



Buried Dreams

*From Devastating Loss to
Unimaginable Hope*

LINDSEY R. DENNIS

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ONE

THE DEATH OF DREAMS

*One thing I know,
God's story never ends with ashes.
Nothing is for nothing.*

—Elisabeth Elliot

Our car slowly made its way over the bumpy cobblestone road, canopied by Spanish moss dangling from giant oak trees above, as we passed through the open iron gates.

The road quickly became smooth as we entered the cemetery, but my heart was anything but smooth. We drove past the small rolling hills full of gravesites and up to the top of the little hill in the middle of all the others. There, the tiny white casket with the shell of the body of our firstborn daughter rested.

Earlier in the morning, I sat on our worn chair in the living room of our small second-floor apartment. I looked up at my husband, Kevin, and with weary eyes asked what I realized he would not be able to answer:

“This is the last hardest thing we have to do, right?”

I meant “ever.”

BURIED DREAMS

Bury our firstborn daughter. We won't ever have to do anything harder than this? Of course, he wouldn't answer the way I hoped he would. He did not hold all knowledge of the future. But that morning, I really wanted him to.

"I don't know," was his response, as he looked at me with kind and knowing eyes.

"But this is the last hardest thing we have to do with our daughter."

His response was clearly not the comfort I was hoping for. His words were void of the security I desired. I wanted to hold onto a hope that our circumstances would never be this hard again. I wanted the surety that God would never ask us to bury another child. Unfortunately that kind of hope is elusive and unstable. For as much as I like to think I can control my circumstances, they are ever-changing and unpredictable. We cannot hope in our circumstances but in the One who is Lord over our circumstances. Easier said than done, right?

Over the course of my life there had been many pivotal moments where I had been brutally awakened to the reality that my hope was in what God would do for me and not in God alone. I would sing, "You are my only hope" from the comfort of my seat on an average Sunday morning. But did I really believe it? Would this hope that would grip me in moments fade away as my day and the week went on? What did Paul mean when he said we have a hope that doesn't disappoint when life can be full of such brutal disappointments (Romans 5:5)?

You never expect to bury your dream. But it happens to us all. The day comes and we are paralyzed, staring down at what we never thought could be written into our story.

Throughout our lives there are many circumstances where our hope must be reoriented and woven deeper in our hearts. In singleness, in

broken relationships, in unmet expectations, in career uncertainty, and now, for me, in the death of our precious child.



Twenty-two weeks earlier, this new season had begun. Kevin and I had just found out at my twenty-week ultrasound the child I was carrying had a severe, life-limiting condition and would not live long once born. There would be no cure or treatment. And it began a stunning unraveling of our dreams for the child we carried, of our hopes for our family and the future.

And though we were overwhelmed with grief, Kevin and I chose to carry her to term. Her short life captivated the hearts of hundreds and then thousands as a community gathered around us cherishing and celebrating each day she grew in my womb.

Stunned at the magnitude of love that poured out for a child yet to be born, there were no hearts so captivated by love and changed by her life than her daddy's and mine. Those months were rich and full of so many conflicting emotions. There was so much joy in her life amid the many tears that fell in the brutal anticipation of her death.

After forty-two weeks and two days, our firstborn daughter, Sophia Kyla Dennis, entered the world. She arrived with arms stretched wide and the sweetest cries I had ever heard. I delighted in every second she was in my arms.

But how would I bury this child I loved and had so many dreams and hopes for? I did my best not to think of what that day would be like. My heart grew weak even as I tried to anticipate how God would enable us to survive that day.

For no one can prepare you for burying your child, even when you know it is coming. And no one can prepare you for what it will be like to stand in front of a tiny casket and embrace the reality that this child you bore and held and loved would never be in your arms again this side of heaven.

BURIED DREAMS

You never expect to bury your dream.

But it happens to us all. The day comes and we are paralyzed, staring down at what we never thought could be written into our story. Pain and tragedy, we realize, are a part of life, but somehow it can appear as though the unexpected will only happen to those around us, not to us.

You didn't think you'd be thirty and single, be unemployed, struggle with infertility, lose a loved one so young, or maybe like me, you never thought you'd have to bury your child. That wasn't in my plans or the story I had dreamed of for my life. But it would be those very places of pain, disappointment, and buried dreams that would become the fertile soil for the hope that doesn't disappoint to rise in my soul.



As Kevin and I pulled up to the gravesite, several friends gathered around our car. I didn't want to be there. I didn't want my eyes to meet theirs because somehow it made the day a little more real, as if it was indeed all true. I had carried a beautiful baby girl. Her hiccups and kicks had kept me from sleeping and reminded me she was still alive. Hundreds of people helped Kevin and me celebrate her life and make incredible memories with her in the womb. I heard her breathe, held her in my arms, and listened to her sweet cries.

I wanted to relive every moment I had with my little girl as truth but not the last part. Not the part where I said goodbye to her little shell of a body, and not the part where I stood there about to bury her in the ground. This couldn't possibly be the story God had asked me to walk.

That day it seemed as if my story, her story had ended in ashes. In those moments I had forgotten all that God had done in the previous twenty-two weeks. How He had used His people to lift my weary arms and help me celebrate Sophie's short life. I had forgotten the laughter and joy He had brought in the midst of the tears. I wasn't able to see in those moments of such pain, the depth of His goodness and hope He had woven into my heart as I wrestled with this chapter He had written into my story.

In moments where the sorrow of life is often overwhelming, it is easy to lose sight of any goodness beyond the pain. In the months that followed, God drew me back to the aspects of His character He had been rooting in my heart. But on this brutal day when I buried my firstborn daughter, I needed a fresh encounter of hope. It seems daily we need a fresh encounter and reminder of the hope we have. We forget so easily.

It's easier to dwell on the shattered dreams, the unmet expectations, all it appears we've lost and miss the reality that the God who holds the world on its axis holds us in the palm of His hand. We can't see in the loneliness of our grief that those who gather around us in our pain are a reflection of His deep love for us when His love feels far away.

Sitting in the car at the gravesite, fighting to not dwell on my own shattered dreams, a silent prayer rose in my heart as Kevin and I prepared to face the inevitable.

"An infusion of hope today, Lord. Someone please offer me hope because I can't see beyond my pain right now."

Suddenly, I'd never seen a more beautiful casket. I'm not sure I would have ever used the words *beautiful* and *casket* in the same sentence. It was a small glimpse of redemption now and redemption to come when the Savior breathes life into every broken and dying piece of our heart. It's what He does. It's what He came to do—a gentle reminder that there is no pain so deep that our God cannot redeem.

My sunglasses on, my head hung down in despair, unrelenting tears a slow and steady stream on my cheeks, and the pain just hanging in the air, I slowly stepped out of the car.

BURIED DREAMS

A few steps later my pastor, Renaut Van Der Riet, was by my side, a comforting smile on his face and an answer to my prayer on his lips.

Tall (taller than Kevin, which is quite tall since my husband is 6'4"), with dark hair and a slight South African accent, he had a commanding and comforting presence. Kevin and I met with him often throughout our journey with Sophie and always walked out of his office with lightness in our step, as if we had just been asked to be a part of the most beautiful and redemptive story. I couldn't wrap my mind around how he did it, but he had a way of breathing the hope of Christ into the darkest moments. Today was no different.

"I wish we were not here today, but I have to tell you as I was driving over I became so excited for today. Not for what today is, but for how God may speak to you both and lift our eyes to something greater," he said with joy and hope written on his face I wished was written on mine.

"Excited for the day?" He was the only one who could get away with such words. And only God had heard the prayer I had prayed and answered in such a profound way. Someone to offer me the hope that God would do something in my heart and lift my eyes to the Anchor for my soul I desperately needed as the weight of my grief was about to swallow me whole.

The words Renaut spoke at the gravesite that day held the hope and promise of heaven, as ten of our close family and friends sat underneath a small green tent. Colorful flowers cascaded over tall white stands on either side of Sophie's little casket, where a large bouquet of pink, blue, white, purple, and orange balloons was tied to a chair and reaching for the bright blue sky above.

Renaut gave a picture of the glorious future when all will be made new and the sorrows in this life will make the joy of heaven sweeter. Smiles began to be mixed with tears as my eyes were turned heavenward.

After Renaut spoke, Kevin and I gathered around Sophie's little white casket that, to be honest, was quite ugly. I felt bad about that. Fortunately

we had brought pink and blue paint so Kevin and I could put our handprints on top of it, filling it with color and life. We knelt beside it, painting each of our hands and then pressing those messy colorful palms onto the top of her little casket.

We laughed at the mess of it all, the paint all over our fingers, the imperfect handprints just a few inches from where our daughter's little body lay. I think Sophie would have liked that.

We placed butterfly stickers, each filled with short notes to Sophie from family and friends, all over that ugly little casket, transforming it into a beautiful sea of love written in color.

Suddenly, I'd never seen a more beautiful casket. I'm not sure I would have ever used the words *beautiful* and *casket* in the same sentence. It was a small glimpse of redemption now and redemption to come when the Savior breathes life into every broken and dying piece of our heart. It's what He does. It's what He came to do—a gentle reminder that there is no pain so deep that our God cannot redeem.

The prophet Isaiah testifies to this promise of redemption, pointing us to the one who would come: "To comfort all who mourn; to grant to those who mourn in Zion—to give them a beautiful headdress instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit; that they may be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that he may be glorified" (Isaiah 61:2-3 ESV).

The savior God's people were hoping would come would display all the beauty Isaiah spoke of, and this is now our Savior who has come. His promise of restoration is still playing out in the hearts of countless men and women who come to call Him their Savior too.

His name is Jesus, and our journey with Sophie was just the beginning of knowing with greater depth and awe the One that makes beauty out of ashes. He was the One whose promise of restoration was being played out in my life in unseen and unexpected ways.

I imagine you feel it, too, in your own buried dreams, in learning how to adjust to a life where what you'd hoped it would include is missing—in learning how to embrace and live with the often-daily tension of the joy and pain that now exists.

We gathered around Sophie's casket, me in a flowing white dress covered in butterflies, Kevin in a baby blue shirt and khaki pants, my mom and several other friends clothed in color. Arm in arm we sang through our sorrow the words in that great old hymn "How Great Thou Art." The lyrics point to the splendor of our God, the hope of the cross, and the hope of the day when Christ comes and we are taken to our true home. And that day we will see with eyes wide open and full clarity the greatness of our God in all His glory and splendor as we sing, "My Savior God, to Thee, How great thou art."

Hope filled my heart as I stood there and longed for the day when all would be made new. It was as if I understood the words to those lyrics for the first time. Unspeakable joy in the midst of my tears at the mere thought of what that day would be like—to see Jesus face-to-face, to see my daughter, for all this pain to be redeemed. Her life and now death were giving me a deeper experience of joy—joy not apart from my tears but enhanced because of my tears.

At that time, I did not know how many more tears would still fall, how much joy would seem to be shrouded by mystery, and how much more grief we would bear in that coming year.

Fourteen months later Kevin and I would be standing there again, next to the headstone of our first daughter, with the little casket of our second daughter before us, about to bury her as well. It would be another devastating goodbye. And my dreams for motherhood, for how my life would unfold, would come to a crashing halt.

Buried.

Two daughters in the ground.

How could it be? The depth to which my dreams died the day I stood at the gravesite for a second time cannot be put into words. What hope could rise from not one but two graves?

These precious dreams that I had for my life had not only been unrealized but utterly shattered right before my eyes. And I felt as if God Himself had little concern for the devastation such loss would leave. How much pain can the soul endure? How much light can break through layer upon layer of darkness? When will the night end? When will the dawn of hope arise? What beauty could rise from these ashes?



If I told you that this story you are about to read will be an unpacking of everything I have just written above, you would rightfully conclude that what you are about to read is filled with devastating loss and unbearable heartbreak. These chapters in my story are very much a sad story, but they are also so much more than a sad story. For the sadness has revealed the joy, and the grave has displayed the resurrection hope we were created for, promised, and given.

Our culture likes to categorize stories—happy or sad, joyful or painful. It seems we are uncomfortable living in the tension of the joy and the ache our stories, and ultimately this world, hold. When faced with tragedy, this is what begins to take place in the heart of the one in pain. There is a constant collision of joy and pain. But truth be told, even without what we would define as tragedy in our lives, we all ache in some way for the things in our lives that are not what we thought they would be, that are not as we know they should be.

I imagine you feel it, too, in your own buried dreams, in learning how to adjust to a life where what you'd hoped it would include is missing—in learning how to embrace and live with the often-daily tension of the joy and pain that now exists.

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And it is in these places of tension where transformation has begun in my life.

For in between all the bottles of tears I have filled, in between each buried dream, in between all of the astounding shattering of my soul, there has been hope—hope that has indeed arisen in the darkness. Hope that has been forged in the very midst of my deep pain. Hope that breaks through the darkness and leads to joy and peace in ways that only darkness can reveal, because of the unlikely and unexpected companions of sorrow and suffering.

It seems a strange path, to be taken through
the wilderness into the darkness and be
given the companions of Sorrow and Suffer-
ing as part of the way to find the places our
hearts long for and ultimately the person our
hearts long for.

One of my favorite books is an allegory by Hannah Hurnard titled *Hinds' Feet on High Places*. It has been a beautiful picture for me of the strange ways that God allows sorrow and suffering to be pathways to know the greatness of His love and hope more fully.

In her book, Hurnard tells the story of a young girl named Much-Afraid who is called by the Good Shepherd to go to the High Places where fear is transformed by love, and the Good Shepherd turns her weakness into strength.

It is an allegory inspired by the words of the prophet Habakkuk, a little book toward the end of the Old Testament, where the prophet makes the bold declaration amid stunning sorrow he sees and experiences: “Yet I will exult in the LORD, I will rejoice in the God of my salvation. The Lord GOD is my strength, and He has made my feet like hinds’ feet, and makes me walk on my high places” (Habakkuk 3:18-19).

In Hurnard's book, Much-Afraid is struggling with her own losses. She is lame in one leg and tormented daily by her relatives. She desires to go to the High Places with the Good Shepherd, but fear runs deep as she anticipates the dangers involved in leaving her home.

Suffering is never wasted. It has purpose and is an integral and, yes, even a necessary part of the journey of a believer to taste the fullness of the joy of Christ.

Can she trust the Good Shepherd to take her there without harm?

As she sheepishly and slowly learns to follow Him, much to her dismay, He gives her the companions of Sorrow and Suffering. Upon hearing the names of her new companions, she exclaims:

"I can't go with them," she gasped. "I can't! I can't! O my Lord Shepherd, why do You do this to me? How can I travel in their company? It is more than I can bear. You tell me that the mountain way itself is so steep and difficult that I cannot climb it alone. Then why, oh why, must you make Sorrow and Suffering my companions? Couldn't You have given Joy and Peace to go with me, to strengthen me and encourage me and help me on the difficult way? I never thought You would do this to me!" And she burst into tears.¹

This was much like my response to God as I walked through carrying two little girls, loving, cherishing, and celebrating them for nine months in the womb, only to say goodbye too quickly.

I never thought you would do this to me! my heart also exclaimed to my Good Shepherd. *How could this be the way to know You, Lord?*

Sorrow and Suffering had become my companions, too, and I could not have known—much like Much-Afraid—how they would become the

way in which my heart would be carried to the High Places. I, too, would learn to walk on the heights and see Sorrow and Suffering transformed into Joy and Peace.

It seems a strange path, to be taken through the wilderness into the darkness and be given the companions of Sorrow and Suffering as part of the way to find the places our hearts long for and ultimately the person our hearts long for. Paul speaks often of this in the New Testament. To the believers in Rome he says, “we can be full of joy here and now even in our trials and troubles. Taken in the right spirit these very things will give us patient endurance; this in turn will develop a mature character, and a character of this sort produces a steady hope, a hope that will never disappoint us” (Romans 5:3-5 PHILLIPS).

How could this be true when I feel so utterly disappointed? What is the hope that Paul speaks of that can only be found through the progression of suffering, endurance, character, and hope? Paul speaks of these truths again to the Corinthians: “For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal” (2 Corinthians 4:17-18).

Light. Momentary.

Surely the affliction and suffering I’ve experienced, watched others experience, and perhaps you have experienced would not be described that way. And yet, here is how Paul describes it. There was no way to get away from it. These words he chose were not a mistake. For they were the very words of God spoken through Paul.

And when I looked up, when I looked at unseen things, when I looked at my circumstances through the lens of God and eternity, I observed something different altogether. For God was at work in the darkest moments of my life, doing what only He was able to do to draw my heart to the reality of His glory, His love, and His worthiness of my life. Suffering is never

wasted. It has purpose and is an integral and, yes, even a necessary part of the journey of a believer to taste the fullness of the joy of Christ.

Jesus says as He's preparing his followers for his death, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (John 12:24).

Death for life. Life in death. It's the way of the Cross. It's the way of the people of the Cross, and it's the way to know the Person on the Cross.



Standing in front of that little colorful casket of my firstborn daughter, I wondered how God would meet me in the raw questions stirring inside of me. How would He continue to write hope on my heart?

It was hard to comprehend, in the midst of such agonizing loss, that the life and death of my first and then second daughter would lead to knowing the hope that doesn't disappoint. In fact, I could not have known then that as I learned to wrestle with God, my heart would become more settled in the mystery, more surrendered to Him as the author of the greatest story ever told—a story in which I have the privilege of playing just a small part.

This is my story of how the hope that doesn't disappoint was forged in my heart and how my companions of Sorrow and Suffering were being transformed into Joy and Peace. And it's a story of how, when death invaded my life, life invaded it more.

It is not a linear journey where pretty bows are tied along the way. Far from it. It's a journey of deep soul wrestling, of the constant mingling of joy and sorrow. It's a journey where often I thought I was moving backward instead of forward. A journey where God's grace has been sufficient for me as He has lifted my eyes above the sadness and heartache to give me small glimpses of His hand at work, writing hope and joy into the sad pages of our story. And it's a journey of discovering there is no amount of wavering faith that can undo the unwavering faithfulness of God in my life.

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Oh, how I hope you would discover this God in your own journey too. That you would discover the rich intimacy and love of the One who writes the kind of hope that doesn't disappoint into our hearts in the midst of our disappointment. It isn't often written on the mountaintops, or seasons of ease. But it is written in the very darkness where mist surrounds, His truths shrouded in mystery, and we cannot see what is ahead. These are the unexpected places hope has been forged more deeply in my heart. And I pray you would discover how these are the places where He is forging His hope more deeply in your heart, too, in the things you are waiting for, in your suffering, and as you surrender your story to Him.

For the days my dreams were buried in the ground were the days God was already at work bringing life into death. Of course, I couldn't see more than millisecond glimpses at the time. But they were there, and even if you cannot see it now, they are there in your story too.

Years earlier God was preparing my heart for these very chapters in my story, teaching me what true hope is and how we can be rooted in the hope of God more deeply. I thought they were just lessons for my young-adult years, but I discovered they were a deepening foundation for now.

FINDING HOPE WHEN FACED *with the* LOSS of YOUR MOST PRECIOUS DREAMS

At 20 weeks pregnant, Lindsey Dennis and her husband were told the child she was carrying would not live. Later, they were told the same news with her second pregnancy. In the face of crushing loss, they chose to celebrate both lives alongside a community, both local and online, of hundreds of thousands as she carried each child to her birth only to bury them 14 months apart.

This experience of infant loss revealed how sorrow and suffering can become instruments in God's hands, forging in us a great joy and hope.

In *Buried Dreams*, Dennis writes that we can never plan for the unexpected turns of this life, but we can reach for the One who is there with us in the loss.

"Lindsey has been to death's door with two newborn daughters and there has found the wonder of God's all sufficiency, His comforting presence, and the hope He alone can offer us in our darkest days. Adoration, worship, and peace arise in our hearts when we experience the good He can bring out of devastating loss."

—**Barbara Rainey**, author of *A Symphony in the Dark* and *Letters to My Daughters*, founder of Ever Thine Home



Lindsey R. Dennis has worked with Cru International for over 15 years. She has served in international locations as well as at universities in the States. Within a few weeks of learning the news of her first daughter's diagnosis, Dennis began to blog about her unfolding story of hope and loss. Within a couple of years, she had 1.5 million page views and 400,000 unique visitors. She lives in Orlando with her husband and son. You can read her blog at vaporandmist.com.



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