

ONE REALITY

Do you remember the day you discovered your life wasn't going to turn out quite the way you thought?

It happens to everyone sooner or later.

All of us have had dreams, wishes, goals, and expectations that, for a variety of reasons, have not come to fruition.

Plans fizzle. Expectations come to nothing. Trusted people let us down—or we let ourselves down. Dreams shatter or slip away.

Has it happened to you?

Plan A comes to an abrupt stop, and you're not sure if there even is a Plan B.

Maybe the realization hits you in the form of illness or even death—a terrifying diagnosis, a sudden descent into the world of hospital beds and IVs, the sudden loss of a close friend or family member. Maybe it involves a disillusioning church experience or a financial reversal.

Or maybe your shattered dreams come with divorce papers. You expected to finish your life with the partner you married. But your marriage is ending, and you're hurt and disappointed.

I recently met with a woman from our church who had been “happily” married for almost twenty-five years. Three days before our meeting, she had found an e-mail that caused her to start questioning her husband. Over the next several hours, he confessed to a

sex and porn addiction that included dozens of affairs over the past twenty years. I'll never forget the look on that woman's face as she sat in my office mourning the betrayal of her trust and the devastation of her dreams.

But your broken dream may be completely different. Maybe, like my friend Dana, you just knew you would be married by now and have a family, but it's just not happening. Dana desperately wants to meet the man of her dreams. On several occasions she thought she had met *the one*, only to be disappointed. Now every wedding she attends is a reminder that life isn't turning out the way she expected.

Keith and Sheila feel the same way when they receive a birth announcement or shower invitation. Their first Sunday at Cross Point Church, where I pastor, they asked me to pray with them. They desperately wanted to have a child, but for some reason Sheila couldn't get pregnant. That was four years ago. Despite continued prayers and several procedures, they are still without a baby.

Do you have a career dream that keeps being frustrated? Maybe you trained as an engineer, but the economy is bad, and no one is hiring. You are convinced God wants you to go into ministry, but no doors are opening up. You were sure you were destined for the corner office, but you're stuck in the cubicle. You've always wanted to be your own boss, but you just can't get a business off the ground.

Or you might be like my friend Brian. He's a great guy that has so much to offer to people around him. He really wants to be involved with ministry in some way, but he wrestles with a drug addiction. Brian has been through several treatment centers and regularly attends twelve-step meetings, but every day is still a struggle. "You know what, Pete?" he told me recently over lunch, "I'm never going to do what I want to with my life because of this problem. I've prayed and prayed and prayed. Why won't God take this addiction away from me?"

Sometimes our disappointments are clearly our fault—we made

a poor decision or took the wrong path. Sometimes another person's poor decisions are to blame. Sometimes, honestly, it's a little of both.

And then there are the times when life just seems to suddenly fall apart with no explanation. It seems totally random.

I was watching a movie the other night—one of those suspenseful, edge-of-your-seat films. I'm not a big fan of that kind of movie because they tend to stress me out. But at least the movies give fair warning when something terrible is about to happen. The camera angles shift, the music grows sinister, a shadow looms. Something tells you, "Watch out."

Don't you wish life was this way? But it's not, is it? It's not even close. Because often our dreams seem to shatter when we least expect it. There's no warning. You can't explain it, you can't blame it on someone else. It just happens, another painful reminder that life can often be unexplainable.

It Happens to Everyone

If you're like so many people I know, your shattered dreams may have left you wondering if God is still actively involved in your life. You may wonder if he even cares or if you're too broken and bruised to be healed by him. You probably wonder quite a lot about what to do next.

No matter what has happened or how you feel, please know you're not alone. Because here's what I'm learning: everyone needs healing. Everyone.

Everyone has shattered dreams.

Every one of us has been let down and disappointed in one way or another.

And every one of us needs healing for our brokenness.

Everyone.

We all have this picture of the way our lives should be. And for

some of us the picture of the way our lives should be and the picture of reality is just a reminder our lives are not turning out the way we had hoped.

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We all have dreams, little or large. We all have expectations, reasonable or unreasonable. We all have this mental picture of the way our lives are going to be.

Isn't that true for you? In your mind you probably had it all planned—where you would go to school, whom you would marry, what your kids would be like, what kind of work would bring you satisfaction and purpose. Maybe you dreamed of the perfect house, perfect spouse, perfect two-point-three kids, perfect job. Maybe you saw yourself traveling the world or spending your life in service. Maybe you just hoped to be safe and reasonably comfortable.

Whatever you wanted for your life, if you're a Christian, you may well have assumed God wanted it for you as well. You might not admit it, even to yourself, but you were pretty sure God was going to sweep down and provide for you as only God could do.

The problem is, what you assumed was not necessarily what happened.

Nobody ever grew up thinking, *I'm going to get cancer at forty-one.* Nobody ever grew up thinking, *I'm going to get fired at fifty-seven.* Nobody ever planned to be divorced twice by forty-five or alone and depressed at age thirty-five. Nobody thought their child would end up in prison at age twenty.

You never imagined you wouldn't physically be able to have

children. You never imagined you'd get stuck in a dead-end job. You never imagined the word that might best describe your marriage would be *mediocre*.

But it happened, and you're frustrated. Or hurt. Or furious. Or all of the above.

And let's be honest for a minute. Part of what brings up such strong emotions is the fact that it feels like all the other people around you are achieving their dreams. Their lives seem so put together.

Everyone else is getting married. Everyone else is having kids. Everyone else is successful. Everyone else is healthy. Everyone else is happy in their marriages—or content and productive in singleness.

Does this sound familiar to you at all?

If it doesn't, it will eventually. Because as I have said, it happens to everybody.

So what do you do with a shattered dream? What do you do with an unmet expectation? What do you do when your life isn't turning out the way you thought life was going to turn out?

What do you do when you have to turn to Plan B?

That's what I want to explore in this book.

Because, to tell the truth, I need the answers as desperately as you do.

Grace

I would never pretend to know what you're going through. I would never assume that I understand the pain or confusion you may be experiencing. But I have personally experienced shattered dreams—I'll tell you about a few later. And I've walked with a countless number of people through unspeakable loss.

I planted my first church in Morgantown, Kentucky, just a few months after graduating from college. Not that I have a clue what I'm doing these days, but back then I was absolutely lost! I knew

God had called me to start the church, but I had never been a pastor, and I was only twenty-one years old. I had begun to work my way through seminary, but no seminary could ever fully prepare me for what I would experience as a new pastor.

Morgantown Community Church, although growing fast, was still a fairly small church the first few years I was pastor. The small size was a great fit for me because it allowed me to spend a lot of time with the people in our church. And some of my favorite people in that church were Dan and Kimberly Flowers. The church was only a year or so old at the time, and they had been there almost from the beginning. They were the perfect volunteers. They spent countless hours serving and were willing to do anything that was needed.

Then, all of a sudden, Dan and Kimberly just seemed to disappear. We didn't see them for several weeks. I called one afternoon to check up on them, and they invited me out to their house. They said they wanted to explain to me why they had stopped attending MCC. And they did. That night, over dinner, they very nervously told me they felt they couldn't come back to church because their unwed twenty-year-old daughter, Kelly, was pregnant.

That dinner was just the beginning of a sweet experience of grace for the Flowers family and our entire church. I told Dan and Kimberly that not only would they be welcomed back at MCC, but that nothing would make me happier than to see Kelly get involved as well.

They took me at my word. And I was so proud of our congregation over the next several months as they willingly and generously reached out to that family. Week by week as Kelly's pregnancy progressed, I could see her life being transformed by the love of God's people.

One of my proudest moments as a pastor was showing up one Saturday afternoon at the church office to get a little work done, only to walk in on a group of women holding a baby shower for Kelly. They were laughing and crying together, doing their absolute

best to help. Most of the women in that room couldn't have been more different from Kelly. And yet they were extending a love that was beyond themselves.

The highlight of the shower was a beautiful white dress with little pink flowers that one of the women had bought. Kelly was so excited. She immediately squealed, "This is the dress she's going to wear home from the hospital."

I remember getting into my car that afternoon thinking, *This is what God's church is all about!*

Since I had walked the path with this family, I asked Kimberly if she would please call me when Kelly went up to the hospital to have the baby. When the call came, I rushed out to the hospital, which was located about thirty minutes from our small town. I sat in the hallway waiting with Dan. I'm not sure which of us was more nervous. This was Dan's first grandchild, and it was my first time as a pastor walking a church member through this process.

While we sat there chatting, Dan asked me if I knew what Kelly had named the baby. He went on to tell me she had chosen to call the baby Grace, and he thanked me for everything the church had done to show God's love to Kelly. I just sat there in total amazement at everything God had been doing through our church and this family.

But then I started to notice an unusual amount of traffic going in and out of Kelly's room. And all of a sudden, Kimberly stuck her head out the door. "Please pray," she begged. "Something is terribly wrong."

My heart started to beat fast, and my hands got a little shaky. *What could possibly be going wrong? She's just having a baby.* For the next ten minutes Dan and I just sat there, not saying a word but praying like never before.

When Kimberly came out again, she was crying uncontrollably. She finally calmed down enough to tell us that Kelly's baby had been stillborn. Apparently the umbilical cord had wrapped around the

baby's neck. Despite the doctors' best efforts, they had not been able to resuscitate little Grace.

I would like to tell you in that moment I stepped up to the plate and did something really pastoral—quoted Scripture, perhaps, or led the family in a prayer. But I didn't. No words came to my mouth. No pastoral thoughts popped up in my mind. I just stood there in silence and watched Dan and Kimberly cry and hold one another.

Then Kimberly said those words that still make me nervous to this day when I think about the moment. She said, "Pete, Kelly would like to see you."

I remember thinking, *Like now?* I wanted to come up with an excuse and take off. I wanted to run and hide. I just knew I couldn't go in there. I didn't know what to say. I didn't know what to do.

I walked into the room completely ill prepared for that moment. I still remember how dark it seemed. There were no noises except for a faint beeping coming from one of the monitors. Most of the medical personnel had cleared out. And there was Kelly sitting on the bed, holding Grace.

I sat by her bed as she kept stroking the baby's head, speaking to her little girl as if the baby's lungs were full of air and the little heart was beating. After about an hour she looked at me with big tears in her eyes and simply asked, "Why?"

I didn't know what to say, so I didn't say anything.

"It just doesn't make sense," she added. "After all God has done over these past few months to restore my relationship with my parents and to show me who he is, why would it all end like this?"

I never answered her question that day—mainly because I didn't have a good answer. As I sit here almost twelve years later, I still don't know that I have a good answer.

I think we all have questions that plague our minds. For many people it's the basic question of "Does God exist?" I don't wrestle too

much with that one. In my opinion there is too much evidence of God's existence for me to spend very long questioning it.

No. The question that resurfaces for me again and again and again has more to do with all the unexplainable pain and hurt in this world. The greater struggle for me is that God does exist, yet so does a lot of pain and suffering. There are so many Kellys in this world. So many broken dreams. And while I've spent a lot of time studying and pondering, I have to be honest and say I'm still not sure I understand why.

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I stayed with Kelly and her parents the rest of the afternoon. There was very little conversation. Most of the time, we just sat there, silently praying and staring at one another in disbelief.

At one point Kelly decided she wanted to dress Grace before the funeral home came to pick up the body. They took the baby away in that pretty little white dress with the tiny pink flowers.

I cried the whole way home that night. I cried because I hurt for Kelly and her family. I cried because I didn't feel like praying. I cried because I couldn't understand why God would allow this.

Three days later, a handful of pallbearers would follow me carrying a little wooden casket up a hill where we would bury baby Grace. As we walked toward the hundreds of people gathered around that gravesite, I wondered, *How am I going to explain this to my church? How do I tell them God didn't show up!* The following question would haunt me for months: What do you do when God doesn't show up for you in the way you thought God was going to show up?

In a way, those questions still haunt me. But I've learned a few things since then that have helped. I've learned a few more things about the Plan Bs of life, mostly through spending time with people in the Bible who faced their own shattered dreams.

The Journey

I'm not sure where you are with your faith. You may not have a relationship with God. You may not believe in the Bible. But if that's true, I'm going to ask you to do me a favor. I'm going to ask you to suspend your judgment. I'm going to ask that you remain open-minded throughout this journey we take together, even though we'll be spending some time in the Bible. You might be surprised where you end up.

On the other hand, you may have grown up in the church. Maybe you've read the Bible all your life, but you've still reached a point where what you thought you knew doesn't seem to be working anymore. You're confused, lost, and possibly annoyed because God hasn't seemed to deliver the way so many over the years have promised you he would. I'm praying this journey provides a new perspective on the promises of God. I'm praying you won't jump to the end of some of these stories you've heard a million times, but will read with fresh eyes.

You know, I've never heard of anyone's journey of faith that hasn't had a Plan B story—a time in life when a person was going through something completely unexpected. A time when she felt as if God were a long, long, long way away if he existed at all.

Those were the times when the stories of Scripture suddenly became very personal.

So maybe, just maybe, there is some wisdom in these ancient Scriptures that could help you answer the "What now?" question. Maybe there are some truths that will unlock hope in your life once again. Maybe there is a way of life you've yet to discover.

I once read a statement that really struck me: “If you don’t change your beliefs, your life will be like this forever. Is that good news?”¹

Think about that for a second. Why did you pick this book up? Why did your friend give it to you?

You’re probably at a critical crossroads in your life where you’re trying to answer the “What’s next?” question or the “Why is this happening?” question. One thing you probably realize is something has to change. You need some answers. You need to change some patterns. Your hope needs to be renewed.

So who knows? Maybe this book could be the catalyst for you. The Bible is full of stories about everyday men and women whose plans didn’t work out. It’s full of people who were trying to figure out what to do with a life that wasn’t turning out the way they expected.

People like you.

People who really needed hope in the midst of a Plan B.