

Loving Well in the Face of Loss: Preparing Foster Families for When a Child Leaves

Our Story

Jennifer and I met in Junior High in our church youth group. Early in high school we began dating. Although we didn't attend the same high school, we learned to make our relationship work—which would be helpful when we decided to attend different colleges. We quickly learned that a long-distance relationship was much harder than it seemed, but with God's grace, and Jennifer's, we made it through and were married in 2001.

Up to this point, everything had gone as planned, which reinforced my planning nature. As Jennifer began her teaching career, I started on a Master's degree in Counseling while working in a psychiatric clinic. The plan was in full swing—and the plan included waiting until I was done with school to start a family.

In 2004, as I approached graduation, we began trying to get pregnant. We were excited, but not overly-eager. However, we were “ahead” of most of our friends and it was quite a big deal to some. Early in 2005, I was hired into a position that would put my new Counseling degree into use training and evaluating foster and adoptive families. I found in this new position a way to put my calling to build strong families into practice and the satisfaction of protecting vulnerable children. Everything was right on track.

In 2007, after 2 full years of trying to start a family, we finally decided to go and see a specialist. Our plan was about to be derailed. But God's bigger plan was only beginning to be set into motion. As waves of emotions engulfed us, we made a choice to be a part of God's bigger plan, too.

Saying yes was easier than living it out, though. Our friends were starting their families with ease—becoming pregnant when they wanted, and having as many babies as they had planned. Couples gave birth to their second and third children while we still yearned for even the tiniest bit of good news for our family.

The **LONGING** was becoming intense. It intensified for Jennifer long before it did for me, but it was intense. I remember praying that God would give me the same passion for our family that Jennifer so naturally possessed. God blessed me with that passion—and I learned that while the longing provided a drive, it often felt like a curse.

Never would we have thought that we'd be infertile, never did we think that we'd develop a special relationship with doctors and nurses who tried relentless to help us get pregnant. Never did we think that we'd spend thousands of dollars on medical treatments and find that our family's ministry would include caring for other families yearning for children, too. The irony was that we were surrounded by foster care and adoption through my work all along the way—and God just wouldn't give us the freedom to go down that path.

So, after 13 intrauterine inseminations, we finally found ourselves moving forward with in-vitro fertilization.

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And, after years of hoping, longing, and waiting, we learned on August 7, 2009 that we were finally pregnant.

Hope had finally arrived. Joy was in abundance and God's provision surrounded us.

As we settled in to the plans, thoughts, fears, and worries that are common to most new parents, we relaxed into our new plans. Our new plans included **LOVING** our new child, anticipating our upcoming life as a family.

At 12 weeks into the pregnancy, we'd learn about another new plan. As we watched the image of our child appear on the sonogram screen, we quickly became aware that something was wrong—very wrong. In the middle of our baby's abdomen was a large black circle. The next day, a specialist would explain that our child's bladder would not release and that his abdomen was distended. The hope that had filled our spirits weeks prior disintegrated on October 9th when the doctor told us the our child would die.

Over the coming weeks, we would work with different specialists to understand our child's condition and to try and intervene. By Thanksgiving we had met with a third and final specialist who would help us to begin facing the reality that Jennifer would likely carry our son to full term, but that his life would not be sustainable after birth.

As excruciating as it felt to hear a doctor confirm our worst fears, it felt healthy to be able to aim our hearts toward reality. Even so, preparing our minds for the birth of a little boy that would not live was overwhelming. Jennifer was afraid, to say the least, of delivering a child who would quickly pass away, and I had no idea how I would be able to provide the support that she needed. The fears were intense and on our minds constantly.

On Thursday, January 7, 2010 I received a call from a stressed Jennifer who was feeling uncomfortable. Being late in the day, her doctor wanted her to come in to the hospital for observation. While there, it was determined that Jennifer was not in labor, but did have a UTI. Since they wanted to check on our son, we were fortunate to be able to hear his heart beating for almost 4 hours straight. Jennifer was released to go home, and she continued to feel very uncomfortable, but the doctor reassured that her painful bladder spasms would eventually subside.

Very early in the morning on Saturday, January 9, 2010, Jennifer determined that she was not having bladder spasms, but was actually in labor and very close to delivery. As we raced to the hospital in the four o'clock hour on the coldest day of the year, a calm overcame us both. We arrived at the hospital and met a nursing team, and our doctor, who would, literally, hold our hands through each step of what would come next.

At 7:59am on January 9, 2010 Hudson Parker Jones was born weighing 4 lbs 7.6 oz and measuring 15 ½ inches in length.

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Travis Jones, LPC

Development Director • Covenant Kids, Inc.

817.516.9100 • tjones@covenantkids.org • www.covenantkids.org

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We learned that our son had likely passed away late in the night on Thursday the 7th; we had listened to his heart beating for hours only minutes before he would pass away.

While we were surprised that our son was born at 26 weeks, and not full-term, and stillborn, rather than passing away soon after birth, the moments that we experienced that morning were written with God's clear handwriting and every moment seemed "just right."

Throughout the day, we held our son, talked to him, cried, laughed, and shared our son with our closest family and friends. At 5:00pm we faced the agonizing task of handing our son into the arms of the nurse that we take him to the morgue, and out of our arms, forever. **LOSING** our son, our dreams for him and for our family, and our control was devastating. At the same time, though our loss would seem to overtake our lives, our love for Hudson would grow and abound.

The overwhelming support from family and friends, and many who we didn't even know who contacted us to let us know that they were praying for our family, carried us through the weeks that would follow. Hudson's funeral was a beautiful time of worship and celebration, of sharing the testimony of God's faithfulness, even in times of tragedy, and of connecting with many who would lovingly support and care for us.

The weeks and months that followed Hudson's birth were a whirlwind of emotions, thoughts, fears, and feelings. Some days were great; some were quite messy; many were just a matter of "getting through." But, with the help of a support group, counseling, family, friends, and prayer, we began to feel like we were headed toward a life that would be our "new normal."

We knew that we had to keep doing whatever we could in order to move forward and keep **LIVING**. We knew that God's plan was not for our lives to come to a stop—we were certain that God had a purpose and a design for each and every single step of this journey.

We miss our son each and every day, we think of him all of the time, and we wish so badly that he were here with us today—but we can't live our life in a world of fantasy. So, we choose to embrace the reality; we choose to accept God's plan as somehow better than our own. We claim the truth of Jeremiah 29:11 and trust that our God has plans to prosper us and not to harm us, plans to give us a hope and a future. And, we know with confidence, that we will see our son again in Heaven, and we strive to live each day in a way that honors God and gives life to Hudson's legacy.

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What is Grief?

- Grief is a natural response to any loss.
- The grief process, on average, usually takes about 2 years.
- Five common stages of grief are: Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression and Acceptance
- Another model calls the stages: Shock, Reality, Reaction and Recovery
- It is important to recognize that we all grieve in different ways. Even though most people move through all of the common stages of grief, it can often look very different.
- Life won't just go on – even if Denial feels good
- John 16:33 (NIV) “I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”

Why prepare for Grief?

- We are not in control!
- James 4:13-15 (The Message) And now I have a word for you who brashly announce, "Today—at the latest, tomorrow—we're off to such and such a city for the year. We're going to start a business and make a lot of money." You don't know the first thing about tomorrow. You're nothing but a wisp of fog, catching a brief bit of sun before disappearing. Instead, make it a habit to say, "If the Master wills it and we're still alive, we'll do this or that."
- Choosing reality is healthy
- Grief is a process; an experience. Learning more about grief, talking about it, or just reflecting, is helpful, but it can't take place of allowing yourself to really feel the things that you feel and to truly live out and live through your grief. Healing takes place on an experiential level.

Things you can do for others

- Pray
- Say something
 - The worst thing to say is nothing!
 - It's okay to tell your grieving friend/relative that you don't know what to say.
 - Avoid clichés, even Christian clichés
- Share your condolences, thoughts, feelings, and encouragement
 - Send Cards, Letters, and Emails
 - Call or visit
 - Send Flowers
 - Don't stop! It's such a blessing to know that someone still cares 3, 6, and 9 months later.
- Don't forget your grieving loved one on birthdays, anniversaries, or special holidays
- Use the child's name
- Serve your grieving loved one
 - Bring food
 - Help out with household tasks
 - Offer to babysit to offer alone time
 - Serve through acts of kindness

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- Share inspiring and encouraging music
- Add your grieving friends to a prayer list
- Talk about the child and Ask questions about the child
- Share your feelings, be open and vulnerable
- Give a gift of remembrance
 - Jewelry
 - Figurines
 - Pictures
- Make a donation
 - To a charity of choice
 - Purchase Gideon Bibles in memory of the child
 - Purchase books for a church, school, or community library in memory of the child

Things you can do for yourself

- Journal
- Write a letter
 - To your lost child
 - To their future
 - To their birth family or adoptive family
- Connect with others who have shared a similar experience
- Read about grief and loss—there are many great books that will educate and encourage.
- Participate in Support Groups
- Participate in remembrance events
- Create a special ritual to remember your child
- Talk with others—don't hold in your thoughts and feelings
- Share what you feel and need with your friends and family
- Plant a tree or do something lasting to remember your child
- List your blessings or the ways that others have cared for you
- Meditate on the things that you can be grateful for and the ways that God has provided for you and your family
- Display items of memory and meaning
- Process your thoughts and feelings with a counselor
- Call your child by name
- Exercise
- Take care of yourself
- It's okay to have fun, to live and to enjoy life.

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Music

God has used music to minister to me in a profound way through my (our) own journey of waiting during our time of infertility and healing during our time of loss. These songs offer hope, some invoke emotions of sadness, and all of them help me to express my own feelings and faith, even if just through listening. In fact, I listen to some of these songs almost every day.

I hope that these songs may be a blessing in your life. Download them on iTunes, pick them up in a music store of Christian Book Store—do whatever you can to get these resources in your hands and support the artists that are lead by the Spirit to record songs of hope and healing.

These Songs were played/sung before and during Hudson's funeral service and have been some of the most powerful in my healing journey:

Song: **Glory Baby**
Artist: **Watermark**
Album: All Things New
Label/Year: Rockettown Records 2000

Song: **I Can Only Imagine**
Artist: **MercyMe**
Album: Almost There
Label/Year: MercyMe 2001

Song: **Bring The Rain**
Artist: **MercyMe**
Album: Coming Up to Breathe
Label/Year: MercyMe 2006

Song: **Amazing Grace (My Chains Are Gone)**
Artist: **Chris Tomlin**
Album: See The Morning
Label/Year: Sparrow Records/sixtepsrecords 2006

Song: **Broken Hallelujah**
Artist: **Mandisa**
Album: Freedom
Label/Year: Sparrow Records 2009

Song: **The Lord's Prayer**
Artist: **Shane Barnard & Shane Everett**
Album: Everything Is Different
Label/Year: Inpop Records 2009

Song: **Worthy Is The Lamb**
Artist: **Darlene Zschech**
Album: Extravagant Worship
Label/Year: Hillsong Music Australia 2002

Song: **Be Still and Know**
Artist: **Steven Curtis Chapman**
Album: Speechless
Label/Year: Sparrow Records 1999

Song: **I Will Carry You (Audrey's Song)**
Artist: **Selah**
Album: You Deliver Me
Label/Year: Curb Records 2009

Song: **Jesus Will Meet You There**
Artist: **Steven Curtis Chapman**
Album: Beauty Will Rise
Label/Year: Sparrow Records 2009

Song: **Our God Is In Control**
Artist: **Steven Curtis Chapman**
Album: Beauty Will Rise
Label/Year: Sparrow Records 2009

Song: **Unredeemed**
Artist: **Selah**
Album: You Deliver Me
Label/Year: Curb Records 2009

Song: **I Love You Lord**

Song: **Praise You In This Storm**

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Artist: **The Katinas**
Album: Lifestyle: a Worship Experience
Label/Year: Gotee Records 2002

Song: **Bika Mono Ve (Pass Me Not, O Gentle Savior) / It Is Well With My Soul**
Artist: **Selah**
Album: Greatest Hymns
Label/Year: Curb Productions 2005

Artist: **Casting Crowns**
Album: Lifesong
Label/Year: Reunion Records 2005

Song: **Hold Me Jesus**
Artist: **Big Daddy Weave**
Album: Every Time I Breathe
Label/Year: World Entertainment 2006

These Songs have been shared with us by friends, in times of worship, and some, just by accident. God uses them in unique ways to keep our eyes fixed upon Him, because He Is In Control!

Song: **A Mighty Fortress**
Artist: **Christy Nockels**
Album: Life Light Up
Label/Year: Sparrow Records 2009

Song: **I Will Lift My Eyes**
Artist: **Bebo Norman**
Album: Between the Dreaming and the Coming True
Label/Year: Essential Records 2006

Song: **Arms Open Wide (Live)**
Artist: **Hillsong United**
Album: Across the Earth: Tear Down the Walls (Live)
Label/Year: Hillsong Music Australia 2010

Song: **Lifesong**
Artist: **Casting Crowns**
Album: Lifesong
Label/Year: Reunion Records 2005

Song: **At The Cross**
Artist: **Hillsong**
Album: Mighty to Save (Live)
Label/Year: Hillsong Music Australia 2010

Song: **Our God**
Artist: **Chris Tomlin**
Album: Passion: Awakening
Label/Year: Sparrow Records 2010

Song: **Blessed Be Your Name**
Artist: **Matt Redman**
Album: Blessed Be Your Name – The Songs of Matt Redman, Vol. 1
Label/Year: Survivor Records 2005

Song: **Overcome**
Artist: **New Life Worship – Ross Parsley and Desperation Band**
Album: I Am Free – The Essential Collection (Live)
Label/Year: Integrity Media 2009

Song: **Desert Song (Live)**
Artist: **Hillsong United**
Album: Across the Earth: Tear Down the Walls (Live)
Label/Year: Hillsong Music Australia 2010
Song: **Everlasting God**

Song: **Still (Live)**
Artist: **Hillsong**
Album: Ultimate Worship: Hillsong (Live)
Label/Year: Hillsong Music Australia 2010

Song: **What Faith Can Do**

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Artist: **New Life Worship**
Album: My Savior Lives
Label/Year: Integrity Media 2006

Song: **Gratitude**
Artist: **Nichole Nordeman**
Album: Woven & Spun
Label/Year: Sparrow Records 2006

Song: **He's Always Been Faithful**
Artist: **Sara Groves**
Album: Conversations
Label/Year: Sponge Records 2000

Song: **Healer**
Artist: **Kari Jobe**
Album: Kari Jobe
Label/Year: Gateway Create Publishing 2009

Song: **Here in Your Presence (Live)**
Artist: **New Life Worship**
Album: I Am Free – The Essential Collection (Live)
Label/Year: Integrity Media 2009

Song: **I Give You To His Heart**
Artist: **Alison Krauss**
Album: A Hundred Miles or More: A Collection
Label/Year: Rounder Records 2007

Song: **I Still Believe**
Artist: **Jeremy Camp**
Album: Stay
Label/Year: BEC Recordings 2002

Artist: **Kutless**
Album: It Is Well
Label/Year: BEC Recordings 2009

Song: **While I'm Waiting**
Artist: **John Waller**
Album: The Blessing
Label/Year: Reunion Records 2007

Song: **Who Am I**
Artist: **Casting Crowns**
Album: Casting Crowns
Label/Year: Reunion Records 2003

Song: **You Are God Alone (Not a God)**
Artist: **Phillips, Craig & Dean**
Album: Let the Worshippers Arise
Label/Year: INO Records 2004

Song: **You're Not Shaken**
Artist: **Phil Stacey**
Album: Into the Light
Label/Year: Provident Label Group 2009

Song: **Your Grace Still Amazes Me**
Artist: **Phillips, Craig & Dean**
Album: Phillips, Craig & Dean Ultimate Collection
Label/Year: Sparrow Records 2006

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Who have you lost?

- What helped you?
- What didn't help?
- What would have helped more?
- How is your grief different from that of your spouse or close friends/family?

Who might you lose?

- How can you prepare for loss?
- What do you think would help you prepare?
- What can you do, now, to prepare for your loss?

What have your children lost?

- How does your child grieve?
- What helps them?
- What might help them to grieve even more productively?

2 Corinthians 1:3-4 (NIV) Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.