

Christian Book Summaries

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Shattered Dreams

God's Unexpected Pathway to Joy

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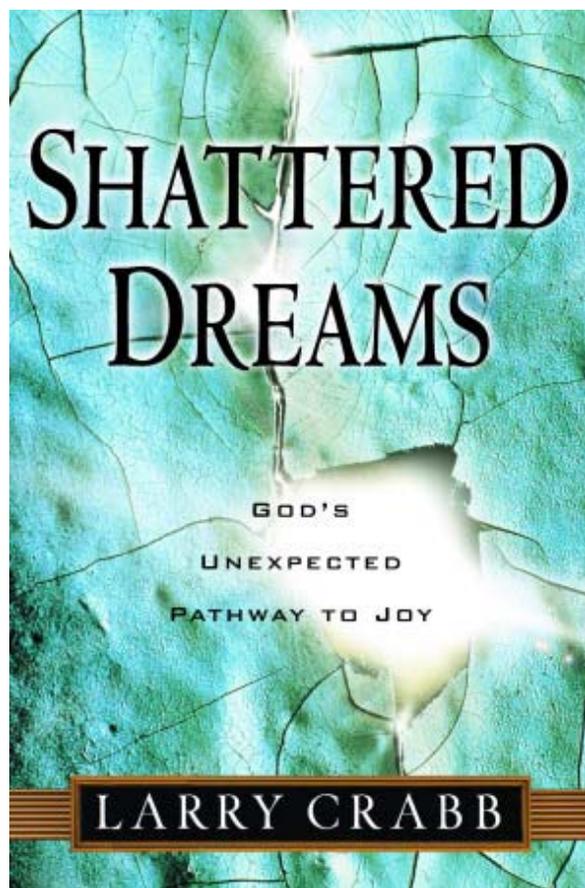
A Quick Focus

The Book's Purpose

- Reassure us that God wants to bless us
- Reveal that our deepest desire is an encounter with God
- Analyze our tendency to seek happiness in lesser pleasures
- Demonstrate how God allows our dreams to shatter so we will discover true joy in Him

The Book's Message

We dream of happy lives and good things. We long for strong marriages, obedient kids, fulfilling jobs, and many healthy years of purpose. When those dreams shatter, as they so often do, we doubt God's goodness to us. However, in reality, our deepest need and desire is to know and encounter God. Only by allowing our lesser dreams to shatter can God reveal this to us and give us the true joy of experiencing Him.



by Larry Crabb

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greatest suffering. Perhaps God deepens our desire to experience Him by appearing absent. God tells us to not lose hope.

When Naomi lost her husband and two sons, she cried out to the all powerful God who seemingly had done nothing to assist her. She knew the stories of His faithfulness to others, and was frustrated, like we are, with God's inconsistency and unpredictability. Some are healed; some are not. He often allows the dreams we think are necessary for our happiness to die unfulfilled. But from Naomi we learn these difficult but essential lessons:

1. Our own dreams for our lives must be completely abandoned in order for us to truly know God. Broken dreams lead to spiritual growth.
2. The extreme pain is part of an essential process.
3. Every one of us will experience shattered dreams, and will struggle with the God who could have done something to help them come true.
4. If only our lesser dreams were to come true, we would not recognize the greater dreams God has for us. Only deep suffering enables us to enjoy true life.
5. Many of us fail to drink deeply of the living water, so we are weakened in our experience of God and in our impact in the world.
6. The future holds promise of a better dream to replace a good one, a better dream of joy.

OUR PROBLEM WITH GOD

The friends we most treasure are the ones who do something for us. They listen, and care, and respond to our needs. They would do anything to help us, which is why we value them so highly.

While that seems a selfish reason to appreciate a friend, we *are* needy and must be willing to accept what we cannot provide for ourselves. Jesus urged us to receive the kingdom like little children, not because they are cute, but because they realize their helplessness. We are not out of line to appreciate people we can count on to give us what we need.

This is why our "friendship" with God seems so troublesome. Sometimes He appears incredibly elusive and unresponsive, especially during really difficult trials. When dreams shatter, it seems like He does nothing, despite His unlimited power and resources. How can we call Him our most caring friend when He abandons us?

As we suffer losses, we wrestle with our feelings toward God. We pray, but find fear and despair instead of peace. We wonder what God can be trusted for, if it's not to keep our dreams from shattering. To find an answer, we must adjust our thinking entirely. We live as if we are here on this earth to have pleasant circumstances and good feelings. To have all pleasure and no pain. To have what is reserved for heaven *now*, and we want God to give it to us. When He doesn't come through, we feel betrayed. But in reality, our shattered dreams point us toward our true hope. Our suffering will have a purpose; it will stir our desire to know God above all else, which will ultimately bring us our greatest joy. *"Shattered dreams open the door to better dreams, dreams that we do not properly value until the dreams that we improperly value are destroyed."*

Jesus doesn't promise His disciples freedom from trouble, but rather the power to remain faithful no matter what. He promises to reveal His love in the midst of suffering so that we can share it with others. He promises to make us like Himself, although we much prefer relief over pain.

We can find comfort in this: *"God will never allow suffering to come into our lives that is not necessary to achieve His good purpose. He doesn't like to see us suffer."* Maybe the greatest power and the greatest joy come through the

"It's hard enough to develop a personal relationship with an *invisible* God, one whose voice I never hear the way I hear a friend's voice over the phone; it's even harder to feel close to an *unresponsive* God."

"Something wonderful survives everything terrible, and it surfaces most clearly when we hurt."

THE RHYTHM OF HOPE

EVERYTHING HELPS ME TO GOD

If we are honest, we can recognize a cycle in our lives. Happiness, then despair, then joy. Happiness, despair, joy, over and over. People in happy circumstances place their hope in the blessings as the foundation for life. They do not love well or seek real joy because they are intent on keeping the blessings coming. People who have not been broken by suffering love their blessings more than the One who gave them, and rarely hunger for what their souls really need.

“Happiness must be stripped away, forcibly, before joy can surface.”

Four phrases in the narrative of Ruth point the way on Naomi’s journey toward hope. God’s hope has a unique rhythm that sets an unhurried pace toward joy. These phrases tell us this:

The sun is rising.

God is on the move.

Our Redeemer is getting ready to bless and will not rest until He does.

And we can depend on the Spirit to grow in us what is needed to fulfill our destiny.

When Naomi comes home bitter and blaming God for her tragedies, He doesn’t chastise her for her feelings. She is honest

before Him and others about her struggles. When Jesus says, “Do not let your hearts be troubled,” He does not mean that we should feel no hurt. That is a Buddhist teaching, to nullify all emotions and to be content. Jesus teaches these truths:

“Life includes suffering, but life is good.

The cause of all suffering is separation from God.

The way to handle suffering is to discover your desire for God.

The new life provided through Jesus must be accepted as a gift of love.”

He urges us to enter into the suffering and let it move us toward God, to face our disappointments and seek God for forgiveness and love and the power to do what is right. He wants us to bring our hurt into His presence and not pretend any longer. With His strength we can then journey through the brokenness with prayer, scripture, spiritual disciplines, and connection with others. Our pain will reveal an even deeper desire for God that He promises to fulfill.

“Shattered dreams are a prelude to joy. Always.”

We would like our brokenness to be fixed quickly, like a car, taken to the shop and out the next day. But in God’s wisdom, He works in the depths of the soul, quietly moving us closer to Himself. It is not a fast trip, but a slow and bumpy one, and many who find themselves on that path choose to give up and conclude that either God doesn’t exist or doesn’t care.

What do we say to someone like Naomi on this difficult path? How would we help? With humility we can trust that the Spirit is at work in her life, using everything she has experienced and is feeling to draw her to Himself. We can help her see her challenges *“not as problems to fix or struggles to relieve or pain to deaden, but as important elements in a larger story.”* God is present in her current state, loving her, working in her, and helping her grow.

When Naomi found out that Ruth had “happened” to glean in Boaz’ field and that she had found favor with him, Naomi recognized the work of God. “He has not stopped showing His kindness to the living and the dead.” (Ruth 2:20). She realizes that He has been at work all along, demonstrating His love and provision. Naomi was able to see God’s hand at work because she had entered deeply into her pain~ not deadened it, and discovered how desperately she needed God.

Just when we want God to comfort us, He withdraws, and our hearts break. Realizing just how much we crave God’s presence brings more pain. We recognize that we have no power to satisfy our most profound need. We wait on the mercy of a God who may or may not respond. This brings us to a crossroads. Will we fall into despair and bitterness, pursuing selfish pleasure, or will we accept that life is not meant to be all about

EVERYTHING HELPS ME TO GOD
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us and our comfortable feelings? Longings that are left unsatisfied point us to heaven. By frustrating our desire for Him, God allows it to deepen.

“C.S. Lewis somewhere said that if we discover a desire within us that nothing in this world can satisfy, we should begin to wonder if perhaps we were created for another world.”

It is good to be bothered that you cannot find God. When you admit that your longing for God is your deepest yearning, then you are ready to see Him at work in your life.

CBS

GOD

THE ELUSIVE

Competing in our souls is our desire for God with our desire for anything else. But only one of them will shape our lives. If we try to please two masters, we always favor the one who seems more responsive to us, and by default despise the other. Only when our dreams shatter do we understand clearly what our true desire is.

We need God not only to expose our idolatry and reveal our deepest desire for Him, but also to fulfill that desire. *“Only a fulfilled desire for God provides the power to consistently resist the lure of lesser pleasures and to stay anchored in Christ when life’s storms rage.”*

Why does experiencing God seem so elusive? Why does His reality seem so unreal? A critical question, one which brings with it the pain and fear that we will never find Him.

“When we most long to sense His presence, we instead feel His absence.”

First, we must return to biblical truth, which clearly states that God exists not only in heaven and earth, but within us. And it is there that He promises to be personally and deeply found. We must search deep within to find Him, allowing quiet and solitude to penetrate through the morass of our outer lives until we can be still and know Him.

In order to find and experience God, we will need to enter our heart’s sanctuary, and like Jesus in the temple, grow angry at the mess we’ve made of it. *“There is no way to God but through the rubble. We must go through, not around, whatever keeps us from Him. The process is what spiritual people call brokenness and repentance.”*

Our search for God requires that we abandon ourselves, give up control, and put our confidence in a Being who cannot be controlled. Not a technique for getting what we want from God, abandonment is, instead, a giving up in absolute dependence on God’s intention to show Himself to us, or not. We invite Him and await his response.

“Spiritual activities can become spiritual maneuvers designed to make something happen.”

Following abandonment, we humbly wait for confidence—an awareness that emerges as “Warm Truth,” a sense of God’s presence within and around us. As Iain Matthew puts it, *“Yes, there is someone there, has always been, a silhouette becoming clear.”*

But in the pain of waiting, sometimes it seems easier to not believe in God at all. If only we could see the love in His eyes, or have him respond directly to what concerns us, or take action on our behalf! When God appears to be inactive, it feels like we are desperately ringing for the nurse to come and help us, but to no avail.

We can respond in one of three ways to this God who seems absent and uncaring. First, we can forget God and dismiss him as insignificant and irrelevant. Make our own way in the world. Or, we can confess our feelings of anger at God as terribly rebellious and disrespectful, falling on our knees in repentance. *“Of course that’s the right thing to do. Why then does it feel like crawling into a small, dark box of uncomplaining submission?...It requires that I smother my soul, that I kick the life out of myself in order to get along with God.”*

A third option is to cry and scream at the pain of life until its weight knocks you over and you discover that you are on solid ground. The solid ground is Jesus, and His love that restrains Him, holds Him back from giving us the blessings for our own good. We cannot understand why He is restraining his passion, but just like a mother restraining her baby so he can receive

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THE ELUSIVE GOD continued from page 4

a shot he needs, so God allows us to suffer for reasons we cannot understand. It hurts, but we must have confidence in His love.

Jesus said to not let our hearts be troubled. Not untroubled by pain and suffering, but continuing to hope and wait and trust that God is at work. The focus is not on making things “better,” but on Christ. The focus is not on the here and now, but on preparing ourselves for then, when we meet Christ.

“We can rather know that the solid ground of His passion for us is beneath our feet. It’s a firm foundation. We need no other, no matter what life may bring, no matter how low we sink in despair or sin. God will work through it all.”

CBS

Lesson three:

“It isn’t always good to be blessed with the good things of life. Bad times provide an opportunity to know God that blessings can never provide.”

CBS

OUR HIGHEST DREAM IF ONLY WE KNEW IT

Can we really consider Jesus our best friend when life is miserable and He seems so far away? When we see Him hanging on the cross, we gain a different perspective. We see Him taking our pain, our sin, our suffering upon Himself so that we can receive His kindness forever. It is then that we realize that we have no friend like Jesus. His name does not get top billing on our list of best friends, because His name “belongs on a page by itself.” His love is separate, unique, calling us to an encounter with Himself, an experience of deep community with others, and a transformation of our inner being. That is our highest dream and what our hearts truly desire, but we will never fully know it until we suffer.

We are impatient as we long for relief from pain. But God’s good for us is higher and greater than simply making life more comfortable. His highest good is for us to meet Christ, to realize how strongly we want to know Him. Our Christian faith is not centered on getting to heaven or in obtaining a satisfying meaningful life here and now.

“We’ve shrunk Christianity into a neat little package full of blessings, that, if opened, will empower us to feel good now and feel even better in the next life.”

BUT LIFE OUGHT TO WORK

Behind many of our efforts is the assumption that we are supposed to feel good about life and that it is God’s job to make that happen. We think of our Christian lives as a business partnership with God where we share resources and get life working fairly well until we can all go to heaven and live happily ever after.

In believing this we miss true joy. *“God is **not** cooperating with us to make life work so we can feel now all that He has created us to feel...we **cannot** count on God to arrange what happens in our lives in ways that will make us feel good.”* But we can depend on Him to lovingly knock down all that stands in the way of our enjoyment of Him. And we can count on Him to give us enough joy and hope to remind us that this world is not our final home.

But it’s difficult to keep that focus when what we want most is to feel better. We want things to improve. We realize that our life goal consists of that and nothing deeper—to feel good. It is a ball and chain called the *flesh*. God wants us to give up demanding that He make us feel better, because in the brokenness of giving up our arrogant and selfish hearts, the chain breaks, the heavy ball rolls away, and we can learn to fly.

Brokenness teaches all of us these three lessons:

Lesson one:

“The good news of the gospel, for this life, is that He will make our lives better. We will be empowered to draw close to God and to love others well and to do both for one central purpose, to glorify God, to make Him look good to any who watch us live.”

Lesson two:

“When God seems most absent from us, He is doing His most important work in us.” Struggling and suffering are often the part of the journey when God is doing His deepest work.

OUR HIGHEST DREAM—IF WE ONLY KNEW IT
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We tend to doubt that true joy will come just in knowing Christ, so we content ourselves with smaller joys and miss out on the deepest joy available. Can we actually enjoy God more than anything else?

In order to find the answer, we must discern how we think about God, and how we think about ourselves. Current Christian culture has undermined our awareness of the holiness of God. Our perception of God has transmuted from a *“Holy God of Passionate Wrath”* into a *“Fatherly God of Strict Standards.”* To avoid even a hint of overzealous legalism, we’ve cheapened Him further into *“A Helpful God of Useful Principles.”*

How we view ourselves impacts our understanding of God as well. We think we have committed only minor infractions, and thus deserve just a tongue-lashing or small penalty. Concern with personal sin is overshadowed by our desire to fulfill our longings and meet our needs and build successful earthly kingdoms.

**“We
become the
point and
see nothing
really wrong
with it.”**

We fail to see that we are really arrogant sinners who deserve only separation from God and misery. We dismiss our sin as understandable and insignificant, and see ourselves as *“scoldably selfish people who really ought to do better,”* or worse, as *“understandable strugglers who deserve to be understood and helped.”*

But when we realize in our deepest core that we are arrogant sinners who deserve only God’s wrath, when we shake in fear before a holy God, only then will we discover the oceans of kindness and love He offers us. Only when we recognize how desperate and undeserving of God’s grace we are can we be overwhelmed by

that gift. We can seek God with abandon and be welcomed into the community of other broken, forgiven sinners. We discover that with complete abandonment comes a changed interior, with a deep yearning to obey God and know Him intimately. The journey continues, since we learn slowly. But shattered dreams take us onward and upward on the amazing joy-filled journey of experiencing God.

**“We
can live
beyond
shattered
dreams.”**

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