

Chapter 9

Battling Guilt

The most persistent challenge in my efforts to heal has been guilt. Despite the emergence of research and theories about sudden infant death syndrome, there is no clear explanation to soothe the hearts of grieving parents. If anything, the lack of answers stirs up more questions and doubts in parents' minds. At least this was the case for Dan and me. Despite the powerful workings of the Atonement, he and I still felt guilty. We seemed to take turns subjecting ourselves to the “what if” questions and “if only” thoughts. We didn't blame each other and we didn't blame God, but there were times when I blamed myself, and times when Dan blamed himself.

I am not one who enjoys dabbling in the unknown. Some days, the need for answers ate away at my comfort, as it did for my husband. We seemed worse off when we uselessly (and always independently) researched about SIDS. It was as though we needed to know without a

doubt that we did nothing wrong—as though somehow that knowledge would soothe our pain.

I believe the adversary often uses guilt to destroy our peace and our testimonies. When I was alone, Satan seemed to work the hardest, putting awful thoughts into my head. One day, when I was at Dan's and my old apartment packing up our bedroom, I came across Ty's newborn footprints. I was hit with the excruciating memories of finding him under his crib blanket. I tried to hold onto the peace and comfort we had received that it was God's plan to bring Ty home early, and all the things that seemed to prepare us for his departure.

Still, the cruelest thoughts entered my mind, in a seething voice dripping with loathing: "God knew you were going to fail. And that's why everything happened the way it did." Sitting there alone in our abandoned apartment, I curled into a sobbing mess on the floor. My heart broke all over again as I thought I had failed my son—that he could be here with me if I hadn't messed up. I should have removed the blanket when the thought had crossed my mind that evening. The explanation made sense to me: God, knowing all things, knew I would make a mistake with Ty. That's why the Spirit prompted us to cherish our time with him, and prompted others to act on our behalf before they even knew what their prayers were for.

It would not be the last time Satan would inject vicious lies into my head. I struggled with these thoughts off and on for years to come, and always when I was alone and vulnerable. However, the guilt would be

alleviated later when I spoke with Dan or with family and friends, who could clear my head and help me step out of the dark box Satan sought to trap me in.

I found myself trying to retrain my thinking. What if it *was* my fault? What if I did accidentally play a role in my son's death? Certainly, in some situations a family member inadvertently contributes to a child's death. Even so, Heavenly Father would not want anyone to carry that self-destructive burden. The gospel is still true, and families can still be together forever. However, for that to happen, we all must forgive ourselves and allow the Atonement to heal us.

Five weeks after Ty's passing, my husband had an experience that completely destroyed Satan's guilt-inducing grip on him. One Sunday, Dan was struggling with guilt over Ty's death, so he asked the bishop for a blessing. He said the bishop took his time in offering the blessing, allowing long pauses so inspiration could come. In this blessing, Dan was told that before he came to earth, he was given an assignment, which he wholeheartedly accepted. Dan obediently consented that he would be willing to endure the death of his son at an early age, and he agreed to suffer and overcome this.

From that moment on, Dan was filled with unwavering confidence and understanding that thwarted any guilt or confusion about our son's death. Dan laments that I wasn't there to hear the blessing, because it was not merely the words alone that brought comfort, but the confirming Spirit he felt. That confirmation has

strengthened Dan and prevented him from struggling with guilt as I have.

A few days before Dan requested the blessing from the bishop, my friend Lisa said she strongly felt she needed to share a message with me. At her house, I watched her pull a tattered magazine article from a stack of papers. It was Elder Richard G. Scott's talk from October 2005 general conference. Lisa read to me the following words from that address: "You were taught and prepared for the circumstances you would personally encounter in mortality. . . . Your memory of premortal life would be kept from you to assure that it would be a valid test, but there would be guidance given to show you how to live. Our Father's plan for salvation in this life with the opportunity of returning to Him would be called the gospel of Jesus Christ."¹

While appreciative of this message and believing the doctrine it taught, I did not put much thought into these words until after Dan's blessing. Looking back on the timing, I do not think it is a coincidence that my husband and I were both reminded of this truth within days of each other. The Lord wanted us to know that everything happened as intended. Most importantly, He wanted to remind us that we were not sent ill-prepared for this tragedy—that in fact we could learn and grow from this experience because of the many tools and blessings provided to us in the principles of the gospel. I am grateful for yet another friend who followed the promptings of the Spirit to deliver a message the Lord wanted us to hear.

Guilt is one of the most difficult obstacles to overcome after the loss of a child, and to some degree it may be a lifelong struggle for me. However, thoughts of “if only” and “what if” do nothing but create instability and heartache. We cannot change the past, whether a death or other tragedy was our fault or not. We must accept that what happened cannot be undone. We must also understand that our future is still within our control and is largely determined by our attitudes and actions.

My son had been dead for two and a half years when I finally took some major steps to leave the cycling guilt behind. Until that time, I was almost obsessed with figuring out if I played a part in my son’s death. If it was my fault, I wanted to understand that so I could work on forgiving myself. Sometimes I knew I had nothing to do with Ty’s death, but other times I was certain it had been my fault. Back and forth, I tormented myself with this internal struggle, unable to find resolution.

Then October 2012 general conference came along. After praying for comfort and asking Heavenly Father for help in addressing my guilt, I received my answer. Elder Shayne M. Bowen of the First Quorum of the Seventy gave a talk that touched the broken hearts of mothers and fathers everywhere. He explained how his eight-month-old son had passed away after aspirating a piece of chalk. Elder Bowen described the consuming emotions—including guilt and anger—that followed. He then spoke of the change that took place in his heart that allowed him to “look forward with hope, rather than look backward with despair.”²

As I heard Elder Bowen's words, the Holy Ghost spoke to my heart. My obsessive guilty thoughts took a back seat as I understood where my focus should be. No good would come from debating my role in Ty's death. The how and why of his passing needed no more attention. Rather, I needed to remember his funeral and the Spirit that flooded the chapel, testifying that all is well. During general conference, I was reminded that the gospel is not about knowing all things, but instead relying on those areas where our testimony is strongest, and allowing faith to carry the rest.

Notes

1. Richard G. Scott, "Truth Restored," *Ensign*, Nov. 2005, 78–79.
2. Shane M. Bowen, "Because I Live, Ye Shall Live Also," *Ensign*, Nov. 2012.