

Part 1 — In the Valley

Chapter 1

I'm Sorry

I am weary with my sighing; every night I make my bed swim, I dissolve my couch with tears. My eye has wasted away with grief (Ps. 6:6-7).

“I’m sorry.” Two very small, very used words. But, oh, the meaning those words can hold! Those two words, “I’m sorry,” can change the course of a person’s life forever, especially when connected to the loss of a child. Your child.

“I’m sorry” can come very early, even before the actual birth of a child, in the form of a miscarriage. Those words can ring in the ears of parents at birth when the beautiful baby they expected to take home with them has no life. Stillborn. “I’m sorry.” Those words can echo in a parent’s heart when a healthy child so full of beauty and life, takes a nap, never to wake again. The stealthy robber of young life, Sudden Infant Death Syndrome, takes your baby. “I’m sorry” can come later in life when a child has a totally unexpected accident, an accidental poison overdose, a fall into the swimming pool, or a disease that so fiercely attacks and just refuses to let go. “I’m sorry.” Two words we very rarely like to hear. Two words we never want to hear when they are about our child.

Sometimes the bearer of the news is gentle; sometimes very abrupt. It really doesn’t matter. The heart is still pierced and left with a gaping hole. A hole that hurts like nothing else in this

world. There is no easy way to hear those words or gentle way to live with them. Not now, anyway.

In talking with many, many parents, I have found that the hardships of life itself can be brutally cruel. The stories that have been shared from each one who has suffered child loss have been heart-wrenching. Just hearing the words that a child has died brings most of us to our knees in tears. Children are not supposed to die. Especially not now. Not our children.

My own heart has been torn at several different times, and each time I heard those words, "I'm sorry," I wanted to run away. Scream. Hit something. Do anything to make the hurt go away. I wanted to go to bed for a long, long time and wake up to find out that it was only a bad dream. But, the bad dreams never go away. Never totally.

One of the saddest stories told to me was from a young lady that I didn't even know. She was working as a sales clerk at a store, watching me try to school shop with three of my very excited little ones. She began making small talk about how patient I was with the children. They seemed to be all over that store, and into just about everything. After exchanging the usual talk about school shopping, I asked the question, "Do you have any children?" "Yes," she said. And then the tears began to flow. She gave birth to a beautiful, perfect son 12 years ago, and all of life was wonderful. She bathed him one evening, rocked him to sleep as usual, and he slept through his night feeding. She awoke from habit, and peeped into the nursery. All looked well, so she enjoyed an extra hour of sleep. When he still had not woke up by 7:00 a.m. she decided to wake him. After all, he needed to be fed, and she wanted to hold him. He was adorable! As she touched him, she knew immediately. There would be no pulling him to her breast for a morning feeding. His little body was cold and so, so still. No movement. No waking. Only the silence that comes with death.

The next thing she remembers is her husband standing by her side as the paramedics placed her little son in a black bag and zipped it shut. She said that she wanted to scream, but nothing came out. Only bitter, bitter tears would fall.

The worst was not over, though. Because her son had died at home, the parents had to be questioned about their baby's death. She said the questions were at times accusatory in nature and

harsh in content. After an hour of painful questioning, it was concluded that her beautiful son had died in his sleep of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome at the age of six months. He was gone. Forever. And “I’m sorry” was the best that the hospital staff could do. It was all that anyone did.

This young lady went on to tell a bittersweet story. It was a long journey from her tears to this day of talking to me, from her days of not wanting to get up and move, to getting a job and trying to live again. She and her husband had always wanted a large family. After five difficult, trying years she got pregnant again, and she delivered a two and one-half pound baby girl prematurely. Even though the little girl was a fighter, it was almost one entire year before she was ready to be released from the hospital. Instead of being a wonderful, peaceful, joyous time, it was a year of deep anxiety, never knowing from day to day if this little girl would live or die. There was a separation from her baby. And fear. That awful, crippling fear. A constant fear that none of her friends or family seemed to understand. A fear that she would lose this baby, too.

Twelve years later, she and her husband have their little girl, and no other children. She explained that for some unknown reason she cannot get pregnant again. She has had all of the fertility testing done. She’s had genetic counseling. But nothing. No other children. The questions still come, though. She explained that her family and friends still tease her constantly about having another child. She said she wants to scream, “Don’t you understand? I can’t. I just can’t!” Being unable to conceive again only adds to her grief. Shattered dream after dream. A heart that has been broken in two.

I asked if she got any help or ever attended any grief support meetings, and she quietly said she had not. She said, “At first I just couldn’t be around other people. All I did was cry. Everyone kept saying to just have another baby, and I would feel better. That would take the hurt away. But, of course, I know that another baby doesn’t take the hurt away. What helped? My faith. My prayers seemed to be the only thing that got me through.

“But, there’s my husband. Our son’s death is a closed issue with him. He refuses to talk about it. So I try to smile and be happy, but inside I feel so alone, and it still hurts so, so much. Thank you for listening.”

This conversation took place over a year ago now, and it still haunts me. This young family suffered a severe blow to the heart, and there just didn't seem to be the kind of help available to them that they needed. The pain is still there, still hurting, still throbbing every day. But the grief is so silent now. No one seems to even understand. So why should they continue to bare their feelings and their souls to people, only to be hurt time and time again by people who do not feel what they feel? They simply find it easier not to talk.

Why did this young lady share her deep feelings with me, a total stranger? I wondered about that for a long, long time. The answer was in her closing words: "Thank you for listening." I did not have anything new to tell her that she had not already heard hundreds of times before. But I did listen. Hold on to that thought because it will be most important throughout the rest of this book. It is so very important to have someone who will listen. And to listen without passing judgment. God listens, and allows our tears to fall. He tenderly pays attention to each tear, and allows us time to really hear those words, "I'm sorry." This young lady and her husband need listeners, even 12 years after the death of their little boy. God listens. Why can't we?

Many may be wondering at this point why very early child loss is even brought up in this book. After all, in cases such as miscarriage parents haven't even seen their child, or named their child. We can somehow understand slightly the brief passing of pain with the SIDS baby, but miscarriage . . . that's another story. Most times, when child loss occurs very early in pregnancy, the gender of the child is not known. Many physicians will use the term "fetal tissue." A woman will say, however, "baby." Many may ask what the big upset is with losing a baby that you have never seen, held, or heard. The woman's body will be back to functioning normally again in six to eight weeks, and she can try to have another child if she so desires. Besides that, the rate of miscarriage is at least 20 percent of all pregnancies, and possibly higher. To many people, miscarriage is just a percentage — a number. Ask the mother and father who have suffered a miscarriage, and they may tell you something quite different. They experience a very painful loss. A grievous loss. And so few people can even begin to understand.

It is probably extremely difficult to understand a couple's grief over early child loss unless you have personally been there, or know someone close to you who has been there. While the number of miscarriages are high, very few people will talk about them. Why? Child loss at any stage is a difficult topic to discuss, even between the couples who have themselves suffered the loss. Also, most people are made to feel uncomfortable around someone who cries, or who says that they are grieving. We would much rather talk about the weather than the loss of a child. The weather changes from day-to-day; child loss is here forever. And, there is the age-old belief that one should be able to quickly brush one's self off, pick up the pieces, and get on with life. In the case of miscarriage, the underlying belief seems to be that if you just have another baby immediately all will be well. I really wish that this misconception could be straightened out. You can never replace babies or children of any age. Yes, having another baby can bring joy to your life, but in no way does that child ever, ever replace your loss. Never. And for those couples who can no longer conceive, this idea of having another child is devastating to their grief.

My first miscarriage was a total nightmare, and has had a bearing on my entire life. My first pregnancy was a breeze. I delivered a perfect 8 pound, 8 ounce baby girl. I barely experienced morning sickness, and I only gained 20 pounds during pregnancy. My husband and I were as proud and happy as any couple could be. We always wanted a large family, so a year after Michelle was born, we decided to have another baby. I got pregnant immediately, had my first prenatal visit, and life was wonderful — until January 8. I noticed a tiny bit of a blood stain in my underwear. I looked in my little pregnancy book that the doctor had given me, and there was one very brief paragraph titled "Miscarriage." To tell you the honest truth, I did not even know what a miscarriage was. All that was said in the book was that some pregnancies end early. If you experience any bleeding, contact your doctor. I didn't consider a speck of blood to mean bleeding, so I went on through the day as usual.

Towards evening, however, I now had red blood, but not much. We were in the process of moving, so I thought that maybe I lifted something too heavy which caused slight bleeding from a strain. I briefly mentioned seeing some blood to my husband before going to bed. Neither one of us got upset. After all, the