

## An Answer to a Father's Prayer

On any given Sunday one is likely to hear a sermon proclaimed from the pulpit of many Christian churches regarding the mercy of God and His compassion toward mankind. The God of Judeo-Christian faith has always been viewed as merciful and compassionate, and this is repeatedly proclaimed throughout the Old Testament: *But thou, O Lord, art a God full of compassion, and gracious, longsuffering, and plenteous in mercy and truth.* Psalms 86: 15. *The Lord is gracious and full of compassion; slow to anger, and of great mercy.* Psalms 145: 8. Although Scripture tells us that God has punished mankind at times for their disobedience, even when men suffer for their sins God has compassion upon those who are grieved: *But though he cause grief, yet will he have compassion according to the multitude of his mercies. For he doth not afflict willingly nor grieve the children of men.* Lamentations 3: 32-33.

Many instances are recorded in the New Testament in which it is said that Jesus, who is God manifest in the flesh, had compassion for people. In Hebrews it is written that Jesus is the great high priest who has compassion upon us in times of need: *Seeing then that we have a great high priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our profession. For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.* Hebrews 4: 14-16. The undeserved grace which God has given to men is most clearly demonstrated in the Christian doctrine that God sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to lay down his life upon the cross as the one sacrifice for the sins of the whole world forever. The compassion of God to forgive men of their sins was proclaimed by the prophet Micah: *Who is a God like unto thee, that pardoneth iniquity, and passeth by the transgression of the remnant of his heritage? He retaineth not his anger for ever, because he delighteth in mercy. He will turn again, he will have compassion upon us; he will subdue our iniquities; and thou wilt cast all their sins into the depths of the sea.* Micah 7: 18-19.

Is the compassion of God limited to His forgiveness of our sins? Most Christians believe that the mercy and compassion of God is not only manifest through the forgiveness of sins, but it also extends to our individual everyday lives. We acknowledge with thanksgiving that all the blessings which we receive come from God through His mercy and compassion. When everything is going well, and one is fortunate to enjoy good health, financial security, and emotional fulfillment, it is very easy to be thankful and to proclaim the great compassion and mercy of God. What happens, however, when the circumstances of life become distressing, and God's beneficence is not so apparent to us? In those times it is a much more of a challenge for one to view God as merciful and compassionate. However, even in times of trial and tribulation God is working in ways which we may not see and cannot comprehend. In such times His mercy and compassion are still manifest and something to be praised?

Many circumstances in life can bring great heartache and sorrow. Health concerns, financial difficulties, and the loss of a loved one are examples of such occurrences. When the loss of a loved one involves a child, the sorrow is infinitely worse. For a parent, there is no greater tragedy, and no greater source of emotional pain than losing a child of any age. I know this to be true because I lost my 26 year old son, Justin. The death of one's child is a devastating

experience of unimaginable dimensions. When that child takes his own life, as did my son, it is infinitely more heartbreaking. For a Christian parent of a child beyond the age of responsibility, who believes in an eternal spiritual existence beyond the grave, not knowing for certain that the child has acknowledged Jesus Christ as their Savior at the time of death is a crushing burden. I hold fast to Jesus' own words in John 14:6: *"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes To the Father except through me."* (NIV) Furthermore, I believe there is truth in the claim that is made in Acts 4:12: *Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.* (NIV) With the belief that salvation and eternal life is only available to those who confess their sins and believe in Jesus, how could I ever have peace if I did not know that my son had accepted Christ as his Savior?

This is the story of my son who battled chronic depression since his early teens, and his tragic, far too early death. What could have been a rewarding and enjoyable life for my son came to an abrupt and horrifying end due to his depression, which compelled me to write this short story. The story is not one of hopelessness, but one of hope and praise; for it is a story of God's compassion and mercy. Through the compassion of God, I was given a sense of peace which I did not think was possible. With that peace came the realization that we can never truly know the heart of another. This realization provides a story of hope, a demonstration of the power of prayer, and the confirmation that God can accomplish His purpose in ways we can never comprehend.

Although my son had been raised in a Christian home and attended Sunday school and church weekly from the time he was an infant until his late teens, it was not at all apparent that he had accepted Jesus as his Savior. In fact it appeared that he had rejected the Christian faith. Regrettably, I had not discussed salvation with my two sons. Instead, I had relied upon their instruction regarding matters of faith to be given by others through the church. I had taught my sons the importance of honesty, a strong work ethic, respect for others, and personal responsibility, but not the most important value of all: reliance upon God and the need for salvation through Jesus Christ.

When at the time of my son's death it was unclear whether or not he had accepted Christ as his personal Savior, I was forced to acknowledge my own failure, and to trust that my prayers for his salvation had been answered. Such trust required an enormous amount of faith at a time when it seemed as if I had been abandoned by God. Faced with that daunting challenge, my faith was not up to the task. Yet, despite my lack of faith, I was fortunate enough to have been miraculously blessed and comforted by God with an answer to prayer for assurance regarding my son. The message that I received was so clear as to leave no doubt that my son is now present with our Lord in Glory. God had worked in remarkable and incomprehensible ways to bring about circumstances which led to my son accepting Christ as his Savior, and then in an equally amazing way to give me assurance of that fact.

Merely as a result of our physical condition in this world bad things can happen to good people. When facing challenging circumstances Christians are accustomed to offering prayers for deliverance from their troubles. Sometimes those prayers are not answered, or at least not answered as we would like them to be. We will never be able to explain why tragedies occur, and the reason why some prayers are answered while some are not will forever remain an enigma. In the Bible, the story of Job tells how he was subjected to great suffering. Job lost his health, his possessions, and his family. He then questioned God as to why he was so afflicted and had to

suffer such great loss. God's answer to Job was to delineate all that He had created, and declare His omnipotence, making it clear to Job that man is incapable of comprehending the purposes of the Almighty God, and the way in which He accomplishes those purposes. The writer of Hebrews made a similar statement regarding this truth in the New Testament: *For he saith to Moses, I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. Therefore hath he mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth. Thou wilt say then unto me, Why doth he yet find fault? For who hath resisted his will? Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus? Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honour, and another unto dishonour?* Romans 9: 15, 18-21. God, who created all things, accomplishes His purpose in ways mankind is incapable of understanding.

My son Justin struggled with depression for many years. Why was he tormented with severe depression, and why was he not healed despite the prayers of those who loved him? Scripture makes it plain that such things may occur not because of any sin committed by someone, but so that the work of God may be made manifest. When Jesus was asked by his disciples who had sinned to have caused a man to be blind from birth it is written: *Jesus answered, Neither this man nor his parents sinned: but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life.* John 9:3 (NIV). My son Justin, the same as many others, was afflicted with depression simply because of the human condition, and not as the result of sin. Through his tragic death, however, the work of God was displayed as will be revealed in this story.

Despite being unable to comprehend why the tragedy of my son's death occurred, I believe even more now than before that God has compassion for us and there is a purpose in everything which happens in our lives, even if that purpose may be unknown. The reason I have such confidence is because of the message that I received in answer to my prayer which provided comfort at the time of my greatest need. What I have written in this short story is not a deep philosophical or theological discussion of suffering, tragedy, and grief, because I am not an authority on any of those topics. It was simply my intention to tell a story that might benefit someone who finds themselves in similar circumstances.

My desire is that should anyone read this story who is battling depression, or who has loved ones that are, they might realize the seriousness of the condition, and seek treatment. I would emphasize that although the power of prayer cannot be denied, sometimes the prayer can only be answered when one avails themselves of the medical knowledge with which God has blessed mankind. Another reason for this story is to encourage Christian parents to not neglect the most important thing that can be taught to their children which is the love of God and the need for salvation through Jesus Christ. Finally, if there is anyone whose trust and faith in God's willingness to answer prayer is wavering, especially regarding their children, then this story might give them assurance and comfort.

My son Justin entered this world on December 30, 1979. There was nothing unusual about his early childhood, except that even though he got along well with other children, he spent a lot of time playing alone. As he began middle school this seemed to be occurring more often. He also was becoming very angry over little things, and frequently expressed feelings of inadequacy and unworthiness. Whereas he had never been in any kind of trouble before, and had no problem getting along with others, he now became involved in a fight at school, and later was disciplined

for causing damage to a school desk. At about 14 years of age, he refused to get his hair cut, which caused some friction between us. I also discovered that he had started smoking cigarettes, of which I strongly opposed.

During the summer of 1994 as his older brother was preparing to go off to college, Justin became more withdrawn and irritable. He had also become argumentative with his mother and me. One day after some minor argument with his mother, she came to me as I was outside doing some yard work and told me she was very worried about Justin. Justin had stormed out of the house in anger and was heading into the woods adjacent to our property. Even though I did not think it was anything serious, since my wife was so obviously concerned, I started out into the wooded area where Justin had gone.

Entering the woods, I looked ahead about 25-30 yards and saw Justin facing me, standing on the limb of a tree about six feet off the ground. Walking toward him I called out to him, asking what he was doing. Justin did not answer, and as I got closer to him a sense of fear such as I had never known struck me when I saw the rope. He had thrown a rope over a limb above him and had a noose around his neck. Running as fast as I could toward the tree, I screamed for him not to move. He looked straight ahead with a blank stare and stepped off the branch. I arrived at the tree just as he stepped off the limb and was able to catch him by the thighs which I held with all my might. Since I could not lift him high enough to reach the limb he had been standing on, I begged him to loosen the noose around his neck and remove the rope. I told him that I loved him and after what seemed like an hour, but was probably less than one minute, he did as I asked. Lowering him to the ground, I hugged him and again told him I loved him. As we walked slowly back to the house together, Justin had a blank expression and was emotionless, but tears filled my eyes. How could I, a doctor, not have been able to see the severe depression that had overtaken my son? I couldn't bear to think what might have happened if my wife had not been more perceptive than I had been. Justin was in need of immediate psychiatric treatment for his fragile emotional state and the severe depression that had consumed him.

The next few weeks, at least up until then, was the most agonizing time of my life. There was a constant fear that Justin might try to end his life again. We immediately brought Justin in for evaluation and he was diagnosed with severe clinical depression, and he began outpatient treatment at a juvenile psychiatric facility. An antidepressant was prescribed but Justin refused to take it, insisting that there was nothing wrong with him. I prayed continually that Justin would not make another suicide attempt and I prayed that he would be cured of his depression. Despite the fact that Justin did not participate much in his treatment, his suicidal ideation resolved. Gradually he improved to the point that it was no longer necessary to watch him constantly, but he remained somewhat withdrawn. Over the next year Justin seemed to lack motivation, but presented no behavioral problems.

Even though Justin did well in school, he had little interest in academics. He did, however, enjoy art classes in which he excelled. During the summer prior to his senior year in high school, my prayer that Justin would find an interest to pursue and some purpose in his life was answered. Justin's cousin had started his own advertising agency a few years earlier that was beginning to flourish. His cousin knew about Justin's problem with depression, and he was also aware of his artistic abilities. He offered Justin the opportunity to work in computer graphics as an unpaid intern at his office.

This seemed like the ideal situation: not only for the exposure to computer graphics which might provide him with a career opportunity, but just as important if not more so, the type of environment he would be in. The advertising office was a very casual, open environment conducive to enhancing creativity. Also, Justin's cousin had been a Christian young adult leader, many of his employees were active in the church as well, and they frequently held Bible study sessions among themselves.

Justin caught on quickly to computer graphics, and developed more interest in the work. Soon he was able to do things that others with far more training and experience were capable of doing. Before long Justin was offered a position with pay. After winning an award in a regional high school art competition Justin was accepted to art school at the Center for Creative Studies in Detroit. He began work toward a degree in art direction in the fall of 1998. Justin continued to work for his cousin even while attending art school. Here was a young man, previously without motivation, now working long hours and enjoying it. It appeared that he had found his future career and for the first time in a long time, he appeared to be happy. Justin became much less withdrawn and returned to being the playful joker that he had been as a young child.

As mentioned before, Justin had refused to get his hair cut when he was about 14 years old. He continued to let it grow and it was now down to the middle of his back. It no longer bothered me, and I felt that as long as he remained the good kid that he was I didn't care. It was a source of frequent good-natured kidding, however, from both my wife and me. In addition to his long hair Justin developed his own personal sartorial style. He started wearing a floppy leather Australian outback style hat and in inclement weather he wore a long waterproof canvas western style coat. The combination of his hat and coat along with heavy boots made him look like a cowboy coming off a cattle drive. I started calling him "High Plains Drifter" and "Pale Rider" after the characters in a couple of Clint Eastwood westerns. He stood out as being different, which may be exactly how he felt.

After his first year in art school with art direction as his major, Justin realized that he was able to do everything that those having completed their training could do. He wanted a greater challenge and so he changed his major field of study to 3-D animation. Now this field really excited him and he was enthusiastic about doing more complicated graphics. As he continued going to school and working for his cousin, he decided that he only needed three years of school to do the kind of work that he wanted to do. The fourth year of art school would simply consist of the kind of work he had already been doing, as well as some academic English classes in which he had no interest. He would not have a degree but he had already established an impressive portfolio of work if he ever needed a resume for another job. We tried to convince him to complete courses in order to earn a degree, but to no avail, and I could not argue with his logic. He had shown such talent in animation that his cousin was planning to put Justin in charge of an animation department for his agency.

Justin had progressed well in computer graphics. His work was so good that when he was still a high school student, he was an integral part of a team that won a local Emmy award for graphics in print advertisement. Justin eventually went on to win or be nominated for numerous other Detroit area advertising Emmy's. He did the animation work using difficult mathematics equations that he had never been taught. His cousin's advertising agency had received a contract to create a series of medically oriented television programs for a large hospital system. The series often required animations to demonstrate anatomy or surgical procedures. In order to create the

animations for numerous programs, Justin borrowed my anatomy books for reference, and did fantastic renditions. Without having any architectural training, he helped to draw designs for the exterior and interior of medical buildings. Not only was he able to do all of that, but he also became the computer repair tech for the agency office, teaching himself to troubleshoot computer and networking problems and fix them. I always knew that Justin was bright, but now I know he was brilliant.

During this time, especially in the first few years working for his cousin, Justin was exposed to religious discussions and Bible study. I was not aware of the extent to which this occurred as he never talked about it. Even though I asked him to go, he stopped attending church with his mother and me. Another problem started while he was attending art school; he began binge drinking. This was a real concern for many reasons, including the fact that it could adversely affect his tendency for depression.

Despite his accomplishments and despite being liked by his fellow employees, Justin started to complain that he did not do things as well as he should have, and he felt like he had few friends. At times he seemed depressed when those friends that he had either got married or moved away. A couple of years after leaving art school he also developed a need to be on his own and provide for himself. My wife and I were concerned that he might become more depressed again if he was on his own but he was not happy “living off of us.” In the summer of 2003 Justin purchased a condo. At the time of Justin’s move he appeared quite happy and excited about being on his own. His future was beginning to look a bit brighter as he no longer seemed depressed.

Since Justin was not very interested in sports, as I am, we did not have much to talk about. In the fall of 2003, we finally developed a common interest. I am a longstanding automobile enthusiast, and had talked often about a desire to get a classic muscle car. Justin had become interested in cars as well. Together, we went to look at a partially restored 1972 Oldsmobile Cutlass. Justin bought it, and subsequently proceeded to have the engine rebuilt with high performance parts to increase the power to about 360 Hp. Justin was happier than ever.

The Cutlass was only for fair weather driving, and there was one particular vehicle which Justin really wanted for everyday use, and it belonged to me. I had a GMC Typhoon which I purchased new in 1993. For those who may not have interest in high performance cars, and are unfamiliar with this vehicle, it was a limited production compact, two door SUV with a lowered stance, body cladding, all-wheel drive, and a powerful turbocharged V6. This was not your typical family people mover. The Typhoon had amazing acceleration, being able to go from 0-60 in 5.3 seconds, which was equal to a Corvette of the time. When he realized that I wasn’t going to part with my Typhoon, he started looking to find one on EBay and AutoTrader.

After losing to a higher bidder on one Typhoon, a new listing on EBay came up for a 1993 Typhoon with only 26,000 miles which was available at an auto dealership. The problem was, that the Typhoon was in Florida, and we were in Michigan. Justin wanted the vehicle badly, and so we drove down to Florida together. We drove non-stop for eleven hours to trade in his pick-up and buy the Typhoon. We bonded on the trip and became closer than we had been for a long time. Justin was excited and happy, and we had another thing in common, each of us had a Typhoon.

After purchasing the Typhoon Justin continued to do well at his job and he usually stopped by our house once or twice a week for dinner. Not long afterward however, he seemed to be complaining more about things at work and expressed a great deal of frustration with delays in work projects which he said ended up getting to him late and required long hour last minute work on his part in order to make deadlines. We were assured by his cousin, however, that it was Justin himself who was putting the pressure on himself to meet deadlines. Nevertheless, Justin felt obligated to never miss a deadline and frequently worked through the night. He often said that because of the delays, his animation work was not as good as he would like it to be.

Over the next few months Justin came to our house ever more infrequently. He often said that it was because he was busy at work, but I do not think that was the case many times. When he did visit, he was often angry about things and complained more than usual. He also stopped spending time with his closest friend and his wife. Another close friend was out of town a lot and so Justin saw him only occasionally. In mid-summer 2006 Justin was obviously depressed. On the phone he sounded down and complained that he had no friends and nothing to do outside of work. My wife tried desperately to help him. She called to invite him to dinner frequently and she baked goodies and brought them to his condo. I tried to get him to take some time off work and offered to take him golfing. He said he had too many obligations at work, but he was not working nearly as many hours as he had in the past.

The Detroit metro area has an annual event called the Woodward Dream Cruise, when thousands of muscle cars, custom cars, and hot rods, cruise Woodward Avenue, or park along the route for a weekend. Justin had hoped to drive his Cutlass in the Woodward Dream Cruise, but on the day of the official cruise it was raining. The next day the weather was sunny and clear. After my wife and I returned home from church, I called Justin and invited him to drive his Cutlass over so we could cruise down Woodward, and he decided to go. Pulling into our driveway the rumble of his engine sounded great, and the bright orange Cutlass looked fantastic. Justin and I hopped into his car and headed for Woodward Avenue, knowing that there are always plenty of classic car enthusiasts not ready to quit, and still out showing off their cars on the day after the official cruise. Justin now seemed to be in a much better mood than he had been for several months.

There were many muscle cars and hot rods still cruising Woodward Avenue and we stopped at a shopping center parking lot where about 100 or more were parked. We walked around looking at all the nice rides. After checking out all the cars we agreed that Justin's Cutlass looked as good as any of them. He then let me drive his Cutlass home. During the drive, we talked about the plans he had to fix up the Cutlass even more. His mood seemed very upbeat and I was glad that I had invited him to go cruising.

Two weeks after Justin and I drove his Cutlass down Woodward Avenue he called to tell me that he thought the turbocharger on his Typhoon had gone out. Even though he had been declining my wife's invitations to dinner, typical of times in which he was most depressed, he did not sound as if he was very upset. After having a mechanic look at the Typhoon, it was confirmed that he would need to replace turbocharger. Whereas little things seemed to set him off earlier in the summer, he did not seem upset about this problem at all. He left his Typhoon in my garage and borrowed mine so that he would not have to drive his Cutlass if it rained.

Over the next two weeks my wife continued to invite Justin to dinner at our house but he declined each time. It again appeared that he was putting a lot of pressure on himself at work.

Then, on the morning of September 22, 2006, wife talked with Justin on the phone and he seemed to be alright. Later that afternoon Justin called me and informed me that he had contacted the company from which we had ordered parts for his Typhoon. The turbocharger and high-performance exhaust system were scheduled to be shipped the following week. We talked for several minutes about where he could take the vehicle to have the work done. Justin joked that his Typhoon would now be faster than mine. I was encouraged because his mood seemed to be very upbeat.

September 22, had started out clear and sunny but as I spoke with Justin it was beginning to rain. Justin told me that he had made the mistake of driving the Cutlass to work instead of my Typhoon which he had borrowed. He never drove the Cutlass in the rain and now he was forced to, but he did not sound very irritated, merely talking about it in a lighthearted way. I reminded him to be careful driving in the rain because the Cutlass certainly did not handle on wet roads as well as the AWD Typhoon. Justin mentioned how much he liked to drive his Cutlass, and expressed his desire to drive it whenever the weather was nice for another month or so until putting it away for the winter. He was also excited about getting his Typhoon fixed and anxious to see how much quicker it would be with the new turbocharger and exhaust. After our talk I felt that things were going well for him, and his depression seemed to be diminishing.

My feelings of relief, as it seemed that Justin was coming out of his depressed state, were suddenly shattered later that evening. At about 9:30 that night while I was upstairs on the computer and my wife was downstairs, the phone rang. My wife answered the phone and I heard her talking for just a moment and then hang up. Immediately, she called upstairs in a frantic voice, "Tyrone, get downstairs now!" From the sound of her voice, I knew something bad had occurred and thought that Justin might have been in an accident. I ran downstairs as fast as I could and my heart sank when I learned the nature of the phone call. The call was from Justin's best friend, and he said that Justin had just called him from his car. He had driven his Cutlass into the garage at the condo and was going to kill himself by running the car in his closed garage. While his friend was doing everything that he could to talk Justin out of it, his friend's wife started driving to Justin's condo hoping to get there in time to open the garage door. Justin's friend had called 911 as soon as Justin stopped talking, and then he called us.

My wife and I got in the car and sped toward Justin's condo which was about ten miles away. It was frustrating because road construction was underway and we had to take a longer route than usual. About three-fourths of the way there I received a call on my cell phone from the police informing me that Justin was at the hospital where I was practicing at the time. We hoped for the best, and dared not fear the worst, as we changed direction and drove the agonizing five miles to the hospital. I prayed as I drove. Running into the ER, we asked where Justin was and they ushered us into a conference room. I now suspected the worst. In the room was the wife of Justin's best friend, in tears and looking very distraught. She tearfully informed us that she had arrived at Justin's condo just as the police and EMS crew were pulling Justin out of the garage. She said that they immediately started CPR as they put him into the ambulance. A nurse then came into the room and told us that Justin was being treated in the trauma room of the ER and that someone would come to speak with us soon.

Being a doctor, and having spent a great deal of time in the ER for over 30 years, I knew that it was a very serious situation. Time seemed to stand still as we waited for further information. Since I knew my way around the ER, I wanted to go back to see for myself what was happening,

but I did not want to leave my wife alone. After what seemed like a long time but was likely about two minutes, an ER physician who I had worked with many times when I was treating patients, came into the room. He informed us that Justin had arrived in the ER without a pulse, that CPR had been started immediately by the EMS crew, and had already been continued in the ER for another 15 minutes. We were told that there was some electrical activity from the heart but no pulse. My wife and I were asked if we would like to be by Justin's side while efforts to revive him continued. I knew exactly what to expect, and that it would be very difficult to see what was happening, but not my wife. Still, we did not hesitate to go with the doctor to where great effort was being made to save the life of our precious son.

Walking toward the cubicle, consumed with frantic activity of ER personnel, it was a feeling of unreality, as if we were in a nightmare. Words cannot adequately describe the pain and anguish of watching life slip away from the child you love more than life itself. I prayed aloud as we watched in total helplessness while efforts to revive him continued. I kept looking up at the monitor praying that I would see evidence of a restored pulse, but none appeared. As time passed, I knew that the resuscitation efforts could not go on much longer, and they would have to stop. It was the most difficult thing I have faced in my life. My wife was so shaken that I did not know if she could handle it. This was her baby, and we were losing him.

After attempts to resuscitate Justin had continued for 45 minutes in the ER there was still no pulse. The doctor approached us and said that he was very sorry but they had to stop. The cubicle emptied of health care workers and we were left to be alone with our son. As I looked at my son's lifeless body lying on the stretcher, I felt as if my heart had been ripped from my chest. My prayers had not been answered and we lost our beautiful son at 10:23 pm September 22, 2006. With the curtain of the cubicle closed we stepped to Justin's side. We bent over and held him and kissed him. I asked God to have mercy on his soul and then we returned to the conference room. In the room by ourselves, I was totally devastated by the feeling that God had not answered my prayers and we had lost our son. In anger I said aloud, "There is no God." My wife responded at once, "You know you don't mean that." Immediately, I felt shame and asked God for forgiveness. Although I could not understand why Justin had to die such a tragic death, I realized that I needed God at that time more than ever.

While in the conference room a police officer came in to ask some questions and to tell us what had happened at the scene. It was then that we were informed that Justin had been involved in a minor car accident earlier in the evening. Apparently, it was not serious but Justin was determined to be at fault. He had received a ticket, but no alcohol or drugs were involved and both drivers drove away. Justin probably could not stop in time on the rain slickened pavement and ran into a car in front of him.

I can only imagine that after being in the accident, damaging his Cutlass, and feeling that he had failed, he was suddenly overcome by the negative feelings caused by the depression which had been building up for several months. There is absolutely no way to make sense of such a tragedy. Justin had so much potential, and so much to live for. He had a brilliant mind, was already quite successful in his career, was loved by his family, and even though he felt lonely, he had many good friends. Despite his effort to keep others at a distance by his aloofness, long hair and style of dress, people still liked him. There is no logical reason why he would want to take his life. That is the problem with depression; those affected are incapable, at times, of thinking logically.

The night after Justin's death, as I lied down in bed for the first time in 48 hours I was overcome with a wave of grief. My sorrow was not only for the physical loss of my beloved son, but even more so for the possible eternal loss of his soul. Justin had never acknowledged Jesus Christ as his Savior, as far as I knew. I called out to God asking forgiveness for my failure to be the Christian father that I should have been, in that I had not led my son to Christ. In agony I prayed that I be given assurance that Justin was saved, despite the seemingly futile request.

The next morning, after a sleepless night, I arose with a feeling of hopelessness. While sitting in the family room not knowing what to do, I had a sudden urge to go upstairs to Justin's old room in which he had not lived for three years. Stepping into his room slowly, I looked around. There on his bed was the Creature from the Black Lagoon poster which we had given him for Christmas along with some other sci-fi movie posters the year before, and which he never got around to bringing to his condo to hang up in his computer room as he planned. I looked at the dinosaur picture on the wall and remembered how much he liked to play with his plastic dinosaurs as a child. Next, I looked at some of the drawings and paintings he had done while in art school which were stacked in a pile. For reasons I cannot explain, I then felt the need to look into the drawer of his bedside table. I sat down on the edge of the bed and opened the top drawer. Beneath a pile papers, old candy wrappers, and other junk in the drawer was a Bible. It was the Bible that had been given to me for my high school graduation by my mother, which I had replaced with another version years earlier. Protruding from the pages of the Bible were numerous yellow post-it note bookmarks. Inside the Bible, unevenly double folded, were several pages of paper.

Taken aback by what I saw, I picked up the Bible and the folded paper fell to the floor. I looked down and noticed what appeared to be Justin's handwriting on the paper. Since I never knew that Justin read the Bible on his own, and had no idea why he would place handwritten notes in the Bible, I was a bit perplexed. As I picked up and unfolded the paper which had fallen from the Bible, I realized that it was several pages which had apparently been ripped from a small notebook. The pages had been torn out in such a way that the upper right-hand portion of each page was missing. Then I noticed that the missing corner for each page remained in the Bible. Reading the first sentence of one page, these initial words caught my attention, "*you are quite the fellow.*" Who would Justin be writing to in that manner? I gathered the corners which had been torn from the pages and tried to find the one that matched the page I was reading. After locating the portion of the page that had been torn off, I positioned it against the remainder of the page and was stunned when I read the first sentence again, "*Jesus, you are quite the fellow.*" To my utter amazement, it was a letter which Justin had written to Jesus as if writing to a friend.

Could this be the answer to my prayer for assurance of Justin's salvation for which I had prayed just the night before? Was it possible that I had been given the thing I needed most to provide some measure of comfort in a time of crushing grief and heartache? As I continued reading, it became apparent that this was a journal Justin had written in the form of letters to Jesus. From the content of the journal, it appears to have been written sometime during his final year at art school six years earlier.

In the journal Justin wrote about events in his life, some good and some bad. Many of the entries exposed the inner pain of his depression and sense of loneliness with which he lived. His kind heart and concern for others was also demonstrated. Most importantly, the journal revealed a close relationship with Jesus and Justin's fervent desire, but inability, to let others know about

his faith. Yes, indeed, this was the assurance that I desperately needed to comfort me with the knowledge that Justin did not die in jeopardy of the consequences of sin. That which had been revealed by Justin's own writing was not simply a suggestion that he might have accepted Christ as his Savior, I had been given absolute proof. Although my prayers for Justin's delivery from the shackles of depression had not been answered, two other prayers which I had lifted up to God had been answered. First was my prayer since Justin was a child that he would accept Christ, and second was my prayer of the previous night to be given assurance of my son's salvation. This was truly a miracle which I could not have envisioned. I cried uncontrollably as I read through the pages of his journal, making it difficult for me to read through the tears.

Confirmation that Justin had accepted Jesus as his Savior through his own words was only one part of an even greater miracle. On nearly all the bookmarks which were left in the Bible, specific verses were indicated. There was also a separate 2x2 inch page from a notepad upon which multiple verses were listed. This separate paper listed the number for the chapters and verses but not which book of the Bible from which they were taken. Initially, I was uncertain that the book in which the list of verses had been found was the correct one. I checked every book in the Bible with the listed number for the chapters and verses, and confirmed that it was, indeed, for the book in which it had been found. I confirmed that the paper listed verses in the book of Job.

As I read some of the verses for which bookmarks had been placed, and which apparently had great meaning for Justin, it aroused in me an overwhelming sense of sadness. However, other verses brought a sense of relief and a feeling of awe when I realized the message that had been given to me by God through His holy word. The various passages of Scripture provided a clear window into how Justin viewed his life as one of suffering and despair. There was also a veiled prediction or premonition of his early death, and yet his hope for an eternal future free of suffering caused by his inner pain. Most importantly, there were verses that revealed Justin's confidence that he would one day see God and experience the joy of heaven. The passages of Scripture that were bookmarked provided me with the assurance from God himself that my son had been saved.

Because the pages of what Justin had written were torn from a notebook, it was a little difficult to determine the exact order in which they were written. What I believe was the first entry in Justin's journal was written on only one side of the paper, unlike every other page which had writing on both sides. This is what he wrote:

*For thou didst form my inward parts, thou didst knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise thee for thou art fearful and wonderful. Wonderful are thy works Thou knowest me right well; my frame was not hidden from thee, when I was being made in secret, intricately wrought in the depths of the earth. Thy eyes beheld my unformed substance; in thy book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there were none of them. How precious to me are thy thoughts, O God How vast the sum of them. If I would count them, they are more than the sand. When I awake, I am still with thee. Psalms 139: 13-18*

In addition to the verses from Psalms 139, Justin wrote the following below the verses.

*Lord, your thoughts are truly precious to me. I am also thankful for the possession of my own. My desire would be for the two to meet, within are the thoughts given, by you, to me as well as my thoughts on those thoughts.*

Justin had copied the verses from Psalms 139, exactly as they appear in the Revised Standard Version of the Bible which I found in his bedside stand. The passage of Scripture was printed with perfectly even margins on both right and left sides and was much neater than the writing found in any other portion of his journal. To me, this demonstrated his extreme respect and reverence for the Bible. This entry in his journal was emotionally very difficult for me. As I began to read the verses which he had copied, tears welled up in my eyes. Then, coming to the part that seemed to be a veiled prediction of his death, I began to cry so hard that I could barely see enough to read: *“in thy book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there were none of them.”* I perceived these words from Scripture to be a message to me from God that in His omniscience He knew that Justin’s life would be short, but also that God was giving me the assurance that He was in control and that there was a purpose for the tragedy which had occurred.

Justin’s musings after the verses that were recorded from Psalms leave no doubt as to the desire of his heart which was to be in the will of God. How many of those who claim to be Christians have expressed such praise and thanksgiving to God for His thoughts that are made known through the words of the Bible? For the remainder of his life after making this entry in his journal Justin may have struggled with the ability to live up to his desire that his thoughts might unite with those of God, and as a result he may not have appeared to be a Christian in the sight of others. However, as Scripture says: *“The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.”* I Samuel 16: 7 (NIV)

In a second journal entry, Justin wrote the following, which is a small portion of a much longer entry in which he talked about events in his life.

*What do I fear: I fear most everybody I know. I fear telling them about my new found faith. I fear the expectations of others if I state something like that. They’ve been my “friends” for a while but they aren’t ready to hear about you. They would ridicule me. Not that it is that big of a deal - but right now, I don’t need to be tested.*

*Help me out - help me feel more comfortable so that I can learn without distraction.*

Although he had attended church all his life, the Gospel message had not registered with him, and Justin had rejected the Christian faith in which he had been raised. However, in this entry of the journal he acknowledged his new found faith, and revealed apprehension about letting others know about it. Despite Justin’s fear of revealing his faith to others, he indicated a desire to increase his knowledge about what the Bible teaches.

One of Justin’s journal entries indicates that he was under conviction of the Holy Spirit.

*Sometimes you seem to be just too much. Everywhere I turn something is heard, seen or whatever that - I don’t know. It’s a reminder? Reinforcing a message.*

*It’s a constant stream and I can’t quite know if I should try and make you stop or pour more on. Maybe a little break... but is that what I really want - or do I just fear the outcome.*

In yet another entry, Justin wrote of his feeling of loneliness.

*I am really starting to be annoyed by my own loneliness. I go out to lunch alone, I go outside to smoke alone, I drive home, go to bed alone. At times, true, I am around friends - but I don't say much..... I talk to you, and I am still lonely. Should I be? Interesting. While looking for scripture I had in mind, I ran across this: "Ask, and it shall be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened" - Matt 7: 7-8 Well I'm asking and I'm seeking - two out of three says that I'm really trying to get some sort of companionship down here. But hey, I've lasted 20 years lonely, I can go on, especially with some of your help, sad yes, but who am I to bitch and moan? But, if you're going to give me something in a while - tell me. Ease my mind a little - a simple "not yet" would suffice - heck it would be fine if you said "never" - then I wouldn't have to worry about it.*

Included in one page of the journal was a plea to relieve his loneliness, along with expressing thanks for the Lord's presence.

*I hate to sound as though you're not enough - you're more than enough - but I don't think I'm dying soon and the voice of another would be nice. Something I don't have confusions about understanding - something to help me, help me what? I don't know...It's difficult to have you without any sense of what love can be - this crap is new to me and well I don't get it, never had it. I feel it emanating from you - but my receptors are atrophied. But thank you. Thank you for listening - If you do nothing - fine - so long as you continue to listen to me, having that knowledge is enough to ease me. Goodnight.*

What is so apparent in this entry is the depth of loneliness and inner pain that Justin felt at the time he wrote these words. It was very difficult for me to read. Having recurrent depression since his early teenage years Justin simply could not feel the same sensations of acceptance associated with friendships that others feel, and thought that he would never find someone with whom to share his affection. One sentence from this entry is most poignant. In Justin's expression of a desire to have female companionship he wrote that he did not want to sound as if Jesus was not enough "but I don't think I'm dying soon and the voice of another would be nice." If he had found the companionship which he longed for, would the outcome have been different?

In the following excerpt from his journal Justin wrote of being referred to as a non-believer at an office meeting. He wanted desperately to tell others about his faith but could not bring himself to tell other Christians even though they would accept him. Like many of us he was afraid to speak up concerning his faith and the guilt had hurt him deeply.

*It's Wednesday, and this week up until now and including now - has sucked. I have felt so empty. A sharp contrast from the weekend when I felt so full I couldn't contain it. Maybe it's because I never moved on - I was content with the ice cube in my hand, while totally unaware of the fact I was standing on an iceberg. Monday is when it began - at the DBA meeting. \_\_\_\_\_ refers to me as the "NON." True he has no idea but I just wanted to stand up and yell it out. I don't know why it hurt - but since then I haven't felt you deep within me. I want it back. Did you leave because I would not admit my faith - even to those who would embrace it? Or is it my recent fear of giving you complete control? Both? I've messed up - but I think Sevendust put it best: "So*

*green I could follow, so weak I will fumble, so weak I could crumble... Wipe my face, get up again" I want to get back up. I blew it - I admit, Forgive me.*

In another entry Justin acknowledged that he needed Jesus, and wanted to have a closer relationship with Him.

*I can say that I want you to control my life until I'm blue in the face - but it won't happen - because I don't mean it. I just can't give it up - I'm scared. I know I shouldn't be - you've brought me no adverse things, only good. Yet I am unwilling to let you bring me more. Instead I fumble around trying to appease (Not the best word, but eh, close enough) you. I can't. Only you can do it for me. But I resist because of some sort of fear. You let me sit back, you gave some slack to me - but as soon as you tugged - I resisted, even though you've given me so much, I give nothing in return. I feel so undeserving, I guess that's grace, huh? Well let's be official - I'm sorry. I want you back in my life, this week has been miserable. I need to talk about it I need to grow - I need to move on - I need you. I want to talk to \_\_\_\_\_, to tell her pretty much what I wrote down - I just want to talk. Then I want to talk to \_\_\_\_\_. I just want to let him know where I'm at. Then, who knows, how about the world?*

Later, he wrote of another instance in which he failed to profess his faith.

*I'm down, and yet up. I feel that you have returned, but unfortunately, nothing has changed - except maybe a little more understanding. When I feel compelled to do something, I should do it, no hesitation. If I think - I let the opportunity slip.*

In the same entry, he acknowledged that he needed Jesus to live the kind of life he wanted to live; he could not do it in his own strength.

*Of course, I did come up with a good realization today. During the week, I doubted my faith - but during this I prayed - unconsciously proving that I am with you. I also realized that I can't quit smoking, I can't find love, I can't be anything. Only you can give me the abilities to do so. "I can take care of myself" is the greatest lie. I can't. I'm trying to be what a good person is expected to be - I'm not listening to what you want me to be. I don't feel you strongly opposing smoking, or drinking. I feel you trying to just say something - that the rest will follow. Why I keep trying to do it myself, I don't know.*

The journal entry which I first discovered is a message directly given to Jesus as if writing to a close friend. Justin seems to be developing a sense of peace and acceptance, and indicating that he had shared his faith with a friend. Remarkably, despite Justin's own struggles with depression, he noticed that a friend appeared to be depressed and asked for Jesus to assist him in helping his friend. The following are parts of that entry.

*Jesus, you are quite the fellow. This week was good. Busy & stressful yes - but good. At work, I feel something new - respect. \_\_\_\_\_ is really pushing for me to get animation going. \_\_\_\_\_ especially has been impressed with my work/ creative input.*

*On Wednesday I did something I didn't think I'd ever do. I talked to \_\_\_\_\_. True I was a little drunk, but who cares? I talked to him about you - I think maybe a little sank into him. I know he's depressed about something - don't know what, but if you see it so that I can help I would be grateful.*

*Everything is kind of falling in place - I'm really starting to not worry about the opinions of others - Most of them so far have received my beliefs without problem. Thank you.*

Justin mentioned that when he spoke to his friend about his new faith he was drunk. Oftentimes people who are depressed begin to "self-medicate" with nicotine, alcohol, or drugs in the attempt to ease their emotional pain. That may not be the reason why he began drinking, but perhaps it was a factor in his continued struggle with a drinking habit

The final two entries are quite disturbing. In these entries Justin wrote about things that were occurring in his life at the time. He wrote about having feelings for a certain girl, but being reluctant to let her know. Subsequently, he revealed that while at a party, he had discovered someone he thought was a good friend having sexual relations with that girl. Excerpts from the two entries are as follows.

*I don't know why I try. I guess friendship is too much to ask for. Oh well - screw it. I need to get out of here. Seeing people I know, all around me happy. I'm guessing, if I don't know them, I won't mind.*

*Yeah, It's been a while...And yep life still sucks.*

*I've gone out with the guy's from work a few times - but I don't belong - can't quite place why. I'm the only one who smokes, and I feel myself losing their respect with my drinking. I do have to say not all is bad though, I love my new truck - But it is only a possession, my new job description is nice, more work though. But that's it - I feel that I simply don't belong in social situations. I don't have a clue on what to do about it. I guess there is always room on earth for a fifth wheel, the useless extra, the loner.*

*Oh well. F--- friends - enemies at least you know they intend to harm you - Friends do it out of the blue - I trust nobody now - why should I?*

Although feeling betrayed, depressed, and lacking self-esteem, Justin was still trying to rely on Jesus, who he wrote was the only friend that actually cares.

*All I truly need is you...The only friend that actually cares - too bad I can't see you.*

Justin was betrayed by someone he thought was his best friend. The kind of betrayal which he experienced would be difficult for anyone to deal with, and for someone prone to depression, it would be a devastating act. Justin had just finished art school, was being given more responsibility on his job, and bought a new pick-up truck, about which he tried to remain upbeat and attempted to find some good in his life. However, his predisposition toward depression was just too strong.

I am uncertain whether the pages of the journal Justin left behind are the only ones he wrote or if there might have been other pages which he did not save. No other portion of a journal was found, nor did I find the notebook from which the pages had been torn. These few pages are the only evidence which confirm Justin's faith in Jesus. In the 5-6 years following the time which his letters to Jesus were written, Justin showed variable degrees of depression but continued to function at a high level on his job. Perhaps he started making journal entries on his laptop computer. Unfortunately, the laptop which he used for both work and personal activity was never

found. By leaving behind the pages of his journal as he did, Justin must have known that eventually what he had written would be discovered. Was it his hope that the journal would be found by his mother and me so that we would talk with him about it? Perhaps the only explanation is that it demonstrates the mysterious work of God which provided me with the answer to my prayer for assurance of Justin's salvation and the only way for me to find peace after the loss of my son?

I do not know what specific problems Justin may have faced in his life following the last page of his journal. Almost certainly the same struggles of loneliness, a sense of unworthiness, and difficulty overcoming his smoking and drinking habits continued, and perhaps more. His fear of being unable to live up to his own expectations as well as the expectation of others, his loneliness, his inability to stop smoking, and perhaps excessive use of alcohol were all influenced by the state of mind caused by his chronic depression. However, Justin did not give up totally in his desire to be the Christian that he wanted to be. A few weeks after his passing I was cleaning out the glove box in his Typhoon when I came across something which revealed that he was having continued communication with someone concerning his Christian faith.

I found six folded pages of paper on which were photocopies of hand printed poems related to how the struggles of life can be overcome through the grace of God and the love of Christ. The handwriting did not appear to be Justin's. On each sheet of paper, the title of the poem and the date was written. The dates ranged from July, 2004, through July, 2005, which was 4-5 years after his letters to Jesus were written. Whatever Justin may have done, or failed to do beyond the time which he acknowledged his Christian faith in the pages of his journal, even taking his own life, would not remove the saving grace for which he called upon Jesus. The compassionate God of the Bible whom I worship would not forsake a repentant sinner whose emotional instability prevented his spiritual growth.

I am unable to answer the question as to why Justin never received from God the strength to let others know about his faith, why his plea for help in overcoming his smoking and drinking habits, and for companionship was never fulfilled. If these things had occurred, Justin would very likely still be alive. He also might still be with us if he would have acknowledged his depression and agreed to seek treatment, which then might have allowed him to talk to others about his faith and made it possible for him to feel hope. There must be a purpose for which God would allow this tragedy to happen. I may never know that purpose until my time on this earth is also done, but the proof that the work of God is displayed through this terrible situation is in the unmistakable message that I received through the passages of Scripture for which Justin had placed bookmarks in the Bible.

The message which Justin left behind that was written in his own words would have been sufficient for me to have comfort in knowing that he had accepted Jesus as his Savior and that he was trying to live according to God's will. Even more comforting was the message that I received from the Word of God as a result of the verses for which Justin had placed bookmarks in the Bible. How long after Justin had written the letters to Jesus until he placed the bookmarks is unknown. It may have been soon afterward, or even a year or more later. Some of the bookmarked verses concern topics which would be understandable for Justin to identify, but it is a total mystery as to why he would bookmark other verses.

As mentioned earlier I found a 2x2 inch paper with verses from Job listed on it. First on the list was “*Chapter 7 (all)*.” This chapter which was obviously meaningful to Justin is apparently the way Justin viewed his life through the eyes of someone deeply depressed. When reading the entire chapter, it is very enlightening, and heartbreaking as well, to feel the sense of despair which he must have felt. The following is Job 7 from the NIV translation.

1 *“Does not man have hard service on earth? Are not his days like those of a hired man?  
2 Like a slave longing for the evening shadows, or a hired man waiting eagerly for his wages,  
3 so I have been allotted months of futility, and nights of misery have been assigned to me.  
4 When I lie down I think, “How long before I get up? The night drags on, I toss till dawn.  
5 My body is clothed in worms and scabs, my skin is broken and festering.  
6 My days are swifter than a weaver’s shuttle, and they come to an end without hope.  
7 Remember, O God, that my life is but a breath; my eyes will never see happiness again.  
8 The eye that now sees me, will see me no longer; you will look for me, but I will be no more.  
9 As a cloud vanishes and is gone, so he who goes down to the grave does not return,  
10 He will never come to his house again; his place will know him no more.  
11 Therefore I will not keep silent; I will speak out in the anguish of my spirit, I will complain in the bitterness of my soul.  
12 Am I the sea, or the monster of the deep, that you put me under guard?  
13 When I think my bed will comfort me and my couch will ease my complaint,  
14 even then you frighten me with dreams and terrify me with visions,  
15 so that I prefer strangling and death, rather than this body of mine.  
16 I despise my life; I would not live forever. Let me alone; my days have no meaning.  
17 What is a man that you make so much of him, that you give him so much attention,  
18 that you examine him every morning and test him every moment?  
19 Will you never look away from me, or let me alone even for an instant?  
20 If I have sinned, what have I done to you, O watcher of men? Why have you made me your target? Have I become a burden to you?  
21 Why do you not pardon my offenses and forgive my sins? For I will soon lie down in the dust; you will search for me, but I will be no more.”*

Reading through this chapter caused me to cry bitterly as I came to realize the intense inner pain with which Justin lived much of his life. The words of this passage of Scripture not only express utter despair, but also seem to predict that Justin would have an early death. Why was Justin not healed of his depression when he called out to God for help, and from his journal there can be no doubt that his desire was to be in the will of God? Although He is able, God does not always heal physical infirmities, and for whatever reason He did not miraculously heal Justin’s mental infirmity. Certainly, it was not God’s will for Justin to take his own life. However, I am convinced that Justin was saved by God, in his earlier suicide attempt, allowing him further opportunity to acknowledge Christ as his Savior. By accepting Christ as his Savior, he is now free of the inner suffering which he had to endure, and is free of all suffering forever. I believe there must be a reason why God allowed this to occur, and I trust that God has extended mercy to Justin because I believe the scripture that reads: “*And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him....*” (Romans 8: 28 NIV); and I know from his own words revealed in letters to Jesus that Justin loved God.

Additional verses from Job which Justin had indicated on the paper provide further enlightenment as to his thoughts. Some verses further reveal his deep despair.

*What is my strength, that I should wait? And what is my end, that I should be patient? Is my strength the strength of stones, or is my flesh bronze? In truth I have no help in me, and any resource is driven from me. Job 6: 11—13 (Revised Standard)*

*If I speak, my pain is not assuaged, and if I forbear, how much of it leaves me? Job 16: 6 (Revised Standard)*

*My face is red with weeping, and on my eyelids is deep darkness; although there is no violence in my hands, and my prayer is pure. Job 16: 16—17(Revised Standard)*

*My days are past, my plans are broken off, the desires of my heart. They make night into day; 'The light, they say, 'is near to the darkness.' If I look for Sheol as my house, if I spread my couch in darkness, if I say to the pit, 'You are my father, and to the worm, 'My mother,' or 'My sister,' where then is my hope? Who will see my hope? Will it go down to the bars of Sheol? Shall we descend together into the dust? Job 17: 11—17 (Revised Standard)*

At the time Justin placed bookmarks for these verses he was functioning at a very high level. He continued to accomplish a great deal on his job for another several years and yet it is obvious that he was living in constant emotional pain caused by his depression, and was harboring thoughts about his death. Some people assume that it is a weakness of character that prevents those afflicted with depression from “coming out of it.” On the contrary, it takes great strength to live from day to day in the emotional pain which is has been shown by medical research to be caused by a chemical imbalance in the brain.

Two of the verses which Justin had bookmarked demonstrated his concerns regarding the response of others if he made his faith known.

*I am a laughingstock to my friends: I, who called upon God and he answered me, a just and blameless man, am a laughingstock. Job 12: 4 (Revised Standard)*

*Surely there are mockers about me, and my eye dwells on their provocation. Job 17: 2 (Revised Standard)*

Justin was searching for answers as to how he should live according to God’s will. The next few verses show his confusion with life.

*Should a wise man answer with windy knowledge, and fill himself with the east wind? Should he argue in unprofitable talk, or in words with which he can do no good? But you are doing away with the fear of God, and hindering meditation before God. Job 15: 2—4 (Revised Standard)*

*What do you know that we do not know? What do you understand that is not clear to us? Job 15: 9 (Revised Standard)*

Another bookmark was placed directly over the following passage but without an indicated verse as was found on the other bookmarks. The manner in which it was positioned in relation to the other bookmarks that had verses written on them, leads me to believe it is related to the following verses. These reveal Justin’s search for understanding, but also the verses are a

message to me that only God can know the purpose for that which occurs in our lives. More importantly, this passage of Scripture proclaims that true wisdom and understanding comes from reverence for the Lord.

*But where shall wisdom be found? And where is the place of understanding? Man does not know it, and it is not found in the land of the living... Whence then comes wisdom? And where is the place of understanding? It is hid from the eyes of the living... God understands the way to it, and he knows its place.... And He said to man, 'Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding.'* Job 28: 12—13, 23, 28 (Revised Standard)

In further passages of Scripture that had bookmarks, Justin demonstrated a clear understanding of what it means to be a Christian. The following passage had an arrow and the word “especially” pointing toward it.

*There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set me free from the law of sin and death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law, indeed it cannot; and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.* Romans 8: 1—8 (Revised Standard)

Clearly, despite Justin's emotional struggles, it was his desire to live in the Spirit, and not in the flesh.

Several other verses which further reveal how Justin viewed his life of inner suffering and yet had hope for eventual relief from his pain were bookmarked. These verses have given me even more reassurance of his place in glory. Consider the following verses which Justin had identified with the exact verses written on the bookmarks to leave no room for doubt.

*More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us.* Romans 5: 3—5 (Revised Standard)

Although Justin lived with an inner suffering most of his life this passage of Scripture reveals that he had a hope in God's deliverance. The next verse shows that he knew that there would be an eventual reward in heaven if not on earth.

*I consider the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God.* Romans 8: 18—19 (Revised Standard)

To me this is a clear message that Justin knew his earthly suffering would come to an end and that he would see the glory of heaven. In addition, it is encouragement for me that the present

emotional suffering that I have due to the loss of my son cannot compare to the glory that I will share with him one day.

I believe that God gave me a message of reassurance through the passages of Scripture that Justin had indicated with labeled bookmarks. The hand of God in the message I received was most amazingly demonstrated in a sequence of five verses from different chapters of Job. These five verses were indicated along the right-hand margin of the 2 x2 piece of paper which was placed in the Bible. Each one had a “bullet” icon next to the numbers for the chapter and verse. If taken individually, it is impossible to see how any of the verses would have much significance. Incomprehensible to me is why Justin would have identified these specific verses. There is no way in which one might find any meaning from each verse alone, with the exception of the first verse which reveals despair. However, when taken in the sequence in which they were listed, a story is told that outlines Justin’s life and provides confirmation of his salvation. When the verses are read in the order that Justin had them listed an unmistakable message appears.

In the first verse Job is regretting the night he was born. This correlates with Justin’s longstanding feeling of despair.

*That night—let thick darkness seize it Let it not rejoice among the days of the year, let it not come into the number of the months. Job 3: 6 (Revised Standard)*

The second verse on the list seems to be a prediction of Justin’s early death, or perhaps a premonition which Justin had.

*He returns no more to his house, nor does his place know him any more. Job 7: 10 (Revised Standard)*

Next is a declaration that in everything which occurs in our lives God has a purpose.

*Yet these things thou didst hide in thy heart; I know that this was thy purpose. Job 10: 13 (Revised Standard)*

The fourth verse indicates hope and expectation of salvation for those who seek God.

*This will be my salvation, that a godless man shall not come before him. Job 13: 16 (Revised Standard)*

It is my belief that the final verse in this list of five verses from Job to which I was directed is a message from God to me, confirming Justin’s salvation. I have never heard the voice of God, but this is as close to His voice as I can imagine.

*Even now, behold, my witness is in heaven, and he that vouches for me is on high. Job 16: 19 (Revised Standard)*

How could the message be more certain? Through these five verses I have been told that God himself, through His own word, vouches for my son, and gives me assurance that Justin was saved and is now in heaven. Truly, God is a compassionate and merciful God. Remarkably, in other Bible translations, the message from these verses is not as obvious when compared to the words from the Revised Standard translation of the Bible that Justin used. The Bible which had

been given to me years before by my mother, who was responsible for my accepting Christ, was the one that was essential in providing the answer to my prayer.

Why would Justin do something so out of character and write down such intimate thoughts? Why would only the few pages of a journal be the ones left behind; the very pages that unmistakably proclaimed his faith and his desire to allow Jesus to control his life and to share his faith with others? For what reason had Justin removed the torn upper portion of the pages from the binding after tearing the pages from the notebook and then saved everything in the Bible? Why had the pages of a journal and bookmarks placed in the Bible remained undisturbed in the drawer for three years while Justin was still at home and another three years after he moved out of our house? On another note, which has enormous implications in regard to the tragedy that occurred, why was his journal not found when Justin was alive? If it had been found by my wife or me when Justin was still with us it would have allowed him to reveal his faith to others which he so much wanted to do, and may possibly have opened the door to help resolve his longstanding depression. I will never know the answer to the many questions which filled my mind. Only God knows the answer to these questions.

Justin's chronic depression distorted the impression which he had of his self-worth and how he was seen by others. His tortured mind would not allow him to feel good about himself. Whereas he thought that he did not fit in, and felt lonely and without friends, nothing could be further from the truth. This was made apparent on the day of Justin's funeral. As my wife and I did not feel that we could handle prolonged visitation time in the funeral home, or a lot of people at the service, we requested a family only visitation and service. Justin's cousin, for whom he worked, approached us, and informed us that some of his employees who knew and worked with Justin were greatly affected by his passing. They had asked if they could come to the funeral home for a short time prior to the service in order to pay their respects and say a few words to us about Justin. We agreed to allow this request.

The advertising agency was small and so we were expecting maybe six or eight people, but at least 30 or more came to the funeral home. Some of those who came were even from out of state. Former and current employees in the office were there. People who did not even work with Justin, but simply leased office space at the back of the agency's office building showed up. It was amazing that someone who felt that he did not fit in, was lonely, who thought that he was not liked, had so many people, some with which he had only limited contact, come to show their respect.

The people who had come congregated in front of my wife and me, and one by one approached us, and began to tell us of their thoughts toward Justin. Nearly all of them had similar things to say about him. We repeatedly heard terms like brilliant, genius, gentle, kind, funny, always willing to help. Many good-natured comments about his appearance were expressed regarding his long hair and that crazy hat. Several told of their initial reservations regarding Justin because of his appearance that drastically changed once they knew him. Several, in tears, described him as their best friend, and someone who was always willing to listen to them and to lend a hand. The depression that afflicted Justin's mind would not allow him to recognize that he not only fit in, he was enormously popular among those with whom he came in contact.

The funeral service was then conducted. Having received the miraculous answer to my prayer for assurance of Justin's salvation I was compelled to give my testimony to the compassion of God.

Somehow, I was able to keep from breaking down as I read portions of Justin's journal and the passages of Scripture he had bookmarked. Another cousin of Justin's sang a touching song that he had written. Before the casket was closed, we placed two objects inside. One was a wooden steering wheel which I had given Justin for Christmas but had never been installed in his Cutlass as planned. The second object was something Justin could not go anywhere without: his hat. Finally, the motorcade traveled to the cemetery where Justin was laid to rest next to Papa, his beloved grandpa.

Our prayers are sometimes answered in unexpected ways. I prayed for my son's salvation and I prayed for assurance of that salvation. Both of my prayers were answered, but in a way that I wish had not occurred. I also had prayed that Justin be freed of his depression. God does not always heal physical maladies, or as in Justin's case emotional or mental afflictions. If a miraculous healing occurs, then God must have a purpose, and if healing is not provided then God must also have a purpose. For what reason Justin left us far too soon we may never know, but I will continue to trust in God that although it was not His will that Justin take his own life, at least there must be a higher purpose and some good will come from this tragedy.

I do not know if anyone will ever read the story I have written, but if they do, perhaps the purpose of the tragic loss of my son is that through the telling of Justin's story someone might be more inclined to accept treatment for their depression, or rely more upon the promises of God's word. Could the purpose be to caution Christians against the judgment of others based upon their appearance or habits, as we can never know the heart of an individual as God does? Possibly it is encouragement for someone to trust God with their children even when all seems lost, or proof to someone that God loves us and has concern for our suffering even when it seems we have been forsaken.

Whatever the reason for my loss, I have confidence that God's plan is perfect and that some good will come from this terrible tragedy. Attempting to make sense of this incomprehensible loss has taught me to accept instruction from the frequently quoted verse from Proverbs: *Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding.* Proverbs 3: 5 (NIV).

There will be a hole in my heart that can never be filled for the rest of my life, but I will continue to praise and trust in the Lord as He has shown that He is there to comfort me. I had purchased a CD of a contemporary Christian musical group a few weeks prior to losing Justin. In the weeks following Justin's death I listened repeatedly to a song on that CD, and the words had great meaning for me. The lyrics of this song, "Praise You In This Storm," by Casting Crowns, speak of God being present in the storms we face in this life. The God who gives and takes away is praised, because of who He is no matter what circumstances in which we may find ourselves, and because He is always by our side to wipe our tears and provide comfort in time of need. I was the recipient of God's mercy and felt His loving presence when he gave me the assurance of Justin's salvation, and I do praise Him in my own personal storm.

The following verse which Justin indicated with a bookmark and apparently was important to him, is a message to me that helps relieve my sorrow and provides me with comfort.

*For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at last he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then from my flesh I shall see God.* Job 19:25—26 (Revised Standard).

I believe that Justin is now in the presence of God. He no longer needs to commune with Jesus through letters in a journal, but is now able to talk with his friend and Savior, and I also believe that one day we will be reunited, and join each other in worshipping a loving and compassionate God.