Even as I read the newspaper and church and alumni magazines and observe that other couples, who were married the same year as Carol and I, have celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary, I can be glad for them and glad for Carol and me. How can I not be glad for her, who is now in the presence of our Lord Jesus, in fact the whole triune God, and without pain and suffering—in glory! I then think, “How much better we were married just 48 ½ years than not having been husband and wife at all! I got to be her special friend for three years, then her fiancé for a year, and then her husband for 48 ½ years!” I thank God every day for my wonderful wife, indeed for every nanosecond with her, even for the tough times we experienced, that we’ll be together again, and with him, our family, and the others I mentioned earlier...next time forever! Again, let’s choose to think about all we have that is good (and don’t at all deserve; they’re all gifts of God by his grace), rather than think of what we, momentarily, don’t have.

Also don’t compare yourself with others in the grieving process. We’re alike in many ways, but in many ways we’re all different. If someone else is grieving differently, or is not demonstrating grief after a period of time, and you are still struggling, don’t get down on yourself. It is natural for people to grieve in different ways. Trust God, and he will supply all you need in Christ.

How do we thank God not only *in* but *for* all things?

How do we thank God the Father for all things, including a wife or husband dying, as the Holy Spirit speaking through the apostle Paul tells us to do in Ephesians 5:20? The tense of the verbs in the original Greek inform us where the English translations don’t. The context of this passage is in the light of the command in verse 18 to “be filled with the Spirit.”

The verb in “be filled with the Spirit” is in the Greek present tense, which means a continuous, repeated, not a once-for-all experience. Never one and done. The verb is in the Greek imperative mood meaning God is commanding us to do something. This verb is not a suggestion, a recommendation, or an alternative to something else. It includes inviting him to take control, to fill us with a Christ-like and Christ-oriented will to guide us. The verb is in the Greek passive voice, indicating that we are to be acted upon; we cannot fill ourselves. For example, I can’t get filled by whipping myself up into an emotional frenzy. Our part is to ask God to direct us, to lead us to do what pleases him and is thus in our own and others’ including our spouse’s best interests.

Very significantly, the verb’s Greek number is in the plural, 2nd person, meaning for the whole church, not just me privately. We are filled with the Spirit together in Christ. Regular, at least weekly, attendance in worship is necessary for the maturing in Christ that enables us to be filled with the Spirit and have the required resources to engage and overcome the challenges of life, even including the death of a wife or husband.

Don’t do as some do when losing a spouse and stay away from the church. Doing so cuts yourself off from your greatest God-given resources. Are you afraid someone may see you cry? Why? I was in church the first Sunday after Carol died. I needed to be there. That also gave many people the opportunity to offer sympathy and words and gestures (sometimes just a hug) of support. Yes, I wept when some spoke to me. They handled it well. Most people know that crying is a natural way that fosters healing. Jesus wept at the death of Lazarus. (John 11:35) They didn’t have to say anything. They just stood by me. Some said something; others just put

a hand on my shoulder or gave me a hug. God blessed me greatly through his people who came along side me in an acute time of need, and I thank him and them for doing so.

The five verbs following verse 18, all in the context of worship and other corporate aspects of the body of Christ, are all *participles* in the Greek, which indicate ways to apply and results of that being “filled with the Spirit:” “*Speaking* to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs;” “*Singing* and *making music* in your heart to the Lord,” “always *giving thanks* to God the Father for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” The fifth participle is “*Submitting* to one another out of reverence for Christ” which provides the context for the verses that follow pertaining to the husband-wife relationship.

I testify that doing this speaking, singing, making music, giving thanks, and submitting together with hearing God’s Word and prayer have a causative effect, regularly filling and keeping me filled with the Spirit that has prepared and equips me well to overcome and manage the pain of Carol’s death and to be able to thank and serve God during the interim until we are reunited forever in heaven. Regularly participating in worship with the church, the body of Christ, is essential, but so is maintaining a devotional relationship with God daily when apart from brothers and sisters in the Lord. You may watch a brief video summary of my testimony at this URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nut7zNklCaU>.

Communicate with God.

Continue to communicate regularly throughout each day with God, and at one or more special times, for example in the morning and/or evening, by reading his Word and in prayer. As you talk with God in the course of your daily activities, your prayers can be short, one or two expressions or sentences, or longer. This is an example of Paul’s urging to “Pray without ceasing.” (1 Thessalonians 5:17 KJV; “continuously” NIV) In my saddest times my greatest help is in talking, out loud and silently, with God—telling him, even though he already knows, how I’m feeling and what I need. I often long to be with Carol again, and it comforts me greatly to realize he knows that and that when I’m praying to him, I am also as close to her as I can be while I’m yet here on earth, for she is right there with God, with whom I’m having this conversation!

Thus, when I want so much for Carol to know something, like how much I’m thinking of and love her and forever will, I ask God to tell her since she’s right there with him! Will he tell her? He has told us in his Word that the prayers of the righteous who are in Christ are effective. (James 5:16) At the same time, I always keep in mind that if anything I ask him to mention to, or show, her would make her sad in any way, that he does not do so. (See, e.g., Revelation 21:4.) And that is good! We can always trust God; (2 Samuel 22:3, 31; 1 Chronicles 5:20; 2 Chronicles 20:20; Psalms 62:8; 91:2; Isaiah 50:10; John 14:1; Romans 5:11; 1 Corinthians 10:13; 1 Timothy 6:17) he will do what is right in his sight, and that is not only just fine with me, it gives me great comfort! Indeed, when I reflect on these matters I can feel my whole body relax. More of the countless blessings of daily communication with God!

I also sense huge comfort recognizing that Carol and I are still connected by our relationship in and with Christ Jesus and thus with the triune God.⁷ Immediately following this awareness is the Biblical reality that we'll be together again, together thanks to God with the rest of our family and all God's other people in his eternal service and presence, which is my greatest succor and solace.

Some of the comments I've uttered to God in gratitude to him are these: "O God, you are good, totally good; there is no imperfection in you!" And when I'm keenly missing Carol, I thank him that it's only temporary...and does that help! Immediately! And then I realize and say with words on breath racing to God, "Oh Wow! Without your instant and all-sufficient help, I'd be a basket case!" Then I am empowered to engage the rest of my daily life and work.

Also make a time where you can go to a special place in your home and be quiet, without interruptions and distractions. In prayer, *speak but also listen* to what God has to say to you. As you keep daily doing your reading of his Word and praying, you'll feel God's presence and look forward to those times with him.

Our relationship with God comforts and strengthens us.

Keep in mind you are never alone. "The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything...." (Philippians 4:5b-6a) Through doing the above, God's presence will become ever more evident to you. Thank God for your spouse. Truly, he gave each of you to the other; your spouse belonged to you, and you to your spouse, but you both belong to God. Several important implications flow from this sense of belonging to God.

The need to belong is one of human beings' most important needs. On the human level, we mutually fulfill that requirement in a very unique and irreplaceable way with and for our spouse.

But we have our spouse because God gave him or her to us. Since God is the owner and ruler of the universe, of all creation, since everything and everyone belongs to him, and since he alone knows what is best for all involved and for the accomplishment of his plan of redemption, he has the right to decide when to give and when to take back. And when he takes one of us to be with him in paradise, in heaven, and in the new heaven and new earth, if we truly love the one he has taken, how can we be any way but glad for our spouse?! I'd love to have Carol back with me, but healthy not suffering as she was, but since I love her, how could I ask that she return having been in paradise! Yes, I'm sad for myself and her other loved ones, but glad for her!

Truly, God gave Carol to me to be my wife, and me to her to be her husband. Yet all the while she was my wife, she was also his daughter! As she still is and always will be. Especially in her

⁷ Here another Biblical and theological doctrine helps us, specifically the connection between the church triumphant, the believers in Christ who are in heaven, and the church militant, those here on earth waging the cosmic warfare against the opponents of God and trying hard to function effectively as God's main means through whom he is redeeming his creation. The Eastern Orthodox Church has an especially inspiring and uplifting means of engaging that doctrine in its Divine Liturgy where the church in heaven and the church on earth are united in worship. Orthodox architecture facilitates this reality in an inspiring way as the congregation in the sanctuary worships under the dome above, graphically drawing participants' worship heavenward to Jesus Christ the Pantocrator, ruler over all, whose icon is at the apex of the dome in all Orthodox sanctuaries.

baptism, he declares, this child is mine! As such he always loved and cared for her, as he still does, and as he forever will. When the time was right in his sight, when it was best for Carol and all others involved, including me, he brought her home. Because of his great love for her, he stopped all her pain and suffering.

How can I be angry at God who has only done what is good and who loves us to the extent that he came to us and suffered so we could have eternal life! We must have the right starting point in our thinking, in our reasoning, as we go about the human quest to make sense out of life. Anger erupts from unwarranted premises: that the one to whom the anger is directed has failed and is accountable to the one who is angry. Clearly, God is perfect; he never fails. Jesus said that God is perfect (Matthew 5:48), and Moses sang, “I will proclaim the name of the LORD. Oh, praise the greatness of our God! He is the Rock, his works are perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he.” (Deuteronomy 32:3-4) God has done nothing wrong, and he never will do anything wrong; it is not in his character to do wrong. That Carol became ill is not God’s fault. Neither is it Carol’s fault. God warned Adam and Eve what would occur if they disobeyed him, and we live in a fallen world that contains all kinds of evil and concomitant unpleasantness as a result of their sin. Until Christ returns and renews God’s creation, righting all wrongs in the process, afflictions will occur in the lives of the just as well as the unjust.

Recall what the “blameless and upright” (1:1) Job said after experiencing his devastating losses including his children, “‘Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked I will depart. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised.’ In all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing.” (Job 1:21-22) Job recognized, as we should, that God owns all that is, ever was, and ever will be. Further, since he is also perfect he has the right, and since he is sovereign he has the ability to do what is best in his sight for all. Thanks be to God! One of the greatest blessings in this reality is that we have the broad, eternal, perspective that helps us make sense out of the phenomena of life, cope with these occurrences, and overcome the greatest challenges. As the apostle Paul said, “I can do everything through him who gives me strength.” (Philippians 4:13)⁸

Further, God is not accountable to me; he is the Creator, owner of all he created. He is also all-knowing; I am limited, and he is unlimited. Logically, the finite cannot comprehend the infinite. Like with Job, God has no need for my counsel; he knows what is best, and I’m fine with that. So was and is Carol. For the above reasons I can truly testify that I am not angry toward God, nor have I been so, and nor will I ever be so; I can only thank God for all these blessings. Let us

⁸ For any who’ve studied psychology and may be thinking that I’m in denial, that is not so. I’ve had many courses in psychology and in counseling; I know about denial, and I’m not in it. I’m very much in touch with my feelings, but I’m also in touch with God’s Word that forms my thinking and which was written thousands of years before I was born (thus I didn’t write any of it). I’m not denying Carol has died; just the opposite! In Christ I have the Biblical hope, which in historic Christian systematic theology is a realized expectation; it is already here inaugurated by Christ in his First Advent and which he’ll finish, bringing to complete fruition, when he returns in his Second Advent, his Second Coming. I have this great hope and you either do or can. Don’t worry if someone who doesn’t understand the Bible or historic Christian theology questions your psychological well-being; he or she must not know the many who engage in healthy grieving in Christ. My love for God and for my precious Carol, whom I’m looking so much forward to seeing and being with again...next time forever together and without pain, sadness and suffering...gives me much joy as well!

remember these words from Job, who lost his wife and more: “He said, ‘Naked I came from my mother's womb, And naked I shall return there. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away. Blessed be the name of the LORD.’ Through all this Job did not sin nor did he blame God.” (Job 1:21-22 NASB)

Anger? Anger toward God? Not at all! I choose to remember what I had, what Carol has now, what I have now, and what I will have again rather than what I *temporarily* lack now. Though, as Jesus taught, in heaven people won't be married, but Carol and I will be together again in a perfect place, and next time...forever!⁹ Thanks be to our triune God!

Thanking God the Father immediately reminds me that I'm not unconnected and alone; that he hears me; and that there is a future of joy without sadness coming...indeed it has already begun in part. (Luke 17:21) Thanks to Christ Jesus, I know I am, and feel, connected with the Father and the rest of the triune Godhead and sense the immanent help I need. I'm expressing these thoughts in the first person singular to emphasize my experience of these realities, but they can be yours as well in Christ.

In the Lord we're never alone.

One of the great catechisms in the history of the Christian church is *The Heidelberg Catechism*. Reflect on how practical and comforting our belonging to God in Christ is in the words of Question and Answer #1:

“Question 1: What is your only comfort, in life and in death?

That I belong—body and soul, in life and in death—not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ, who at the cost of his own blood has fully paid for all my sins and has completely freed me from the dominion of the devil; that he protects me so well that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, that everything must fit his purpose for my salvation. Therefore, by his Holy Spirit, he also assures me of eternal life, and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.”¹⁰

That we belong to God, and all that means, is made certain to us by Christ's death and resurrection to glory and authority as revealed in the Bible and as witnessed by over 500 people in history. (Matthew 28:18; Ephesians 1:22; 1 Corinthians 15:3-8) Think about what great comfort this reality gives us!

As a believer in Christ, especially one who walks closely, faithfully and obediently, with the Lord, you are never on your own; God is always with you directly and through others as you relate to the body of Christ, the church. As you do, it will not take long for any feelings of

⁹ Matthew 22:30. Be careful with this text. Jesus says we will be *like* the angels in some ways, *not* that humans will *become* angels as in popular but unbiblical thought. He did not specify the ways in which we will be like angels, but we do know from many other passages that we don't cease to be ourselves, much less cease to be humans. See also Revelation 21:1-4.

¹⁰ *The Heidelberg Catechism*, 400th Anniversary Edition, Translated from original German and Latin texts by Allen O. Miller and M. Eugene Osterhaven (New York: United Church Press, 1962), p. 9.

loneliness to fade. The very unique and special relationship the members in Christ's body have with one another and the Holy Spirit, that the New Testament refers to as *koinonia*, meets the human need for fellowship and is an antidote to loneliness, especially the more you become involved.

Again, this reality does not mean anyone can replace your loved one. Certainly, no one can take Carol's place either. Yet as a part of God's loving Providence for his people and his whole creation, he gives us this and other help we need to cope with and overcome our grief and in the process to continue in the calling he has given us through which we will serve him in the accomplishment of his redemptive purposes.

God provides many other resources for grieving and thanking him.

Such involvement begins with regular worship and volunteering to help in one of the ministries in which the congregation serves the Lord. Make appointments as needed to visit with your pastor or the pastor in charge of pastoral care.

Read Bible-based and Christ-centered literature that will help you grieve. Don't worry about weeping. If you cry, remember that even Jesus wept at the grave of his friend Lazarus. (John 11:35) Nevertheless, as the apostle Paul wrote, we do not grieve as those who have no hope. (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18) Ask your pastor for suggestions, but keep in mind that even some of the more highly recommended booklets and other materials contain suggestions that are well meaning but misguided and hard to fit with the Bible, so read with discernment.

Talk with brothers and sisters in Christ who have lost a spouse and learn from them what helps to come through this huge loss well. Look for older people who have walked for a long time with the Lord and have developed much wisdom; they will be very helpful. In days to come be such a person to others newly widowed.

Consider a support group for and with others who grieve the loss of a spouse. Ask your pastor for a recommendation of such a group, preferably in your church, or, if your church does not offer one, in another Bible-believing and Christ-honoring church. Such a group will be most helpful if it consists of all widows and widowers. While those who grieve the loss of parents and others are well-meaning and are genuinely trying to help when they say they know how it feels, because they recently lost a mother, father, brother, etc., they really don't know how it feels unless they've lost a spouse. That one-flesh and very unique relationship that exists between a husband and wife in the marital bond is unparalleled and the loss so deeply profound that you'll be helped much more by those who have gone or are going through what you are experiencing. By God's grace I had a wonderful mother and dad, and I grieved much when they died, but not nearly the same as when my wife died. Not even close. (Matthew 19:4-6)

As hard as it still each day sometimes is, because I love Carol, I'm glad for her that she got to go home to the Lord first, and I thank him every day that she is with him with no more pain and no more suffering...forever! How difficult it would have been for her if I went first. Because I love God, while I wait for the time I can go home and be forever reunited with Carol and the rest of our family and all God's other people, I am pleased to thank God for all these blessings and to

serve him here on earth in caring for my family and in using my gifts and skill set for him wherever he opens the doors for me to do so. I have so many opportunities to do so that I never in the morning wake up wondering what I'll do that day.

What now?

Truly, the rest of your and my life will not be the same without our spouses who by God's grace have helped each of us respectively develop into a much better person than we were before we were married. Yet our lives are not over. God has more for us to do here on earth, which is one reason why we didn't get to go to our heavenly home with our wife or husband, and just the thought of that reality provides much meaning, significance, encouragement, and purpose for the remainder this phase of our lives. Let's find what it is and begin doing it for God's glory and for the accomplishment of his redemptive purposes through us.

When Carol died a huge void in my life, my total being, occurred. Half of me, my better half, was taken from me. I felt greatly diminished, and in that way I still do. But God is good! He did not leave me in such a state. He added a new dimension to my call in this phase of my life.

While not eradicating my sense of void missing Carol, he honors her by not filling the gigantic gap she has left in our temporary time apart, until we are together again in the Lord's presence. He honors her by my continually cherishing her and all the time we had together, every minute (yes, even the times when we had disagreements on some things).

God has not filled the void that resulted from Carol's passing. Yet he has enhanced my life in this new dimension to my call to be a pastor and teacher. This call to serve him in the church locally, regionally, nationally, and internationally has transformed my loss by giving me a renewed and expanded ministry in the church catholic, a good word meaning the global church. He has even given me a multitude of opportunities to help couples prepare for, cope with, and overcome the unique and profoundly challenging experience of the death of a spouse.

If you are a member of a church, you, too, never have to wonder about whether your life has meaning and purpose. You never have to sit around wondering what to do. There is work for you to do in the Kingdom of God. Talk with your pastor; there is more than enough to do to serve the Lord.

Volunteer especially in your church home and also in the community where you live. Find a need and meet it; you won't have to look far. You'll find many you can meet and many more will come to you. If you wonder where to start, begin with your pastor, another member of the church staff, or another church member. Since the church is the body of Christ and the main means through which God is redeeming his creation, consider starting by asking your pastor what needs you might be Providentially well-equipped to meet. Church leaders have access to a spiritual gifts inventory that will help you identify the gifts the Lord has given you, which with nurture provided by the church will enable you to serve God in ever more effective and rewarding ways.

In the community call the director of an organization that does important work with which you think you'd like to help. You'll feel wanted and sense that you are needed; further, over time you'll have the opportunity to witness for Christ. And thank God for the opportunity you are given and the many blessings you'll experience in engaging that mission.

As you grow stronger, consider sharing your experiences with others to help them come through difficult challenges life presents, especially as you help them understand how Christ has helped you. If you like to write, establish a blog. If writing doesn't come as easily as you'd like, or to start writing, use one of the social media outlets such as Facebook. When you want to graduate to a blog, use Facebook, Twitter, and other media to help market it.

At the same time let's thank God the Father for the good we see all around and within us. Right now thank him for at least one person or matter you value, cherish, and count as good—and thank him that you can see how he is blessing you constantly in this or these and in countless other ways in these expressions of his love for you that have come from his caring hand.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What can you and your spouse do to strengthen your marriage that will bless you both now and in the future when you may need to part due to death?
2. What can you tell your loved ones, friends, and others that will enable them to effectively prepare for the time when they likely will lose a spouse?
3. How can you best develop your relationship with God?
4. How can you see God's presence in your life each day? Begin with citing with you see as good. (James 1:17)
5. What can you do to pray more meaningfully?
6. Cite at least three passages from God's Word that give comfort throughout life and especially in times of great difficulty.
7. If you are a caregiver, what can you do to help your spouse or another loved one cope with the challenges of his or her circumstances and prepare for the rest of eternity?
8. How can you "be filled with the Spirit?" (Ephesians 5:18)
9. How does thanking God not only in but for everything help cope with and overcome grief and other difficulties in life?

10. After losing a spouse, what else can you do, and what can you suggest others do, to heal, to overcome sadness, and to prepare to function well, serving God most effectively, for the rest of your life here on earth?