ccording To His Purpose

A Dad's Journey Through Grief

DAN WAGNER

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The official Beachfest Santa Cruz brochure

A DAY AT THE BEACH

Luis Palau held his evangelical festival, Beachfest Santa Cruz, at Main Beach on Saturday and Sunday, September 22 and 23, 2001. Lynn and I and our two teenage daughters, Mandie, age 16, and Carrie, age 14, attended the Saturday event along with about 20,000 other people. Lynn had gone earlier that day to the prayer meeting, and the girls and I caught up with her in the afternoon.

I would like to say how wonderful Dr. Palau's amazing beach ministry was, listening to great music, eating fun food, and what it all meant to the Wagner family – but I just can't remember.

We left Beachfest that evening and headed for our car parked in a quiet neighborhood across from the trestle where we usually park to go to the Boardwalk. We drove up Cayuga Street toward Broadway, heading home to the Live Oak area.

A woman who was drunk and had coke and meth in her system had just picked up her two kids from a babysitter, and was driving her Suburban on Windsor Street toward Cayuga at almost 50 miles per hour, ran the stop sign, and crashed into us on the driver's side of our minivan. The impact sent us into a power pole and then onto someone's front yard. Lynn and I were rushed to the hospital.

Mandie and Carrie died in the van.

NEWS NO ONE WANTS

Neither Lynn nor I have any memories of the accident, and very few memories of that day. Lynn remembers leaving the prayer session before the Saturday festivities began, and hearing God's voice in her heart saying that it was not the worst thing in the world for a Christian to die. She wasn't sure why God spoke that to her, but she certainly didn't think it was meant for herself.

We woke up in Dominican Hospital, Lynn on Sunday morning and I on Monday morning. Lynn had three fractured ribs and a broken pelvis in two places that prevented her from putting any weight on one leg for about six weeks. I had torn cartilage in my chest, a sprained coccyx (tail bone area), a neck injury, and embedded safety glass in my face and arm that had to be removed later. Both of us had concussions. Lynn remembers that Luis Palau had visited Sunday morning before going back to Beachfest for the second day; I was still unconscious in the ICU.

My pastor has said that he told me about our girls right away when I seemed coherent – again, I don't remember. The first time I remember grasping it was when someone visiting me in my hospital room had said that they were sorry for my loss. I had asked, "What loss?" They told me I had lost my daughters. I remember sharing that news with others who came to visit as if it were a baseball score; it's amazing what shock and medications can do to your emotions.



Mandie and Carrie – friends as well as sisters. This was taken less than a month before the accident.

REINFORCEMENTS ARRIVE

My Mom and Dad in Oregon were called the night of the accident and drove down through the night. They had a key to our house and let themselves in, cleaned up a bit, and came to the hospital. My Dad told me the first thing he did when he checked on me in the ICU was reach for my legs to see if they were still there.

I remember how comforting it was to see them when my bed was finally wheeled into the room Lynn was already in. I remember also how good it felt to finally take a shower, which was located across the hall from our hospital room.

As I walked back in my robe toward our room, I saw a lady writing on the butcher paper the staff had taped to our door – apparently we were attracting too many visitors, so they were being asked to write notes on the butcher paper instead. The lady turned around and saw me reading what she was writing. I gave her a big hug and invited her in to see Lynn. Robyn now has her own story to tell of what God has done in her life through this accident.

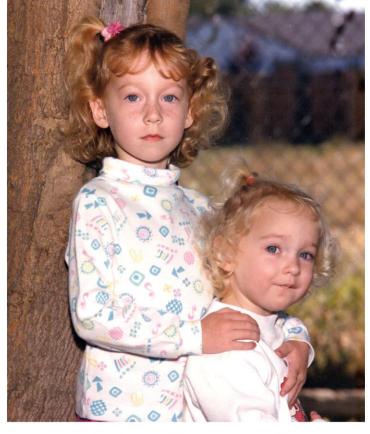
I was discharged to go home on Thursday but Lynn was sent to the Recovery Care Unit, located in the former Santa Cruz Community Hospital building where both Mandie and Carrie were born. She spent about a week and a half there letting her fractures begin to heal.

NOT ON THE SAME PAGE

Our pastor, Barney, performed an interment service for the girls at Holy Cross Cemetery on Friday, October 12, and a memorial service the following day at Twin Lakes Church in Aptos. At the interment, Barney could not contain his emotions as he spoke what was on his heart. The realization that the pain of losing the girls was not our pain alone, but was shared by everyone who knew and loved them, stunned me.

It seemed that everyone we knew came to the memorial service, including the guys I was working with at a hospital in Salinas. I remember being a little too exuberant when I saw the guys in the hallway before the service began, and later wondered what they thought of me and my apparent lack of grief. All I can say is, it's amazing what shock and medications can do to your emotions.

My Mom and Dad stayed with us for a couple of weeks. I would hear Lynn getting up each morning, and peek down the hall to see her and my Mom hugging and crying. I felt guilty because I wasn't yet suffering with the same level of grief Lynn was. I can now attribute that to a few things: the pain of my injuries, the narcotic pain meds I was taking, and the fact that I was no longer getting up at 5:00 in the morning to go to work all day, but staying home with the one I love. Eventually the pain diminished, I trimmed down on the meds, and the novelty of being home all day wore off. It took about a year; then it all broke loose inside of me. While Lynn was processing and healing, I was heading off in the opposite direction.



This is my favorite photo of Mandie and Carrie at this age.

MY TIME WOULD COME

We had been interviewed twice by the Santa Cruz Sentinel newspaper. In one article I was quoted saying, "I feel God's Holy Spirit is resting on me and allowing me to physically heal before I grieve." My time was coming soon.

I guess what triggered my anger and resentment toward God in those days were the Scriptures I kept running into, such as Ephesians 6:2,3 "Honor your father and mother – which is the first commandment with a promise – so that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth." Nobody had honored their parents more than Mandie and Carrie had, and yet that promise was not for them – why not?

And Psalm 1:6 "For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous..." Psalm 25:13 "...and their descendants will inherit the land." Proverbs 12:21 "No harm overtakes the righteous..."

Those promises didn't apply to us either, so why bother asking God for protection? In fact, why bother asking God for anything? If He couldn't or wouldn't protect my precious girls, how could I trust Him with anything else in my life?

Someone had told me it was OK to be angry at God – He's big enough to handle it. But what they didn't say was whether *I* was big enough to handle it. My depression deepened as I grieved the loss of my girls *and* my relationship with God.

GRACE A Free Verse Poem January 2004

[Shock]

I'm suddenly awake, startled. What I thought was a bad dream is now all too real. The pain – the awful pain! Oh God, where were You? You promised to protect us; how could You let this happen? Weren't You paying attention?

-Grace- I offer you grace.

[Despair]

Darkness deeper than I ever thought possible closes in on me like a stalker. My life is over; I have nothing left to live for. Oh God, I am so afraid I can hardly breathe! Why me? What did I do to deserve this?

-Grace- My love will conquer your fear.

[Anger]

My memories haunt me like some cruel joke; the joys of days past that made my life so wonderful bring me such agony now. Oh God, it hurts so bad! Do You care about me? Do You even know I'm here?

-Grace- Take hold of My grace.

[Mistrust]

The raging storm of grief is passing, but it has left me deeply wounded. I struggle now in trusting God. If I ask for more of Him, will he take more from me? I've lost so much; how much more can He take? What will God require of me next?

-Grace- Trust My grace.

[Discouragement]

The rains have stopped, but the darkness persists. What little sunlight that slips between the clouds reveals the extent of the damage in my life. There is much work to be done, exhausting work. Oh God, give me the strength to go on, to rebuild my life from this rubble; give me a reason to live.

-Grace- Let My joy be your strength.

[Healing]

God's merciful Grace. His peace slowly dispels the darkness; I can finally see beyond my pain. There is joy again in my precious memories. Yes, God does care for me, though I don't understand what He is doing or why. But I finally feel that I can trust Him again. Oh God, help me to stand and walk with You once more.

-Grace- Lean on My grace.

THE PERPETRATOR

Lisa, the other driver, was sentenced to state prison in March of 2002 for 7 years, 8 months. But in my mind, she was not the perpetrator – God was. Consider this hypothetical example: The four of us are taking a walk, and along a particular section of sidewalk a wall begins to rise. One of my daughters steps onto the wall and walks along it as it rises higher and higher above the sidewalk. A dog barks at her and scares her, causing her to fall toward the sidewalk. I'm standing right there, and could easily catch her if I choose to. I don't. I can understand my wife's rage at me, not the dog, for letting our daughter fall to the concrete and getting injured, and would be hard pressed to give her a reason for my inaction. These were my thoughts toward God. Why didn't He act to protect us? I was His child and had gone to church all my life. I was a good person and had even served in leadership. I and my family were entitled to His protection, weren't we?

I had conjured up an image, probably from watching too many war movies, of God as an Army general (like Patton), standing in the map room, drawing up strategies. He points to the map and says, "If we move this company of soldiers into this area and draw the enemy in, then we can move this brigade around the enemy and defeat them there." A colonel replies, "Yes, but you realize that these troops you're moving in will suffer great loss." God says, "Don't worry; I'll take care of that. But I'm not willing to let this opportunity for victory pass." This fantasizing has led me to believe that perhaps God, with the Big Picture in mind, isn't as concerned about our individual suffering and pain level (as we might think) as He is about saving people.

GOD'S REVELATION

I came to realize that I have a choice of what to believe about God, whether to believe my own thoughts and feelings or to believe the revelation God Himself gave us – the Bible.

My own thoughts and feelings want me to believe that perhaps:

God was powerless to stop the accident, or God did not know it was going to happen, or God was somewhere else and couldn't get to us in time; or God did not have the right to make that decision, or He simply didn't care.

Or I can choose to believe what He said about Himself in the Bible:

He is all-powerful – He could have stopped it;
He is all-knowing – He knew it was going to happen;
He is everywhere at all times – He was there then;
He is sovereign – He had all authority to stop it;
He is I was everything Cod does at allows in motivated by His law.

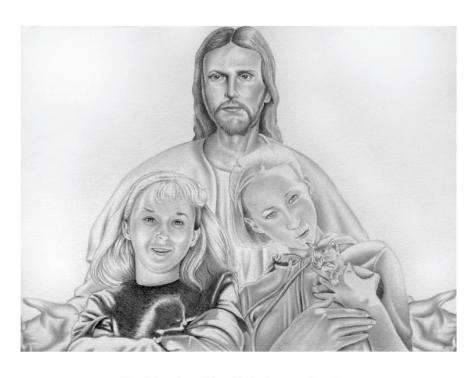
He is Love - everything God does or allows is motivated by His love.

That last part about God's love is the hardest for me to grasp. How could having my girls taken at such a young age be an act of love? I don't know; it's a complete mystery to me. But I must choose to either accept it or reject everything the Bible tells me about God – there is no picking and choosing what to believe; it's all or nothing. Either the Bible – that is, God's own revelation to us about Himself – is correct and reliable, or it isn't.

MEETING THE DRIVER

We got a letter in August 2008 from a parole officer that Lisa would be released from prison on September 8 after serving 85% of her sentence, as mandated by the court. I called the parole officer and asked if he could set up a meeting between Lisa and us so we could finally meet her. I explained that we had never gone to court because she had pleaded guilty, and therefore we had never actually met her. The parole officer said it was an unusual request, and that meeting with us, the victims, was against Lisa's conditions of parole. Since he didn't have the authority to grant it, he asked me to write a letter stating our case that he could present to his superiors. I did, and heard back that our request had been approved to meet at the Parole Office in Santa Cruz. So we set a date – a date, as it turned out, just a few days shy of the 7th anniversary of the accident.

Lynn and I took along the director of a recovery house in town who had come out of a drug-and-alcohol background and had accepted Jesus. We felt she would be a good person to help us interact, as she had been corresponding with Lisa in prison over the past year. We met the director beforehand to show her the girls' gravesites at Holy Cross Cemetery, then on to the parole office. I'm sure each of us had something we wanted to say or ask of Lisa, but we really didn't discuss it. Personally, I just wanted to get this meeting over with and get that last door closed. We knew from the moment she was sentenced to prison $6\frac{1}{2}$ years earlier that the day would eventually come when we'd meet her, and we wanted that first meeting to be in a controlled environment like this, not in the check-out line at a grocery store.



Pencil drawing of the girls by Ivan, an inmate in the California State Prison System

MAKING AMENDS

When the three of us, following the parole officer, walked into the meeting room and laid our eyes on Lisa for the first time, it seemed natural for each of us to greet her with a hug, no exception for me. But when I hugged her, I started crying and couldn't stop and couldn't let go. The thought crossed my mind that this may have seemed awkward or unseemly, but in my heart I felt a sense of relief. After 7 years, I was finally meeting the woman who had killed my daughters. But I felt no anger, no hatred – just relief. So I cried.

We eventually sat down around a large table. Neither Lynn nor I can remember much about the meeting or who spoke first, but it was evident that the Holy Spirit was there. We do remember that Lisa talked of her new relationship with Jesus and her 12-step recovery process, and that step 9, Making Amends, would be for her a living amends. She explained that she wanted to share her experience with others and convince them to not do what she had done that took the lives of Mandie and Carrie. She would invest her life, as it were, to make that kind of living amends in the girls' names.

I thanked her for pleading guilty and keeping us out of the court proceedings. She kept saying, "I was guilty." Then, to wrap up the meeting, the parole officer said that he had never before seen anything like this, and it was happening only because of our faith. Then he said that we serve a God of reconciliation, including himself in that statement. The three of us walked out of that building rejoicing that the final door had been closed, that the meeting we had dreaded was certainly covered by God's grace, and that even Lisa and her parole officer had professed faith in Him.

OUR NEW LIFE

Lynn and Lisa have since spoken together to various audiences and have been interviewed by Pastor René of Twin Lakes Church here in Santa Cruz County. God continues His marvelous work in people's lives on the issue of forgiveness.

In the years since the accident, my relationship with God has been healing, and may even be deeper and more genuine than before. Lynn and I are, separately and together, involved in ministries that in our "former life" would have been unimaginable. Someone early on had told us that God does not waste His children's pain.

God has certainly used us to save and touch many people's lives. It may happen some day in Heaven – for all believers – that lines will form with people telling us that they are there because of our testimonies. Sometimes it's hard for me to rejoice at that prospect while I long to have my girls with me now, but the fact is that in Heaven we'll feel no sorrow or grief, no suffering or pain of loss.

While I have considered that I may never again feel a true sense of joy or happiness in this life, I know that when God is done with me here, I will spend eternity with Him and with our girls in Heaven.

And then I'll rejoice!

ONE FINAL THOUGHT

Recently I visited a friend in the hospital recovering from a motorcycle accident. The previous day, he had had a trans-metatarsal amputation of his left foot. As he talked about it he seemed a bit cavalier, and I realized that he was still under heavy medication. I can certainly relate to that. Because he well remembers our girls and the accident, I wanted to tell him:

When you go home and the medications wear off, and you realize the full impact of your loss, don't shake your fist at God like I did and demand to know why He didn't protect you. Those were the darkest days of my life. Know that God loves you and cares for you very much. Know also that while He may not restore what you've lost, as you allow Him He will heal you and use you to bring others to Him.

I do believe that God does not waste our pain. And I know that He sees the Bigger Picture. Pain and suffering are the way of life on earth, no exceptions. But if our aim is to bring others to Jesus, then how we respond to suffering is so important to those around us who don't yet know Jesus. "You are the light of the world," Jesus said. But if, like my garage flashlight, our light is dim or flickers or keeps turning off by itself, how will they "see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven"? (Matthew 5:14-16)

1 Peter 2:21 says, "To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps."

Amen.

EPILOGUE

At the time of this printing, 8 years have passed since I wrote the original version of *According To His Purpose*. If you don't recognize that phrase, it comes from Romans 8:28 "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."

That was a passage of scripture my wife and I clung to after losing our girls. We had to know that there was purpose in our loss; and God saw to it that our loss has been others' gain. We've spoken to many groups of people, from small church congregations to a battalion of Marines that filled the base theater on their return from deployment.

Our message is not so much about drinking and driving (although that was why the battalion commander asked us to speak to his Marines) but about not giving up on God when bad things happen; about continuing to trust Him because He knows what He's doing; and about forgiving others as we ourselves have been forgiven by God.

I hope this little book brings you encouragement if you've lost a loved one. You will heal. Or if you've lost faith in God. He hasn't stopped loving you. Or if you're struggling with the difficulty of forgiving someone who has hurt you badly. Understand that nothing anyone has done to hurt us compares with how we've hurt God by the sins we've committed against Him that put Jesus on the cross for our sakes. With God's help, you *can* forgive.



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