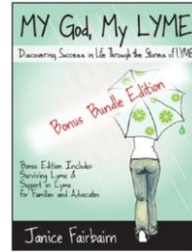


Free Excerpt “My God, My Lyme”

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The Valley of the Shadow of Death

I had a very vivid dream one night in the first few months of this illness. I was some sort of spy detective soldier person on a stakeout after some bad guys with my fellow team members. I got shot, but it luckily hit my bullet proof vest. They radioed in for help and kept telling me I was not going to die but would make it. As they were loading me in the ambulance, I distinctly remember telling one of my partners, “I can’t die yet; Lance (my husband) doesn’t know how to give the kids their supplements.”

Even in my subconscious thoughts I was wrestling how my husband and kids would survive in my absence. At that time, before we knew the kids had Lyme, we had been on a 4-year journey trying to duct tape together their health. Just like holding the antennae at just the right angle on one foot to get that TV signal, if we gave the kids supplements each day in the right amount and combination (27 total between the two of them) and the correct foods (they were both allergic to different ones) then we could get through the day and to the next one. Being the mastermind of this process, I researched went to doctors and created the plan, memorized the plan and executed the plan.

I was terrified that if I died, the kids would go to ruin because no one would be able to keep them duct-taped together in this system. So paranoid for my poor husband to have to do this upon my departure, that I called over a girlfriend and made her copies of the plan and educated her on the system just in case.

Tell me, dear one, what extreme plans and dire thoughts have you been having and wrestling with in this valley? Some are in denial and others are drawing up wills. When they say to prepare for a rainy day, they need to remind you not to do it in monsoon season.

I get it. For months, it genuinely surprised me that I woke up the next morning. On the days with the inability to sleep, shocked that morning ever came. I stood at death’s door for about three months. For months after that I lived in the yo-yo of relief and despair, back and forth. I

first wrestled with being there at all, too young, so suddenly, but soon the “why” portion of the struggle ended and I landed somewhere different.

- I had work left to finish – like raising my children
- I had unfinished business that had before gone unnoticed – the regrets of the undone
- I felt trapped between planning and unplanning

“How to live fully in each day but plan to live toward tomorrow. I get it. I get to live. How do we live fully so we are fully ready to die?” (Ann Voscamp in 1000 Gifts). It was here on this precipice of living fully but being fully ready to die that God had me. God placed me here to reconcile many things in my heart and to strip away all things not eternal. This forced me to focus on Him and His plans for my life.

Sure, I had unfinished business, but did I have unfinished business for the Lord or was it mine? I, I, I, me, me, me – The more I wrestled, the more self-focused I became. The more I prepared to be ready to die, the more it became obvious to me that my undone list was my own. My purpose in life needed to be refocused on things that mattered long after I was gone.

Do you want to live fully so you are fully ready to die? How do you balance this act of living fully and preparing fully? The juxtaposition frightens and overwhelms me.

A song by Steven Curtis Chapman echoes in my mind. “I’m living the next five minutes like they are my last 5 minutes, cause I know the next five minutes may be all I have. Every morning God gives is precious, every heartbeat, every breath I take. I’ll never have them back once they’ve left us.”

But how do I truly live out that concept? Does that mean no planning, no actual discipline, not washing dishes - how do you plan to not plan? A heart of gratefulness isn’t the most difficult part to achieve; marrying this to the reality of the disease becomes the quagmire I find myself in more often. Do I correct the bad behavior between siblings at breakfast? Do I plan to go on a school field trip? Do I plan to paint the kitchen cabinets, or rearrange the furniture? Do I plan a summer vacation not knowing how I will feel?

How do I prepare to die and live fully each day?

Journal Entry:

At a museum in London, there was a special showing of the work of Edward Munch, famous for his painting the Scream that is a cultural icon. I didn’t know much about his work or life before entering. He was a very troubled artist evidenced on the walls as I

walked through the show. I could see Munch's anguish build in his work. They had journal entries of his life placed on the wall along with the paintings as a timeline. Toward the end of his terrible life journey filled with tragedy and angst, I find myself standing in front of the infamous 'Scream'. Next to it was a journal entry that I now know by heart.

“Over the blue and black fjords, hung blood and tongues of fire and a loud unending scream was piercing nature.”

I had seen this iconic painting in culture and in art class, but as I stood in front of it, I heard it for the first time. I heard that cry from his soul in anguish. It was terrible, terrific and empty.

Is it any wonder that the human condition could survive anguish, physical or emotional or both without Christ? I felt that anguish; I have felt that unending scream pierce my own soul. I never fully comprehended David's words in Psalm 23 of “the valley of the shadow of death.” But let me tell you there is an unending scream in that valley of the shadow of death. An unending scream that resonates through every cell in the body and bounces and echoes off the walls of the soul.

The valley of the shadow of death was where I walked, where my steps have trodden. I always thought that once I felt God calling me home, I would be at peace and that because I knew my eternal destination, I would have no fear of death. Was I wrong? Why didn't I find peace and comfort in the heaven that awaited me? I don't know if it was because the timing felt so premature, or if I just felt unfinished work on earth, or missing my loved ones. But every cell in my body battled standing in death's door. I had many talks with God there and why I was at that point and how long I would be there. Finally, when the pain and anguish got so great that I reached the point of surrendering and begging for heaven. I thought I was resolved and would go, then He quietly told me 'no'. I was staying but I would stand where I was. The suffering was not over yet.

That is why David says a shadow accompanies death – it's a dark cloud, a panic cloud which is difficult to breath in, difficult to talk in, difficult to find a coherent thought in, impossible to see a way out or imagine making it another minute in.

I had asked and begged to stay and complete the work he gave me to do here on this earth, and now I had my answer. He granted my request but at such a high price that I wasn't sure I could pay it and complete the task. I was standing at death's door and told I

couldn't pass through but had to stand there indefinitely. All I knew is that he knew the number of my days; he knew this illness wouldn't kill me, and then he had to know how I would survive the rest.

Control is an Illusion

One summer after my freshman year of college, in my first apartment with a friend, we got the cable hooked up and received free HBO for one month. We watched Days of Thunder with Tom Cruise twice every day for months –no exaggeration. It was at the pinnacle of “hotness” in his career, and we swooned. Nevertheless, it turned out beyond hilarious to me that God used a line from this movie one day to get my attention. Cole, Tom Cruise, sustains an accident on the racetrack and becomes scared to race again. His doctor, now his new girlfriend played by Nicole Kidman, calls him on it. “Control is an illusion, you infantile egomaniac. Nobody knows what’s gonna happen next: not on a freeway, not in an airplane, not inside our own bodies and certainly not on a racetrack with 40 other infantile egomaniacs.” See, even cute guys couldn’t plan for accidents – life altering accidents.

I am an admitted control freak. Type A, workaholic, persistent to be in control of everything. This year, God ripped that out of my white- knuckled grip and quoted Days of Thunder to me in my frustration over the loss of this control. He knew how destitute, trapped and lost I was. For the first time, I didn’t know what would happen next. God answered me with “control is an illusion, you infantile egomaniac”. Control most certainly is an illusion. What I thought I was controlling before, I was not. My healthy body existed as a gift from God, not under my control because I ate right and exercised. It was not by my hand that I experienced good health and and it is not by my hand that I am not. I was never in control of anything; I just had to learn that I wasn’t.

Lyme disease didn’t simply have me feeling at a loss of control though. Lyme had me scared out of my mind. Fear had me grappling in the shadow of death. Fear over who would help my husband raise our kids and if they would do a good job. Who would make sure they knew how to tie their shoes, knew how to protect them, help them make friends and teach them good judgment, knew how to comfort each of their many tears, knew how to show them surrender, true control surrender – how to die to self and love the Lord?

But control does not exist, not here on earth by me. The Creator of the universe, however, is in control. Ann Voscamp says it best from 1000 Gifts “And it is only when our lives are truly emptied that we’re surprised by how truly full our lives were. The fullness of joy is discovered only in the emptying of our will.” Lyme disease emptied me to the bottom of my well.

The loss of control, the complete surrender changed everything. The curtain torn down, the rookie magician fired and the truth revealed. I had let God into some places, let Him handle the big stuff at times when life came to a crossroad, but I had controlled all the rest. I had not surrendered all of it. Not let Him have the little stuff, the plans, the stuff I could “handle.” I robbed God of the credit for the daily bread and the daily breath.

“Now listen you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money. Why you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, if it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that.’” (James 4:13)

I resolved to live within the boundary of His will. I resolved to make plans within the fences He lays up for my life. At the heart of my surrender came my need to plan.

I have made plans, a lot of plans. I am a plan-maker. At this point, I hesitated to begin, but I was ready to live again, prepared to look forward longer than one minute. My kids needed it, my family needed it, and I needed it. More importantly, God challenged me with life continued – but it would be on His terms. Now, when I make plans, my prayer became that He will allow or not allow them to take place and I will be okay with that.

Some plans worked out, while other fell by the wayside. I did get my kitchen cabinets painted with a friend’s help. I didn’t make it home to see my sister and my nieces last summer. Disappointment mitigates that hurt, but I am able to negotiate it because it was the Lord’s will. He closes doors that could be too much for me. I have limitations now. I live with a realization that I cannot do it all. This new arrangement is from the Lord and I trust Him. That trust in Him brings the peace to handle it no matter what.

In light of that thought, I must remember that I am “one breath away from eternity”, as Louie Giglio said so profoundly. My best advice is this: make plans; look forward, but live in the now. Don’t live in tomorrow’s plans, live in today and make plans for tomorrow. Bathe those plans in prayer and let God shut and open doors as He see fit.

Journal Entry:

He said this thing wouldn't take me and yet he holds me here on the precipice of life also with no healing, no forward movement and sometimes with regression I feel I am falling off it again.

I asked my counselor yesterday about this grappling with death thing that has kept me in conflict about my faith and eternal yearnings. Why wasn't I at peace at facing death? What was driving my reluctance, my fear of leaving so suddenly, so seemingly undone here? Why, if eternity has been placed in our hearts, in standing in the doorway of death, wasn't I ready to be with our Lord and Savior?

My counselor's answer was simple, and I don't know how I missed it. God planted eternity in our hearts, yes. But he also planted the human need to have breath on this earth and to do our work here. To be with family, to raise children, to share Christ with others. There is nowhere else in the space time continuum of heaven and earth that these things can be achieved. "We are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do works, that He prepared in advance for us to do." Eph 2:10

He breathes life into all things. Deut 32:39 "I put to death and I bring to life, I have wounded and I will heal." He gives breath, and until He takes it, we fight to keep it for the continuance of our souls.

We know in our most inmost beings that we cannot leave here without permission. It is He who gives and takes away. We cannot yearn not to breathe; it is against the DNA of our creator that we were made in the image of. He planted eternity in our hearts to give us that hope when we are discouraged, when this world gets too hard and we long for something better, to be released. What a beautiful dichotomy He knew we would need. To have the hope of heaven so we don't give up and to have the hope of life so we will fight to keep it and let it be blessed.

Death is Done

It occurs to me as I have typed it over and over again so far, that Lyme is the shadow of death. Not death itself. But the valley of the shadow of death. Just as we are under the covering God's wing, in the shadow of his protection. Why? Why did he hide Moses in the cleft of the rock? Because the very presence of God himself would be too much for our earthly bodies. Too much holiness, too much glory - so he protects us and only gives us a shadow.

The same remains true of death for the believer. We don't have to experience death. David purposely doesn't say "I walked in the valley of death", but the "valley of the shadow of death." Because that is all the power death has over us - a mere shadow.

Imagine being a prize fighting boxer and only having to experience the shadow of your opponent instead of the actual sting of his punches. Because that is all the power death has over us. We don't have to feel the punch or the sting or the agony of the hits.

How priceless is your unfailing love, O God! People take refuge in the shadow of your wings. They feast on the abundance of your house; you give them drink from your river of delights. For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light. (Psalm 36:7-9)

Please, hear this! Death has no power over us. Christ lives in me the hope of glory, the fountain of life. We will feast on the abundance. I will never, never have to walk in the valley of death because Christ did it for me on the cross. The only chance death has to scare me is to throw its shadow over me and loom there toward crisis as an empty threat. This valley of the shadow of death cannot grow worse from a spiritual standpoint. That is the bottom; that is the end of it. The shadow is all we will feel. End of the story. Christ walked through this valley, kept going and took all the pain of death for all mankind so we would not have to walk any farther.

Christ walks through it still.....with me, with you. And Christ does not fear the shadow. Walking through the valley with him means we can do it without fear.

"To shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace." (Luke 1:79)

"My body also will rest secure because you will not abandon me to the realm of the dead." (Psalm 16: 9)

The boundary has been laid, the line drawn in the sand. You don't have to take another step from here. He paid it forward for you. Death's door is closed, not open for business. Imagine that prize fight again - you standing in the opponent's shadow but not feeling a single punch. At the

end of the match, the winner is declared and it is you. It is you? The one who didn't take a punch, who only stood in the shadow? Who would fight and win this for you? Christ would. He did. He raises your arm in victory.

David says in Psalm 18:4-5 "The cords of death entangled me, the torrents of destruction overwhelmed me. The cord of the grave coiled around me, the snares of death confronted me." But then he says of God in verse 28-29 "You, O Lord, keep my lamp burning; my God turns my darkness into light. With your help I can advance against a troop; with my God I can scale a wall." David recognizes the strength of living in the light and so can you.

Because Christ conquered death, all we have to experience is this shadow. This doesn't mean downplay how bad the valley is. The shadow stands vicious and mean. As David said, the pain and agony of it entangle. It is horrible; it is horrific. But Christ has saved us from the worst. He has saved us from its vilest and most awful desolate parts.

We don't know about death because we don't have to. Death is done for the believer. Christ conquered death. Death is done; it's had its day. Let's put a contemporary slant on this.

For any of you Seinfeld fans I picture the Soup Nazi standing at death's door. Instead of sending people away saying "no soup for you", he is sending believers in Christ away saying "no death for you."

Not today. No death for you.

Death is done.

Sara Groves has a song called "What do I know" about an 88 year old friend who is afraid of dying. The song wrestles with faith at a young age, faith at an old age and what do we really know about dying. She ends the song with this "But I know to be absent from this body is to be present with the Lord, and from what I know of him, that must be pretty good."