Discernment: the art of listening

It was our first year at Prairie. Mark Francisco, a pastor from the greater Vancouver area in BC, was in Three Hills to speak at our chapel, so we invited him to our home for dessert. Knowing his love for the stories of Scripture, especially in the context of their original culture, I asked him to surprise us with an example of a story that is typically misunderstood by western readers.

With only a moment’s pause he went to Solomon’s prayer for wisdom in 1 Kings 3. At the very outset of his career as the leader of Israel, the young king had prayed: “Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, that I may discern between good and evil, for who is able to govern this, your great people?”

“An understanding mind”—that means wisdom, right? (How I’d love to have WISDOM—the ability to make great decisions that will stand the test of the unknown future.) Solomon’s prayer, however, in the context of the Jewish culture, was a prayer for a listening heart. He asked for sensitive ears that would hear from God and from the people.

Those two definitions are remarkably different.

A leader who listens does not need to have all the answers to make good decisions. I often feel that God wants to speak to me through the people around me—I just need to listen to them. In fact, we need to stop trying to have all the solutions and ask questions instead. As we do, we hear a variety of viewpoints and perhaps even new information that will give us the discernment we need to find the answers we seek.

I have spent a fair bit of my life analyzing companies, trying to determine the best investments. And along the way I have found that the rarest, and therefore the most valuable resource in the corporate world is good judgment or good discernment. People with strong decision-making skills and good discernment make good decisions. Buy the stock!

We are told in Proverbs 15 that “with many advisers, plans succeed.” Why? Is it because the average of the many is the fountain of brilliance? No. The average of the many may be just that: average.

Nevertheless, I have found that in the midst of the many, the discerning ear that is listening for the voice of God will hear divine brilliance. I think God delights in passing that brilliance around and surprising us with the variety of voices that will help us stay on course.

Let’s determine to listen carefully to God and to the people he brings around us. May he open our hearts, give us discerning ears along with willing hands and feet, and provide the courage to go forward with a confidence in him that is well-placed and well-informed.

May he give us listening hearts and discerning understanding—the formula for true wisdom.

Our theology professor, Dr. Ray Yeo, has put together a seminar on Discernment that is intended to help young adults find God’s will for their lives. Let Dennis Landon know if you are interested in hosting one at your church (dennis.landon@prairie.edu).

Mark Maxwell is president of Prairie. He welcomes your comments. Send them to mark.maxwell@prairie.edu.
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LETTERS

Thank you, Mark, for your piece “A Higher Court” and for setting out a way that leads to abundant life. This clarity is helpful as my own parish has voted to pursue “same sex blessings” and push for approval of same-sex marriages. I struggle with how to express the uncharitable direction this represents without at the same sounding like a holier-than-thou person laying down the law about one particular sexual behavior. Thank you for your thoughtful writing and faithful leadership. My parents graduated from Prairie in the ’40s and I’ve been thankful all my life for their faithfulness and their stories of the faith they saw modelled there. Jean Marie Clemenger, Calgary, AB

I have read the powerful message by Mark Maxwell about answering to a higher court. What a strong and bold truth you have presented. I am so much impressed. May the Lord fill your heart and mind with the truth of the Bible and help you not to compromise with worldly knowledge that is based on a lie. My prayer for you and the staff of Prairie is that the Lord will always fill your hearts with spiritual boldness and wisdom. Nasim Zahir, Edmonton, AB

Editor’s Note: Not all responses to the article were positive. We thank those who took the time to write and respect their desire not to be published.

Your article “Afghan Surrender” really hit home as we have family living in Rwanda who are under much stress and planning a furlough. Thank you for recognizing the hard choices that sometimes have to be made and for your dedication to building up the Body. Name withheld

3 year Music & Worship Arts program:

Songwriting is a unique focal point of our program. In addition to learning from Juno award-winning songwriter, Brian Doerksen, as well as other special guests, songwriting students will learn how to arrange and record their own songs.

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Learn more @ www.prairie.edu

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How to reach us:
Email servant@prairie.edu, leave a brief message at 1-800-221-8532, or write us through the enclosed envelope. Letters may be edited for space and clarity.

MOVING?
Let us know by email or call 1-800-221-8532 and tell us both your old and new address.

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Virtually unknown a generation ago, a world without social media and technology would be unthinkable today. In the church, few have championed its unparalleled benefits more than Craig Groeschel. Yet, he also believes that we are in danger of becoming captive to something that can consume our time, mask our real selves, and limit the quality of our caring and our communication. In his new book #struggles, Groeschel, founder and pastor of Life Church, a multi-campus congregation based out of Edmond, OK, shows the digitally dependent how to regain control over their lives. He recently spoke with Phil Callaway about his love/hate relationship with technology and how to bring a balance of spiritual depth and rich human engagement back into our social-status-seeking world.

YOU SAY YOU HAVE A LOVE/HATE RELATIONSHIP WITH TECHNOLOGY. WHAT DO YOU MEAN?
Our church was really honored to create the YouVersion Bible App that’s used by 220 million people and is helping me fall more and more in love with God’s Word. I also love movies and I did a video conference today with people from different locations where we were all able to see each other. I can see what’s going on in my kids’ lives and stay in touch with people on Twitter. There are so many benefits. At the same time there are an increasing number of unintended negative consequences that many people are starting to recognize, like a false sense of intimacy, and discontent because we’re comparing our behind-the-scenes to everybody else’s highlights. We’re no longer transparent with other people and even though we may be momentarily connected, we’re not really present and engaged with them. I love the benefits of technology but I hate it when it takes me away from the most important things.

WHAT ALARMS YOU MOST ABOUT SOCIAL MEDIA?
The University of Michigan conducted a comprehensive study of attitudes among college students between 1979 and 2009. Basically, they found that students today care about others 40 percent less than people did during the 1980s. They point to strong explanations as to how social media actually contributes to that. It is also creating a false sense of intimacy. The new phrase sociologists are using is deferred loneliness. I feel disconnected or alone so I post something, then I go back to see how many Likes I got, but it’s actually deferring that loneliness to a later date. People are settling for a counterfeit intimacy and we don’t really know how to relate, drop the guard, and get to know people in the way that God intended us to do.
YOU TELL ABOUT YOUNG PEOPLE ADMITTING THAT THEY'RE UNCOMFORTABLE EVEN ORDERING PIZZA BECAUSE THEY CAN'T HANDLE UNSCRIPTED, SPONTANEOUS CONVERSATION. WE'VE ALWAYS HAD THESE PROBLEMS TO SOME DEGREE, BUT HAS SOCIAL MEDIA EXACERBATED THEM? I think social media and technology are complicating them and giving us opportunities we didn't have in the past. You mentioned the fear of unfiltered communication. There's a generation that's grown up primarily communicating via text. If someone calls them, they'll let it go to Voicemail and then respond with a text because then they're in control of the conversation. I think a lot of people really struggle with how to talk, how to show who they really are. They don't know how to let others in and be transparent because they've filtered the images that they share and if they aren't good enough, they'll just delete them and post something better.

SO WHAT SHOULD I DO? BACK OVER MY PHONE? If you're extremely addicted, you may need to take some extreme steps. I know some people who have put away their smart phones and gone to dumb phones. I don't recommend that for everyone, but if you're addicted to pornography and can't break away, if you're always on your phone and don't know how to interact, you may need to go that far. A better idea is just to have a social media fast. We did this with hundreds of young adults, asking them to fast from technology for a weekend and journal what happened. Within an hour or two, the vast majority were pulling up something on their phones because it was so habitual they didn't even realize they were doing it. Many went through withdrawal. But those who made it began to engage more with others, felt closer to God, and connected in ways they never had before. So start there and if you realize that what's happening to your heart and your relationships is counterproductive, then do something about it.

AS A RESULT OF READING THIS BOOK, I WENT ON A 40-DAY SOCIAL MEDIA FAST. Wow! That really means a lot to me. Tell me what happened.

I CONNECTED MORE WITH THE PEOPLE CLOSEST TO ME AND WAS MORE INTENTIONAL IN MY WALK WITH GOD. YOU SAID THAT PEOPLE FALL INTO SIN EVERY DAY, BUT NO-ONE JUST FALLS INTO HOLINESS. IT REQUIRES DISCIPLINE AND DELIBERATE CHOICES. THIS FAST HAS BEEN PART OF THAT PROCESS FOR ME. That's amazing. This struggle isn't native to our generation, but for today's youth, it's all they've ever known. Imagine how different their lives could be if they learned to enjoy technology but not be controlled by it.

YOU GIVE TEN COMMANDMENTS FOR USING SOCIAL MEDIA. WHAT ARE A FEW THAT STAND OUT TO YOU? Well, obviously these are not from the Bible, but the one I think is most important is to put God first in all you say and post. It's really sad to me how people who are Christians will often say things or re-post or re-Tweet things that are very dishonoring to God. Just like we want the words out of our mouth to reflect the love of Jesus, we want everything we post to do the same. Another one is: Do not use social media to fuel temptations. I work with a lot of people of all ages who find themselves wandering into dangerous places with technology and seeing images that could be hurtful. I've put limitations on my phone because even though I'm a pastor, I'm a man and vulnerable, so I make it really hard to see things I shouldn't be looking at. Why would I manage a temptation in the future that I have the ability to eliminate today? And the last one is really big: Do not base your identity on what people think. I talked to a prominent pastor the other day and he said, “I had to go off social media because I was comparing all the time. I felt inadequate, that I wasn't doing as much as other people. It made me guilty and angry and jealous.” And this was a very godly man. Imagine how a fourteen-year-old girl would feel? You are not the sum total of your Likes; you are who Christ says you are. We need to get our identity from God.

IF I'M A FOLLOWER OF JESUS, WHAT'S THE BEST WAY FOR ME TO USE TECHNOLOGY? The best thing I can do on my phone first thing in the morning is open up a reading from my Bible App. Maybe through the day you'll want to play some worship songs that continually direct your heart toward God. We're able to share in the lives of others, talk to people all over the world, and do practical things like banking and shopping online. We can use the benefits that technology offers, but the bottom line is that we don't want to be mastered by it. The moment we become a slave to it instead of it being our servant, I think we've stepped into a place of idolatry or if nothing else, we're wasting time. Life is too short to spend it staring at images rather than doing life with people that we love.

HOW WOULD YOU LIKE TO BE REMEMBERED? That I was faithful. I'm very in love with my wife and I plan to be faithful to her and to my children for the rest of my life. I want to serve my church until I'm too old or go Home. If someone could say of me, “He was faithful,” that would be a great blessing. |
KENYANS RUN FOR BIBLE TRANSLATION

Six thousand Kenyans, including many primary, secondary, and university students, ran in March 2015 to raise more than $65,000 for Bible translation work in their African country. They were part of a large annual fundraising event called “Run for the Bibleless” coordinated by Bible Translation and Literacy (BTL), a member of Wycliffe Global Alliance. Runners raised the funds entirely from donors within their nation. Tobias Omollo, BTL’s church relations officer, sees the event building partnerships among Kenya’s spiritually maturing churches as they “participate prayerfully, give financially and serve in all ways” as part of the global church.

SHARING THE SON THROUGH THE POWER OF THE SUN

One out of five people on the planet do not have the advantage of electricity, limiting the spread of the gospel through electronic means. Solar power was an option, but even a few years ago its use was limited because any portable device was much too big. Sunset International Bible Institute in Texas has produced a solar-powered audio player that is the size of a “fat” smartphone and can function for years with only the sun for power. Containing over 400 hours of Bible and Bible teaching, it is reaching into isolated communities throughout Africa. Faith Comes by Hearing has also developed the Proclaimer, a solar-powered audio Bible that can be charged via a built-in hand-crank or run directly from a solar panel. The device is reaching some of the poorest people on the planet who cannot afford the luxury of batteries. The Mini-Proclaimer is a smaller, hand-held version. For millions of adults in the world who can’t read or write their own language, these and other similar devices allow them to hear the Word, understand God’s truth and respond in faith—thanks to a power source that has been with us since the dawn of time.

COUNTRIES VIE WITH NORTH KOREA AS MOST DIFFICULT FOR CHRISTIANS

According to the 2016 World Watch List (Open Doors), modern persecution of Christians hit a record high in 2015 with the greatest number of all forms of religious freedom violations in recent memory. North Korea, where up to 70,000 Christians are in labor camps, continued in first place but more countries than ever followed closely behind. At least 7,000 Christians were killed for their faith last year, up drastically from 4,344 in 2014 and 2,123 in 2013. The numbers don’t include North Korea or parts of Iraq and Syria, where accurate totals are hard to obtain. In addition, 2,400 churches were damaged or attacked worldwide, more than twice the number in 2014. According to Open Doors, violent Islamic extremism, rather than state-sponsored terrorism, was the leading cause of the surge. Islamic extremists also caused the displacement of thousands of Christians. As organizations such as ISIS, Boko Haram, or al-Shabaab push out existing governmental structures, the lack of organized law enforcement leads to even further violence against minority groups.

DOES THEOLOGY SOUND INTIMIDATING?

Many students in our introductory course thought so—until they watched the first lecture and realized they have been “doing theology” all their lives! This free one-credit course is designed to get you thinking about your own beliefs about God and the nature of the world. Enrol now @ www.prairie.edu/th100
“People talk about the sacrifice I have made in spending so much of my life in Africa. Can that be called a sacrifice which is simply paid back as a small part of a great debt owing to our God, which we can never repay? Is that a sacrifice which brings its own blest reward in… the consciousness of doing good, peace of mind, and right hope of a glorious destiny hereafter? Away with such a thought! It is emphatically no sacrifice. Say rather it is a privilege. Anxiety, sickness, suffering, or danger, now and then, with a forgoing of the common conveniences and charities of this life may make us pause and cause the spirit to waver and the soul to sink; but let this only be for a moment. All these are nothing when compared with the glory which shall hereafter be revealed in us and for us. I never made a sacrifice.”

A glass church shaped like a high-heeled shoe has been built in Taiwan as part of an effort to appeal to female worshippers. BBC News

A century-old cracker, salvaged from the survival kit of a Titanic passenger, sold for more than $23,000. New York Daily News

Dubai held its first Camel Marathon in December. The race covered 31 miles and awarded luxury vehicles and cash prizes to the winners. Gulf News

The US has one theologically trained pastor for every 230 people. Outside the US the ratio is 1 to 450,000. Training Leaders International

On an average, 42,500 people were displaced around the world each day in 2014. UN High Commissioner for Refugees

“People talk about the sacrifice I have made in spending so much of my life in Africa. Can that be called a sacrifice which is simply paid back as a small part of a great debt owing to our God, which we can never repay? Is that a sacrifice which brings its own blest reward in… the consciousness of doing good, peace of mind, and right hope of a glorious destiny hereafter? Away with such a thought! It is emphatically no sacrifice. Say rather it is a privilege. Anxiety, sickness, suffering, or danger, now and then, with a forgoing of the common conveniences and charities of this life may make us pause and cause the spirit to waver and the soul to sink; but let this only be for a moment. All these are nothing when compared with the glory which shall hereafter be revealed in us and for us. I never made a sacrifice.”
FACULTY FOCUS  BRIAN DOERKSEN WITH SARAH FRINSEL

Songs for the journey

On a cool autumn day on the prairies, the sound of a strumming guitar floated through a classroom window. A voice began to accompany the chords vibrating from the instrument as a young student sang words that they themselves had crafted together, the melody coming from deep inside of them.

Prairie’s Music and Worship Arts program, led by worship leader and recording artist Brian Doerksen, aims to explore how those with a calling to music ministry can better serve the church and community through creative culture-making, songwriting, and “emotionally healthy spirituality” that embraces both praise and pain.

While the role of worship leaders within the church is generally understood, that of the songwriter is often overlooked. They play a key role, not only in the world in which we live, but in our spiritual communities as well. As an act of culture-shaping, creating new music is one of the more important tasks of the church as it helps us internalize Scripture and worship more deeply, provides comfort, and gives us words when we have none. Fresh songs can bring the ancient truths of the faith into our current experience.

Brian’s own appreciation of the power of a song began in a moment when his baby daughter, Rachel, lifted her arms up to him as if to say, “Daddy—pick me up and hold me.” As he reached for her, he began to cry, realizing that he longed for his heavenly Father to do the same for him in a way that he could tangibly experience. In that moment, however, he could not find a song that expressed this longing and out of that gap, “Father, I want you to hold me” was born. Although the song was meant to be purely personal, after it was shared at a small Bible study and then at a large conference in Edmonton, Brian’s career as a songwriter was born. His music is now heard in churches all over the world by what he describes as “All grace.”

Such moments often provide the “seeds” of the song-writing process: God gives the inspiration and the writer takes it from there, draft by draft, until the work is complete. The process sounds simple but is often long and requires patience and practice. However, the moment when a song is born and people are able to relate to its message and melody is unsurpassed.

Brian recognizes the church’s need for young writers, those who will be able to supply a voice for the next generation through lyric and melody that churches and communities can take as their own. As such, it is his goal to train up a new breed of songwriters and song-writing worship leaders, those who can write from their hearts new expressions of worship, love and lament that tell our human stories, make us smile, and serve us in our struggle.

At the heart of the Music and Worship Arts program and its director is a desire to thrive in relationship, enabling discovery and growth together. Brian’s hope is to see the church increase its impact on culture by gifting us with new songs to accompany us on our journey.

Editor’s Note: The winter edition of the Prairie Harvester (www.prairie.edu/harvester) stated that the recording studio for the Music and Worship Arts program had been completed. At present Prairie has a small basic demo studio with plans for a full-fledged recording studio in progress.

ULTIMATE COLLECTION

The songs of Canada’s premiere songwriter and worship leader are sung and loved around the world. Brian is also the Director of Prairie’s Music & Worship Arts program, sharing his skills with young people who are eager to grow creatively and offer their musical talents to God. This 15-track album features all-time favorites such as Come, Now Is the Time to Worship, Refiner’s Fire and The River.

See the enclosed envelope to order your copy of Brian’s CD Ultimate Collection.

SONGS FOR THE JOURNEY, VOL. II

Brian’s most recent creative project is co-writing new inspirational folk-rock settings of the ancient Psalms with his band, The Shyir Poets. Volume I, based on the first ten Psalms, was named “Inspirational Album of the Year” at the 2014 Covenant Awards. Volume II was released in 2015 and features Psalms 11 to 20. The result is music that is honest and meditative and at times unconventional, but deeply comforting.

See the enclosed envelope to order your copy of Songs for the Journey, Vol. II.
I’ve always believed that life was an adventure and God has certainly proven that true. Along the way I’ve learned that the option of becoming better or bitter on the twists and turns of the journey is a choice that is given to every one of us.

I was raised in a Christian home in the small community of Three Hills, but after graduating from Prairie High School in 1992, I headed off to the big city of Calgary to attend Rocky Mountain College. It was there that I met Duane Kraaikamp and fell in love. The next year we were married and continued our studies, me in counselling psychology and Duane in drama and music. When I became pregnant we moved back “home” to Three Hills. After our son was born, Duane followed his passion for music by becoming Director of Worship and Children’s Ministries at the Prairie Tabernacle. Life was good and very full as three more sons arrived in rapid succession. We had no idea there was about to be a bend in the road.

Shortly after the birth of our fourth baby, Duane went in for routine gall bladder surgery. It would be the last time our lives would be “routine” in any sense of the word. White spots on his liver prompted further tests that revealed the unthinkable: terminal pancreatic cancer. Our oldest son was only six and the youngest was barely eight months old. This could not be happening!

People began to pray and the doctors called to say that it might not be cancer after all. Nevertheless, Duane continued to decline as medical teams struggled to find the root of the problem. When he was accepted for a liver transplant, we grasped at new hope. The operation went much faster than expected but it was not a good sign. I listened in disbelief as the surgeon explained that Duane’s body was so riddled with cancer there was nothing more they could do. Just after Christmas in 2008, my husband passed away, leaving a gaping wound in my heart.

Without the support of both our parents and the amazing compassion of our church and community, I could never have made it through the devastating grief of those terrible days. In so many ways, God was there, reminding me that I was not alone, that he would be a “father to the fatherless.”

As time passed, I realized that the boys needed the influence of an older man in their lives so I began to pray. My friends were busy raising their own children and did not have the extra time, but God had a plan. One day Grant Gillespie, a single father in the community, called to say that he only had his three boys every other week and would be willing to help out in between.

That started a new relationship, not only for my children, but for me as well. God provided room in my heart to love again and blessed me with a second marriage to a man who accepted me as I was and embraced our blended family of seven sons.

Once all of the boys were in school, it seemed like a good time to consider the dreams that had been temporarily set aside. I had always enjoyed photography and design, so after looking into Prairie’s Digital Media Program with much prayer and consideration, I signed up and became a college student once again. My studies have opened doors I could never have foreseen, including freelance work, commercial and family photo shoots, promotional designs and video productions. I love the challenge of coming up with a unique idea and presenting it in a new or dramatic way.

I have learned that trusting the Lord and having a positive attitude makes all the difference when life does not go as you had planned. After seeing how God has been so faithful to me in the past, I can look forward with confidence to the adventures he has in store for me in the future.
How an airport encounter and a trip to Walmart changed me forever

Craig Groeschel

Technology is changing the way we relate to people. The term *friend* has evolved to even mean someone you’ve never met but who has access to your social media online. We’re more connected online, but less compassionate about real people’s needs and more isolated as the depth of our relationships decreases.

Evidence seems to indicate a strong correlation between sharing popular ideas and the decline of compassion as a shared cultural value. Some cause or crisis shifts into the spotlight for a brief fifteen minutes of fame. Then people lose interest in it when something else comes along, as if this new thing somehow means the first issue is no longer significant or worth pursuing.

Recently two hundred schoolgirls were kidnapped by a militant group in Nigeria and disappeared into the jungle. A handful managed to escape and told their harrowing story, which captured the heart of the world. Everyone was talking about it. Tragically, as I write, those girls are still missing. But I don’t know anyone who is still talking about them, still urging others to do something. It was hot. Until it wasn’t anymore.

Why would engaging more with social media cause people to care less about others? First, it turns pain into popular causes that are easily abandoned. Second, it makes us more obsessed with ourselves, and third, it conditions us to care less about other people because we become desensitized over time. The more often we see pain, the harder it is for us to care each time we’re exposed to it.

When some new guacamole recipe is followed immediately by an article about a football player who beat up his girlfriend, followed immediately by a funny cat video, followed immediately by an article about an innocent reporter beheaded somewhere in the world, our brains struggle to distinguish which thing is most important. I don’t have to consider the plight of other people dealing with disease, dirty water, terrorism, or abuse. With a quick click, I can ignore it and shop for a new Keurig on Amazon instead. We can simply text, chat, post, or tweet messages without having to look anyone else in the eye. I’m just one more observer, watching as your life drifts by in my feed.

But why *should* we care, if no one else does? Because if we have chosen to follow Christ, then we need to understand that God implores us to love others just as he has loved us. True compassion demands action. If you say that you care but then don’t act, it’s the same as not caring at all. We see on Facebook that someone is going through a hard time so we acknowledge their pain by giving them our Like. But clicking isn’t caring. Truly caring means getting ourselves involved so we can make a difference in a life. Caring is not Liking a post; it’s loving a person.

Jesus is the best example of how this concept is lived out. In every verse in the Gospels where we see Jesus and the word *compassion* together, we immediately see him perform some action. He was there, he felt compassion, and he did something. Every single time.
I believe it’s unacceptable for those of us who call ourselves God’s people, his church, to just sit by and not act when we’re surrounded by people in need. It boils down to this: the more I obsess over social media, the more I care about me and the less I care about other people. But the more I focus on Jesus, the less I care about me and the more I care about his people.

Believe it or not, even though I am a pastor, I don’t feel like helping other people 24/7. A few years ago I’d been speaking all day at an event in another city. I was exhausted and found myself stuck in the Kansas City International Airport late on a Thursday evening, waiting for a long-delayed connecting flight. All I could think about was how tired I was and that I just wanted to get home to my family. I sat away from the crowd, trying to read quietly until the plane was ready.

All of a sudden, a woman was standing in front of me, trying to get my attention. “Oh, my goodness!” she said. “You’re my pastor! I can’t believe you’re here!”

I looked up, forced a smile and chatted politely for a minute, but not much more. After some small talk, she awkwardly said goodbye and walked away slowly. I went back to my book and tried to find where I had left off before she interrupted me. Almost instantly, God’s Spirit shook me out of my selfishness. I could feel him urging me, “We’re not done here. Go find that woman and talk to her!”

I closed my book and started looking around for her. She was sitting by herself, just kind of staring off into space. I cleared my throat, and she turned to look at me. “Please forgive me,” I said. “I’m really sorry. Was there something you wanted to talk about?”

She immediately burst into tears and her story came gushing out. Through sobs, she explained that she was on a business trip, that she didn’t usually drink much alcohol, but that last night she drank way too much. Then she blurted, “I’m married, and last night I cheated on my husband, and I don’t know what I’m going to do.”

I prayed silently and then said, “God must really care about you. I don’t think it’s any coincidence that we just happened to run into each other, here in some airport in a city where neither of us lives. Do you?”

She shook her head. “I guess not. I hope you’re right.”

I talked with her for a few minutes, then called a counselor I knew and they made an appointment to meet in person when she got home. Finally I told her, “Okay, now you need to confess this to your husband.” She agreed, and we planned a time when she would do it: 10:00 a.m. on Saturday morning. I prayed with her and promised I would pray again on Saturday morning and that we’d follow up the week after. We went our separate ways and I didn’t see her again.

A couple of days later, it was Saturday. My daughter had a dance rehearsal that morning on the other side of town. After dropping her off I remembered, “Oh, yeah. It’s 10:00. Time to pray.” There in the parking lot in my car, I prayed for the woman and her husband, then wondered what to do for the next two hours. The thought suddenly came to me, “I should go to Walmart!” There was one nearby, but you need to understand: I don’t usually go to Walmart. I’d rather go to a pet store and look at cats. But I just couldn’t shake this idea that I needed to go to Walmart, so that’s what I did. I walked in and just wandered around until I turned a corner and almost bumped into a guy. We looked at each other for a split second and then his mouth dropped open and he blurted, “You’re my pastor! I can’t believe you’re here!”

He grabbed me and started sobbing into my shoulder. Between heaves, he managed to get out, “Thursday night you were in Kansas City in the airport…and my wife was there…and she confessed to you…and she just told me this morning that she cheated on me. I didn’t know what to do…so I came to Walmart…and now you’re here.”

I put my arm around him and let him cry. Then I said, “Let me ask you something. Do you realize how much God cares about you? He delayed my flight to get me stuck in the same airport where your wife was so we could have that conversation. Then he sent me here into this Walmart on a Saturday morning as your pastor so I’d be here for you. I don’t know what you’re going to do. But I can tell you this: your marriage must be really important to God and I believe with all my heart that he wants to heal it, if you’ll just let him.”

That story still amazes me. The couple went to counseling. He forgave her. They worked through their differences. God healed their marriage.

I cannot tell you how many times I have missed divine opportunities because of my selfishness, doing what I wanted to do instead of being open to interruption by the Holy Spirit. When you get outside of yourself, God changes lives. But sometimes he does what you least expect—the life he changes the most is yours. We don’t have time to take endless selfies and obsess about the wording of our latest brilliant caption when we’re caring for someone else.

The greatest weapon the first-century followers of Jesus had was their love for each other. Can you imagine? The skeptical world looking on was thinking, “You know, I’m not so sure about that whole Jesus-being-raised-from-the-dead-business, but I sure wish I had what they have. They love each other and care for each other.”

That’s exactly what Jesus said would happen: “Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples” (John 13:35 NLT).

They won’t know that you’re his disciple by how many followers you have or how quickly you respond to emails or how many Bible verses you post. No, they will know that you’re Jesus’ disciple when they see his love in you through your actions. When you get involved in the lives of other people, when you open up your heart and do life with them—that’s when they’ll see something in you that they really want.

Others won’t know you by your Likes. They will know you by his love.

You’re my pastor!” he blurted.

I can’t believe you’re here!”
I waited silently as the technician pored over a grainy image on the ultrasound screen. Finally she spoke: “How do you feel about twins?”

“That would be my worst nightmare!” I said with a laugh, wondering why she would even ask.

Three weeks earlier my doctor had confirmed that Andreas and I were expecting our first child. A pregnancy in the first year of marriage wasn’t part of our carefully-laid plans and we were still in a state of shock. We had met at Prairie Bible College where I was training as a pilot and my husband was taking biblical studies. When I moved to Vancouver after graduation in 2011, Andreas followed and we were married in 2013. The road map we had laid out for our lives didn’t include children for another five years, but just eight months later we found ourselves facing the unexpected. I felt guilty over my lack of enthusiasm toward this new season and was totally oblivious to the beautiful gift that God was offering.

We arrived at our first ultrasound with a mixture of nerves and cautious excitement, ready to meet this tiny “interruption” to our lives. But when the technician turned the screen toward us and pointed out, not one, but two little miracles, our shock turned to pure joy. Washed with an incredible sense of peace, we didn’t care that those man-made plans had just dissipated before our eyes. Life had taken a drastic detour and our family had doubled in size overnight, yet somehow it felt so right.

We stumbled out of the appointment with a fistful of fuzzy ultrasound photos and the reassurance that One greater than us was holding this pregnancy in the palm of his hand. Upon discovering that I was carrying identical twins, the hospital quickly slapped a “high risk” label on us, but we barely felt it. With each ultrasound, the technicians were amazed at how well the boys and I were doing and I went naively through each day as if untouchable. After all, God had orchestrated this entire experience. How could anything go wrong?

We breezed through seven months of doctor’s check-ups and everything seemed perfect. But one stifling July day when rambunctious flips and robust kicks suddenly faded into subtle flutters, I knew in my heart that something was wrong. I was now on maternity leave and we had spent the week getting the boys’ room ready: two cribs built, two car seats and a double stroller unpacked in the living room. I told myself that my fears were unwarranted. Perhaps my boys, Alistair and Landon, were just having a slow day. And yet I couldn’t contain my growing sense of unease.

The limited movements continued, however, and we finally drove to the hospital. In the examination room, I felt a sudden stomach-stretching kick from Landon and was momentarily relieved. I didn’t realize it would be the last time I ever felt my son move. I didn’t know that he was saying goodbye and that this one final moment with my little boy would become one of my most treasured memories.

Moments later I lay in a sterile hospital bed as a monitor beeped furiously and we watched helplessly as Landon’s heart rate began to plummet. The doctor looked me in the eye: “We need to get the boys out now!” Everything switched to fast forward as we flew down the hall and into the operating room.

This wasn’t part of our carefully-laid plans.

I WAITED SILENTLY AS THE TECHNICIAN PORED OVER A GRAINY IMAGE ON THE ULTRASOUND SCREEN. FINALLY SHE SPOKE: “HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT TWINS?”

“That would be my worst nightmare!” I said with a laugh, wondering why she would even ask.
room, leaving a stunned Andreas standing outside. Oxygen was pressed over my face and the world around me faded to black. I awoke an hour later, fighting through the heavy fog of anesthesia to choke out a single syllable. “Twins...?” I slurred as the room spun.

Andreas came in with tears streaming down his face and spoke four words that changed our family forever: “Honey, Landon went Home.” He collapsed on the bed beside me and the two of us sobbed, utterly broken. The medical team had done everything they could for our son but it was no use. My tears bathed his still warm face as Landon was laid in my arms, a bundle of sweetness wrapped in a pale green hospital towel.

Alistair had been taken to the NICU, not yet breathing on his own, but stable. It was almost 2:00 am before we got to see him, a tiny bird covered in tubes and wires, monitors beeping, machines breathing for him. He, too, had been in rough shape but this little one was fighting his hardest to survive.

The next morning, numb from grief and lack of sleep, we were informed that while in the womb the boys had developed sudden and acute Twin to Twin Transfusion, a syndrome that occurs only with identical siblings. A connection had developed between the blood vessels of the boys’ shared placenta and blood had shuttled from one baby to the other. Landon’s little heart couldn’t handle the additional pressure and failed. The doctors struggled for half an hour to find a heartbeat or tiny breath, but it was too late. He was gone.

When Landon’s heart failed, a piece of mine went with it. From the maternity ward I watched as families proudly headed home with their newborns. They smiled broadly in my direction, inviting me into their joy. I desperately wished to share in their excitement, but couldn’t seem to get further than the fake smile twisted on my face. This was their direction, inviting me into their joy. I desperately wished to share in their excitement, but couldn’t seem to get further than the fake smile twisted on my face. I felt robbed and envious of the firstborn in our arms and the utter joy surrounding the precious gift we were allowed to keep. I felt that would become all too familiar over the next few weeks.

We went about planning a funeral for one son while making daily visits to our other beautiful three-pound baby in the NICU. Through the blur of hospital trips and casket choices, we were overwhelmed with contrasting emotions: the pain of holding a lifeless firstborn in our arms and the utter joy surrounding the precious gift we were allowed to keep. Nothing prepares you for when the happiest and the darkest day of your life blends into one.

That summer, it seemed as if everyone had a baby. My Facebook newsfeed was flooded with pictures of happy mothers with their newborns. These were supposed to be my pictures too, unmarred by acrid sorrow and intense grief. I felt robbed and envious of the happiness of those women, and guilty that I couldn’t feel that same surge of emotion for my surviving twin. Overwhelmed by the initial grief and exhausted by the energy it took to get through each day, I mostly just felt numb.

As the months passed, however, and the strangling weight of grief began to slowly lift, I realized that I wasn’t being fair. My expectations of how a new mother should look and feel were based on glowing Facebook photos taken during moments of unblemished bliss. Comparing my experience to these sunny, one-sided pictures only stirred up feelings of inadequacy, envy and guilt; but these snapshots don’t tell the whole story.

We fill our social media accounts with our smiles, incredible highs, and once-in-a-lifetime moments. But rarely do we post photos that show the pain of infertility, postpartum depression, miscarriage, still birth, gestational diabetes, children with disabilities, and pregnancies lived in fear. For many, however, this is what real motherhood looks like. I had been too overwhelmed with grief to see that behind the smiles were women whose journey was just as messy and imperfect as mine.

It’s okay to have an imperfect story, to not feel the way you’re supposed to feel, to curl up in a ball and cry until there are no more tears. It’s okay to be angry, exhausted or confused. And when the day comes that you begin feeling happy again, that’s okay too, because as we struggle to stop comparing and simply embrace, we begin to be satisfied with the story that we’ve been given, one that is complete despite all its imperfections. Mine doesn’t read the way I thought it would. But even with its jagged edges and soggy, tear-stained pages, it’s my beautiful love story of hope, restoration, and the faithfulness of a steadfast God who can use this brokenness for his glory and bring joy to a weary heart.

After a six-week stay in the NICU, we brought our miracle baby home from the hospital but it didn’t make our grief any less. My arms weren’t empty, but they weren’t full either. I felt frustrated by a “perfect” pregnancy that had shattered so unexpectedly. I wished for memories with my boys that didn’t include funeral planning and prolonged hospital stays.

I hated that a little one was missing but no one could see it, that while other mothers adjusted to life with one, I had to adjust to life without one. And yet, through the confusion, anxiety and pain, there remained an offer of unwavering hope. Wrapped in the loving embrace of a faithful Father, we found his presence amidst our loss and it was clear that his hand was at work through the joy and the pain. In this tear-flooded valley, he remained by our side to teach, strengthen and carry us through.

I longed for the day that I was given with both my sons, to carry, love, protect and pray for them. This is the story that I’ve been given and I will treasure each moment of it. And as I gently rock one son to sleep, I hear the whispered promise of an incredible heavenly reunion that awaits our family.

I long for that day.
For twenty-nine years, our son Steve has been single. He flew the coop nine years ago and landed in a coop of his own. He learned to keep it clean, to do his own laundry, and, when offered the option of cooking or starving, he discovered how to make Kraft Dinner. And waffles.

Still, he’s been searching for a wife. He had more dates than a palm tree. They came from surfing online, surveying the field, fishing the pond. Some fish he threw back in. Some threw him back in.

“What do you look for in a wife?” he asked me one day as he stood at our fridge considering the possibilities. “Well,” I told him, “you could put a classified ad in the newspaper. I did years ago. It said, ‘Wanted: good woman with tractor. Please send picture of tractor.”’ Steve laughed. And showed me a list he had created: “Things I Would Like in a Wife.”

With his permission, here it is: Must love Jesus, must love kids, strong character, compassionate, must be crazy about me. Then came the secondary stuff: Athletic, musical, adventurous, confident… The list went on for a while. You could never fault the boy for setting his sights too low. And off he went with tackle box and fishing pole.

There were times he’d walk through our door with a grin to tell us about a girl he met. “I think she likes me,” he’d say. “Maybe she’s the one.” There were days the tears would come as a relationship fell apart. It’s not easy being a dad, watching your son’s heart break. “Maybe I set my sights too high,” he admitted. “Maybe love is about compromise. What if that girl on my list is just a mythical creature? Maybe I just need a good tractor.”

 Mostly we prayed for him, as we’d done almost every day since he was born. But one day he put aside his fishing pole. I don’t know how else to put it. He stopped chasing girls and started chasing Jesus. Something happened. There was a measurable change overnight. He loved telling others what Jesus had done in his life. Random people. In malls. On park benches. He did it in a way they loved. And there was contentment in his eyes. “Maybe the boy was designed to be single,” I told my wife. “The Apostle Paul was. Jesus, too.

Then he saw Dallas. Sitting one row behind him at a conference, worshipping Jesus. He didn’t know she served as a youth worker at a large church, or that a mutual friend would set them up, or that two weeks later they’d be sitting in a restaurant talking about things that matter. “She’s all those things on my list and more,” he told me. The boy could hardly walk in a straight line for three months.

Last July 31, he dropped to one knee on a mountain peak after a stunning sunset. Four friends provided background vocals as he serenaded her. They started out too high, and Steve sounded like the Bee Gees as he sang, “Dallas, will you marry me?”

She didn’t hesitate. “Of course I will,” she said.

Ask Steve and he’ll tell you the wait hasn’t been easy, but it’s been worth it. “Be patient,” he’ll say, “and don’t compromise. Seek Jesus first and don’t stop praying. God hasn’t forgotten you.” One of Steve’s favorite Bible verses is Matthew 6:33: “But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”

This is not some surefire guarantee for people seeking a vending-machine God. It is a reminder that God already knows what we need, and the more we live rightly, seeking him, the more we discover that our plans will line up with his, and they will be very good.

And now you’ll have to excuse me. I have a wedding to prepare for. My son has finally hung up his fishing rod for good, put on a suit and is about to step away from our fridge. He’s even thrown out that list. “She doesn’t own a tractor,” he told me, “but I think I can overlook that.”

Steve and Dallas were married this past November. Phil is the host of Laugh Again Radio. Check it out at philcallaway.com
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