

Hope & Healing Amidst Trauma, Depression, Disabilities and Restoration

Kelly Speck - 2025-02-20

INTRODUCTION: We welcomed Kelly Speck as she spoke about her life experiences firmly rooted in a love of Jesus that has seen her through many seasons of suffering. She talked about being a very ordinary, even a boring person, working as an accountant, not an expert in anything, including the Catholic faith, being a recent convert herself. Kelly has come to know how the gift of hope in Jesus can see us through many trials. It is this powerful knowledge that has fed Kelly's passion to humbly share the gift of hope in Jesus with us and with the world through her personal witness.

A SEASON OF PRUNING: Kelly began by briefly mentioning her eldest son Bennett, who has quadriplegic cerebral palsy and is unable to speak. Much of his story can be found in her book that she gifted each one of us. She promised to tell us more about him and her other children later in her talk. The Lord has chosen to refine Kelly, grow her, mature her through her husband and her children. This is her greatest joy and her most important vocation. "How precious is your unfailing love, O God. All humanity finds shelter in the shadow of your wings" (Psalm 36:7). The last six months have been especially challenging for Kelly and her family. When asked by her spiritual director if she feels that God loves her, she replied without any hesitation "yes, absolutely." He has kept her safe under the shadow of His wings throughout the numerous blows that have happened, and for this she is extremely grateful. As she looks at the last six months, she refers to them as her season of pruning. In that season, she has felt the Lord cutting off the things that needed to go, and revealing to her the things that need to stay and the things that need further trust & reliance on Him.

SEASONS OF SUFFERING: We all go through seasons of suffering. It is not IF, but WHEN. How do we still have faith amidst all the suffering? Kelly is all in, she is with team Jesus until the end. Without Him, she would not be able to get out of bed in the morning. Without Him, she would avoid all the drama in her life. He has carried her through some of her darkest moments. For her talk, she focused on four Ds that impacted her life profoundly: Divorce, Depression, Disability, and most recently, Devastating injuries. Yet through it all, she never felt alone, and knew the Lord was carrying her. She will also be discussing what the Lord has asked her to offer up in sacrifice. The concept of "offering up" our pain is a new one to her. She is continuing to learn what it means as she grows in her beautiful Catholic faith.

THE BACKSTORY: Kelly was raised in Fairfax, Virginia, in a devout Protestant family, growing up in and around the church, in a tight community. They were part of a small Protestant denomination called "The Church of Christ." They were Bible-based, with lots of a cappella singing. From as soon as she was able to sit up, she participated in a Sunday school called "cradle world," where the babies were lined up at little tables, saying "Jesus loves me" and singing songs that have been engrained on her heart. Kelly's handsome, strong, tall southern gentleman of a husband, Travis Specks, was born and raised in Nashville, Tennessee. They met in Abilene, Texas, at a small Christian University. They married in May, 2000. Travis had a similar upbringing. Kelly is grateful for the seeds of faith that were planted in both their lives. Travis and Kelly moved 11 times in 11 years, when they finally decided to settle in the Washington DC area. Kelly began working as an accountant.

DIVORCE: The divorce of Kelly's parents after 29 years of marriage occurred when Kelly was a newlywed. It was an ugly divorce, and painful for Kelly, just as she was learning to be a responsible wife. As an adult child of divorce, she was struggling to understand her childhood: Were those happy memories real? Who was she? Where did she come from? Was anything real? She was starting her married life at a time of deep disillusionment. The Lord was asking her to surrender her identity and her security that had been founded in her family of origin, and place her identity and trust in Him. She was shaken and grasped onto God as her anchor because she realized that her husband could not fill the pain that was in her heart, only God could. "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor 12:9). She was weak, but thanks to the seeds of faith planted in her heart as a child, she knew there was only one place she could go, and that was into the arms of Jesus.

DISABILITY: Travis and Kelly were living in DC, working hard, and saving for their first home. According to Kelly, they lived boring lives – they worked and went to church, and participated in the SOME (So Others Might Eat) Ministry in DC. They were young, leading professional lives, being responsible, planning for the future. Kelly got pregnant in early 2007, and after what was a normal, uneventful pregnancy, Bennett was born, and everything went wrong. Her book, Hope in the Heartbreak: A Journey of Grace & Growth with a Special Needs Child details much of Bennett's fight for survival and subsequent medical issues and diagnosis. After 40 days in the NICU, an MRI done before he was to go home revealed the devastating diagnosis. Kelly was struck by the significance of 40 days, often associated with testing, discipline, devotion and preparation in Biblical accounts. She sensed the Lord's presence with them on this day of diagnosis. Bennett's life is such a gift, and is all the perspective she will ever need. It helped her focus on what matters. God jolted her into reality, and set her on a path where she absolutely had to trust Him. "I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength" (Phil 4:13). When they finally brought Bennett home, she left her job to take care of him. At the time he was withdrawing from morphine and screaming constantly, God knew what she needed and sent an angel in the form of a nurse who was an African nun. She would march around the house with the baby saying "Jesus, I love you. Jesus, I love you." And because of the relief she offered, Kelly loved her. God always provides.

DEPRESSION: With all the drama surrounding Bennett's birth, Kelly had not been paying close attention to her husband, and so missed the warning signs of his descent into depression. They had decided to move back to Nashville, to be near family with Bennett. Life was simpler there. Travis still had his job in DC, and was traveling back and forth. He was also suffering from PTSD since Bennett's birth; and as a father, he was feeling the weight of providing for his son's future needs. Finally, things came to a head when they were in Nashville. Looking back, Kelly saw how God had provided, as there was an excellent mental health team in Nashville to walk with them, many of whom were faith-filled. Kelly quickly realized she had no control. They were at the mercy of psychiatrists, medicines, and side-effects of the medicines. Kelly was living with a person she did not recognize. These were dark times. She was in a state of holy numbness. "Come to me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matt: 11:28). Travis needed rest and he needed help. Kelly needed help because she could not fix him, no amount of love, care or devotion could give him what he needed. God was asking her to surrender her marriage and her husband to Him. She was forced to let go and trust God completely. When Travis was in the care of professionals, Kelly was in a state of supernatural peace, knowing he was with people who could help him.

During this time of turmoil, Kelly discovered she was pregnant and did not know if that would set him back further. But when she told Travis about the pregnancy, he said it was the best news he had ever heard, and he could not wait to meet this baby. The Lord's arms were the only place for Kelly to go – Travis' recovery from mental health crises and prescription drug abuse was not a quick fix. It was many, many years of highs and lows. There was much more to the story that she did not share with us, including an intervention, 28 days in a rehab facility, all while Kelly was pregnant with their second son. She had to give her husband an ultimatum. Travis was determined to do whatever it took to get well. After witnessing Travis' struggle so intimately, Kelly was able to grow in her compassion for others too. Jackson came into the world healthy and active. The Lord knew that they needed him. Jackson brought such joy in the simple gifts of rocking a baby to sleep, feeding a baby, giggling with him. Kelly will always thank God, because they found out about Jackson in one of the lowest times in their marriage. She reminded us that in our darkest moments, God sends a glimmer of light to remind us there is always great hope. Then, twenty one months later, daughter Reagan was born with a significant birth defect, but was a mighty force. So for quite a while, they had three children in diapers!

DEVASTATING INJURIES: In the last six months, both younger children had fairly severe injuries. Reagan fell while playing basketball and had a meniscus tear, rarely seen in a twelve year old. A short time later, son Jackson broke both his tibia and fibula at a soccer game on his 14th birthday. So, all of a sudden, she and her husband had three children over 100 pounds each who could not walk. The injury was crushing for Jackson – aside from being in great pain, he struggled emotionally with missing out important events in school - 8th grade is an important year in parish life. In addition, both younger children are coming to terms with having a severely disabled older brother. The population of children who are siblings of a child with disabilities of every kind (physical, mental, learning) have a difficult cross to carry. Kelly is learning on the fly right now to walk along side them, and speak the truth of God's love, of knowing what we know to be true that God does not make mistakes. During the Q & A, she spoke a little more about the challenge of raising the younger two with a disabled older brother. She does not want the two to resent Bennett and all the extra time he requires. Nor does she want them to lose their faith because of the hardship they endure. She tries hard not to shame them about bad feelings they might have about Bennett. She tells them that everything she and Travis do for Bennett, they would do for them. They experienced this first hand when they sustained their injuries. Kelly focuses on grace and not shaming them – their feelings are OK and valid. Hard things happen, and even adults have trouble with that! She needs to admit to them that she does not know why God saved Bennett's life and gave them a son and brother with severe disabilities, But we trust that God's plan is perfect, and we do not understand that today. It remains a constant, evolving conversation.

Praise be to God, two of her three children are back to walking! They have prayed as they have never prayed. As a mother, she knows her own weaknesses and sins, and her children's weaknesses and sins, and she saw the Lord work on these in their injuries and recoveries. God is at work in all of it.

CONVERSION STORY: Jackson started kindergarten in a local Catholic school at the recommendation of her friend Paige Rien, even though neither of them were Catholic at the time. Kelly did not know that non-Catholics were welcome there, yet Jackson was welcomed with open arms. When Jackson was in first grade, Travis decided to do this "RCIA thing" to learn about what Jackson was being taught. Paige Rien (TASTE speaker) was also in that same RCIA class! Several months later, Travis informed Kelly that he planned to join the Catholic Church at the Easter Vigil Mass. Kelly always wanted Travis to be the leader of the family spiritually, so if this is the direction he was going, she was willing to take a look. In short order, Travis was confirmed, all 3 children were baptized into the Catholic Church, Kelly was confirmed, Jackson had his first communion. Having these sacraments, the graces poured onto them!

CONCLUSION: As far as Kelly is concerned, the Christian brothers and sisters who welcomed her and her family into the Faith are the icing on the cake. They already had faith in Jesus, but what the Catholic faith has brought into their lives is this missing piece that they did not even know was missing. They had never had a faith community with the depth and the real lived out faith as this Body of Christ. Kelly had never known anything like it. She is also grateful for the Eucharist. And she is here to proclaim the goodness of God, and remind us that there is always HOPE.