

## Transcript 168

Shea Houdmann

Welcome to the Got Questions podcast. On today's episode with me, Tim Challies. He's a writer, Blogger, book reviewer extraordinaire. We'll include some links where you can learn more about Tim and his ministry, his writing. So Tim, welcome to the show today.

Tim Challies

Thanks for having me.

Shea Houdmann

So today we're going to be discussing a question or topic that's near and dear to my heart and near and dear to Tim's as well, we'll be discussing ultimately trusting God in the midst of grief. Trust in God in the midst of sorrow. Trust in God when you don't understand what's going on, or why he's allowing something. So Tim, just start us off with your recent book, Seasons of Sorrow, what led you to write this book?

Tim Challies

Yeah, Seasons of Sorrow came out of a time of grief and loss in in my life, and in my family's life. My son Nick was a student at Bible College and Seminary, taking both concurrently. And in November of 2020, he was just out hanging out with some friends when he just very suddenly collapsed and his friends and a passing doctor and paramedics were unable to resuscitate him. And so he he went to be with the Lord. And so we we had no inkling this could happen. No warning this could happen. No idea. So to think it happened really and we were just left then very suddenly having this time of great sorrow, great grief thrust upon us. And I responded and really, the only way I know how, which is to write, I just write my way through the best of life and the the hardest things in life. And so eventually, all that writing over a couple of years became the book that's now Seasons of Sorrow.

Shea Houdmann

Describe for me like the the process of grief. When you secular psychologists have, there's all these stages of grief that each person goes through. But one thing about your books, you talk about how every person grieves differently. So maybe focused both on your experience and also maybe what you learned from studying the Bible on this issue, what what is the process of grief?

Tim Challies

I think it varies a little bit for everybody, but generally I think grief begins with a time of great sort of mind cloudiness. You just can't understand. You can't wrap your mind around what's happened. So emotions are high and reason is low and you're just really left grappling to even understand the reality of what has happened. And I think that's especially true when it's when the grief comes very quickly. We haven't had a chance to say goodbye, haven't seen somebody, you know, get sicker and sicker overtime when they're just taking very suddenly. And then overtime you you sort of reach I think the far side of greif which is a pressing on in life. You'll be sad about your losses for the rest of your life. You never get over grief, but you do learn to get on with life again. You've established a a new normal. And then

there's this period between the two. Between being completely incapacitated by your grief and then starting to go on with life again, even if it looks a little different than it used to. And that's the sort of processing of grief there. And as you said, that's that's very different from person to person. It's different for a husband than a wife, a mother than a father or a child for a parent, etcetera. Can vary by personality type. How well you knew the person and all these different factors. And so that just means I think, as when we look at as Christians we understand then I need to be very understanding with other people and not expect they'll process grief exactly like I do. I need to give them space to process in their own way.

Shea Houdmann

Probably my biggest experience with grief was the the death of my father when I was 16 years old, and compounding that was the fact that I had just very recently become a Christian, so I didn't have any of the biblical knowledge. I think I had a youth pastor who was disciplined to me and kind of stepped in as the father, big brother figure. But I didn't have this, a solid foundation in God's word. My relationship with Christ was very new. So I remember going through all the different like sort of a depression, sort of a rage. Something like an anger at God is like, why did you allow this? Going through different stages and ultimately, here I am, wow, 32 years later, still don't actually know why God allowed that. And probably in this life never will. But have come to terms with it. It's under learning to trust God even though I don't understand. I have some ideas now of why God may have, but ultimately I had to bring myself to that point of God I don't know why you allowed this, but I'm going to choose to trust you anyway because of how much I've learned from your word. How much I've seen you be faithful again and again and again. And based on the promises in your word, if I if I can trust you with the things I can see, I need to also trust you in the things I can't.

Shea Houdmann

And one of the things that really helped me is that even during that time, I was especially aware of God's presence with me. It was almost like a tangible. I'm not a big feeling type of guy. It's not like I feel God's presence all the time. But I remember even when I was like, going through the very angry time I was like, I could still feel God with me. And that's something that you mentioned in your book as well that the the presence of God. And so what are some ways that God made his presence with you through this process of grief that was especially helpful for you?

Tim Challies

Yeah. I just want to pick up on one thing you said, which is you learned to trust God even when you don't understand. Which sounds an awful lot like what we call faith, right? Which is if we were only believing in what was explicitly known, we wouldn't really be putting our faith in God. But he doesn't give us the answers. What he does give us is himself and a view of who he is. And so that's why it's so important to be men and women of the word, people are diving into the Bible to see who God is. And when we understand his character, then we can begin to interpret his actions in light of his character. And we know well God is good. Therefore he can't do anything bad. So somehow even that loss that's so sorrowful that that truly is grievous, it's still not evil. God's committed no evil in doing that or permitting that or or whatever. It's it's so important to understand who God is and that's really the best way to interpret our griefs in the light of his his character.

Tim Challies

Trying to remember what you asked me right about the presence of God. So we found God very present with us, and I mean, there's there's a sense in which we felt it perhaps whatever, that even really means. But I think what we we looked for were just real evidences of God's care and provision. And so if God was present with us, well, certainly He was present by his word, right? We could cling to those promises. God's present in his word in that way, so we look to the word and what it says. Look to the Bible and what it says, and we we hold to that. So God's present with us that way. Of course he's present through his Holy Spirit who dwells within us. And so he's always as close as close can be present with us. And then present through his people, right? And so God's people, his church. This is his body. This is the the way he now essentially incarnates himself in the world. And so if we're looking for God's presence, looking for God's care for us in this world, it's probably going to come through other Christians especially. And so as they reach out with words of help or deeds of love or whatever it is, I think we can accept that as coming from the Lord himself. He's motivated these people. He's empower these people. He's called these people to extend love to us. So we ought to receive their love as as his love.

Shea Houdmann

Well said. Bring up an excellent point in terms of the the body of Christ, other believers coming to you in, in, in a sense, being God's presence with you. With that said, I mean so GotQuestions.org is a ministry where we answer questions online to people submitting questions, to us people reading articles. We get a lot of questions from people who are struggling with grief and going through very difficult times. And we can't even do that personal touch and all we have is written writing where it lacks the emotion, it lacks the tone of voice, it lacks the body language. It lacks so many things. And it's it's really hard to do that well. But even in person, helping someone who's struggling with grief and sorrow can be incredibly difficult. And and in no sense am I do I want you to disparage some people, but a lot of Christians do grief counseling or grief care very poorly. So just maybe to help our listeners know what are some, it's hard to speak in universals, but what are some do nots in terms of trying to help someone dealing with grief and what are some things other believers did for you that actually were very helpful?

Tim Challies

Sure. So I would say it's better to do something than nothing. What you can and should not do is abandon people in their sorrows. In fact, I think you can outright sin against people if you fail to reach out in love to them. If they're part of your circle. You know, strangers, I'm not talking about that. But people, you know, people you love, it can be tempting to back away because you don't want to do the wrong thing. You don't want to say the wrong thing or you yourself are so grieved for your friend that you can't reach out. But take a take on the responsibility and take on the responsibility of love to reach out in some way. In the early days, people really are incapacitated, often by their grief. And so being able to help them with very normal, tangible physical needs can be really, really helpful. So just bringing food or offering to shop for them or drive their kids to school or clean their house, whatever they need, just making yourself available is hugely helpful. And then we have this huge advantage in Christians is we can bring the word of God to people. We can bring them words that God himself has given humanity, and nothing is more comforting than that. You know, we can say all sort of we can say other helpful things. We can say very unhelpful things, you know, while he's become a star in the sky or something like that, that maybe feel makes us feel better but has no basis in truth. But we as Christians can bring words that God himself has spoken. And so always come with Psalm 23 or come with Romans

8 or anything that can comfort people and help them. And just help them see that that God is good. Help them focus on who God is and how loving and kind and gracious and fatherly he is. Because again, if we're focusing on the character of God, we can now begin to interpret our circumstances in that light. We tend to do the opposite, right? We tend to let our circumstances change our view of God. And so this is a bad thing. Therefore, God himself must be bad to have allowed it. If we begin with God's character, then we can interpret the events that way in a much clearer view of what's actually happened and and who's behind it, and just how lovingly God is.

Shea Houdmann

I love your focus on being present and being with someone offering very simple things. I remember one time someone who's very close to me was going through a real time of grief and really, really struggling and I had never experienced anything even remotely similar to this. So for the most part I just kind of sat there with the person and talked to them as they're available, and I left feeling like a miserable failure. It's like, well, that was a complete waste of time, only to have that person call me the next day and say, Shea, it was just so nice to have someone there. Like you you weren't like preaching at me. You weren't. You didn't throw Romans 8:28 at me. Like way too early. Those sorts of things. And so it's like God uses some of those very simple things to encourage someone who is really struggling. You don't need to feel like I've got to solve all this person. I've got to help them understand everything about, like, no. Just be there. See if there's a need communicate and then attempt to meet that need.

Tim Challies

Yeah, I think our culture, 21st century Western culture is especially bad at this. And I think we used to have more patterns of what to do. It used to be intuitive to us what we do when somebody goes through a real grief or trauma. But I think we sort of let that go a little bit. We don't really know how to respond. Other cultures still have that embedded within them. So they know here's what you do when somebody has experienced a loss. But I think we we've really fallen behind in that way. And so we need to take it on then it's just our Christian duty of love toward others to to care for them as we're able. And and again I want to make clear there's there's circles around any one person, right? There's the really, there's his family. Then there's his close friends, and then there's his local church. And then strangers, not every stranger needs to come rushing in to see somebody. That could actually be unhelpful and offensive. But if you're in that close circle, and that's a, that's a friend or a a close acquaintance, then by all means reach out and do something.

Tim Challies

And and sorry, one more thing I wanted to say is I don't try and fix it. I think that's where we can go wrong is we can we want to go in and just make them feel better. But I think what you said sometimes just sitting with people in their sorrow can be the best thing. That's Job's friends they did best until they started talking right when they talked that they messed everything up. When they just sat in silence, everything was going fine. And we can bring words of comfort, but if we're just going to bring words of fixing it or moving past it, or getting on with it way too soon, then that that can be really hurtful and harmful.

Shea Houdmann

Right before you said that I was exactly was going through my mind is like Job's friends were doing so well until they opened their mouths. And now that doesn't mean sometimes sitting in silence is not what is needed, but the words need to be in the right time, in the right spirit. When the person is ready. Rather than OK, that's enough of that time for us to fix this. That's sort of add to it's often not helpful.

Tim Challies

Another thing I would want to say is for those who are on the the flip side of it, if you are the one who is grieving, you don't get a free pass on being sinful. Which is really hard to hear. But you will be tempted to sin in your grief. Satan's not going to just turn away and say, oh, he's having a hard time, I'm going to leave him be for a little bit. There will be temptations to sin in your grief, in your sorrow. And one of those temptations will be to be easily offended. And instead of hearing what someone says and taking whatever comfort you can, and assuming the best of that person and assuming the best about his motives, you can allow yourself to be too easily hurt. And you you can miss the blessing of what other people are saying and doing and choose to be offended instead. So it's a hard thing to hear, but when you're deep in grief, that that's the time as well to just commit to, to finding joy and accepting people's love as they offer it, even if it's not really what you need in that moment.

Shea Houdmann

One of the things I really enjoyed about Seasons of Sorrow is your focus on let me just ask the question. Then they will say a better. Like two-part question, what have you learned from your son's death? But also how does your son's life continue to impact you?

Tim Challies

I think I've learned a lot about the character of God. I keep coming back to that, but the loss of my son made me look at God anew. It made me take a really close look at him, a fresh look at him and say is God what he what I've always believed he is? Is God truly good? Is God truly kind? Is God truly purposeful in all he does? And so I could say for myself, and I'm sure my wife and girls would say the same, we've all emerged from this with a deeper confidence in God and a deeper love for God. We truly love him more now than we did before, because this, this tragedy has just caused us to rely on him all the more. To dig deeper into our relationship with him. And as we've done that we've we've become more in awe of him. This God who could have purposes so good and so far beyond our comprehension that they would involve taking somebody we love so much. But through that, just learning to bow our knee in submission to him and yeah, trusting that he is good. The second part of the question was.

Shea Houdmann

How do you continue to be impacted by your son's life?

Tim Challies

Yeah. Yeah. I think one of the main things is, I mean I'm I'm very proud of him. He left an unblemished legacy behind, which I think is is so sweet to have a short life but he used it well. And his friends remember him fondly, his fiancée, sisters they all remember him fondly as a, as a kind person. So he's left behind a legacy of good, which I think all of us hope to do, but sadly, a lot of us dropped the ball on the way. And then the other thing is Nick's death has really chased away my own fear of death. And so that's nothing Nick did. It's something God did, really, but it's just caused me to realize if Nick can

bravely go to heaven or if he can go to heaven without wavering, without faltering, then then so can I. And it's made me all the more eager to be in that place where he is.

Shea Houdmann

It's powerful. Often when we lose someone, our focus seems to be understandably so, on the loss, this person is no longer in my life, but even just remembering what that person represented and how that person impacted us. And especially as believers knowing that the person is he, he is not dead he is with the Lord, he is more alive now than he ever has been. Those sorts of things continue to be grateful and even help you overcome the grief, the sorrow, just trusting the Lord and also knowing that one, you'll see him again, but also just being grateful for the time that God gave you with him. And that is that can be powerful and that's often a focus that we get to, in a sense too slowly in the process of grief. But in no sense am I saying we need to rush to it, but it's it can be really powerful just to remember that, that the impact the person had is not ended by the fact of them no longer being in this world.

Tim Challies

No, absolutely. And it's it's such a blessing to to know there is a heaven and to really believe God's promises and to believe that Nick has not ceased to be, he's just ceased to be seen for for this time, separated from his body. But we do believe in the resurrection. And you know, through Christ we Christ has been resurrected as the the first fruits, right, that down payment on our own resurrection. So we look forward to that day and truly believe in it. And trust him for it.

Shea Houdmann

So you mentioned that Nick's death changed how you view death, so to speak. So how can we as believers, as followers of Christ, how should we live our lives in light of the reality of death?

Tim Challies

Well, I mean by facing the reality that we will die. And we're culturally we're afraid of death, we hide ourselves from death. We don't see it the way people would have when it was just more common right in front of their eyes. You know, there weren't hospices for people to go and die in. There weren't hospitals. It was just everything happened locally. We're we're very insulated from death. But we do need to from time to time and really on a regular basis, just consider death. Consider that we will die. And then we can work backward from there and say, am I living in a way where I'm ready to die? Is my am I trusting God? Am I living in a way so I would be expressing love to others in my death. You know by taking care of of my responsibilities in life, so I can leave behind a good legacy. And do I have the kind of character where when I'm gone, people would be able to remember me for for what I really want to be remembered by, not as a a wealthy person or a beautiful person, or a successful person, but a person who loved the Lord, a person who loved his family, a person who loved his church. All these things that that matter so much in the economy of God.

Shea Houdmann

Everything we've talked about so far today has been revolving around the the core question that I mentioned the very beginning, maybe in in conclusion, how would you answer the question? It's so broad and so many questions we get at Got Questions ultimately revolve around this question of how do I trust God even when I don't understand what's going on and why he's allowing it? How even

without any specifics, this is a sort of general, almost philosophical question. How do you answer that question?

Tim Challies

Yeah, I mean that again is literally what faith is. If God gave us everything, we wouldn't need faith. And so God calls us to trust in him even when we can't see and that that's literally just putting our faith in God. So if we look at who God is, we study the character of God. Then we can interpret his actions in light of his character. And that changes everything, because, as I said before, we're so tempted to do the opposite, to take our experiences or our circumstances as the main thing, and then to say I'm going to interpret God or change my understanding of God in light of these circumstances. And we simply can't do that. God's word is true, sure, infallible and inerrant. We go to the word that tells us who God is, what his character is like, how he relates to us as human beings, how he relates to us as his beloved children. And then we look at our circumstances in light of all. That and it, it utterly transforms them. We begin to see expressions of God's love, even in things that are hard. Or we begin to see God carrying his purposes out in us and through us. Not apart from what we've gone through, but exactly because of what we've gone through how God uses these things to carry out his purposes. Meanwhile, we have this great confidence and great hope that someday God will show us what he's been doing. God will show us himself, and he'll show us what he's been doing in the world all this time. And how we little, sinful, messy people like you and me have actually been able to play a part in this amazing thing that God's doing in this world and will give him all praise and all glory.

Shea Houdmann

Amen. Absolutely. This has been the Gap Questions podcast with Tim Challies, author of Seasons of Sorrow. We'll include some links to where this book and his other books can be purchased in the show notes for this episode on the description in YouTube in this video goes live and also at [podcast.gotquestions.org](http://podcast.gotquestions.org). So Tim, to conclude, how can our listeners learn more about you in the ministry God's called you to. And what's something you've got going on currently?

Tim Challies

Sure, the best thing is go to my site [Challies.com](http://Challies.com). That's sort of the portal to my blogs and my books and so on. What I've got going on this year is I'm traveling the world for a project called worship around the world where I'm going to 12 different countries and I'm worshipping with local churches in each of those countries. And just trying to observe how Christians are the same but different. How we worship the same God and hold the same doctrine and read the same Bible. And yet because we're inculturated beings, products of the circumstances which God has placed us, how we're also a little bit different. And so I'm making a study of those differences and we'll be presenting all that in a book and DVD that will come out in a couple of years. So really excited to be doing that and really honored to be able to travel the world and worship with God's people in many different places.

Shea Houdmann

That sounds fascinating. I mean, I've done enough traveling and I've had the tremendous experience of being in churches in different countries, in very different cultures. And it's so interesting that, like you said, it's the same but different, and you'll instantly experience the bond with the person you've never met. You don't speak the same language, but you know you're worshipping the same God is one thing,

but then seeing the beauty of how culture expresses itself in worship and in fellowship and so forth, it's powerful. I love this idea and I look forward to reading your next book. So, Tim Challies, thank you for joining me today. Thank you for going through some of these questions that we get at Got Questions, but based on your recent experience. And again, the book is Seasons of Sorrow, highly recommended. So Tim, thank you again for your time.

Tim Challies

Thank you.

Shea Houdmann

This has been the Got Questions Podcast seeking to answer the question, how can we trust even when we don't understand. Got questions? The Bible has answers and we'll help you find them.