

Neal, Mary C.. 7 Lessons from Heaven: How Dying Taught Me to Live a Joy-Filled Life. The Crown Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

But let me tell you what happened to me. I was gently leaning into Jesus, embraced and comforted by his presence. Scenes from my life became visible in front of us, as though projected onto a large three-dimensional multisensory screen. Everything else that may have surrounded us faded into irrelevancy. Rather than anxiety or apprehension, I felt nothing but love. When I looked into Jesus's face, I saw only kindness in endless supply. In His arms, I felt like a newborn baby into whom He poured all of His hope, concern, love, and His very being. His embrace was gentle, complete, and familiar. As my life unspooled before me, I felt deeply loved, and I knew somehow that His love was not just for me, but for all people. The scenes moved quickly past, from right to left in sequential order. It was like swiping through the chain at the bottom of "all photos" on an iPhone. This forward motion intermittently slowed when Jesus reached his hand forward to pluck a scene from the strand of my life. Rather than just seeing the scene in front of me, I would immediately re-experience it with absolute understanding, and from every vantage point. If this sounds impossible to you, remember the paradigm shift I laid out at the top of this chapter: Time seemed to no longer exist. I was alive in the eternal present. And everything existed in and because of the love of God. In other words, I tasted the eternity of goodness and grace that awaits us all.

As I looked at each aspect of a scene or event, I was able to instantaneously see the life story of the people involved. I perfectly understood their emotional backgrounds, motivations, and feelings. I understood their side of the story, what they brought to the situation, and how we were each changed by it.

Things got specific. The rage and confusion I felt as a child when I was witness to physical violence was replaced by compassion as I saw how the hurts, expectations, and hopes of the people involved had brought them to that moment. Their personal history influenced their behavior and reactions, and I saw how that moment would transform the future. The decades-old anger I felt toward a neighbor boy who had physically molested me as a young girl dissolved into empathy and forgiveness. Again and again, seeing a person's backstory—their experiences, circumstances, sorrows—changed my understanding of them and my emotional response became one of grace. My life review actually reset my understanding of grace, and I think it can do the same for you.

Grace is often thought of somewhat dismissively as just an empty and unattainable cliché. As we listen to the lies of our broken past, we assume that grace is reserved only for others. But God's New Testament grace is relational and is the manifestation of His promised love for each of us. He looks beyond our flaws and failing, accepting us just as we are. Where we see only brokenness, He sees restoration and healing. God's grace is His love in action—*continual forgiveness*, encouragement, mercy, compassion, and kindness that is borne out of undeserved love. That is what I learned about the grace that God offers. And it doesn't end with us. The grace we accept is also the grace that we are able to offer others, regardless of what the circumstances might be.

As you can imagine, an experience like that changes you. I'm not the same person I used to be. I experience much more grace toward others, even in minor situations. When I feel cheated or taken advantage of, even when an erratic driver cuts me off in traffic, I am able to feel a gentleness toward the perpetrator that I didn't before. When someone treats me rudely or disrespectfully, I remind myself that the person is, at that moment, the sum total of all his or her burdens and joys, successes, and failures. Certainly, I feel all the strong emotions that come with being human, but now I'm better able to choose how to respond. It shows up in large and small ways.

#### RIPPLE EFFECTS

As Jesus "swiped" through the scenes of my life, I witnessed how certain actions rippled outward

from the original incident, like concentric circles, to affect others. It is easy to understand how our words and actions impact our immediate circle of family and friends, but it is usually impossible to appreciate their distant influence. During the review of my life, Jesus repeatedly allowed me to see both the immediate and distant effects of an event. I was able to appreciate and understand how each event spread through time and space, initiating a cascade of other events from which something of beauty and worth always emerged.

Events that seem horrible and unjust do indeed ripple outward and touch people in positive ways—in ways that we would never imagine from our earthly perspective, but will be perfectly evident when we see them from heaven. *The secret, in the meanwhile, is to allow ourselves to be transformed by trust.* As I'll show you in a later chapter, consciously choosing to trust God's promises opens the door to fully experiencing the depth of God's love, grace, and His very presence in the world. Even in times of struggle and heartache, we can expectantly wait for the beauty that will surely come.