



The Last Lesson My Father Taught Me

By Wayne Jacobsen

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My dad was one of my greatest heroes. Not only was he a decorated World War II veteran, who was wounded on the front in France, but he was throughout my life a man of great integrity and generosity. What he taught me about who God is and how to follow him, he did far less by his words than his example.

He was married to my mom for sixty-six years until she passed away. He had four sons and worked hard in his own vineyard to provide for his family. In addition, he was an active leader in whatever congregation he attended and helped many people find Jesus in dark and painful times. His passion for Jesus was infectious and few people I ever knew were more devoted, kind, and discerning.

So, the day two years ago when he turned on me without warning, making absurd accusations, shocked me to my core. Others close to him had manipulated his fears and vulnerability to convince him I was obstructing his medical care in an attempt to take control of him and his money.

Those words are excruciating to write. If you've heard me talk about my father, you know the deep regard I have for him. It was heart-breaking when he cut me off, unwilling to find out if any of the accusations he leveled at me were even true. It destroyed a lifelong friendship and I'm sharing this story now, not to expose the darker side of my family, but to encourage others who find themselves in similar situations. I find myself sitting with people every week who have endured similar things in their own family.

My dad has since passed away. Now that he knows what's true without feeling any shame, I have no doubt he would want this story shared as well, not just for what it taught me, but also as a cautionary tale for those who think they are beyond delusion. Jesus warned us that at the end of this age, conflict would separate families. He even expressed his concern that darkness would be so strong that if the days weren't cut short, even the elect would be deceived.

I consider my dad one of the elect. I know of no one who gave his life more fully to Jesus, who never made a dime from his service. Yet, no matter how closely any of us walk with God, we are not immune from being tricked by darkness and believing things that aren't true.

This article is not about my father's betrayal, but how God can redeem even the unmerited rejection of people we deeply love and respect. It happened to Jesus and, in the polarized climate we live in, it will happen to many others. Nothing has taught me more about God and how his kingdom works than walking with him through unmerited rejection. I assume this was the last lesson Jesus wanted me to learn from my dad, though I doubt he volunteered for it. Not only did it alter some deep places in my heart, it also prepared me well for a crisis I didn't yet know was headed my way.

A Surprise Attack

I first recognized the shift in my dad's demeanor seven years prior, not long after my mom passed away. I saw an anger in him I'd never seen before as he verbally attacked someone close to him who had thirty years earlier accused him and my mom of unspeakable acts. "You let my wife go to her grave with all your lies." Though his words were accurate, the venom built up over those years was dark and destructive.

A few years later, I saw that same venom directed toward his pastor, whom he felt was resisting the Holy Spirit. He told me how he was going to confront him. Fortunately, I was able to talk him down before that conversation ever happened.

At the same time, his discernment about how Christ was leading him became more of a wish list. Preoccupied with why God was keeping him alive into his nineties when most of his peers had already passed on, he struggled to find meaning. He became more absorbed in Christian television and the revivalist fervor that was influencing many Charismatics. One day he told me that he had found his purpose: God was holding him here for the last, great revival where he would personally pray for thousands of people to receive the Holy Spirit.

His passions also turned political. One month before the 2020 election he said God had told him President Trump would win re-election. When that failed, he told me God would put him back in power by March of that year and then later in August. He wasn't the only one saying such things, but he was completely certain he had it right.

When I asked him what mechanism would allow that to happen, he was dismissive of my "unbelief." When I expressed concerns that he was living alone in a mountain community far from medical care, he said God had promised him that he wouldn't be sick again, but simply die

in his sleep one night at his home in Shaver Lake. When I asked him to at least consider if he was prophesying his preferences, he couldn't see it.

I am always concerned when people find their comfort in false hopes because I know how painful they can be when their expectations don't materialize. Even as he was talking about his good health, he was already battling bladder cancer. Then two years before he died, he fell and broke his hip. Soon after, he was diagnosed with melanoma and died in a hospice in Idaho, far from home.

But before that happened, he made it personal. One day, I walked into his hospital room while he was recovering from surgery for a broken hip to meet an icy glare. I had come to visit him for three days and help him arrange his finances for his future care. The day before we spent a delightful afternoon, reminiscing about our younger days. This was different. I'd seen that look before, but then it wasn't directed at me. I had no sense it was this time, either. Unfortunately, I was wrong.

Concerned that he didn't recognize me, I greeted him, "Hi Dad, it's me, Wayne."

He continued staring, a scowl twisting his face. After an awkward pause, he growled, "I know who you are." His voice was ominous, threatening, and laced with rage. Surprised, I paused to appraise the situation.

After a few seconds, he started yelling at me, "What have you done? What have you done?"

I was caught off guard and had not a guess as to what he meant. "I'm sorry, Dad, I don't know what you're talking about."

"Don't lie to me. You know exactly what you've done."

The next twenty minutes was a blur. He continued to make accusations that made no sense, and nothing I said made a dent in his suspicions or his rage. According to him, the doctor had told him that I was obstructing his medical care. Furthermore, he was also convinced I was there to forcibly remove him from the hospital and place him in a care facility near where I lived, all in an attempt to take control of his money.

Though none of that was remotely true, I had no ability to communicate that to him. I told him I had not raised any issues with his medical team, nor would I force him to live anywhere he didn't want to live. My entreaties were all rejected. He had put up a solid wall. "God told me you are a liar, and I will never trust anything you say again."

I excused myself to seek out his doctor, who unfortunately had left that morning for a medical conference. His case manager followed me back to my dad's room. I told her what my dad had said, and she assured him that I had not been an obstruction to his care in any way and that the team enjoyed working with me. He didn't believe her and told her so to her face.

I hope to find out some day that this could all be blamed on dementia, but his doctor said he showed no signs of it medically, and his anger was only directed at me. His doctor called me the next day and when I asked why my dad thought I was obstructing his medical care, he felt horrible. “I was referring to his caretaker, not to you.” In the days that followed, I begged Dad to call him to find out for himself. He steadfastly refused and I don’t know that he would have believed him anyway.

I told him none of his accusations was true and that I was sorry he had come to believe such things, especially without ever talking to me. He grew increasingly agitated in my presence, so I asked if he wanted me to leave. He did. So, rather than spend the afternoon with him as I’d hoped, I found myself driving four hours back home, trying to figure out what just happened and what I should do about it.

Losing My Dad

It’s a good thing I had a long drive home. It gave me time to process my confusion and pain. I was angry, to be sure, more at those who lied to my father than at him. I had already known they were being less than honest with me about his care; now I knew they were also lying to him about me.

But what do I do now? On that drive and over the next few weeks, I called a few close friends to share my grief and seek their counsel. Initially, we all hoped God would find a way to healing for our family in this season of my dad’s life and help him get the care he needed. I held on to some hope that because it came out of nowhere, this mess would get straightened out in a few days when more reasoned heads prevailed. Attempts to do so, however, only led to doors slammed in my face, literally.

No matter what I said or did, Dad’s anger only grew as did his delusions. Anger makes it easy to identify the lies. Those who know the truth don’t get angry when they are not believed, knowing truth always wins out in the end. Every time we spoke, he leveled a new accusation more absurd than the earlier ones. He refused to listen to anything I said. Distorting every good thing we had shared over a lifetime, he even tried to weaponize my children and my wife against me. I finally came to realize I had lost my dad, and the people around him who knew better continued to play dumb.

My family has a long history of triangulating frustrations. Even at young ages we ran to Mom and Dad whenever we were unhappy with another brother to seek their validation and let them deal with it. In adulthood, it incubated an ugly rumor mill, and I had stopped playing that game decades before. I knew it would cost me one day, but not this—not my relationship with Dad.

One of my brothers, unbeknownst to me, had been venting his frustrations to Dad, blaming me for his discontent. When his new caretaker came, she added fuel to that fire because he’d also been talking to her. When my brother told me one day, over his latest angry tirade, that Dad agreed with him that it was all my fault, I asked Dad if that was true. He said he had heard my brother out but did not agree with him; he was only trying to comfort him and his wife. I

reminded him he was only hearing one side of a painful story and if he was ever tempted to believe it, he might want to hear the other side. He assured me there was no need.

I came to find out after that, those conversations had only intensified behind my back in recent years. He had come to believe them without ever asking for my input. How did such a wise and discerning man fall for so many lies? My dad was never an angry man; he was a kind and gentle soul, firm but certainly fair. So, when his anger came at me with the most absurd accusations without any evidence to support them, it was quite out of character.

Over the years, I've noticed two things that leave people vulnerable to lies and delusion—fear and vengeance. When people are afraid something bad will happen to them or they give into anger for a real or perceived injustice, they cling to any comfort they can find, even in well-spun but untrue stories.

Participating in one-sided gossip certainly helped, as did the angry revivalist preachers who blamed the political left for delaying the revival my dad long hoped for. He was furious over the false accusations he had borne for more than thirty years, and somehow grew fearful his life would have no meaning. Furthermore, he grew frustrated that our country no longer embraced the moral foundation upon which he had built his life.

Combined with the limitations of his age, I'm convinced all these contributed to my dad's delusion. I was no longer a Trump supporter. I do see his self-serving lies as an existential threat to the future of our democratic republic, not only because of the insurrection his words provoked but also by undermining our confidence in the Constitution. Like many other Charismatics, my dad came to see Trump as the force for good in the final conflict between good and evil. And, as he had been told, anyone who opposed Trump is on the side of demons.

Thus, it was not difficult for those around him to separate Dad from me. It triggered his hostility and gave him a focus for his frustration. When I could prove to Dad his accusations had no merit, he would retreat to, "I don't believe you. This is what God told me." Human conflicts are unresolvable when one side invokes the God-told-me defense, especially when you know they are wrong. And few things are more painful than when a close confidant becomes your chief accuser, denigrating every aspect of your personality to support the allegations they cannot defend any other way.

The last phone call I had with him a year before his death was the second-worse experience of my life. He told me that I was a fraud, that I could write beautiful things but not live them. God had shown him I would not be in heaven and that two years before, the Holy Spirit had left me and two demons had taken his place. Even then, I tried to find a way in, telling him how much I loved him and hoping we could find our way back to a tender and honest relationship. He concluded by saying we would never talk again, and we didn't over the next year before his death.

I didn't believe him even for a moment; this was not my dad. He was a far better man than this. I can't begin to imagine what pain and doubt did to him when so many things he thought God told him didn't happen. Lies twist us into horrible caricatures of our true selves. I prayed for him

every day, hoping against hope for reconciliation before his passing, but somehow, I knew from that first day in the hospital that this was not going to heal in this life.

For sixty-eight years, he had been much more than my father. He was a close friend, confidant, and advisor in business and spiritual matters. He served on the leadership team of the congregations I helped pastor. I enjoyed talking with him as much as anyone and bore with him through the painful days of my mom's death. We didn't always agree but we were honest and gracious with each other, as we encouraged each other to follow Jesus as he seemed to guide each of us.

Among other things, he taught me how that the truth matters, how to listen and follow the voice of the Spirit, and that following him was more important than being popular or chasing the status quo. He taught me to trust God as provider when he watched two of his grape crops being destroyed by unseasonable rains. He taught me how to stand up against the powers of darkness that torment people from within, when no one else would deal with it.

And, in one of the lowest points of my life, nearly thirty years ago, he had read me the words of Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount: "Count yourselves blessed every time people put you down or throw you out or speak lies about you..." (Matthew 5:11 MSG) Blessed? I had to convince myself back then, but I have come to see what incredible power arises from dealing with rejection. Who would have thought that so many years later, Dad's encouragement to me would apply to him? I'm sure he didn't volunteer for this, but his actions became a gift nonetheless.

The following two years provided a graduate level education in the power of enduring unmerited rejection. It changed me in deep and wonderful ways. I have come to see any suffering, especially that which is unjust, as fertile ground for the Spirit's work of inviting us to a deeper love. I would be so grateful in days ahead for the lessons that found a home in my heart in this season.

Unmerited Rejection

So, how do you handle unmerited rejection when it comes from someone you deeply love and respect?

I'd been betrayed before by people I trusted, so this was not new ground for me. My best friend and co-pastor lied about a resignation I had not offered and forced me out of a congregation I'd helped plant. Twice co-authors on book projects had reneged on their promises, one even going to court to lie under oath. Those three events are where I took my first steps in learning how to walk alongside Jesus when people turn their back to me and to the truth. You can invite people to reconciliation and healing, but you cannot impose it on those who refuse.

Unmerited rejection is a constant theme in Scripture, some people begging God for vindication for themselves and vengeance on their enemies, while others held in love the people who betrayed them, as David did with Absalom or Jesus with Peter. Jesus knows this territory quite

well, having endured the unmerited rejection of his countrymen and the betrayal of his own disciples. Since then, he has endured centuries of people rejecting him because they believed lies about him. There is no better companion to walk with in such times.

Even though Dad saw me as his enemy, I refused to let him become mine. I grieved the loss of our relationship every day and resisted the temptation to diminish him in my heart. I invited Jesus to hold the pain with me and found in him compassion for my dad and the brokenness of those who had deceived him. I found the courage to keep walking in the same love toward him that Jesus has always shared with me, even when I have been unfaithful to him.

Everything I describe below began to find a place in my heart in the first betrayals I endured, but they came to fruition in the greater depth of this pain. I got to experience firsthand that God was bigger than the destructive things others can do to us. Here's how I learned to deal with unmerited rejection:

Do the work of self-examination. Whenever I am criticized or accused, like most people, my initial reaction is to defend myself. As I've grown older, however, I try to lay down my defenses and see if any of it is deserved, if only a small piece of it. Rejection isn't unmerited if there's a good reason for it. So, I asked myself the difficult questions as well as ran them by people I trust. Is there any merit to his anger? What could I have done differently? Is there anything I can apologize for to help bridge the peace? *Search me, Oh God, and know my heart.*

In this case, however, his accusations were so specific and so provably wrong that I didn't have to spend much time looking for fault there. You can't apologize for something you didn't do. If he had accused me of being insensitive or not caring enough, that would have required more consideration and offered more room to find an honest apology. I'm a flawed human being and relationships are often fraught with misunderstandings and offenses that can be repaired with tenderness and honesty if we dare not judge the motives of others.

Resist anger. With my family's agenda now unmasked, I could feel the hostility rising in my gut, but my heart beckoned me down a different road. "The vengeance you want will only destroy you; walk away and leave this to me." That thought went through my head within a day or two in a familiar voice.

Taking that road, I began to recognize a connection between my dad's anger toward one brother that opened him up to the misdirected frustrations of another. I thought of Dad's angry words in the first instance, "You let your mom go to her grave with all your lies." I found myself wishing someone would say something similar to the brother in the second instance. Bingo! That's where I saw it in me—the vengeance lying in wait in my own heart. I didn't want to perpetuate this cycle and seek a solution with anger. Instead, I sought a love deeper than my pain, and over time, found it.

One day, I awoke to an email from a good friend, who knew both Dad and me personally: "May the Father who is rich in mercy speak kindly to your heart and comfort you with the thought that the only way out of this is to lie at the foot of the cross with the prayer, 'Father forgive them for they know not what they do.'"

I used to think that prayer was for sins of ignorance, but the Pharisees were not ignorant of the fact that they were having an innocent man executed. That's why they had to lie about him. No, this prayer is not for people ignorant of bad actions, but those who can't see who God is in the face of their own agenda. We've all done that, so it is not an impossible prayer to pray for those you love once you understand it. I prayed it every day until it finally came from the heart, not only for my dad but also for those who enabled his darkness.

Embrace the grief and God in it. This was the first time in my life to experience fatherlessness and it was excruciating. I missed my dad and being part of the family as it used to be. So, I sat in my grief and I invited God into it. I thought of Dad often, praying that he would come to his senses, and if not, that he would be at peace over his final days. I entrusted him to God even when he doubled down on his hostility. Whenever he asked for my help, I gave him what he wanted. I learned to be gentle and tender, inviting him to do so as well. Asking him to stop his accusations only made him more aggressive. Finally, the only gift I had left to give him was my absence, which is the most difficult of all gifts.

I held my sorrow with God until slowly over time, grieving with him replaced my feelings of rejection with a growing compassion for my dad's darkness. As I prayed tenderly for him, I saw him as the man I'd known for sixty-eight years, before others took advantage of his vulnerability. It isn't fair to judge people by their worst moments.

But there were other ways God brought me comfort. Many times, friends offered just the right words, Scriptures, or prayers, even those who knew nothing of the circumstance I was in. Four times over those two years I had prolonged dreams where Dad and I talked together like old times, sharing and laughing together. In one, he even gave me counsel as to how to handle his rejection. That was weird, but incredibly helpful. I woke from those dreams feeling full and grateful for the man I had known—a sweet taste of the relationship in another realm.

Instead of deploying our anger we can wait for Father to repay us for what we've lost. That's where we find justice—not in the punishment of those who wronged us but in Father's ability to make up for what others have stolen from us.

Don't let false accusations define you. Here's another note from a friend that helped redirect my heart. "Don't allow your accusers to stifle in any way your message of God's love. Just allow this experience to increase your urgency, your compassion, and to deepen your dependency on grace." I did find myself wondering at times how I would go on helping people experience God's love when I was unwanted in my own extended family? Didn't that disqualify me?

If, however, you let the false conclusions of others define you, you embrace the delusion as well. False accusations are more a commentary on those making them than it is on your character or lack of love. When people comfort their anger with lies, they won't be able to see love because it won't fit into their darkness. You can only entrust them to Jesus and go on with your life as best you can, hoping for a better day.

Find a passion for truth over comfort. Ultimately, what you believe doesn't matter if what you believe isn't true. If you don't want to know the truth, your hopes will become your delusion and

you won't even know it. Cultivate a desire for truth even if it proves you wrong and you get to apologize. The delusion of those we love ought to be a reminder of how easy it is for any of us to succumb to its wiles.

In relationships, control is the opposite of love. When it became obvious that I wanted a relationship with my dad more than he wanted one with me, it was time to let go and allow him to set the tone for any future of the relationship. If he wanted to work at reconciliation, I was ready. If he preferred his delusion to our friendship, there was nothing I could do to help.

You can't force friendships, even with family. Healthy relationships take a lot of patience, communication, and tenderness, willingness to hear each other out, and forbear with each other's weaknesses. There's no room for manipulation, secret whispers, ambushed meetings, or judging with certainty the motives of another. When people treat you that way, the loving thing is to take a safe distance from their toxicity until they are willing to lay it down.

See what other opportunities God has for you. Joseph was first betrayed by his brothers, who almost murdered him before selling him into slavery. As a slave in Egypt, his master's wife tried to seduce him and when he fled, she falsely accused him of rape. In prison, he interpreted a dream for a fellow prisoner that got him released, and then who conveniently forgot to plead Joseph's case with Pharaoh thereafter. And yet after all of this, when his brothers came to him for help, he bore no grudge, "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives."

So, what good might come from this? There is nothing that Jesus can't work for our good if we look for it. Earlier betrayals shifted the trajectory of my heart in ways I came to appreciate, so I began to look for those here. As disappointed as I was to lose my father's respect, it was also a ticket out of a growing cancer in our family of gossip, vitriol, and anger. I had watched it spread person to person over the years whenever someone didn't get their way. They had to be right and if I didn't agree with them, or had a different viewpoint, I was accused of motives I didn't have or called a liar.

It was a relief to finally confirm I was being gaslit by those who could only see what they wanted to be true and were unwilling to consider differing thoughts or perspectives. They tried to control me in the name of family loyalty and punish me when I did not conform. I could finally leave them to it with the good conscience that I had done everything I could possibly do to save that relationship. Thus, while I no longer play their game, I do keep my heart open to them in case they ever want to repair the relationship.

Unmerited rejection also put me in touch in a deeper way with people in the thralls of relational pain. Not all conflicts can be resolved on this side of eternity. It helped me see more clearly the difference between healthy relationships and unhealthy ones and know when people are open to healing and when they are not. Sometimes we are the victims of other people's choices, but that doesn't mean Father won't have endless options to take us on to fruitful ways of living.

Unilaterally learning how to love and forgive in the midst of judgment proved to be a powerful training ground for a disaster still to come. But before we go there, let me tell you these things resolved with my dad.

The day after our last phone call, the one where he pronounced me possessed by demons and destined for hell, I had a waking dream in which I was walking on a beach looking for a place to spread my parents' ashes behind the lake they loved so much. After my mom died, Dad asked me to commingle their ashes and find a place for them there. In the vision, I knew their remains were in my backpack as I searched for an appropriate spot to place them. I finally thought of the perfect place and started toward a rocky outcropping at the end of the beach. Suddenly, I heard footsteps behind me. Turning to see who was there, I saw my dad standing on the water a few feet offshore.

It was disorienting to say the least. How could his remains be in my backpack and yet he was standing right there? His face was twisted in sorrow. As he looked at me, he choked on his words, "I know! I know now!" That was all he could manage to say, but it was more than enough. Then he reached out to hug me. It was a magical moment; my heart swelled with love for the man I'd always known. It is so easy to reconnect with someone you've already forgiven. As I started to walk toward his embrace, the vision stopped.

Awake, I lay in the darkness, reveling in the tenderness of the moment and asking God if this was a dream was a gift from him. I'm convinced it was and that Jesus let me see my eternal dad, the one who now knows the truth and how he had gotten stuck in the darkness. What a comfort it was through the last year of his life, and even more after he passed away.

Dad died a year later, and regretfully, we didn't speak again in this life. I would have loved the opportunity, but I was concerned it would only further incite his anger. The morning I heard that he had died, my visceral reaction was unbridled joy. He was finally free! I was grateful his suffering was over and with it the lies he came to believe.

It is easy to put the last two years of my dad's life inside a giant parenthesis, knowing that those days did not define him. He truly was the man I'd always known—wise, gentle but firm, and a man who followed Jesus as best he could. I know that in Christ now we are fully reconciled; the lies no longer exist for him. I can't wait for the next conversation we have in the presence of Jesus; it will be beautiful.

And what of those who stole two years of friendship with my dad? I pray for them, too: "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do." People who trade in rumors, anger, and lies are hurting people themselves, who are just trying to make their lives work even if they destroy others around them. That may be caused by trauma as well, or selfishness or jealousy. They need love, too, and the opportunity to run to the light and find God's grace and freedom. Until they do, I just don't let them destroy my life anymore. I don't have to let their anger find a home in my heart, knowing that God always has ways to work around the damage they cause.

But the greater gifts of this horrible experience were yet to come.

To a Greater Freedom

I told you that this lesson in unmerited rejection would prove to be a critical one for a crisis yet to come. Ten months after my first taste of Dad's rejection, I found myself confronted with another, this one with someone far closer to home.

I returned from a twelve-day trip to the east coast to discover to my absolute horror, that Sara, my wife of forty-six years, had moved out of the house, split up our belongings, and was pursuing a divorce, leaving me a note telling me how painful our marriage had been and that we would never speak again. I was completely blindsided.

I thought we had a great marriage. She had always loved me well and I thought I had loved her well, too, but her letter said otherwise. It made no sense to me. We hadn't had one conversation about her unhappiness in our marriage, and yet, her letter was filled with accusations. She wrote that she was so miserable that she was either going to commit suicide or leave me. She chose to leave; so great was her pain.

Good choice was my first thought. That's the only way this situation could have been worse, and I texted her to tell her so, not knowing if she would read it or even see it. But I was heartbroken and completely undone.

The first night, I lay wake all night in a half-empty house, in agony and sorrow. Unable to sleep or communicate with her, I poured out my pain on God. As devastated and shocked as I was, I came to realize I had space in my heart to walk through this. I was not angry with Sara even for one second, not for what she had done nor even how she had done it. My concern from the start was for her. Something happened to her, and I was worried that she'd had a psychological break that others around her weren't recognizing. I didn't blame them, either. It would be far easier to think I am a jerk than that Sara would do unnecessarily do something like this.

Clueless as to why this happened and having no access to her, I had no choice but to entrust her to God. That was familiar ground now. God and I talked a lot in those days. I must have read her letter a dozen times in the first twenty-four hours, trying to own what I could and understand what she was going through. If her letter was true then my entire life had been a lie, and if it was, it was time for me to find out. I could recognize what was in it as well as hold before God those parts I thought weren't true or fair. Too many things in it didn't sound like Sara. .

Of course, I've had moments of insensitivity and made some stupid mistakes over 46 years, but I didn't think I was *thisguy*. Something seemed off about it, but I didn't trust my own conclusions. Again, I sought counsel from others as to whether I was completely blind to my own faults. Those who knew both of us best were all as shocked as I was.

It took weeks to unravel all that had happened here, and Sara and I share this story in some detail in the [Redeeming Love Series](#) that were part of The God Journey podcast. Early on, God assured me that this was not what it appeared to be, and he would bring her back to me. I was afraid to

believe that simply because that's what I wanted to be true. I did find the grace not to fight my way back into Sara's life. I assured her I loved her deeply and would make any changes necessary for me to be a safe place for her heart. For days, I heard nothing back, but as I lay on my bed each night I spoke to her as if she could hear me, telling her how much I loved her and how special she was, asking God to somehow communicate those things to her heart.

He brought someone alongside me who suspected some kind of trauma had caught up with Sara, and that turned out to be true. Because I hadn't come at her angry or trying to manipulate her, Sara began to reconsider the conclusions she had made. Later she would say that because I had not responded in any way like her therapist told her I would, she was more open to reconsider her decision to leave me. As we found our way back to each other over weeks, Sara let me in on the PTSD that had surfaced in her life.

Embarrassed to admit it to me or anyone else, because there was seemingly nothing in her life that painful, she had sought out a therapist who concluded Sara must be trapped in an abusive marriage. Her therapist never met me or spoke to me, and even when Sara tried to tell her that she loved me and thought I loved her, the therapist was dismissive. She helped Sara rewrite every moment of our marriage in its most negative light and scripted her departure as if I had abused her. One trauma consultant told me that because of how Sara left, we had a less than one percent chance of ever speaking to each other again.

I began to realize that this was not dissimilar to my dad's situation and what I had learned there served me well here. I had been through this pain before; I knew God was able to hold me through it. The same inner voice that helped me navigate my family circumstances for almost two years now guided me through this one, albeit in different ways.

From the start, my concern was for her. I knew something was horribly wrong for the woman I loved, and I could only entrust her to God's care by not trying to control the outcome. I wholeheartedly let Sara set the pace for any communication she wanted to have, even if it never came. I fit myself to any door she opened and didn't try to push any further than she wanted. I didn't worry about how this would impact my reputation or what it would cost me. I was going to hold space for her as long as it took and protect her every way I could.

To make a long story short, as we got back together after a few weeks she found a different therapist. It only took that one three weeks to identify the real source of her traumatic pain. She had been sexually abused by her grandpa and members of her extended family from the ages of four to eight and for 64 years had complete amnesia about it all. Over months, Jesus allowed her to process vivid memories that had overwhelmed her as a child and explained the deep pain and self-loathing Sara had battled, especially in the last 15 years.

Now we could both see it. Through the actions of a well-intentioned therapist, she had come to believe lies about me. Those lies ganged up on her until it was suicide or divorce. That's how much pain she was in. It has taken a while to untangle the lies and find our way to a deeper love than we've ever known and are excited to begin this season of our lives sharing her burden together instead of Sara carrying it alone. Her trauma is my trauma and whatever it takes, I'm alongside her to support the journey.

If I hadn't experienced this tragic circumstance with my dad, I don't know how I would have been prepared to face this crisis. I knew how to grieve and love at the same time. I knew the voice that would lead me to a deeper journey and to win Sara's heart again. I didn't have to force anything on her, and I could treat her with tenderness until she opened her heart again. I've watched her take on the trauma with an unrelenting passion for freedom, and the horrible circumstances I went through the night I got home are just a blip on a distant horizon.

Without enduring the unmerited rejection of my dad, and all I learned in that experience, I would not have been the person Sara needed when her world collapsed. If every betrayal I suffered throughout my life was to prepare me to be what Sara needed in this moment, then every tear and heartache was worth it. I will be forever grateful that I'd had a trust in God strong enough to respond to him rather than react with my emotions. Sara and I got to be part of that one percent that find their way through the ravages of trauma to a greater love.

But that wasn't all. Learning to bear unmerited rejection would prove to be the gift that keeps on giving.

And to a Deeper Faith

A year ago, I woke up one morning to find myself holding all the pain of the previous two years—my wife's trauma and the pain it caused me, its collateral damage with my children, my dad's anger, and the loss of relationship in my extended family. It was overwhelming and I wanted to express it to God as I drove to an early morning medical procedure.

"Last year, I lost every family relationship I value to lies about me." I said out loud to God, my heart racked with sorrow. Even though many of those relationships had healed, the awareness of what I had lost for a season produced intense sorrow.

I looked for a way to invite God into that, so I addressed it to him. I repeated the line and added, "... and you allowed it." *No that wasn't quite right.* I don't believe God "allows" our pain in any volitional sense. We live in a world out of sync with its Creator, and horrible things happen because of how the darkness manipulates human hearts.

I repeated it again and added, "... and you watched it happen." While true, that didn't sound right either. I could feel the accusation in it that he was a detached spectator. That had not been my experience.

So, I tried again, "Last year, I lost every family relationship I value to lies about me, and you were with me in it." *There it was!* I had never been alone; he had continually given me comfort, insight, strength, and friendships to hold me through all those storms and in the process deeply transform my heart and mind.

As I mused on that with gratitude, my sorrow began to mix with the wonder of his presence. After a few moments, a random thought raced through my mind, “Now, you’re ready to hold some of my pain.”

I’ll admit to being befuddled at the thought. It sounded like God, but what pain does he bear, and why would he want me to hold it? I pondered those words as I drove up a hill into the breaking light of dawn. All at once, I understood. He, too, has lost everyone he loves to lies about him, from the earliest days in the Garden, to so many lost children today.

That undid me in the best of all possible ways.

He not only had been with me in my pain and somehow; he wanted me to be with him in his. Prior to this moment, I had never thought about God’s agony for the delusion and suffering of his creation. He’s God after all, victorious above the heavens, able to do whatever he wants, and yet, the pain of his Creation wounds him. Is that what Jesus was looking for in Gethsemane, someone to watch with him in his agony? How often did Jesus offer himself to God with loud cries and tears that the writer of Hebrews referred to?

Paul wrote about knowing him in the fellowship of *his* suffering, and I’ve thought that was his empathy with our pain, having suffered himself while he was on earth. This was different. I had never considered that his suffering continues because of what his children do to themselves and each other and how he bears their unmerited rejection to this day. And he wanted me to share some of that with him.

Don’t get me wrong, I don’t think I got much of it, a mere drop at most, from an ocean of grief that would crush me if I tasted it in its fullness. But it was enough to hold our agony together and to talk about his heartache at the state of the world. What an intensely tender time!

That day still stands as a major fork in the road on my own spiritual journey. As I’ve mined that thought and shared glimpses of his pain in the world, I am being changed in a way I never imagined. It has affected every human engagement I have had since, and I see God’s redemption at the end of the age in different terms.

Unmerited rejection borne with Jesus can open a wide door into a spacious place inside God’s heart that protects us from vengeance or bitterness and produces the fruit of compassion for anyone lost in the lies of darkness and the relationships it destroys. And that’s as much for those who claim to be his people as for those who don’t follow him because they have never seen him as he truly is.

I’ve shared with you my story in hopes that it will give you insight and encouragement for your own. Learning to rest in his love even when people treat you unjustly will not only help you navigate the darkness and chaos of life in this age, but also change you inside so that you’ll be more aware of Father’s working around you.

Every dishonest business partner, unfaithful friend, cheating spouse, or toxic family member provides an opportunity for you to find God's love is more magnificent than you yet imagine. Find the grace to eventually pray from the heart, "Father, forgive them; they know not what they do." Let go of the need to control the outcome and then you'll be free to follow the pathway love lights up.

Even the most destructive circumstance can become a gift in the hands of Jesus as it draws us into greater faith and freedom. This may be what James meant when he wrote:

"Consider it a sheer gift, friends, when tests and challenges come at you from all sides. You know that under pressure, your faith-life is forced into the open and shows its true colors. So don't try to get out of anything prematurely. Let it do its work so you become mature and well-developed, not deficient in any way." (1:2-4 MSG)

Once you can get through the pain and find the gift God is giving you in the unmerited rejection you're facing, you too can discover how God takes our worst tragedies and turns them into unbelievable triumph.