

## Taken

Ron L. Deal, Feb 17, 2011

It's been 730 days since Connor was taken from this earth. It's still hard to believe. Some days I wake up thinking it was just a nightmare. Words cannot express how much we miss him and only faith in the Ruler over death gives us hope that we will see him again.

I must confess that for the first year and a half after Con's death, I did not hear from the Lord in a mighty way. Yes, He provided through friends and loved ones that poured themselves out for us and sustained us in a million little ways, a wise counselor who has guided our grief journey,—and yes, we felt confident that the Heavenly Father had taken over the care of Connor in ways that this father only dreamed of. But we didn't hear God's booming voice, until...

741 days ago Nan and I went to a movie. It was a Saturday night and we just needed to get out for a while. We went to see the movie Taken starring Liam Neeson. The movie is about a father whose daughter is abducted, that is—taken, for the purpose of child trafficking, sex slavery to be specific. As any good father would do, Liam Neeson hunts down the men responsible and saves the day. We returned home that night to find Connor complaining of a headache. Little did we know that at that very hour Connor was being taken. We gave him an Ibuprofen and sent him to bed confident he would feel better in the morning. He didn't.

Over the next ten days we journeyed up and down steep mountains of hope and fear and spiraled through narrow passages while he clung to life until finally descending into the valley of the shadow of death. Gone from this life. Taken.

My whole life now falls into the categories of *before and after*.

Before: I never once prayed for "daily bread". I prayed for early retirement.

After: I'm learning what it is to pray for daily survival, to be still and know that He is God.

Before: I prayed "if the Lord wills..." just like the book of James says to do.

After: I realized that I didn't mean it. I didn't really think that my plans for life wouldn't come about. I was smitten with the illusion of control. If I just worked hard enough, prayed hard enough, lived right enough, things would pretty much work out. Now when I say "tomorrow I will do this or that" I don't have any illusion that it will really happen...unless the Lord wills.

Before: Nan and I thought we knew what it was to be and have friends.

After: We have discovered the faithfulness of a few amazing friends who are willing to walk through darkness, day after day, year after year, with us even when we can't be for them who we were.

Before: I thought a bad day was the flu, a flat tire, or a flight delay.

After: My definition of a bad day has been redefined. Watching my wife dig her fingernails into our son's grave while screaming "I want my son back" now qualifies.

Before: Sunday was a time of family connection, worship, and celebrating our Lord.

After: Sunday morning worship is the worst hour of the week. Songs without Connor's voice, the memory of his casket at the front of the auditorium, etc., etc., etc. make it a time of confusion and agony.

Before: Stress in our marriage might have been brought on by simple differences in preference, for example, about the temperature of the car.

After: stress results from trying to overcome the vast chasm of sorrow, depression, anger toward a God that you think has abandoned you, and the challenge of connecting when your soul aches so much you don't know how to speak about it.

Before: I recycled.

After: Life is too short to give a rip about paper or plastic!

Before: I thought trust and faith was the antidote to pain.

After: I've realized that the train I now travel on sits on two rails: the left is sadness (deep, deep sadness) and the right wonderful memories. The left is anguish, the right hope. The left anger, the right trust. The left sorrow, the right peace in the arms of Jesus. Neither rail invalidates the other. Neither excludes the other; faith doesn't end grief, and faith does include asking "why?" (no matter what the preacher says). I travel them both, side by side, on an unstoppable train... till Jesus comes.

Before: I weighed 15 lbs heavier and didn't have any gray hair.

After: Well, just look at me.

Before: I thought Job was patient and his wife was faithless.

After: I think, just like me, Job had an inadequate theology, he gripped a lot, and was anything but patient with God - and his wife got a bad rap.

Before: I had read Job's reflections in Job 42:1-6 but I really didn't understand them. If God's plans can't be thwarted, why let Satan wreak havoc on our lives? How is Job's loss something "too wonderful" for him to know? Job had "heard of God" but after his loss he now "sees God"—what does that mean?

After: I have come to accept that God's ways are far beyond my wisdom to know; further, it's not for me to know this side of heaven. And as for what Job saw about God that he had never seen before, I'm still not sure I know exactly what it is, but I think it has something to do with trusting God to manage what in this life I will never have the privilege of understanding.

But despite all these spiritual insights—recalibrations I have begun to call them—Nan and I still didn't hear directly from God. And then, at Nan's darkest hour, she got a phone call.

A mutual friend had connected Randy and Pam Cope to us about one year ago. They, too, had experienced the unspeakable loss of a child when their son Jantsen, age 15, died in 1999 of an undetected heart defect.

To survive their tragedy, the Cope's started the Touch A Life Foundation with the goal of caring for and rehabilitating exploited children. Their work began first in Vietnam, then Cambodia, and finally in Ghana, West Africa. In 2006, Oprah sent journalist Lisa Ling to Ghana, West Africa, to rescue a boy named Mark who had been featured in a New York Times article on child slavery. What Lisa discovered just a few

months after the article was published was that the Cope's had already partnered with Ghanaian volunteers to find and rescue Mark. Additionally, they were able to rescue six other children (including Mark's brother and sister) and begin providing for all of their needs. Pam was later featured in an Oprah program on the plight of trafficked children in Ghana.

One hidden blessing in the Cope's efforts to rescue children was discovering that what ministered to them in their grief would also minister to other grieving parents. So, through the years, they have actively sought out those who have lost children (or loved ones) to be volunteers for their ministry. This is what led them to befriend us, and, as God would arrange it, for Pam to call Nan at a time of great despair. In the course of their conversation, she invited Nan to go to Ghana and minister to the children. Helping children in honor of Connor seemed a worthy effort and something he would have loved to do so Nan agreed. In November of 2010, she, my sister, and a small team of women went with Pam Cope to Ghana for two weeks. But the trip turned out to be so much more than taking gifts to kids.

Day after day I received texts and pictures from Nan reporting on their mission. But one morning I received a text with a picture of two small boys. I didn't know who they were or why Nan had sent the picture. Suddenly the phone rang and Nan was crying on the phone. "Did you get the picture? They're sitting right in front of me," she kept repeating. "They're sitting right in front of me." Who? Who is sitting in front of you?



She then proceeded to tell me about the rescue of these two boys. Sold into slavery by their parents, these two brothers, ages 6 and 8 had been forced to work as fishermen for their master on the waters of Lake Volta. A typical day included fishing for 10-14 hours per day, diving into the dark water to untie nets (many boys drown unless they are excellent swimmers), and living on one meal per day. Nan and the team had just visited the village where these boys lived and had rescued them from their master. They were still in the boat making their get-away as she recounted the rescue.

I fell to my knees. "You've got to be kidding me? You just rescued two kids!" (I knew she would be ministering to rescued children, but no one anticipated that they would be part of a new rescue.) "What are their names?" I asked. Her answer made complete sense because I knew two things: 1) that these boys had actually been rescued before and resold into slavery; and 2) that rescued children often rename themselves with terms that reflect their new future. "Gideon and God's Way," she said. "Their names are Gideon and God's Way."

In awe and wonder, I replied the only thing I knew to say, "You found God's Way?" On more than one level, she did. She did indeed.

And that's when I heard God's booming voice: "I *am* with you; I *am* taking care of your wife; *this* is Connor's voice." And that's also when I heard Connor applauding.

As my wife sat in a boat with two rescued children and I sat on the floor of my house crying, trying to process what was happening. "Now let me see if I have this straight," I thought to myself. Twenty-one months ago, my son Connor was being *taken* even as Nan and I saw a movie about a child *taken* for child trafficking. And now, my wife is half-way around the planet *taking back* two children who were *taken* into child trafficking. Is this real? Who is this God that I serve? How great is His power to redeem, to bring beauty from ashes! And that's when I echoed back to God the words of Job. "God, for a year and a half now I have been calling into question things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know. I have now seen who you are and what you are capable of; my ears had heard of you, but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore, I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes." (see Job 42:1-6)



As a result of this trip, we have begun an effort to support the work of the Touch A Life Foundation (based in Dallas, Texas). Connor's Song, as we have entitled it, seeks to rescue children from child trafficking in Ghana and contribute to their care and rehabilitation. We are raising money to rescue more children and build/manage Connor's Creative Art Center, a facility that will offer education and art therapy to the children. In addition, we will support underprivileged children wherever there is a need and inspire them toward creativity—all things Connor loved. Connor is still singing, and now you can sing with us by making a donation.

Someone asked me recently if all the good that is being done in Ghana changes how I view Connor's death. No way. I know beauty is coming from our ashes, but the ashes haven't gone away. We're still on the unstoppable train riding on two rails: anguish and hope. Year three is just beginning. If I could, I'd *take* Con back in a heartbeat. The price of his life is too much—even with all the good that is happening now. I hate to say it, I told that person, but selfishly I'd *take* Connor back even if it meant those two boys couldn't be rescued.

Sort of gives you reason to pause, doesn't it. The Heavenly Father chose to let his Son die in our place—and He didn't have to. He could have *taken* Jesus back, but he let him go so we could be rescued from the slavery of sin. One day after rescuing Gideon and God's Way, Nan sent me another picture. It was of God's Way wearing his first new shirt—a Connor's Song shirt. As I reflected on this newly saved child bearing the name of my son, I couldn't help but think how precious it must be to the Father when we bear the name of his son. We are after all "Christians". I love it when someone brings glory to God in memory of my son; it fills my heart with joy like you can't imagine. What joy it must bring to the Father when we offer a cup of cold water to someone in need and give Christ the glory, or end our prayers "in Jesus' name," or publically declare Jesus Lord over our life, or boast not in



ourselves, but in His grace! I know I never tire of the good being done in my son's name. I'm sure the Heavenly Father never does either.

Without question, much was *taken* 730 days ago and much will be missed every day thereafter. And yet, my Con-man still sings.

He gives and *takes* away...and then He *gives* again. Blessed be the name of the Lord.

Dad (Ron Deal)