

Voices: Gratitude for those missing

July 31, 2025

If I live to be 100, I will never forget holding the lifeless body of a 4-year-old in my arms.

It was during the second semester of my sophomore year in college. As a student, I worked mostly full-time as an orderly in the emergency room of a hospital.

I normally worked the 3 p.m. to 11 p.m. shift. On this night, I was working the 11 p.m. to 7 a.m. shift when around 2 a.m., a car drove into the portico of the hospital outside the emergency room. When no one came inside, I walked out to see if I could be of assistance.

Family members in the car handed me a child whose body appeared to be lifeless. I carried her into one of the treatment rooms and reached out to the nurse on duty. She asked me to telephone the on-call physician.

The child had ingested rat poisoning earlier in the evening. It was under the cabinet in her grandparents' home. Sadly, there was nothing that could be done. The child was dead on arrival.

The grandfather asked to use the telephone and called the pastor of his church to come to the hospital.

I overheard the pastor providing counsel to the grieving family. He said simply: "We don't understand this, but we have to accept that this as God's will."

The pain of 'missing'

During the three years I worked at the hospital, I overheard "this is God's will" being credited for tragedy after tragedy.

I was 19 when I held the lifeless body of the 4-year-old in my arms and I could not have disagreed more with the pastor. Fifty-nine years later, my posture remains unchanged.

I don't believe the death of a child from rat poisoning was God's will. There is a significant difference between God's perfect will and his permissive will. God is not the author of the horror stories that plague our lives.

My heart has hurt for the families of those who did not survive the Hill Country floods of July 4 and for those families still missing loved ones is familiar to me

My twin brother was missing and unaccounted for 51 years after his plane went down in the Christmas bombing raids over North Vietnam in 1972.

I know first-hand the gut-wrenching kind of pain that "missing" promotes for families. My heart aches for who find themselves dealing with that kind of stress, anxiety and despair.

Recognizing God's gift

In his book, *Tracks of a Fellow Struggler*, John Claypool shares his grief experience in the aftermath of his 10-year-old daughter's death. She was diagnosed with leukemia at age 8. The disease subsequently went into remission, and his family and church thought it was an answer to prayer.

Sadly, the disease came back, and she died at age 10.

Claypool references an incident from his childhood. One of his dad's

employees was drafted into the military during World War II.

With the husband's deployment, the family was leaving the area but planned to return when the war was over. Claypool's dad offered for the family to store their furniture and possessions in the basement of his home.

When the truck came to deliver their belongings, Claypool's dad noticed they had a Bendix washing machine. He asked his employee if he could use it. Gasoline and other amenities were being rationed, and Claypool's father thought the washing machine would be helpful.

Claypool was a young boy at the time, and he was assigned responsibility for doing the family's laundry.

Claypool was fascinated by the washer's agitator and the suds it generated from the laundry detergent. He also experimented with the hand cranked wringer used to squeeze water out of clothes.

Three years later, he came home from school one day, gathered the laundry and made his way to the basement. The basement was empty, and the washing machine was gone. He thought the family had been robbed. He was furious and immediately went to notify his mother.

She explained that his father's employee had been discharged from the military, and the family had collected their things that afternoon. His mother attempted to calm her son by reminding him how the washing machine came their way. It did not belong to them but was on loan. It was an unexpected gift that had come their way.

His mother explained: If you own something and it is taken from you, anger is an appropriate response. In this case, the family did not own the washing machine. Gratitude for the time it had been available was the only appropriate response.

When Claypool's daughter died, that conversation with his mother came to mind. He recognized that his daughter had been a gift from God.

A focus on gratitude

Scripture states, "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows." (James 1:17)

God is the ultimate source of all blessings, and he is unchanging in his goodness and generosity.

Claypool determined gratitude was the best way to deal with grief. Instead of anger and resentment over loss, he opted to be grateful for the time shared and for the tremendous difference his daughter had made in their lives.

It wasn't a process that minimized the pain of grief overnight, but in the long haul, gratitude prevailed and he worked his way through the grief experience.

My brother has been on the other side of eternity for more than two-thirds of my life, yet I think of him often. Every thought of him is a trigger for gratitude. He enriched my life immensely.

When I think of him and all that we shared, I frequently hear the voice of Garth Brooks in his song "The Dance."

"I'm glad I didn't know - The way it all would end - The way it all would go - Our lives - Are better left to chance - I could have missed the pain - But I'd have had to miss - The dance."

Don Forrester is executive director of the Coalition of Residential Excellence (CORE). He previously served with Children At Heart Ministries

and as bivocational pastor of Henly Baptist Church.