**PROLOGUE (done)**

**Langberg:**  The loss of a loved one is considered the most devastating and potent stressor in human life really.

**Clark:**  That’s Diane Langberg .She's a practicing psychologist who's worked with trauma survivors and clergy for 45 years. She's authored several books including Suffering and the Heart of God: How Trauma Destroys and Christ Restores.

**Langberg:**  But that death can occur in more simple ways, so to speak, and much more complex ways. If a child goes missing and you never hear from them again, it's a very different loss than your 90 year old parent who had a full life that you loved and they loved you. Those are two vastly different deaths.

People grieve loss of place. There's a poem written by a refugee and the first line is, "No one leaves home unless home is the mouth of a shark." Home, familiarity, people you knew, traditions, culture. Whatever you built there, it's completely gone.

Then of course, relationships. you end up with a divorce or you end up with a terrific friend who goes and lives on the other side of the world and you never see them again.

trauma and abuse causes profound grief reactions on multiple levels. Natural disasters do that, think of the people where the hurricanes have taken everything or the wild fires. Life will never be the same. They won't get back what they lost.

**Clark:**  Hey everybody, this is Richard Clark. I'm your host from Living & Effective, season one, and welcome to season two. Before we start, I want to let you know this is going to be a little different than season one. I wanted to tell you why. In order to do that, I'm going to tell you how to make season two of a podcast, step-by-step guide.

Step one, what you do is you schedule a meeting with the guys from Christian Standard Bible. You spend all day sort of planning out a whole season around what the Bible has to say about the Prosperity Gospel. It's a really good hook, right? Everyone loves to talk about the Prosperity Gospel and why people believe that stuff. "Maybe there are some answers there. " planned out a whole narrative, Stumble onto the story of Peter Popoff and make it the focal point of your season. He's a prosperity gospel preacher with a fascinating story. Get excited. This is a good plan.

Well, until you get to step two. you spend a couple of days with an expert on grief. His name is Todd Billings, and you think he'll be a pretty good supporting role. but as you start talking to him, all of a sudden the Prosperity Gospel seems shallow as a subject, and grief is like the thing below the surface. It's the thing that the Prosperity Gospel is trying to address, but doesn't? So then you start thinking, this has to be a podcast about grief because that's the real issue here.

Which leads us to step three. Try to write and host this thing all by yourself. Fail miserably. Become self conscious, filled with self doubt. Realize you need a co-host.

**Smith:**  Did you realize that? Or was that a combined realization?

**Clark:**  We realized it together because other people were like, "Hey, some of this is bad. You're just talking into a microphone"

**Smith:**  About grief spiraling down for six hours a day.

**Clark:**  Yeah, like, maybe don't do that. So I said, "Yeah, that sounds great. Let's do this with someone." So Joy Beth, now you're co-host of season two.

**Smith:**  You're right. I got promoted.

**Clark:**  You got promoted to co-host.

**Smith:**  Woo.

**Clark:**  Because grief, and talking about grief, is not a good thing to talk about by yourself. It's not a good thing to try to deal with by yourself.

Step four. Talk to a practicing psychologist about the nature of grief and realize that grief isn't just linear. It's not even cyclical. It's all over the place and no one person experiences it the same way.

Step five, just accept it. This process is not going to be fun. Making a podcast about grief is going to be miserable. It's going to give you grief, literally, but just hope and trust God that in the end, maybe, it'll be worth it.

We've spent a lot of time letting go of our expectations for this podcast, scrapping things, starting over. We were given a lot of freedom to do that and we're glad, because we think what we have is something important. This is a podcast that will be about something we all experience, whether we are aware of it or not, whether we are conscious of it or not, whether we're running from it or drowning in it. Grief is something we're all impacted by. A lot of us are comforting someone who's experiencing it. Some of us just desperately need to be comforted.

I'm Richard Clark.

**Smith:**  And I'm Joy Beth Smith.

**Clark:**  The Christian Standard Bible and Christianity Today present Living & Effective, season two, a podcast about what happens when the Bible and humanity collide.

**Brown:**  I was at dinner being interviewed for another job. I just remember sitting there feeling so guilty and anxious, "What am I doing this for? I won't ... Even if they offer me this job, I'm not going to take it."

**Clark:**  This is Timothy Brown, professor and President Emeritus at Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Michigan. In his time as president he helped shape the intellectual community into a relational community, which explains why he’d be so despondent about the possibility of leaving.

Todd Billings is one of those faculty, maybe one of the ones Tim is closest with. He's the Gordon H. Girod Research Professor of Reformed Theology, and the author of numerous books, including Rejoicing in Lament, and Remembrance, Communion and Hope.

**Brown:**  I'm driving home, probably 9:30 at night and I got a call from Todd telling me that he had been to the doctor

**Billings:**  I had gotten pneumonia quite a few times and been sick with a number of other things quite a few times in the years before, so my doctor was just, he just couldn't figure out why. He just did some blood tests and then he called me in to talk to me. I didn't think much of it. I had a chapter of a book that I was editing in the room. Yeah, I didn't think much of it at all, but then he said that it was definitely cancer. It was serious and life threatening, so basically I needed to start pretty intensive chemotherapy the next week.

**Langberg:**  Health is another tremendous place of grieving, particularly when you find out, somebody finds out they have a chronic illness. That's just constant, ongoing dying, because chronic illnesses tend to get worse. Lou Gehrig's disease and the list just goes on and on and on. Not just for them, but for the people who lived with them. You're living with death that is active for a very long time.

Death meets us around many corners in life.

**Billings:**  My big struggle in the first few years was, I kept on treating this like an acute illness. Even if I wasn't cognitively saying that. I would just try to push through. I had limited energy, but I would just like, "Okay. I can do it today. I'm just going to push really hard." Well, I don't know how many times I had to do that before those around me, my wife especially said, "Todd, stop doing that. You do that for one day, it takes you three or four days to recover. You're completely out of energy, you're grumpy, you don't have energy for your family because you tried to go an extra two or three hours than you know you can do."

I have to take basically nap and downtime for two hours each afternoon and I found in the long term, I have the most energy when I do that very consistently, but I don't want to do that.

**Clark:**  Right.

**Billings:**  I want to say that if I just push through with a really hard effort of the will, that everything will work out. Sometimes, that can be true with an acute illness. But with a chronic illness or with an incurable illness, trying to just push through and ignore what your body is telling you just makes things much, much worse.

Todd Billings has been told he's going to die of cancer. He isn't jus an expert in grief, he's experiencing it So

**Clark:**  the five stages of grief. The first stage is denial.

Did you find yourself experiencing denial at all?

**Billings:**  Some of the medical literature on this has started to classify it as at least having a lot in common with trauma. The vast majority of patients with incurable cancer have at least a number of the key typical symptoms of PTSD. A friend of mine, Dianna Thompson, she's one of the only other late stage cancer patients who's a theologian in writing. There's basically her and Kate Bowler and me, that I know of.

**Clark:**  Right.

**Billings:**  She does some theological reflections on that, but one of the definitions of trauma, its presence continues in your life, the presence of that loss and is actually ever new.

Experience of an incurable cancer is an odd experience. There are ways in which I experienced some of these five stages of grief. In the first month or even the first year after my diagnosis, I had no idea of what kind of griefs and losses that I would be experiencing now.

There's an acute dimension to it, like you go into the hospital and that sort of thing, but it also doesn't go away.

The daily pain, the daily fatigue, I mean, it's kind of like a weird sacrament, where a sacrament in terms of the Lord's supper, especially where you're taking ... it orients you toward your life in Christ and the life to come, and heavenly banquet to come.

Well, I have bodily, concrete bodily signs every day. Every day there's things that I say no to that I would've said yes to before. So like the pain that you feel on a regular basis is sort of a liturgical reminder of your inherent mortality.

**Clark:**  Right.

**Billings:**  That you won't live forever in this body. And Jesus, he tells us not to be anxious. And Jesus doesn’t say because “I have a great and wonderful future for you.” He says “there’s enough evil for tomorrow itself.”

**Clark:**  Todd's vulnerability in his weakness is magnetic. The closer we are to recognizing our own weaknesses, the more we're drawn to his narrative.

But Peter Popoff's a whole other story. He has an entirely different kind of magnetism, one that draws in those who might be less conscious of their own weakness and longing, even while they feel it most acutely.

Here he is on one of his many informercials, sounding like a Price is Right host while doing crowd work at a revival.

**Liz Popoff:**  Guess how much money she got after you prayed with her and you sent her the miracle spring water. How much did you get?

**Commercial 2:**  $23,000.

**Commercial 3:**  $23,000 (inaudible) .

He preaches the prosperity gospel in big letters--he may as well wear a suit with a dollar signs pattern. We'll dig more into his world on future episodes. His story is pretty fascinating, to be honest.

But it's not the kind of story that carries a whole season. Maybe I should have known that from the beginning. Here is one of his more understated informercial clips.

**Liz Popoff:**  One of my favorite testimonies was this man who had been a drug dealer for 25 years, and he said ...

**Clark:**  Popoff and his wife Liz are on a bland talk-show-style set, giving about as little effort possible to convincingly convey what really should be a startling account of transformation.

"I had a bevy of prostitutes." He said, "I liberated all of them, and I became totally delivered."

**Popoff:**  And devoted his life to the Lord.

**Liz Popoff:**  The Lord. That's right.

**Popoff:**  And his what?

**Liz Popoff:**  And, doesn't he have a church now?

**Popoff:**  He's now a pastor, that's right.

**Liz Popoff:**  Was it in Chicago?

**Popoff:**  I believe it was in Chicago, yes.

**Liz Popoff:**  Yeah.

**Clark:**  On the road, it's fireworks and money. But as crazy as this story is, the Popoffs just can't muster the same fire for something so, I dunno, spiritual?

Which is to say, they're not exactly excelling at the deep stuff. For the Popoff's, and the prosperity gospel in general, God's work is all spectacle.

So for our purposes, the prosperity gospel, and Peter Popoff are bit players in our season. He's still a character in the story, but not the main character. Even Todd Billings isn't the main character. Really, the main character is you, the listener.

Joy Beth, you and I experience daily griefs, just like Billings talks about.

**Smith:**  Yeah, I think they're probably pretty different from the ones that he sees. But…

**Clark:**  Yeah, it’s weird to say, right? But Billings actually points out, like the Bible says we experience grief--new griefs--daily.

**Smith:**  And I think especially with Diane talking about death taking many forms, we are justified in talking about our griefs of creation and our griefs of, even relationship as we are battling through this together and having to sit in a cramped studio for hours on end.

**Clark:**  Right.

**Smith:**  I think that there's a lot of loss and a lot of suffering in a way.

**Clark:**  Well, even the griefs that the Bible talks about and that people in the Bible talk about, sort of span the range. There's a lot of, just like a mundane impatience in scripture, and then there's a lot of like, Job lost everything you could possibly imagine losing almost, and he grieves over that. Both of those are in some ways given equal weight.

**Smith:**  Yeah. One of my favorite liturgies in Every Moment Holy, put out by the Rabbit Room, is one, it's a prayer over toddlers and it's like when you're having really hard days with your toddlers and it talks about-

**Clark:**  I think my wife might have that memorized.

**Smith:**  It's so good. It talks about how having patience for them, because they're fighting big battles of their own and facing down mountains of their own. I actually really love that. The idea that my three year old niece, her big battle yesterday was that she had gone swimming and her feet were slipping on the floor and she was incredibly frustrated and she just couldn't get it done. She was crying and stuff and I was like, "Are you upset with Titi?" and she was like, "Titi, my feet are slipping." That was her battle that day. It's my job to be patient and understanding with that.

I love the idea that our griefs are big to us. Even though they might not feel big to someone else. I don’t have to justify my griefs to you and you don’t have to justify yours to mine, and we don’t even have to compare sizes. We can just say that griefs are grief and the point isn’t for them to be compared. The point is actually just to exist together.

**Clark:**  Right. Totally.

You and I have both had, we've had experiences of tragedy and pain in our lives. I've been divorced. That's not something I wanted to happen and I've also had my dad die, around the same time actually as my divorce. That altered my life significantly and also gave me a genuine interest in grief and how to handle it, because I experienced on my own what it was like to go through grief as a Christian in the church and feel like, "Some people get it, some people don't." You know? Has that been your experience?

**Smith:**  I've had large moments of grief over lots of my life from childhood trauma to the death of my aunt who raised me to seeing people who are close to me in really severe car accidents. Lots of people in my family have passed away. Or endured, I have pretty significant health issues. That kind of long term grief is something that's, I have had to navigate emotionally, because for a long time I tried to process it all on the front end and kind of front load my emotions. It all felt very active all of the time. Like that grief was at the front of mind. I think I've learned, or I've had to learn how to coexist with the grief. A lot of those things I'm still processing through. For it not to take up as much space as it used to or for it not to feel as demanding and distracting from my daily life. And that has been a coming of age thing for me I think.

**Clark:**  It's interesting, because you're really conscious of grief being like an everyday thing in your life and in a way, that is true for all of us. I think coming to grips with that and figuring out what that means for us is part of the point of this podcast, even if we don't have a lot of concrete answers. Really what we want to explore this season is if the Bible doesn't answer all of our questions about grief and suffering, what does it give us? A lot of those questions are asked of God and the Bible, and a lot of them are still left unanswered at least directly. But there's a kind of solace and hope that accompanies pain and mystery in our lives and that's what I think we want to explore.

**Smith:**  And I think for me, I would love for the podcast to become a kind of grieving space, which is a concept that Diane introduces at the top of the show.

**Langberg:**  If I'm working with a client, I always encourage them to find spaces like that. For some people, it's by the water. Some people it's in the woods. Some people, it's in the cemetery. But they also need companions that are safe grieving spaces, so they're not always isolated. They should be safe while they grieve and they should have space for it in their lives, because it is a very important task that Jesus did too. He grieved over Jerusalem. He grieved over Lazarus and He knew He was going to make that all better shortly.

And he wept.

**Clark:**  Todd’s done more than simply life with his suffering. His response to suffering is to poor all his intellectual energy into studying what the Bible has to offer those suffering and grieving.

**Billings:**  Erin Ness talks about it in terms of, "Death is part of our growth and maturity, or union with God and the dying process itself is part of this sanctification and without death, we wouldn't have this stepping stone."

**Clark:**  Tim’s still grappling with his friends immanent death.

**Brown:**  I pray for Todd every day and my prayer is, "Lord. If it is your will, take him as a very old man having lived to see his children all walking in the truth and join the gift of grandchildren". I pray that every day.

**Clark:**  I got to spend a lot of time with Todd Billings. I spent two days just sort of hanging out where he hangs out. I have to tell you, his community expands way beyond just a friendship with the seminary president. His son showed me around his home. His daughter was there skeptically watching me the whole time, and his wife was there just sort of matter of factly talking to me about their situation. Todd Billings is a remarkable scholar and professor. I sat in on a couple of his classes. I watched him interact with students both one-on-one and at lunch, and the impact he has on them is just really clear to me.

He's having conversations with them about ministry and their struggles, questions of suffering and mortality. What really struck me was that it's a two-way street. These students were comfortable not just learning from them but providing their own input into his ideas.

I sat in on one class where international students were able to share their experience with how their home country handled suffering. I sat in on a book launch where his students critiqued, sometimes brutally, his own book that he was working on. Billings took notes the whole time. He's a great teacher, but it's not like Robin Williams in Dead Poets Society. He's not the kind of teacher who rips up textbooks and has everyone stand on their desks. Billings's secret is kind of a quiet humility, an openness to his students, which is even more impressive when you consider the extent of his expertise.

Brown: Todd is a much beloved teacher. He's very popular with students. He's thoughtful, he cares, he gives terrific feedback. Yeah, he's a rockstar actually.

He also sits in the most esteemed chair that we have, the Jerrod Research chair in the Form Theology. That's a $4 million investment. I remember telling them I had just the man. Just the man.

So, Todd Billings has success, but he's dying. His life has a trajectory, but it's ending. Still, he's focused on creating grieving spaces in his home, his relationships, and in his workplace. I feel like this is a lot like life, where we have to hold the tension of finding happiness or success in one area, but losing it in another. Yeah. Exactly. Life is like that, and then grief is like that. Right? Where you think you want to get out of it. You want to move on from it. You want to sort of power up, level up. And then the next thing you know, you're sort of back at what feels like the beginning.

But this is something Diane made abundantly clear to us when she was giving us advice about the podcast.

She was just telling me how we had it all wrong.

**Langberg:**  Oh good.

**Clark:**  Just kidding. No, it was the "all stages of grief aren't (crosstalk) ".

**Langberg:**  That's not how I said it.

**Clark:**  You know? She was very kind about it.

**Smith:**  Oh good. Everything we've done to this point may be upset. That's fun.

**Langberg:**

It’s certainly not linear. When people hear stages they think elementary school: first grade, second grand. Grief is not like that. Grief is all over the map, that’s part of the difficulty of it because you can feel like you’ve gotten through a lot of it and then feel like you’re back at the beginning again.

I think that you want to keep in the forefront of your minds that you are talking to people who don't want to hear what you have to say.

You'll also be talking to people who have been terribly damaged in their own grieving spaces by Christians who did not find true comforters, who found instructors and who found judgment and you're not doing it right and you're taking too long. None of which is Christlike. You're dealing with people who are sure they know how to do this and who don't want to hear what you have to say because you'll disturb them. You're dealing with people who have been wounded by people like that, so that's a pretty big task. But I think you want to keep both audiences in your head all the time.

**Clark:**  So that's the challenge, right? We have to keep two audiences in our head at all times. The stakes are really high. That's a scary proposition, right?

**Smith:**  Yeah, and I think one of the hardest parts for us in making this has been that we identify so much with the audiences, like those two audiences that Diane represents.

**Clark:**  Depending on the circumstance, we swap back and forth between relating to each audience.

**Smith:**  Right. Sometimes I feel terribly caustic and ignored and bitter about the state of the church and their dealings with things, but then at other times it's a little bit more hopeful for me. You're the one who can take on that mantle, kind of.

**Clark:**  Every episode of this podcast will explore one of the five stages of grief. I want you to understand, these are not linear stages. These are different ways in which we all experience grief. We all tend to experience them at one time or another. So this is going to be a challenge. It's not going to be easy, either to listen to or to make this podcast. You know? It's something that I think, like grief itself, it's going to take some twists and turns.

**Smith:**  But I think the nice part is that we've kind of gone through this together with each other. One of our dreams is to bring other people into that journey with us.

**Clark:**  Yeah, to create, like Diane talks about, a safe space for people to sort of process their grief and talk about it with others.

On the next chapter of Living and Effective, season 2.