

TRACKS OF A
FELLOW STRUGGLER



John R. Claypool

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Living and Growing through Grief



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*To
Laura Lue*

*a beautiful child
and
in the end
a brave one*



Contents

FOREWORD BY WAYNE E. OATES	ix
PREFACE	xiii
PREFACE TO REVISED EDITION	xix
CHAPTER ONE The Basis of Hope	1
CHAPTER TWO Strength Not to Faint	23
CHAPTER THREE Life Is Gift	45
CHAPTER FOUR Learning to Handle Grief	67
AUTHOR	90

Foreword

The element of testimony, long strangely silent in the pulpits of America, has suddenly sprung into full intensity in the preaching of John Claypool. To him preaching has long ceased to be the making of pretty, neatly trimmed religious speeches remembered more for their entertainment value and their clever phrase-making than for their declaration of the whole counsel of *God*. Preaching for John Claypool is the disciplined confession of the preacher of his and his people's travail and celebration in conversation with *God* on a face-to-face basis—questions, complaints, agonies, ecstasies, and all.

The contents of this book are records of the prophetic utterance of John Claypool as he spoke with the congregation

of the Crescent Hill Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky, of his terror, grief, loss, comfort, and consecration in the face of the death of his ten-year-old child, Laura Lue.

I participated in this community of suffering, not as a member of the church, but as a member of the immediate community of which the church is a part, and as students of mine served as chaplains on the staff of the hospital where she suffered her fatal illness. And I listened while physicians alongside of whom I worked in the hospitals of the community recounted in awestruck terms their experience of having heard these sermons. They gave thanks for the way in which John Claypool made them acutely aware of the presence of God as well as the dark mysteries of the shrouds of grief.

In a different way I myself was facing during the same time span the imminent possibility of the death of one of my sons. He fought for a year in some of the bloodiest engagements of the Vietnam War as a machinegunner on a Navy river assault boat. I was spared having to see my son die, because he came home alive, unscarred, and mentally strong. The fact that he is alive and Laura Lue is dead

FOREWORD

perplexes me with the alternatives, among others, of fatalism, luck, being specially favored by God. I have had to conclude that in the instance either of death or of life, nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Grief slams us in the face with the perils of idolatry of those we have tenderly cared for, strongly defended, and sacrificially provided for as parents.

Yet, in John Claypool's sermons the crystal clarity of the supremacy of our loving worship of the Lord Jesus Christ moves through the darkness to give us strength just when we least expect it. Shining through John Claypool's sermon "Life Is Gift" is the deep meaning of charisma—a word that is being badly mauled with distortion today—as the sense of awe, gratitude, and dedicated being that comes from being redeemed from destruction to creativity. "The Basis of Hope" is in God as we become disciples, learners, students of the handling of grief.

This is the stuff of which authentic John Claypool witnesses to his people and to you and to me as we read and reread this book.

WAYNE E. GATES

Preface

This little book reflects my own encounter with the realities of terminal illness and death and the grief that follows.

It is written from the inside of events, not the outside. For almost two decades, I had served as a pastor and often participated in the drama of suffering and death, but it was always happening to someone else. I could sympathize, but never really empathize. However, no one can live on this earth very long without being initiated into the fraternity of the bereaved. The Darkness moved closer and closer into the circle of my being while I sat beside my father-in-law's bed as he died. Then shortly afterwards it neared again when the wife of one of my closest friends slipped in the Mystery. Yet it was not until part of my own flesh

and blood—my eight-year-old daughter, Laura Lue—was diagnosed with acute leukemia that “my time came” and I was thrust inside the trauma of living with and through the mystery of dying.

Three of the four sermons on the following pages were born out of this experience. Laura Lue lived eighteen months and ten days from the time of diagnosis, just a shade longer than the national average for leukemia at that time. During those months I shared these sermons with the Crescent Hill Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky—the first one eleven days after we first learned of the disease, a second after her first major relapse some nine months later, and the third several weeks after she had died. The last sermon was preached in Broadway Baptist Church in Fort Worth, Texas, some three years later and represents a reflective overview of the whole grief process. These sermonic efforts constitute the main part of the book, although I have tried to sketch in the background events that formed the setting of each of the sharings.

As one would expect, sermons of this nature evoked a variety of response. Some people were frankly offended at the notes of ambiguity and anger that I openly acknowl-

P R E F A C E

edged. They obviously felt that preachers were to deal with “answers” and not “questions.” One seminary professor even murmured that the third sermon bordered on heresy. At that same time, many other people acknowledged being helped by some, if not all, of these words.

In the four years since this experience, I have had numerous requests for copies of these sermons to share with other sufferers, and many indications of their fruitfulness. It is on the strength of these responses that I have moved to share them more widely in this form.

It has taken this long to get to the place I could handle this material without overwhelming pain. Just like a broken leg, a broken heart heals slowly and cannot stand much touching right after the break. Then, too, I needed a while to see for myself how things would “live out” after the silence of death became a permanent part of my ongoing. What I said in the extremes of the agony was as true as I knew how to say it at that time, but I needed to see how well such insight stood up under further living. I am now willing to affirm that the ground that sustained me then is still firm enough to support the weight of life. I am more convinced than ever that the hope of biblical religion is authentic vision and realistic perspective.

There is no way to acknowledge fully the many human sources that were used by the Mystery to make this pilgrimage what it was for me. At the intellectual level, two writers bequeathed great gifts of insight—George A. Buttrick in his volume *God, Pain, and Evil* and Gerhard Von Rad in his commentary on *Genesis*. The congregation of the Crescent Hill Church in Louisville carried our whole family through this valley with unbelievable tenderness and support, and will remain forever an affectionate part of our lives. My staff colleagues at that time—Howard Hovde, Temp Sparkman, Arnold Epley, Wendell Brigance, and Bill Amos—”took up the slack” for me again and again and were of great individual support. So were the two physicians who tried so heroically to win the battle—Owen Ogden and Donald Kmetz. My special friend and confidant, William E. Hull, also helped me tremendously by filling the pulpit on several occasions when I could not preach and by speaking so movingly of “The Sound of Silence” at Laura Lue’s funeral. My family was also of great support. Most of all, however, I was helped by my only other child, my son, Rowan, who steadfastly called me on to life and away from a preoccupation with the tomb.

P R E F A C E

In a conversation soon after the initial diagnosis, Temp Sparkman said, in essence: “Those of us who have not been there wonder what it is like out there in the Darkness. Can you tell us?” The answer is, of course, yes and no. I can only share the glimpse of things that came to me from my particular way of looking. These words make no attempt to say everything for everyone. They represent the most important things I learned down where the valley is dark but where there also is light on beyond and out ahead.

Since eventually we all become “persons of sorrow, acquainted with grief,” I hope these tracks of a fellow struggler will furnish companionship and hope for you.

JOHN R. CLAYPOOL

Preface to Revised Edition

It has been almost twenty-seven years now since that hot Wednesday afternoon when I first learned that Laura Lue had acute lymphatic leukemia. It has been just a little over twenty-five years now since that snowy Saturday afternoon when she breathed her last breath and set out on a journey on which I could not accompany her. It has been almost twenty-one years now since this little volume was first published.

Much has happened to everything in these intervening years. Over a million copies of *Tracks* have found their way to all sort of grieving souls, and I myself have learned enormously from the thousands of interactions—through

letters, phone calls, and personal encounters—that this little book evoked. I have been enriched immeasurably by the other “fellow strugglers” who have shared with me something of their journeys “through the valley of the shadow of grief.”

When the editor of Word Publishers decided not to continue to print *Tracks*, I was saddened a bit, but not totally surprised, for twenty years is a long time for any book to stay in print, and even the best of publishing houses has to balance economic concerns with those of ministry. Part of me thought perhaps it was time “to bury” this manuscript as long ago I had to bury Laura Lue’s body, but another part of me decided to explore the possibility of “new life beyond the old one.” This impulse led me to two dear friends—Caroline and Fisher Humphreys—who with the colleagues at Insight Press have been in the business a long time of giving birth to worthwhile writing endeavors and “resurrecting” manuscripts which in their judgment can continue to provide blessing. I was filled with gladness when they agreed to publish a new edition of *Tracks*, and this preface to the volume you now hold in your hands is one way of expressing my profound gratitude.

P R E F A C E T O R E V I S E D E D I T I O N

This edition is basically the same work that was first published in 1974. I have made references to gender more inclusive in keeping with the times, but otherwise, the content is the same.

My hope now is that these words will somehow provide perspective and understanding for those who have become “persons of sorrow, acquainted with grief.” There are no experts in this field, for we all grieve in our own unique ways. However, there can be helpful exchanges between distinct individuals, and that is the shape of these sharings. Someone once said: “you alone can do your grief work, but you do not have to do it alone.” I believe this is true. While I cannot do your grieving for you or you for me, we can be with each other in honest and tender companionship.

May this be the case with the words that follow, and may you find added courage in the realization that you are not alone.

Brave, brave journey—

JOHN R. CLAYPOOL

February, 1995