

1

UPSIDE DOWN IN A DAY

Shannon

Sometimes I daydream and wonder what it would be like to have a glimpse into the future—just to see ahead to the next hour, day, or week. I think about what it'd be like if God revealed how He was going to answer my prayers, before the answer actually comes. Many of us say we'd like to know what's coming, right? I've been a part of many conversations during which we were verbalizing our longing to just know what's ahead, what the next step is, how the answer will come, or how everything will work out.

But honestly, I'm grateful that God doesn't reveal most things early. I'm not sure that I'd always want to know ahead of time what I'm going to have to walk through. We aren't given grace for future events. We're only given grace to walk through the *now*.

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And in God's master design of our universe, He planned for us to be able to fully know only the events of the past: to remember and see what happened and how He worked it all out. Sometimes He gives us clues about what's to come; though it's rarely enough pieces of the puzzle. I think that He doesn't tell us what's coming because He ultimately desires that we learn to trust.

Looking back over our experience with amnesia, I see now how God used it to answer multitudes of our prayers. However, I'm grateful I didn't know at the time that the answer to our prayers would come in the messed-up package of amnesia.

Two days before everything turned upside down in our world, I wrote the following in my journal. I was on day three of an intense Master Cleanse (ten days of a strict, liquid diet with a goal of completely giving my digestive system a break), we were in the middle of a major home remodel, and life was just plain crazy. This preemptive journal entry describes how our day-to-day world existed at the time. Maybe you can relate:

Day #3 of the cleanse . . . It's not been terrible as far as detox symptoms so far. I was irritable with my family last night—but honestly, I think it's because my blood sugar was crashing. David has been stressed and irritable too (busy church week), so last night was another not-fun-day in the Carroll household. Grateful for a new day.

We found out the drywall guys are coming on Saturday to start fixing my garage—and everything has to come out of there. UGH. It's going to be a major project today, and I have a ton of other things to get done too. Oh well.

I'm reading through the Psalms while on my cleanse, trying to read and pray ten Psalms a day. As junk is cleansed out of my life, I want to fill and saturate myself with truth and let it wash over me. I have much inner cleansing that needs to

happen. Cleanse me fully, Heavenly Father. I'm grateful for Your patience with me.

Little did I know what was coming—or how God was going to answer this prayer for cleansing.

David

How did it all start? I was the pastor of a local church, and it was the week after Easter, which is one of the busiest seasons for pastors, and I had recently started a new preaching series in 1 Corinthians. Shannon and I often talk about the fact that we walk through and literally experience whatever I'm currently preaching. This week was no exception. Actually, this one takes the cake!

The week leading up to April 28 was a stressful one for me. In the middle of the week, I started having some chest pains, but I didn't give it much thought. I figured it was due to increased demands, stress, life, indigestion, and who knows what else. But I did nothing about it except try to escape and rest when I could. By Friday night, I felt truly sick and the chest pains were back. Saturday came, and I was feeling much worse: exhausted, irritable, and—I thought—just needing to get caught up on some rest, so I went to bed early. I woke up Sunday morning still feeling like a train wreck, but I decided to go ahead and lead the church service and preach. Looking back, I should have taken my wife's advice to forfeit the service and go on to the hospital.

When David says that he wasn't feeling well, he is making a vast understatement. I knew that he was not okay that morning. His breathing was heavy. He was talking about his chest hurting. Since he insisted on fulfilling his responsibilities at church, I got him some aspirin and coordinated with an EMT in our congregation in case David collapsed while preaching. Pulling on my RN background, I devised a plan for doing CPR, getting an AED, and had even instructed some friends on

how to gather the congregation for prayer should he go down during the service. I honestly can't believe that I tried to coordinate and plan in case of that severe of an emergency. The fact that I was doing so should have been my sign to override his desires and take him straight to the hospital.

I remember preaching that morning on the entire chapter of 1 Corinthians 2; in verse 2 (ESV) it reads,

*For I decided to know nothing among you
except Jesus Christ and him crucified.*

Little did I know that in a few short hours my memories would be gone and I would basically "know nothing."

I remember being at the church, and I remember preaching, but it was different; it was like I was in a dream. I could almost hear myself speaking as though I was talking from outside of my body; it was bizarre. Perhaps to describe it as something near an out-of-body experience makes the most sense.

I made it through the service, but after church I was feeling even worse—my breathing was labored, I had a sense of doom, and my chest was still bothering me, so I went to sit in my office for a few minutes. Some friends asked if we would like to go to lunch, but I told Shannon that I needed to go to the ER. Since we lived just one minute from the church, we decided to run home and change our clothes first.

I changed clothes quickly and said, "Shannon, we've got to go now to the hospital!"—and I asked her to drive. She knew something was up because I never let her drive. And if you've ever ridden with her, you understand why. Let's just say that Shannon gets to places faster than I do. I remember getting in the van and pulling out of the driveway. The next thing I remember was waking up in the hospital later that night.

If David thought I drove fast before then, I basically flew on that drive! I knew it was about a thirty-five-minute trip to the hospital, but I thought we could make it. We started down the road, but he was

becoming worse with every mile I passed. His breathing was labored and, about fifteen minutes into our trip, he told me that his vision was becoming blurry. I started to panic and tried to think of all my options in that moment: “Where’s the closest hospital? What should I do?” I kept talking to him and praying . . . and driving even faster.

As I was still talking to him, trying to keep him engaged and with me, I realized that he wasn’t responding. I looked over to him in the passenger seat of the van—and I’ll never forget this moment, even though I want to—he was totally unresponsive. I yelled his name and reached over to shake him, but there was no response. I quickly pulled over on the side of the road and called 911 to send an ambulance.

I ran around to his door, pushed the seat down, and began the initial steps of CPR. I discovered that he had a pulse and was breathing, though neither were very stable at that moment. His eyes were open, but he was not home. His gaze was off to the side; nothing I did or said aroused him.

The 911 operator stayed on the phone with me as we waited for the ambulance to arrive. I kept my fingers on his pulse, ready to restart CPR if needed. I was screaming, praying, crying, begging for my husband to come back to me. At one point I remember thinking, “What if this is it? Could this be how he dies—on the side of the road like this? Surely this won’t be how it all ends for us!” It was one of the scariest moments of my life.

It took about ten minutes for the ambulance to arrive. It felt like forever. They later told me that they were just a mile down the road, off the next exit. If I had gone just a little farther, they could have been with me in an instant. When I replay the whole experience in my mind, I wish I had gone to the next exit, but hindsight is twenty-twenty.

About a minute before the ambulance arrived, David started to stir. He asked where he was, and I told him that he was having a heart attack, we were on the side of the road, and the ambulance was almost there. He was extremely anxious and nervous, looking back and forth, and very disoriented.

The ambulance arrived, loaded him up, and we headed to the emergency room. I hopped back in our van and called friends and family to meet us at the hospital. Actually, I called and screamed over the phone with friends and family on the way there. I was so scared, and the emotions from standing over him on the side of the road were starting to spill out. I was panicked and still driving frantically to keep up with the ambulance. Thank God for traveling mercies that day.

I had no idea what I'd find when we arrived at the hospital; I didn't know if my husband would be alive or not, based on how unstable he appeared. God and I had some serious and intense conversations on that drive. I was living a total nightmare.

The Hospital

When I got to David in the ER, he was awake and somewhat aware of his surroundings. But he was very, very anxious. He kept holding his chest and saying that he couldn't breathe. They immediately got him in a room and started testing. Quickly, he became confused and then paranoid, saying things like, "I need to get out of here! They're going to hurt us! Don't you see they're all out to get us and they're evil?" Now it was my turn to be confused! With a background as an ER nurse, I knew this was not a normal presentation for someone having a heart attack. His initial tests were coming back normal, yet everything seemed weird and uncertain.

The next hour or two were especially bizarre. He didn't know where he was anymore, and he was convinced that everyone was out to get him. He saw his clothes on the chair and wanted me to get them, help him get dressed, and then escape "out of here." He was thirsty, but refused to drink the water they gave him because, according to him, it was probably poisoned. He was especially perplexed about the oxygen monitor on his finger, believing it was some type of conspiracy instrument being used against him. I kept trying to calm him down, but inside I was worried

sick that he would make good on his threats and attempt to escape from the hospital.

A series of text messages I sent to my mom during those hours in the emergency room give some insight into what we were experiencing during those unfamiliar moments. From them, you can get a glimpse into the insane progression we lived during those strange hours in the ER:

Getting a room. And an EKG. He's awake.
Just very short of air. Had relief with nitro.

In a room waiting on the Doctor. He's hooked
up. Very short of air and complaining of
heaviness. He's very anxious.

EKG was normal.

Doing blood work. He's very anxious and
confused. Oxygen is normal but he says it's
hard to breathe. I'm ok right now.

I'm beginning to think he's had a nervous
breakdown.

He's talking out of his head.

He's super agitated right now. I don't want
anyone to come back here and see him
like this.

Taking him back now for CT of the head.

He's calming down some. Still has no
memory of the last several years. But he's not
as paranoid.

He's asleep now. Pray he wakes up with a clearer mind.

Hospitalist just left. His story is so bizarre. But she said they'd worry about and check the heart first and then make sure his mind comes around before they let him go.

At one point, an X-ray technician came into the room to take a chest X-ray, and I alerted her that he was acting strangely and believed everyone was against him. He saw that she had a picture of some bones on her shirt, which triggered the intense paranoia once again. He said, "I told you they're evil around here. There are very bad people here. We've got to get out." When I came back in the room after his X-ray, he proudly confided in me and whispered, "She told me to hold my breath when she took the X-ray—but I *didn't!*"

At times, he knew we were at the same hospital where, eight years prior, he used to work as an IT server engineer. He insisted that he still worked there and was adamant about needing to get back to his department for a big project. When I saw that he was not going to be convinced otherwise, I assured him that I had talked to his boss and they had given him the day off to take care of himself. He wasn't satisfied.

This day was getting crazier and crazier! I went from thinking that my husband was having a heart attack, to almost losing him on the side of the road, to walking through his paranoia and confusion, and then finding out that his heart was checking out A-OK! Talk about a roller coaster. Due to his strong paranoia and confusing behavior, the medical professionals turned their attention to checking out his brain.

The Amnesia Reality

Within a couple of hours after our arrival at the hospital, around 4 or 5 in the afternoon, his confusion subsided and he returned to seemingly normal David. It was at that moment we discovered that he had severe memory loss from the last eight to thirteen years. I think my first clue was when, in his totally calm and lucid state, he believed that he still worked at the hospital.

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I tried to assure him that he didn't work there any more—and hadn't worked there for eight years, but he wouldn't believe me. I remember him saying, "I just *know* I still work here! *This* is my place of employment!" He would shake his head when I told him that it wasn't. When I told him that he was a pastor, he thought *I* was out of *my* mind! "You can't be for real!" was a common response in this conversation.

When I realized that he was living in the past, I started updating him very quickly on our life to see if anything triggered his memories:

"How old do you think our boys are?" I asked.

"I don't know, but the little ones are in car seats, right?" he replied.

"No, they're nine and ten now, and Caleb is sixteen. Do you know where we live?"

"We still live in Henryville; in the house we built right after we got married."

"No, we moved from there six years ago and now live in Scottsburg, just one minute from our church, where you're the pastor," I corrected.

He was blown away by it all and couldn't grasp any of it. The picture was becoming clearer—we were dealing with a significant and sudden amnesia.

At that moment, I didn't know what to think about all of this. I was in a total fog, trying to grasp if this was even real life. As Shannon was trying to orient me to our life, I couldn't wrap my mind around any of it. I was experiencing anxiety, fear, doubt, bewilderment, and complete confusion—all at the same time. I felt trapped.

I was in a total fog, trying to grasp if this was even real life.

We determined the memory loss to be eight years since our youngest son, Evan, was nine at the time and David remembered him as a baby. However, he had zero recollection of the church where he had pastored for the last thirteen years, and details in between those eight to thirteen years were fuzzy. He remembered all of life before the thirteen years, but none of it past the eight years. No one could figure out what happened to this healthy guy on the side of the road that Sunday and how he ended up with such a strange, severe amnesia.

Now here's the interesting thing. First Corinthians 2:5 (ESV), which I preached about earlier that Sunday morning, says:

So that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God.

But when none of the so-called educated professionals knew, who else was there to turn to but God?

Think about this for a minute: How would this whole story have turned out differently if any of the medical professionals had said, "Oh! We know exactly what this is!"? But one by one, each professional came in—the psychiatrist, the cardiologist, the neurologist, the primary care physician—and they all scratched their heads and said that they didn't have a clue what was happening. If they had known the specific medical cause, people would have reacted differently. But when none of the so-called educated professionals knew, who else was there to turn to but God?

When he got settled in his hospital room that first night and I finally left to go sleep at my parent's house (after training him how to use his iPhone to call me if he needed anything), I remember being completely dumbfounded by and drained from the events of that day. My brain didn't know how to process it all, and I was totally overwhelmed. I had no explanations for any of it; I wasn't even sure what happened. I had the thought, "I'm going to eventually need counseling from all of today's trauma."

The two-day hospital stay was a continuation of the roller coaster. We were searching for answers, hoping that his brain would pop back into gear at any moment. We were grasping for common ground while orienting David to present day life. It was a twilight-zone experience for all of us, trying to wrap our brains around whatever was happening.

In the midst of all the chaos, some beautiful interactions took place and we started to get a glimpse of God's hand.

The tech in the MRI department commented to David, "Well, the bright side is God has given you a clean, fresh slate in life. That's a gift a lot of people would like." Her words of encouragement and life have stayed with us to this day! Isn't it just like God to plant messengers of hope in the most unexpected places?

Even though I tried to remain strong on the outside, my insides were a mess. This disturbing experience was taking its toll, and I didn't know which way was up anymore. While sitting in the hospital room, I "randomly" received a text from a dear friend. She had no idea that we were in the hospital or what was going on (we hadn't actually talked in several months) but she said that she had this strong impression to reach out to me.

As it turns out, she was working at the hospital at that moment and was able to come down and visit with me at the exact time David was out of the room for multiple tests. God sent her to me as an angel that day! I was able to share the story with her and express my whirlwind of emotions and fears. She gave me a safe place to cry and she offered hope

and such sweet encouragement. It was a gift straight from Heaven in the middle of a terrible and scary hospital stay. God was with us and already providing for our every need.

You may have heard the phrase, “You don’t know what you don’t know.” I needed to find answers, I was desperate to find answers. How is it possible to have so many thoughts in your brain and, at the same time, know that there was an inaccessible vault storing years of memories?

My mind was working overtime to resolve whatever had caused this amnesia.

One night in the hospital, while trying to sleep, I had the first of three vivid dreams. In it, I was walking down a dimly lit hallway of what looked like an office building. All of the doors on each side of the hallway were locked, and the lights in each room were off. At the end of the hallway was another door, which was facing me. Behind this door was a brilliant light, and I knew that, even in my dream, behind this door were the answers my brain needed.

I approached the door and reached for the handle, anticipating with excitement the revelation—and maybe even healing—that awaited on the other side of the door. In that moment, the lights to my hospital room came on and a voice called out, awakening me from my slumber, “Phlebotomy!”

NO! NO! NO! I was so close to finding answers and now so frustrated that I had been prematurely awakened. Not only did I not open the door in my dream, not only did I not get any answers, but I also got stuck with yet another needle.

The next morning, a well-meaning psychiatrist came into my room and asked several questions. She offered to prescribe a medication for depression. I immediately responded, “I’m not depressed. Frustrated, yes. Depressed, no.”

Later the same day, a neurologist came to my room and asked Shannon to leave for a bit. He then proceeded to ask about the state of my marriage. I guess he was trying to find the root of my stress or a possible cause for my amnesia. He began by asking:

“What’s really going on here? How’s everything between you and your wife?”

“I guess it’s good. That might be a good question to ask her since I don’t really know!”

“How are your finances?” he asked.

“That’s another great question I don’t have the answer to.”

He then asked if anything was bothering me. I broke down in tears.

“What is it?” he asked.

“My kids!”

“What about them?”

“I remember them as babies, and they just came to visit me a little bit ago. I’m just having such a hard time with it all.”

The younger boys visiting David in the hospital was a pivotal event for all of us. In that moment, David’s amnesia was definite, clear, and blaring at us like a neon road sign. We couldn’t deny this reality any more. After we got home, I asked the boys about their thoughts from when they first saw their dad in the hospital. Apparently, Grandma had told them that their dad’s memories were gone and he had amnesia. Reid (ten at the time) knew about the word *amnesia* from a *Legends of Zelda* video game. Evan (nine at the time) had never heard of it. They quickly understood its full meaning.

Reid recounts, “It all felt so weird because I expected him to remember pretty much everything. I only expected him to forget one or two little things, and he forgot like eight years! I tried to show him a ton of pictures and videos to help him remember, but that didn’t help. There was just this feeling in the air like something was wrong—this sense that something isn’t OK right now.”

Evan also thought David had just forgotten a couple of things, but left that hospital visit in tears. “It was really weird, I guess because I had never seen Dad in the hospital. He just looked so stressed.”

Our oldest, Caleb (sixteen at the time), finally saw his dad once David arrived home. His first impression was mixed, “I was glad he was alive, but I was also scared.”

After all the poking and prodding and all of the tests were completed, everything came back clean. The general consensus was that years of cumulative stress contributed to this episode. The neurologist said that my memories could come back in a day, a week, a year, or never. He instructed us to go home, live our life, and, if we needed to, give him a call. With that, they discharged me from the hospital.

“I was glad he was alive, but I was also scared.”

Daily Life with Amnesia

The ride home from the hospital was strange. I recognized several buildings and roads from life “before,” but many things were new. I remembered the house that we had previously lived in, but our current house was completely foreign to me. When Shannon took me inside, it was like walking into it for the first time. It didn’t feel like home. I didn’t know where my toothbrush was. I didn’t know where my clothes were. And I kept referring to it as if it was Shannon’s house.

Early on, I noticed that the hot water heater had a leak, so I informed Shannon, “YOUR hot water heater is leaking. YOU might want to call YOUR plumber.”

She retorted, “Well, OUR plumber’s contact information is in YOUR phone.” Situations like that one occurred every day and it was hard when they did. Another time, Shannon asked, “Can you help me put some dishes away?”

I replied, “Sure! Where do they all go?” It was frustrating.

Trying to get used to “normal” was difficult. Every task was a reminder of what I did not know. I looked in the mirror and wondered, “When did I get gray hair?” I looked at Shannon’s iPhone and said, “What in the world is that? It doesn’t look like a Blackberry!” (For those of you who don’t know, a Blackberry was a popular phone and multitasking device from the early 2000s.)

Daily life with amnesia was at times comical, but other times it was frustrating, overwhelming, and even irritating. It’s pretty hard to wrap your brain around the millions of layers affected by amnesia. Maybe some of these conversations will give you a glimpse into what we were experiencing multiple times a day:

Me: Hey, do you remember the businessman Donald Trump?

David: Yes, I remember him.

Me: Well he’s now our president of the United States!

David: NO WAY! You’re kidding me, right?!

Me: So I don’t work at the hospital anymore. I’m home full time and work with Young Living Essential Oils.

David: What’s that?

Me: A network marketing company that sells essential oils and natural products.

David: Are you kidding me again?! You didn’t like network marketing! And what in the world are essential oils?!

Me: Well, we love it now! It’s changed our life, and it’s allowing me to work from home and help others be more well.

David: Interesting. (His new favorite word!)

Side note: Our family had changed a ton over ten-plus years! It was a lot to take in at once—our gluten free diet, using all the essential oils for ALL things, having “all-natural” toothpaste and shampoo, and me being on a cleanse. David tells me now that seeing our massive lifestyle changes was one of the hardest things to grasp; he felt like he was suddenly inserted into a completely different family than the one he remembered.

David: Why do we have twenty chickens?! I don't even like chickens and I can't eat them?! (He is allergic to poultry!)

Me: The chickens were your idea . . .

Within a day or so of being home, I sent this message to some friends:

We desperately need God's help. We are home, which is wonderful. But everything here is “new,” so life is extremely overwhelming. We are figuring it out and adjusting, being honest, crying, laughing, resting, trusting...but it's hard, friends. He wanted to go look around the church. He found his Bible and sermon notes, which he doesn't remember at all. Praying God restores him to preaching when it's time!

As I watched him exploring the pulpit and rediscovering his Bible, I prayed this verse (John 14:26 ESV) as a promise:

But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.

As we attempted to integrate back into life, I saw how tired David was. His brain would get “full” easily, and he would have to step away. Imagine that every single second you’re absorbing brand-new information and you have a limited context to know what to do with it all. His attitude was amazing and, even though he was scared out of his mind (pun intended!), he demonstrated peace and a quiet spirit. He spent a lot of time reading in the Word, learning about life and our boys, jumping in to do what he could, resting, and researching brain health.

Homelife was a reminder of everything I had missed. My boys were older—much older—than I remembered. My oldest son was sixteen and had a full beard. When did that happen? Everything was a mental overload and wore me out easily. My boys were asking question after question, and I tried to describe amnesia to them using the analogy that it was like someone took an ice cream scoop and scooped out years of my memories, that they were just gone. I prayed to God, “Please help me!”

I know this change was difficult for my family. They were all loving, but I could see their stress. Shannon was doing her best to handle everything when, normally, we would have shared responsibilities. This period was an emotional roller coaster for everyone. I felt helpless; I couldn’t do anything. Yet we were blessed and together.

It was also overwhelming to take in our homestead. Everywhere I looked, there was something that needed to be done: fields needed to be mowed, our garden needed attention, our henhouse needed repairs. On and on it went. I thought to myself, “Why are we doing all of this?” I wanted to get away from it all.

Nighttime did not always bring relief. My mind was racing and processing all through the night. One evening, shortly after coming home from the hospital, I had a second vivid dream. In the dream, I was standing in an IT server room, similar to where I used to work. There was row after row of server racks, all filled with servers that had errors. I was walking down each row, cataloging all of the errors in order to prioritize which ones

needed to be addressed first. Somehow, I knew it was a dream and that all of it was related to my mind trying to sort everything out. It didn't bring me any answers, and I woke up exhausted. This pattern of exhaustion from trying to sort it all out in my mind was becoming a new daily reality.

Shannon thought it would be good to get me out of the house, so she took me on a grocery trip. On the way to the store, we had a conversation about what to do if we encountered someone from our life and I didn't recognize them. I laughed and thought, "This is really not a big deal. I'm not going to know anybody even if they know me!" What a strange conversation to be having . . . While at the store, a friend from church approached us. I had no idea who he was, but I shook his hand and tried to wear a smile. Shannon introduced me, and we quickly moved on. As I processed that awkward encounter, I thought, "I can do this." On one hand, it should have been no big deal. On the other hand, it was totally freaking me out.

It was all such a radical, bizarre experience—like living in a movie. I knew that God was going to use it big-time; it was obvious that He was doing a new thing in us, even when we didn't understand any of it.

REFLECTION PRAYER

Heavenly Father, sometimes life can throw unexpected curve balls that attempt to shake me. Thank You for carrying me when I am confused and burdened and uncertain. Help me to stay anchored in You, no matter what I'm going through in my life, knowing that You are with me.