

# the hardest peace

*expecting grace in the midst  
of life's hard*

kara tippetts

Chapter 1

# The Beginning

*For everything there is a season, and a time  
for every matter under heaven:  
a time to be born, and a time to die;  
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted ...*

Ecclesiastes 3:1–2

1. What are the hard parts of your childhood story? In what ways did you try as a child to escape these difficulties?

2. Who has God sent to walk with you through your pain? Has He asked you to walk with someone else in his or her journey?

3. Consider bitterness in your heart from past hurts. Have you forgiven those who hurt you as a child? Why or why not?

4. If you could travel back in time and speak to yourself as a hurting child, what would you say? What truths did you need to hear? What truths do you need to hear now?

5. For all of us “It starts as a child.” Many of the problems we wrestle with as adults can be traced back to our earliest days. Think back to my story and my hopes for my own daughter. Now think about your own childhood story and complete this sentence: I was raised the daughter or son of \_\_\_\_\_.

Chapter 2

# Love Is Kind

*... a time to kill, and a time to heal;  
a time to break down, and a time to build up ...*

Ecclesiastes 3:3

1. How has kindness shaped your life? How has the absence of kindness left you broken?
2. Where do you see grace working on your heart to help you love an unlovely person like Jesus loves the unloveliness in you? Kindness is a gift given and received when we don't deserve it. Romans 2:4 says, *God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance.*
3. Can you recall a time when you did not fit in but someone reached out in kindness to love and accept you? What impact did that kindness have on you?
4. If you are married, what are some expectations you had going into marriage that were not met? How did you reconcile those unmet expectations? How has God shown you that only He can satisfy you fully?
5. Do you fight with kindness? What would that look like? How would your relationships change if your fights were rooted in kindness?

Chapter 3

# **The Unexpected Plot Change**

*“A time to ...”*

1. Your story is a good story. In the grief, pain, and hard, the Author has a plan. It may feel like a desperate breaking of your very heart, but suffering is not the absence of God or good. In our culture, the goal often seems to be winning, being the best, most beautiful, most successful, but what if that isn't the good story? How has suffering made your story richer? How has it shaped your story?
2. What about the bitterness of unmet expectations, hopes, and dreams? What have you done with the bitter that meets us all?
3. What specific things have happened to you that have caused you to struggle to be thankful to God? In the midst of your suffering, where did you turn?
4. Have you specifically experienced God's kindness and grace in the midst of difficulty? What faces and actions come to mind?
5. How does your life look different from what you once expected? Are you okay with the differences? Why or why not? How would you describe the new story you are living?

Chapter 4

# The Dance Most of All

*... a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time  
to mourn, and a time to dance ...*

Ecclesiastes 3:4



1. What is your definition of beauty? Where or who did it come from? Is it serving you well?
2. How do you communicate beauty to your children, especially in a culture that worships only the outward?
3. What about yourself causes you to look downcast at the ground instead of into people's eyes—better yet, instead of into God's eyes? What is the root of that shame? How have you experienced God meeting you there, or wanting to meet you there?
4. What experiences have you been through that have left scars? What are some words you would use to describe those wounds and scars? What are some words you believe God uses to describe your scars?
5. In what ways have you tried to run away from your suffering, pain, hardships? Were you successful? What might it mean to accept your suffering as a vital part of your story, one that could ultimately lead to beauty?

Chapter 5

# Shadowlands

*... a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together;  
a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing ...*

Ecclesiastes 3:5

1. Read again those hard verses in Mark's gospel.
2. What things in your life are you clinging to as shadows instead of remembering the light in your story?
3. How often do you think about heaven? If a lot, describe what you think about. If not, think about why not.
4. Who or what would be the hardest thing for you to let go of? If that's a person, why not share that fear with him or her? It could open up a new level of conversation between the two of you.
5. List three "what ifs" you worry about, ask yourself, and struggle to quiet. What lies are you tempted to believe in worrying? What do you imagine God saying to your "what ifs"?

Chapter 6

# There, I Said It

*... a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time  
to keep, and a time to cast away ...*

Ecclesiastes 3:6

1. Will your children one day look at their little years and feel developed in their musical/sports abilities but not know the essence of your heart shared openly with them? If you answered no, there is *still* time.
2. List five areas of your life where you struggle to give up your perceived sovereignty or control.
3. Good gifts can often become idols in our lives. What have you been given that could easily become an idol? Has it already?
4. Where are you in terms of living vulnerably, inviting others to see the messiness of your kitchen and your heart? Who could you invite this month to join you in that place?
5. In what ways are you a safe place for other people? Think of someone you know who is hurting. How can you pursue them and become a safe place for their messiness? Not save them necessarily, but be a safe place to fall?

Chapter 7

# Faith of a Child

*... a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to  
keep silence, and a time to speak ...*

Ecclesiastes 3:7

1. Do you hide your struggles from your children? How do you seek and find the discernment to know how and what and when to share with your children?

2. Think about being a student of your children. How could you spend time today learning their hearts and moving toward them in love? If you struggle to talk about heart issues with your children and focus simply on behavior, ask God for the grace to begin, one day at a time, to pay closer attention to what really matters—their heart.

3. What are your thoughts about heaven? What does it look like? Sound like? Is it a comforting thought to you or something else?

4. What are the last things your children usually hear before they go to sleep? Words of love and affection? Phrases of impatience? Possibly just silence? How could you begin to redeem that special time before they enter sleep each night?

5. When you pray for God to lift you out of fear and dread, do you truly believe He can and will? Why or why not? What is an example of when He did, and what is an example of when you felt He didn't? How did He show you His goodness in both answers?

Chapter 8

# The Hardest Peace

*... a time to love, and a time to hate; a time  
for war, and a time for peace.*

Ecclesiastes 3:8



1. What masks have you worn that have been peeled off through suffering? How did they come off, and how did you respond? Have you been tempted to put these masks back on?
2. At what points in your life have you been given a clear perspective to view your story as part of God's greater and bigger story? How did this impact you and how you live life now?
3. Are you suffocating under expectations you've placed on yourself? What does God say about those expectations? What does freedom in Christ look like in light of these expectations?
4. What plans have you made that have not or will not come to fruition? What has processing your disappointment been like? What would it look like to trust God with your disappointment?
5. Imagine God speaking to you, pointing out moments of grace in your life. What would He show you?

# **Letters from Kara**

*Dearest Jason,*

*Bright Eyes wrote a song “First Day of My Life” that says, “This is the first day of my life, I’m glad I didn’t die before I met you.” When I first heard these words, I wept. I feel like life—the life I’ve hunted for as that little, broken girl sitting beside the river—started with you. I’m so grateful for each moment, each breath, each giggle, each moment next to you—a lifetime of knowing the big and small places of each other. Together we have built a lifetime of living, embracing, laughing to stomach each moment. Always laughing. You know every corner of my heart—ugly and beautiful. You embrace each morsel of this messy me, and meet me with grace and generosity. You give me the courage to overshare it all—on my blog, in these pages, with friends—because at the end of the oversharing, I’m loved. All of me. Loved. I never fret a mistake. I never fear you moving toward distance. You have spent your breaths, your moments, your love moving near to my heart. You remind me of goodness when the story begins to suffocate. The one moment next to you was worth all that has been painful. You have given me moments of grace when I placed you in the place of Jesus, but you always shepherded me back to my true love. Always reminded me of my true heart, the answer to my deepest need. Jesus. You have led me so gently and so well.*

*While cleaning—let’s be honest, while looking for a reason to not clean today—I found the journal I started for us so many years ago. The journal where we were going to write down the dreams we had for our marriage and our life together. I wrote only three entries in it. Sounds like me, all ideas and little follow-through, but I like to imagine I put that journal down and walked into the beautiful horizon of our marriage and stopped trying to create idols of what life should look like,*

*and actually just sought life and faithfulness in the living. I'm sure in some ways we did that, in some ways we didn't. I will share two of the dreams I listed all those years ago when we were babies trying to figure out how to love each other well.*

My first dream for us is that our love would be unceasing. That we would both give to each other in the motivation to see the other grow. My hope is that our love would be enriched as we get to know each other better. That the passion we have for each other would be intensified rather than dulled.

The next dream is to have children. Everything in me knows that I am made to be a mother. All that I do now is to prepare a healthy environment for my children to be raised in. My dream is not only to have children, but also to be a wonderful mother who displays unconditional love to my children.

*In so many ways, we met these simple and huge dreams, exceeded these dreams, met our limitations in these dreams, and found this life of ours. Stumbling next to you has always promised to be a safe place to fall. You have walked in grace before me, whispering truth, reminding me of love, giving me freedom to walk, run, stumble, and fall in the confines of your loving acceptance. A love I had not known in another person before meeting you, you have given me an environment to flourish within. You have given me the motherhood I longed to have. You have blessed me with your kindness in the face of unkindness. You have gently*

*led me, loved me, protected me, and shown me a true Jesus. Not the Jesus I want to create—easy, comfortable. But the real Jesus who takes love seriously. A Jesus of mercy, truth, grace. You have faithfully walked your faith before me.*

*Dear heart, you do marriage so well. Pridefully, I think it could be one of the greatest accomplishments of your life. When I was first diagnosed, I hurt at the thought of leaving you, possibly sharing you with another. Then one beautiful day it dawned on me. Would I really want this man who does marriage better than any I have ever met or seen—would I really want him to give up that beautiful place in his heart, in his life? As you often have seen, Jesus is patient and kind to point out my selfishness and pride.*

*Dearest husband, you have done husband well. You have loved me so big; you have loved me so wide and so deep. Jason, if I said it all day every day, in my dreaming, in my waking, in my loving, in my arguing, in my writing—Thank you and I love you—it wouldn't be enough. You gave me the life I never dreamed possible. You have braved your faith with integrity in front of this pitiful, weak vessel, and it was beautiful to behold. Beautiful to be led by such grace.*

*Keep loving big in your servant-hearted ways. Love with gentleness, especially when the gentleness is hard to come by. Give it away; there is no reason to keep it to yourself. I know your heart is about to break into a million tiny pieces. I believe something beautiful is going to grow out of that terrible, ugly hard. I'm afraid, but I'm not afraid for you. You will wake to the daily faithfulness you have walked in for years through hard upon hard. The plan is good, even if the path is hard. I trust Him, I trust Him, I trust Him!*

*My Dearest Littles,*

*Oh how I wish this letter were written to my grown children. How I yearn and pray for long days with each of you. Sometimes I see glimpses into what you each are going to become, but there is so much of your story not yet written. As any mama would desire, I want your story to be a beautiful story. I have always longed for a beautiful story where each of you learns to lean into Jesus, love Jesus, know Jesus, understand that His nearness is your good. I never imagined that beauty being accomplished in hard—suffocating hard.*

*Reflecting on my own heart, my own growth, my own embracing of truth, it came through deep hard, desperate hurt, and brokenness. I know, that I know, that I know, that this was how God grew beauty in me, but I quietly longed for your story to be different. I hoped the deep love your dad and I share and have for each of you would be enough to make your story amazing. It does, but ugly beautiful is part of your story as well. I pray your hearts do not grow hard, bitter, or angry at the hard that has entered your life.*

*I want to be there. I want to see who you become, how God shapes you. I want to see if you choose lots of makeup or none. I want to know if you love to hike or prefer to snuggle to a book. I want to know if you fiercely enter community expecting the best of life or if you quietly observe and receive love in small graces. I want to know how you smell. I know your baby smell; will that follow you or will you join me in wearing hippy essential oils? Will you remember in tastes and scents of moments? I want the moment when all of you children gather and confess the sneaky things of childhood Daddy and I didn't see, didn't know. The sibling secrets confessed in the safety of adulthood. Places you hid the food you didn't want to eat or the trouble you found when we were away to*

*dinner. I want the laughter of the moments confessed and forgiven. I want the moments when you tell me of my failures and the times I hurt your heart. I want to be there to enjoy the beauty of reconciliation in my weakness and repent of my sin and hurt I inflicted on your heart. I want those moments. I want to ask your forgiveness and learn a new love in the place of our forgiveness.*

*I want to know your loves. I want to walk through the hurt of your loves big and small. I want to always be the comforter who points you to the Comforter. I want to know you, really know you. I want to ask hard questions and be asked hard questions in return. I want to be with each of you when you reach the age of understanding and remember this hard season with cancer. I want to hear how we protected you, how we failed, how we showed you grace. I want to process the returned pain of your memory of your sick mama and hurting daddy. We loved, we loved, we loved, but we keenly knew the weakness of ourselves in that season. I want to be with you as you begin to process that season fresh as an adult.*

*I want to dance. I want to dance at your graduation, your wedding, while we wash dishes, when days are painful. I want to dance to loud music, quiet music, music that reminds us of our limits. I want to slow dance with you on my toes, fast dance silly, and just dance because it's Tuesday.*

*I long for the want of these moments to make them so. As I have breath today, I will live the life I have been given to love as well as I can. I will seek forgiveness in my failing. Each breath is a gift, as each of you children has been to me. Past Jesus and your daddy, you are the very richest gifts. You have shown me love I didn't know I could feel. You introduced me to limits in myself I did not know. You all showed me to seek grace at the end of myself. You have extended sweet forgiveness*

*when I flew from the boundaries of grace and kindness. You met me in my bottom with love and laughter. You walked our hard with beautiful grace.*

*The hardest part for me is ending this letter. I never want it to end. I want these words, these loves shared, these graces to never stop being named. I want to sit around every meal, hearing the intricacies of your days. I want to put the meal before you but feast on your living, your loving, and your hard. So as long as I have breath to breathe, I pray my living will be a naming of that goodness. I pray you learn the naming long past my last breath.*

*Eleanor Grace, Harper Joy Sonnet, Lake Edward, and Story Jane: I love you. I love being your mama. I love each moment I was granted beside you. When you meet the edges of life, the hard moments, the suffocating realities, I pray you would look to Jesus. I pray you would know His goodness, and in those edges know my prayers are meeting you—uniquely meeting you, even if I cannot. Thank you; thank you for all you have taught me of life. What a gift each of you is to my heart.*



# Letter from Jason

*There is an older couple, maybe in their early seventies, who regularly walk in our neighborhood. Always next to each other. In the summer, they hold hands, but so far never in the winter. Sometimes I overhear words they exchange, but I can never understand what they are talking about. Grandkids maybe? Kids? A long retirement together? Our assumptions of people are many times mysterious.*

*As I write this, Kara and I are awaiting the results of another PET scan; this is beginning to settle in as our pattern. I wait, and my mind goes all over the place as I ponder our mysterious future. How will this test that I can't explain change my future, my next hours, days, months and, yes, years?*

*I think about the older couple often because they hold something that I want. Though I have no idea what they face, I imagine theirs as a pleasant life. Pleasant enough that they don't hold hands in winter. Truthfully, I have avoided meeting them. They hold the picture of what I want.*

*I know a man, who I rarely talk to but I would call a friend, who embodies the opposite. He has walked the path of losing a young wife to cancer. I avoid him, though I know the day is coming when I will call him and all I will do is cry. Because a mystery will be gone. The unknown will be less mysterious. The imagined dark days will be known.*

*It is the mystery of life that I hate, the unknown, the confusion, the truth that I am powerless against what I fear the most. As you have just finished reading Kara's words, you know she deals with the same—living in peace when life screams something different. Even though our path carries a story of cancer, I would never trade a day that Kara and I have shared together. Never.*

*All of us know something of the mystery of this life. As you have read these words, I hope that you will move toward the One who knows the mystery and has a purpose for all things. I hope your deep questions will be answered by the grace that is present, that you will know family and friends and community, and that you will understand a peace that runs through this world and beyond. I am a witness that it is hard, but it is beautiful.*