

May-June, 2008

Dear Laban Family,

"When the enemy comes in like a flood. . . " The formidable foe of death has struck again in our family. As you may remember, we lost our precious little Audrey Caroline Smith 2 1/2 hours after her birth on April 7. She is the daughter of Todd and Angie, our eldest son and dear daughter-in-law. Just 50 days later, on May 27, Luke Sponberg, 10-week-old son of Greg and Nicol, our beloved son-in-law and daughter, was whisked into the arms of Jesus as he lay sleeping. His father, just across the room, was praying for Luke's safety and well being, close to the time he was most likely being transported. Sheer, raw, gut-wrenching grief has become our daily portion while walking through the valley of the shadow of death with our children.

With Audrey, the confounding pain and haunting bewilderment of hearing almost weekly that she was still not compatible with life, that she would be delivered with multiple birth anomalies—the greatest of which was renal failure—threw us and our Congolese brothers and sisters into the occupation of prayer for a miracle from our loving Father. Perhaps he would choose to glorify Himself by touching her body, growing her organs, and allowing her to survive. We prayed, fasted, and anticipated because God can do anything. Our flickering hope lived on despite the consistent reports, "Nothing has changed." But the One who sees every sparrow fall chose to call her to Himself, thus giving her sweet little body relief and total healing. What happens to all these little children the Lord takes "prematurely?" Do they become part of the great chorus of Heaven, praising and adoring His Worthiness?

News of Audrey's impending death first reached our ears on Jan 7. As grandparents, we were still reeling from grief when at about 10:15 on the evening of May 27, Nicol called us saying that Luke was not breathing and that the rescue squad was feverishly working over him. Our ears and brains could not receive this terror, and we again fell to our knees, made several phone calls, and waited for THE CALL telling us that Luke had been revived. He wasn't. Their long awaited for, cherished first son was snatched out of their lives in a matter of minutes.

Shock, numbness, vacuum, the shroud of darkness, keen awareness of the evil one, and all that death leaves in its wake has been their lot. We know where He is. He is with Jesus. That is the issue that is so hard to bear right now. Because He is with Jesus, he is not here! He is gone. The normality of life is forever changed. How long before we see him again? How long before Nicol and Greg can hold him in their aching arms? His passing means part of us has passed too. He took a little

bit of all of us with him. The fact that He is with Jesus does not take the pain away. Nicol and Greg are living the dark night of the soul. They are bruised reeds who need time to walk through the fog of bereavement until they come to the other side. And who knows when they will reach the other side? Grief is such an individual, uncapped process. What will the other side be like? What will be their norm?

God deliver us from trying to wrap up our loss in a neat package with all the ends discreetly tucked away and secured by a big bow. Frayed, wounded nerves are dangling. Nicol's incision has not completely healed yet. She is experiencing a body reversal nature is fighting because she is supposed to be caring for her baby. Greg's dreams of playing golf with Luke and coaching him in basketball, and their aspirations and pure future delight in seeing Luke's life unfold must be relinquished. Grief is hard work. Please pray for Greg and Nicol.

The Lord does not tell us not to grieve. He tells us not to grieve like those who have no hope. God has a way of making Himself known as never before in crises, as blameless and upright Job stated, "I had heard of You only by the hearing of the ear, but now my spiritual eye sees You." Lord, we know that you hear our voice out of Your temple, and our cries come before You, into Your very ears. We believe by faith that you busy yourself with our every step. We cling to the truth of your words that say your ways are higher than our ways and your thoughts beyond any that we can imagine. We are comforted by the fact that you are distressed in our distress, that not one tear escapes you but is preserved in a bottle and written down in your book, that you are our shield, our glory, and the lifter up of our heads, that you have your way in the whirlwind, that you are our portion, and in your light do we see light. We comfort ourselves with these bold acclamations because they are from you; we wallpaper our minds with them, pitch our tents in these thoughts, and we choose to bless and honor the strong tower of your name. We run into your name and are safe. You are past finding out, God. We bless your holiness, we bend the knee in worship, and we praise you because YOU ARE WORTHY.

Even so, come Lord Jesus. . .