

CHAPTER 1

The Lodge

We've changed a lot since the night the Lodge burned down.

It's odd how much I still remember about that night. It makes me wonder if God spends much time thinking about who we were and all of the details surrounding the difficulties we've experienced in our lives. I know He could remember everything if He wanted to, but I can't help but wonder if He thinks that the fires we've endured don't matter as much as the future He's promised us. Certainly God uses everything in our lives; nothing is wasted. But among His favorite questions for us isn't where we've been and what we've been through, but "Where do we go from here?" Like the disappointments we've all experienced, what stands out in my memory of the fire are just a few snapshots. The phone call, the family gathered close, standing next to the charred foundations, and the smell of

smoke. I think God wired a lot of us to remember just a few parts of our pain because He knows we don't need all of the details to remember the lessons we've learned.

We're making plans to rebuild the Lodge one step at a time. We don't know for certain what it will look like, but my bet is that it's pretty close to what we had. It was a bad day for us, to be sure, but not as bad as it was for Lloyds of London who insured the Lodge against fires. It could have been so much worse. Our agent said in jest they'd insure us again if we promised not to have any matches or fireplaces or stoves or careless painters on the property.

Nothing remains of the Lodge. The intensity of the fire even destroyed the foundations. That takes a lot of heat. But you know what? I'm kind of glad it did. If there were even one old charred beam still standing after the fire, I'd be tempted to use it to rebuild.

We do this all the time in our personal lives too. We keep scorched pieces from our biggest failures and incorporate them into our lives as we rebuild ourselves. It's not a good construction practice with wood and it doesn't make for a good future when we do it with our lives, because it only reminds us of our past. Sometimes we're best served to start all over. This takes getting the foundations out too. This doesn't mean we get rid of our faith, far from it. We do this because sometimes God wants us to rebuild our lives from scratch. It's what I've done a couple times.

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Maybe you have too. We start over in our lives the same way we'll start over at the Lodge—we'll make it a holy place again, nothing more and nothing less. Sometimes getting there requires clearing absolutely everything away from what we had, or who we were. Doing this is both simple and hard, yet we all get to decide whether we'll do what is required. And for the courageous at heart, we simply start again.

When we've suffered loss, starting again always feels like a gamble. Will we risk it all, knowing it might all just burn down again? Each of us has to decide if we'll ante up and play another hand, or push away from the table and call it a day. I don't think God gambles. He doesn't need to. He sees the future and because He does, He already sees the beauty we've yet to find in the rebuilding. He doesn't just make beauty from the ashes; He makes something far better. He shapes us into who we're becoming.

Sure, we could fill in the charred hole where the Lodge once was. We could make a sand volleyball court or put in a deck and some picnic tables. We could make it look like there was never a loss there. I've done that in my life more than a few times. We asked our grown kids what they wanted to build in the place where the Lodge used to be and with one voice they said they wanted to rebuild it. We all wanted back what was lost. It's a question worth asking for each of us, after we've had a setback or two in

our lives, whether they are big or small. Do we want what we've had, or do we want something different for our lives? Sometimes different isn't better—it's just different.

The Lodge is a place we built in Canada, which has become a place of rest for all of us. It isn't the easiest destination to go to. In fact, it's pretty difficult to get to. The only way in is by boat or seaplane. There are no roads or power lines or water lines for a hundred miles in the shortest direction and a thousand miles in the longest. We make our electricity from a river, which carries the snowmelt off of a glacier on the property to the edge of the ocean where we live. We get our water from one of a dozen waterfalls on the property. We grow vegetables in our gardens and catch fish and crabs from the ocean inlet behind the Lodge, which is more than a thousand feet deep. The only reason Bob ever flies out of the inlet to the store is to fill up on ice cream and Pop-Tarts. I know. Don't judge him. Our only neighbor for ten thousand square miles is the Young Life camp next door called Malibu.

This part of the world is beyond beautiful. The azure sky, snowcapped mountains, giant cedar trees, and miles of far-reaching inlets are unlike anything I've ever seen. Photographs don't capture the magnitude of pure beauty. The mountains on our property, start at sea level and soar

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to over ten thousand feet in some places. In our home in San Diego, we discover a seagull or two and are wowed. Up at the Lodge, there's a forest full of animals. Spotting bears, bald eagles, and baby seals are common sights and it's not unheard of for a pod of orcas or a gray whale to make a silent and grand appearance.

We bought this property years ago and it's been our life's work to build a place where people can come and get the rest they need. We've deed-restricted thousands of acres of forest in the inlet so they can never be commercially logged. Most of what we don't own is known as "Crown Land" and will never be owned by anyone because it's owned by British Columbia. We built the Lodge itself to have dozens of places for people to sleep. We constructed it out of beautiful, huge cedar logs. Each one was hewn by hand in a yearlong painstaking process with a drawknife. Each log perfectly fit to the log below it. Not even an ant could fit through a crack in the massive three-story building.

At the camp next door, hundreds of high school and college volunteers spend their summers serving the thousands of high school students who come to Malibu as campers. These volunteers wash dishes, clean toilets, cook, and mow lawns at the camp. With very little sleep, they try to make each week for the campers the best week of their lives. What I've always liked the most is how they show

God's love by what they do more than what they say. The campers aren't the only big winners, the volunteers are too. They develop friendships and make memories, which will last them a lifetime.

A dozen or more times each summer, we invite all of the camp volunteers to come over to the Lodge. We fill them up with cookies, iced tea, banana bread, and hugs. But our real joy is to see them find some well-deserved rest. I've lost count of the exact number of people we've welcomed into the Lodge, but it's been thousands. It's hard to take a break on a day off at camp if you can still hear and see others working hard. So, we invite the volunteers over to come aside and rest. The Lodge is a place to leave our shoes at the door, curl up on dog beds, leather sofas, and overstuffed chairs. It's a place to take the time to stop and breathe.

Because we know what we had, what we lost, and what we want, we'll start again. We'll cut the logs, stack them high, and fill the new Lodge with new memories. We decided there's not much we'd want to change this next time around. Maybe we'll put in a couple fire sprinklers, but who knows. While I'm not certain about all of the details of the reconstruction, here's what I know we'll do. We'll build something which will serve who we've become, not just repeat who we were. The biggest mistake we could all make in our lives is to rebuild things we've outgrown or

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to live in constant fear that we might lose what we have all over again. It won't be the fires that destroy our lives and our faith. It will be obsessing over not getting burned again that will.

Early on, I thought it was a little strange when people described Jesus' message as "good news" when what Jesus actually said is if we followed Him we'd suffer loss. Tremendous loss. A lifetime full of it. More than we can ever imagine. Painful, searing, dream-crushing losses. He said if we did it right, it would eventually even cost us our lives. If that's the good news, it kind of makes you wonder what the bad news is. There will be people we put our confidence in who will fail us. There will be relationships, which should have gone wonderfully right, and they will go horribly wrong. What I'm learning is that the good news in our faith isn't found in avoiding the pain, but in living through the loss, walking through the ashes, and stacking the logs once more knowing they could burn down again. What has been growing inside of me is a confidence that whatever it is we put our efforts into, it's God's, and He can do whatever He wants with what we build in our lives.

We have a routine before heading up the inlet every summer. It's been the same whether we had a Lodge there or a pile of ashes. The transition to get up to Canada always includes a lot of planning and packing and filling a landing craft full of food, supplies, and clothes. Some people are

good at transitions. I'm not. My best excuse is that I am a nine on the Enneagram scale. Apparently nothing sucks the life out of nines more than transitions. Moving from place to place pushes all the wrong buttons inside of me in just the right order. Still, I know what it's meant to our family to spend our summers together in Canada so I'm happy to do the work. I'm willing to leave places I love, to be with people I love more. I wonder if Jesus felt a little the same leaving heaven to be with us.

Arrival day in Canada means unpacking and storing everything and then assessing just how harsh the winter was on the property. There are always a few broken branches on walkways and in flowerbeds, pine needles in the rain gutters, and loose rocks that have fallen on the roads. We affectionately call doing all of this work "waking up the Lodge." While none of it is easy work, it's good for the soul. We all need to wake ourselves up once in a while too. To take a good look at what's accumulated in the seasons of our lives and deal with it. Often times I don't want to do this. You may not want to either. But we need to do it anyway. Don't be afraid to roll up your sleeves and move some of the debris or knock down the cobwebs that have amassed in your life and your faith over time.

This year, when we packed to leave for Canada after the fire, I wasn't sure what we would need. On the one hand, since we lost almost everything, it was pretty easy to figure

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out what should be on the list to bring—everything. On the other hand it wouldn't be easy, because what we really needed was to go and be sad and grieve for a while. I didn't know how to pack for that.

A number of years ago, we had built a small house just down from the Lodge and named it the Writer's Cabin. It's hard to believe, but almost a decade after its construction, we had never spent the night there. A few friends have stayed there over the years to work on songs or write books, but we would only visit to drop off cookies and check in on them to make sure the slow writing process hadn't killed them. Now, without the Lodge it was our time to move in there. What we found when we got to the cabin was that it had everything we needed. There were a couple plates, some silverware, and a trustworthy coffee-pot. We were reminded again about the beauty of simplicity in our lives. These lessons often come at a staggering personal costs, but are worth every penny.

We have friends who live on the Lodge property year around. Some people would call them caretakers, but they're much more than that to us. Thankfully, Paul and Dorothy were in one of the other buildings on the property when the fire happened. Losing the Lodge was hard on them too. They led the original crew who built it. After the fire, they thoughtfully helped haul away most of the charred debris. It was a miracle that the fire consumed the

Lodge and left everything around it intact. There were fuel tanks with thousands of gallons of aviation fuel, diesel and gas less than one hundred feet from the fire. If the tanks had gone up in flames, so would the entire forest. I call it a miracle. I am not exactly sure how angels work, but I keep imagining a team of them, covered in soot, standing shoulder to shoulder with singed wings keeping the fireball from destroying the forests and surrounding buildings.

Each time we walked past the crater where the Lodge use to be, we hauled away a little more of the charred bushes, trees, pieces of melted metal and glass. Doing it all at once would have been too much for us, but doing it a little at a time is better. I think we're all this way. Most of us can deal with our losses a little at a time. Going slow gave me the time to find an object buried in the dirt, pull it out, and try to figure out what it used to be. For some reason I don't fully understand yet, I needed to identify each of the things I found before I could get rid of them. Was it part of a light fixture? A piece of the stove? Hardware from a door? I felt a special kinship with one bent and scorched snowman cookie cutter found in the rubble. It was as if we both knew we'd gone through a lot of trauma. I'd stand there turning each thing I found around in my hands like they were a puzzle piece until I could figure out what it was and where it had been before everything went up in flames. I think I had to accept what was lost and properly

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say goodbye as a necessary part of moving on. To a greater or lesser degree, we all need to do this with our sorrow. We have to figure out what it was that we lost and then name it. Even more important than naming it, is letting it go. Our motto after the fire became this: “We’re sad, but we’re not stuck.”

We got the whole family together at the place where the Lodge once stood and had a small memorial service. We named things we lost, remembered the beauty of the people who had come over the years, and said goodbye to the Lodge who had been a witness to it all. We reminded ourselves that memories aren’t flammable and reassured ourselves that there would be more to come. We know these new memories won’t replace the old ones, but will stand beside them as silent witnesses to the goodness of a God and the resilience hope gives us all.

Every time a wave of emotion hits me, I’m still surprised. Just when I’m feeling a little bit stronger, the tears come and then disappear just as fast. We don’t need to understand what we feel in order to experience it deeply. Life can be painful. It’s what we do next that becomes who we are. What some of us do is medicate our pain with activities and routines. Some of these serve us well and others don’t. Find the ones that help you get more real and

do plenty of those. Don't let pain keep you from going to deep places, from doing some work on your hurts so you can get on with the important business of living the rest of your life. Sad is okay, stuck isn't helpful.

One thing about pain is that we don't get to decide when we'll deal with it. When the most severe pain arrives, it demands center stage in our lives. Mine hit the hardest when I was pruning the bushes and trees that had been planted next to the Lodge. I'd pruned and clipped them yearly before the fire. Some of the plants had survived the blast of heat and some didn't. I spent hours apologizing to them for letting this happen. Even odder was the lawn in front of the Lodge, which still stretched out like thick green carpet in front of the now empty space the Lodge had occupied. I watched Bob lovingly mow the lawn because it still needed to be done and the tears would come again. I quickly realized that these things we were doing weren't random chores; they were our personal offerings.

One day as I walked past the burnt foundations I came upon a deer and her fawn. They had wandered in among the rubble and were standing side by side together. Their noses were up in the wind and their ears perked as they turned their heads toward me in perfect unison. They looked as confused as I was when the fire happened. *What the heck happened here?* is what their expressions seemed to say. I felt like I'd let them down. I whispered back,

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“Sorry, guys,” then reminded myself that the beauty of the Lodge and surrounding trees would return again someday.

Loss visits all of us. None of us gets to opt out. Rather than praying that I never experience loss again, my prayer has been that God would show me what’s possible on the other side of the loss. While we’re waiting to find out what God might have for us, we might be sad for a while but we’re not going to be stuck. We’re going to move forward. Love keeps us going and hope moves our feet.

I’m not much of a basketball player, but if I was, I won’t let the fact that I had missed a shot keep me from taking the next one. Don’t let the fear about what you’ve lost keep you from risking and reaching in your life. Here’s my question I think God asks all of us at some point: What’s your next step? None of us know what God might do next, but we get to decide what we’ll do next. Get back in the arena. Press into the pain. Find new building materials and get back to your life.

The fire might have taken the structure and all of our belongings and precious treasures. Even so, God didn’t burn our Lodge down to show us His power. He didn’t need to. He had already wowed us with our family and friends a long time ago. What I think God does is to allow each of us to go through difficult times to show us His presence through it. It’s as if He reminds each of us in our most difficult circumstances that the most beautiful

LOVE LIVES HERE

waterfalls only happen in the steepest places in our lives. Every time I would look at the gaping hole where the Lodge once stood, I remind myself that love *still* lives here. Because love doesn't need a building, it never has—it just needs us.