

A Few Days In March

*Our story of life, love, heroes, healing, family, friends, providence
and pain*

By Reece Mashaw

Preface

I've been planning on writing this for some time now but I knew I had to get the timing right. Letting enough time pass that I could actually tell the story in it's entirety and not feel overwhelmed or crushed by it, but not letting so much time pass that I'd forget some of the experiences and feelings that were so defining during those uncertain days and nights.

Also, I'm breaking the cardinal rule of blogging by posting something that is ridiculously long. It may be helpful to think of it more as a really, really short book as opposed to an absurdly long blog post. But this story, in all of its detail, has become very important to us and we wanted it written down so we could look back on it, remember how it changed us and, one day, share it with our kids. We also wanted to lay everything before all of you as we have been seeking to live transparent lives. There are parts of this story that do not shine brightly on me. They show me in my weakest and most frightened moments. I share them so that, in some way, my weaknesses will show Christ to be strong.

I hope that this story resonates with you. I hope it makes you grateful and helps you to see life differently, as it has done for us. But mostly I hope it points you to the God who has been so faithful and loving to us, each and every day of our lives, and not just in the shiny, happy ones.

Alone

It was sometime after 1 AM on Thursday. I'm not really sure when exactly. The room was completely dark, with the exception of the streetlights outside streaking through the blinds and across my face. I laid there, staring at the ceiling, my head on a stiff, hospital issue pillow that was now soaked from tears, sweat and any other fluids that accompany extreme emotion. There was a bitter taste in my mouth beginning to make me nauseous. I assume it had something to do with the adrenaline still coursing through my body after the horrific events of the last several hours. I was alone.

Just about 36 hours earlier, I was in the car listening to Fun's *Aim and Ignite* album when one of my favorite tracks, "The Gambler," came on. It's a surprisingly beautiful and deeply emotional song in the middle of an otherwise playful album. It tells the story of a man and a woman who fall in love, get married, have children and grow old together. It's a truly captivating song with a very dark and unexpected turn in the middle...

*To think that I nearly lost you
When the doctors tried to take you away.
Like the night you took my hand beside the fire
30 years ago to this day*

*You swore you'd be here 'til we decide that it's our time
Well it's not time, you never quit in all your life.
So just take my hand, you know that I will never leave your side...*

I haven't been able to listen to that song since then. I didn't know it at the time, but those lyrics would haunt me for the next several days. Providing a somewhat torturous soundtrack for the darkest moments of my life.

Mountains And Valleys

Tuesday afternoon, around 5 PM, Erin and I headed to the hospital. Her doctors had decided to induce labor because of some tests that had come back showing she was pre-eclamptic. We were excited and grateful since she was exhausted from carrying these two babies for the past 38 weeks and I was pretty tired of driving down to the hospital every couple days just to sit around for a few hours and be sent home. The excitement soon turned into extreme boredom, as the next 20 hours were rather uneventful. Although we did have a witty, extroverted nurse named Stacy to keep us company most of the day on Wednesday.

Extroverts are amazing in situations like that. I would be the worst nurse ever. I'm super-uncomfortable around new people, not to mention my medical knowledge extends about as far as my interest in cats. Just to be clear...not far.

Stacy kept telling us that she tries to never remember patient's names because she doesn't want to accidentally violate patient privacy laws...something about hippos. Not sure what the hippos will do to you, but I hear they are vicious animals and surprisingly agile. Anyway, Erin was determined to be remembered. So, it became a running joke throughout the day. Needless to say, Stacy remembers Erin now.

Around 1 PM the following day our twin boys, Luke and Wyatt, were born. It was really a remarkable event to watch. I'd seen the birth of both of our other children but this was something altogether different. It was like a choreographed group dance. There were a lot of people in the room, each playing specific roles and trying not to step on each other's toes. We were really excited that Dr. Lewis-Boardman was able to be there. (*Who, by the way, will henceforth be referred to as Dr. Lewis #1 for brevity's sake and to avoid confusion in the storyline. But don't call her that in person though, it would probably be weird.*) Not only is she at the top of our favorite doctor list, she's also quite experienced at turning babies in utero during twin births, which is exactly what we needed. Another Dr. Lewis, who we also like but only just recently met, was actually the one who delivered the babies. Luke came out first without a hitch. Then Dr. Lewis #1 was able to turn Wyatt, who was breech at the time, so both babies could be delivered without a C-section. In retrospect, this probably saved Erin's life, knowing what we know now about DIC. Altogether the delivery was perfect. Well, Erin may not call it perfect since her epidural wasn't really working and she was in excruciating pain. But I felt great, so from my perspective, it was perfect.

We were both breathing sighs of relief. We had made it through. All the things we had feared were behind us and now we could just relax and enjoy getting to spend some quality time with our boys. We returned to our room, introduced my parents to their newest grandchildren. And simply enjoyed our first few hours together. We were both exhausted. So my parents decided to go back to the house to let us get some sleep. And so we settled in to take a nap, completely unaware that all hell was about to break loose.

We never really got to sleep. Erin wasn't feeling very good and what had started as a little more blood than expected was quickly becoming a much bigger concern. Dr. McLean came to our room to check things out for herself. Erin was dosed with a pretty hefty drug that sent her into a rather loopy/sleepy state for the examination. The doctor found, what seemed to me, to be an insane amount of blood clots that had formed. Shortly afterwards, she made the call to take Erin into the OR for a DNC procedure that would most likely get rid of whatever it was that was causing the bleeding and clotting. And while this wasn't routine, it still seemed that the situation was under control and not too serious yet. At least it seemed that way to me, maybe I was in denial, I'm not totally sure. But, when they rolled the bed out of the room and left me sitting on that stiff hospital couch holding Wyatt in my arms with his brother in the crib close by, it almost seemed like someone whispered in my ear..."Brace yourself, this is not what you think it is."

Waiting

My knees were shaking as I paced around the room. I was sure I was over reacting and just needed to relax. I kept telling myself that I didn't need to be overly concerned yet. But that freakin' song was cycling through in my head. My parents called and asked if they should come up to the hospital and I told them, yes. I really didn't want to be alone at that point. Shortly after they arrived, we were transferred out of the Labor and Delivery room and over to a Postpartum room. It was eerily spacious and empty without a big hospital bed in the middle of it. We moved all our stuff, providing a brief distraction from the waiting, which I was grateful for. But I could still feel my heart racing. I just wanted to know something. I don't know how long it had been but it felt like an eternity. And then the double doors in the hallway opened.

Dr. McLean walked out and when my eyes met with hers my heart hit the floor. I immediately saw from the look in her eyes that I was not going to want to hear what she had to say. She called me over and I could feel my hands beginning to shake. "She's not doing well. It doesn't look good." Every word felt like a kick in the gut with a steel-toed boot. I remember feeling my whole body shaking and being unable to control it. As we sat down, she began to explain that Erin was losing blood very fast and that they had cleared out everything they could and it wasn't stopping. She told me that they were replacing her blood with donor blood as fast as possible but it was just running straight through her because her body had exhausted all of it's clotting factors. She explained that they had ordered plasma and all that they needed to replace the clotting factors but that the blood bank is in Orlando and they were still about 40 minutes out. I began to feel hopeful, thinking that 40 minutes wasn't that long. But then she continued, explaining that unless something happened to stop or dramatically slow down the bleeding than she wouldn't live that long. And then came the words that you know are true but you never want to hear from a surgeon..."We are doing everything we can but it's in God's hands."

My head was spinning. I walked back into the room with my parents and began to try and explain the situation. I struggled to speak. I called Brian, my pastor and friend, and let him know what was happening. He told me they were on their way. I knew my next call had to be to her parents. This was the hardest phone call I've ever made in my life. How do you tell someone their daughter is dying? Especially knowing that her father had walked through the death of his own wife when she was the exact same age that Erin was now. Her mom answered the phone. I choked back tears as I tried to explain the situation to her. I could hear her crying as she passed the phone to Allen. He could tell the situation wasn't good and I did my best to explain it to him but I was having a hard time holding it together. He began to pray for me. As he prayed I knew that his heart was breaking too but that he was being strong for me. He had been in my shoes and he knew how I felt. After he was finished, I began to pray for him. There was something powerful that happened during that phone call, something that grounded me.

From the moment I first heard the news from the doctor I knew that no matter how this turned out that it would be a defining moment for me, for my family and for so many that knew and loved us. I remembered the times when Erin and I had prayed that God would use us to show people what it means to trust in God and to walk in faith. How we had said that, no matter what the cost, we wanted to point to Him as our source of hope even if it meant suffering. I thought immediately about the many people that I'd had the privilege of watching in the midst of suffering and confusion. Those who had taught me what it meant to trust God when He really was truly all you had to hold onto. And I knew that this situation, no matter how it turned out, even if it cut me to the core of my soul, was going to be about God's glory.

I walked back into the room with my parents and a close friend who had just happened to show up right in the midst of the storm and we began to pray. I pleaded with God to save her. For my sake. For our children's sake. For all those that she has poured herself out for in ministry, in counseling and in friendship. I pleaded with Him to show His strength by reaching into her body and restoring it. I decided at that point that I needed to share the situation on Facebook and ask our friends to pray along with us. I had no idea the extent of the reach that decision would have and I wouldn't really know until the next day just how far that request carried and how many thousands of people would be dropping to their knees that evening asking God to heal.

Strange Comfort

It was strange. I was surrounded by people who loved me but I still felt isolated and alone. It was surreal, like a dream. I felt like I was standing on the outside of the situation watching all these people walk through this together but I was actually somewhere else. Somewhere no one else could get to.

I remember detaching from the group and just walking around for a while, pacing the hallways. There were some things that I needed to voice to God that were much more private. I didn't want everyone else in on this part. I needed it to be just Him and me. I asked for the strength to make it through if she died. I asked that He would somehow provide for my children the father that they would need to get them through this, because I didn't feel like I could do it. I began to think about what I would say when I had to tell Gavin and Kate that their mommy wasn't coming home. I started to break down. I pushed the thought out of my mind. "We're not there yet" - I kept telling myself. I began to wonder if I could stay in Clermont or if I would need to move closer to family (*a question that would be answered emphatically over the days that followed, as it became evident that we have the most spectacular support system on earth right here and I wouldn't trade it for anything*). I thought about being a single dad of four kids, two of whom were infants. It seemed impossible and overwhelming. I began to think that I might never hear Erin's voice again. I may never feel her arms around me again. I began to lose it.

And it was then that the Spirit began to speak into my heart. It was like He broke through into that space that I thought no one else could enter into. He brought to mind truths about God that I knew but had never really had to trust like this before. He reminded me that He was in control that evening. That He held Erin in his hands, along with me, and all of our children. That He “works all things according to the counsel of his will (*Ephesians 1*).” That this was not beyond Him. He reminded me that He had ordained all of my days before I ever knew one of them (*Psalms 139:16*). And “that in all things God works for the good of those who love him (*Romans 8:28*).” All things! Even in this, God was working for my good. I knew that if she died that evening it would be because that was what God wanted. If she were taken from me, it would be God who took her. He was simultaneously my antagonist and my only hope. And knowing that, in a strange way, brought me extraordinary comfort. I needed to know that. I needed to know that this was not random. That this was not a situation that God could simply empathize with but ultimately do nothing about. That He was a God who, according to His own words, could and would ultimately work tragedy into joy...my joy...my children’s joy. That somehow, in some way, whatever happened would be what was best, whether I understood it or not.

That’s not to say that if she had died I would have responded with some Zen, stoic sense of “Well, that’s okay. I’ll get over it.” I’ll be honest, if she had died that night, there would have been some very deep, raw and emotional conversations between God and me. We would have had words about that decision. It may be His will but it was not mine and it would definitely take a while for me to come to terms with that. But even in that part of me that was starting to bow up against my Creator, I still knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that he held me in the palm of his hand and he would not let me fall. His sovereignty was a warm blanket for me that night. It was the only thing that gave me comfort and strength. It was all I had to lean on and I can tell you from experience that it was more than enough.

A new song began to run through my mind, Matt Redman’s “Never Once.” The melody and lyrics sank deep into my heart and comforted me that evening.

Heroes And Healing

I returned to the room and sat down and waited. Waiting to hear if my best friend was still alive, if I would ever speak to her again. Waiting to hear if my kids still had a mom. Waiting...

My pastor, Brian, and his wife, Tandy, showed up about this time. They prayed with me and with my family. It meant the world to me that they were there. That they had left in the middle of their Life Group discussion (*on the issue of human suffering, of all topics*) and rushed over to be with us.

A short time later, the doors opened again. I swear my heart stopped beating. It was the moment that I had been anxiously waiting for and dreading all at the same time. Dr. McLean and Dr. Texier, who had not even been working

that evening but came in to assist when things started getting crazy, emerged into the hallway...with big smiles on their faces.

I felt a huge weight begin to lift as I came over to meet them. They walked me back through the hallways to the recovery wing to see her. On the way, they explained some of the details of what went down in that OR. At one point comparing it to the movie *300*, trying to explain the amount of blood that was all over the room, the floor, and on the doctors and nurses. Dr. McLean then described what ended up saving Erin's life. It's called a Bakri Balloon, and as far as I can tell, it's little more than an elaborate water balloon that they inflated inside the uterus to apply pressure and stop the bleeding. It's still a relatively new procedure and she had never actually used one before. She had read about it in a medical journal some time ago and somehow remembered it in the midst of the chaos. The hospital happened to have one, and so, with instructions in hand, they performed the procedure. It slowed down the bleeding enough to keep her alive until the plasma arrived which they had started her on and which seemed to be stopping the bleeding. She was currently stable and actually awake in the recovery area.

I am forever grateful to the doctors and nurses who fought in the OR that night to save Erin's life. They are heroes. Now, as I said earlier, I whole-heartedly believe that it is God who gives and takes away life and that ultimately Erin's alive because He wanted her to be. But, whereas sometimes God uses miraculous and supernatural means to heal, other times He miraculously uses the competent hands and brilliant minds of doctors and surgeons. I believe that this was the latter. Still miraculous, still a healing in every sense of the word, but the means He used was orchestrating events in such a way that the right doctors were in the room with the right knowledge and skills and the right presence of mind to think creatively under extreme stress. I thank God for those doctors and others like them who work tirelessly to be excellent at their jobs.

I have said it before but I want to say it again, we absolutely love these doctors more than they could ever realize. If our twins had been girls, they would be named Kristina and Mary Beth (*No offense to the other doctors in the practice, but, there's only two babies in this fictional scenario and we've known them longer. Now, if we were having girl quintuplets...Uhhh, actually that sounds scary beyond all reason. I don't want to think about that.*) Moving on...

Brian was able to come back with me to see Erin and talk with her for a while before they moved her over to the ICU. I could tell it was all very odd to her, having no idea the gravity of what had just happened. She was really confused when I told her that her parents were driving down in the middle of the night, and that people from our church were filling up the waiting rooms praying for her. At one point she started to talk to Brian about work related stuff and he just laughed at her and said, "Uhhh, I think we can talk about that later." It was strangely normal. She was still a little loopy from the anesthesia and quite sleepy, but very much herself. We left her alone to get some rest and returned to the room to fill everyone in on all that had happened and how she was doing. It was

a feeling of relief that was unlike any I have ever felt. Like that first gasp of air after you've been holding your breath for a long time.

After they transferred Erin over to the ICU, they came and walked me over to see her again. When we got there I met her "doctor." He was a robot. I kid you not...a robot. Apparently the ICU Intensivist Doctor for the night shift is an upgraded version of Johnny 5 with a webcam and a LCD screen for a head. On the other side of that screen/camera is, who I assume to be, a very qualified doctor with a remote control, who is monitoring patients throughout the evening hours. It was weird. He filled me in on her current status, although I don't remember anything he said; only that he was a robot. That's legitimately all I remember about that encounter.

I sat with Erin for a while but she kept going to sleep so I decided to head back over to the Labor & Delivery wing where the babies were and let her get some rest. I got some sheets and made the bed/couch thing in the room about as comfortable as possible and tried to shut my eyes.

Now we are back around to where this post started.

Together

As I lay there on that stiff couch and wet pillow I couldn't help but feel like a part of me was somewhere else. I couldn't sleep. After what had happened that night I couldn't stand to be on this side of the hospital while Erin was on the other. I had all but decided to head over there when the phone rang. It was Erin. It seemed that the medication was starting to wear off and she was much more awake than she had been. She asked if I could come over to see her and I told her that I had already started getting some things together. So I cleared it with the nurses, who graciously offered to take care of the babies throughout the night and on into the next day so I could go be with Erin and not worry about them. I felt conflicted about leaving them but I just couldn't handle being away from her that night.

When I got to her room, there were tears in her eyes. I could tell that things were starting to hit her. We looked on Facebook together and read many of the things people had shared and prayed for us. It was quite humbling. We felt very grateful and deeply loved. We sat there for a while just holding hands and crying. Then I set up camp in a small plastic chair with a pillow pressed between my head and the wall and I can say, in all honesty, that there was no place I would have rather been.

Family

Erin's parents arrived sometime around 4 in the morning. They came up to the ICU and we spent a few hours together. I told and retold the story, as much as I understood it, and we just talked and prayed and laughed together. I could tell it meant a lot to Erin that they had come down all the way from Atlanta that

night. And they told us that her brothers and sisters were all making arrangements to come down too. She needed them there. More than we knew at the time. What we didn't know is that her situation was actually getting worse throughout the night and we were about to get a pretty harsh wake up call.

Good Morning, You're Dying

Sometime around 6 AM or so, the ICU Intensivist (*not the robot...a real one*) stopped by. He began to explain what had happened throughout the night and tried to relay to us the precariousness of Erin's current state. She had a blood disease called DIC. It is very dangerous and typically deadly. She had survived the night only because of the balloon and the donor plasma they were pumping into her. It was a lot to handle first thing in the morning and I don't know that we totally grasped what he was trying to tell us.

Later, Dr. McLean came by and filled in some of the gaps for us. She had apparently stayed up all night ordering tests and reviewing results. She was very concerned that the fibrinogen levels in Erin's blood were so low and getting lower. The tests she ordered revealed that her suspicions were correct and Erin had DIC. She explained that they were going to have to stop the donor plasma and keep testing her blood throughout the day to see if her body was going to be able to improve on it's own, showing that she was actually recovering. If not, we were still going to be in for a rough road ahead. She also explained that they would need to remove the balloon in a couple days and that, even if the levels in her blood were much better, there would still be a risk of possible emergency surgery if she began to bleed out again.

I started to taste that familiar flavor in my mouth again. The shaking was starting up and I could feel my anxiety rising. I was trying to remain very positive in front of Erin, but inside I was screaming. I wasn't sure how I was going to make it through this day, after such a struggle the night before. I was emotionally spent and physically exhausted. That's when I got a call from Erin's dad that they had brought the babies over to our room and I had to get back over there to feed them and start the day with them. I was deeply conflicted. I wanted to be here with Erin but all we could do at that point was wait. And I had responsibilities to get back to. We had two new babies and they needed me too.

That day progressed slowly. I went back and forth between the two wings of the hospital. Family and friends stopped in and out, some staying throughout the day to help take care of the babies. At one point, the Director of Patient Services for the entire hospital actually helped me take the babies up to the ICU to see Erin. It was apparently a controversial decision but we couldn't be more grateful. It meant the world to Erin to get to see them and hold them again.

The first test results came back. They were good. The levels were up a little. It wasn't great news but it was decent news. They ran the next set of lab tests and we waited the rest of the day on that. They came back even better. It seemed that her body was recovering and we were at least headed out of the woods.

They let her out of the ICU that evening and took her down to our room on the other end of the hospital, where a room full of friends and family awaited her arrival. Now that may sound overwhelming to some of you. I know it would be for me. But you have to understand my wife. She thrives off interaction with people. It was perfect for her. We even had Paula, who had been watching Gavin and Kate for us, bring them up to meet the babies for the first time. It all felt wonderfully normal.

Then the phone rang...

Decisions, Decisions

It was Dr. Lewis (#1). She was calling to explain our options for the following day. I think I had all but forgotten that we weren't done with this yet. Everything had started to feel so normal. It was kind of a shock back into reality. Like being at a party in college and then remembering that you have a huge exam or a speech the next day that you haven't prepared for. We still had to get this balloon out and she had to survive it.

The doctor laid out two options for us. The first was to stay at this hospital for the procedure to remove the balloon. If we chose this route, and the bleeding started again, they would have to perform an emergency hysterectomy as a back up measure. The other option would be to transfer her to Winnie Palmer Hospital in Orlando the next day and have the balloon removed there. In that case, the back up measure would be a much less invasive procedure called an embolization.

Looking back on it now, it really doesn't seem like that difficult of a decision, but at the time it seemed really hard to choose. Probably because it was the first decision we actually had to make about any of this. Up until that point all of the choices were made for us. There was no real option on Wednesday night about whether I wanted to let her bleed to death or have the doctors try to save her. There were no choices to be made about how to manage or treat the DIC. We were essentially just along for the ride. I guess, on some level, there were choices. I could have stopped treatment or refused blood transfusions or something else crazy, but there was no reason for me to not trust the doctors and just follow their lead.

It's a very uncomfortable feeling to choose something with that kind of gravity associated with it. "If you start dying, how do you think we should stop it?" Even though the odds seemed to be in our favor on this one, which was a welcome change, I, in no way, felt competent to make that choice. I just wanted someone to tell us what to do. About an hour or so later, after a lot of our company left, we ended up calling her back and asking as many questions as we could think of about the procedures. Her husband, himself a General Surgeon, even chimed in on a few points to help us understand the risks associated with each. It was tremendously helpful and I couldn't be more grateful for her patience with us. In the end we decided to go ahead with the transfer.

It was about this time that Erin's brothers and sisters started arriving. They had driven and flown in from various parts of the country to be with her. It was good to see them and, even more so, to see her with them. It seemed like she was able to relax in a way that she hadn't been able to up to that point. Their family has been through a lot of heavy and difficult circumstances and it's given them some amazing coping mechanisms. My favorite is how they make jokes about, what are actually, very sad and/or frightening situations. Her brother John texted Erin earlier that day, before they boarded the plane, "Okay, since you're not dying anymore, and we're already headed down there. Do you think you could score us some tickets to Disney?" At the time it was a very refreshing break from the heaviness of the day. I love being a part of this family. They are one of the reasons we decided to have a bigger family of our own.

It wasn't long before Dr. Lewis called back and told us that there was only one open bed available at Winnie, and if we wanted to it, we had to do the transfer tonight. This meant we'd have to leave the babies at the hospital, since they hadn't been discharged yet. It also meant we weren't going to sleep any time soon, which was heartbreaking at the time. We decided to go ahead with the transfer anyway and I worked out a plan with the nurses. They would keep the babies overnight and I would follow Erin over to Winnie Palmer. In the morning, I would come back, after the discharge had been signed off on by the pediatrician and take the babies to our house, where my parents and Erin's sisters-in-law would take care of them so I could go back to the hospital to be with Erin.

Dr. Lewis came up to the hospital to complete all the paperwork for the transfer and she stopped in and talked with us for a long time and made sure we understood what was going to happen and when. As always, she was incredibly friendly, especially considering she had to come up there at midnight.

Erin's brothers and sisters helped load up our stuff in the van and helped us work through the plan for the next day, with the baby transfer and whatnot. And about an hour or so later, Erin was loaded into an ambulance and I was driving the van over to Winnie Palmer. I was extremely tired. I think the lack of sleep was finally catching up to me. As the lines on the turnpike began to blur, I prayed that I could stay awake on the drive. The last thing we needed right now was a car accident. I began to pray for all of the things that were supposed to happen the following day and asking if we could please just have 24 hours without more complications and bad news.

I got there safely and made it up to her room in the WICU. They rolled in a cot for me to sleep on. It wasn't much but it felt like heaven at the time. It was easily the best sleep I'd had in 3 days.

Goodbye, Balloon

I woke up to the sound of Erin's phone playing the song "Healer." Someone had sent it to her in a Facebook message. It's a song we both knew well, but it

had never meant so much as it did now. I could also hear that she was crying. It was a good cry, the kind of cry that you have when you're simply too grateful for words to express. I know that cry because we'd both had them over the past several days.

The morning started out pretty good. I did my normal wet cloth in the sink bath, which pretty much just consisted of washing my face and hands so I didn't look quite as dirty as I was at the time. I changed my shirt and headed downstairs to grab some coffee. I found they served Starbucks coffee at the food court downstairs, which was a delightful bonus. I thanked God for His gracious provision and made my way back upstairs. I ordered breakfast from a menu they provided in the room (*seriously, this hospital is hooked up*). I think I had a spinach and cheddar omelet or something. It was all pretty amazing. Like staying at the Hilton. Except they keep coming in and taking blood and whatnot, which is not like the Hilton.

Dr. McLaughlin showed up early that morning to begin the process of removing the balloon, which was basically just draining fluid from it in stages throughout the day. She started by draining about half of the fluid and...nothing happened. No bleeding. Not even a little. It was a huge relief. Now we just had to wait a few hours until the next stage.

Erin's parents, brothers and sisters all came up to join us at the hospital. The nurses were beyond gracious to let, as many as, ten people stay in the room with her at one time. I couldn't be more grateful to them for allowing it. The time spent with her family was incredibly therapeutic for her. They laughed and told stories for hours. It made the time pass much quicker and took her mind off of everything.

The babies' discharge went smoothly and quickly. The nursing staff at South Lake went out of their way to be helpful and had everything ready for us. I really LOVE those nurses. I dropped the babies off at the house, kissed them on their heads and headed back to the hospital. I hated to leave them again, but it made it easier knowing I was leaving them with family who already loved them so much.

When I got back to the hospital, Erin told me that the balloon had just come out. It happened rather quickly and was quite unexpected. She had a few contractions and delivered a partially deflated balloon. She said that she and the nurse kind of waited for a minute to see if anything was going to happen. But nothing... It was wonderfully anti-climactic.

The rest of the day was just waiting. Eventually a doctor would come by to check everything out and make sure, but it all seemed like it was all over. Finally.

Homecoming

We didn't get discharged until the next day. Dr. McLean had come by that evening and checked everything out and agreed that the dangerous part was over but she said that they still needed to treat her for the pre-eclampsia that had

brought on the induction in the first place. And, ironically, she was now at a higher risk for blood clots because of all the clotting agents they had pumped into her body. So we stuck around until the next day when she signed off and let her go.

After she left the room that morning I followed her out. I wanted to let her know how grateful I was for all that she had done for us. There were hardly any words to communicate how I felt. I don't really remember what I said but I'm pretty sure I crossed some professional boundaries and gave her a hug.

Shortly afterwards, we were loaded up in the van and headed home. It was over...for real this time.

Grace In The Aftermath

The aftermath of this story has been just about as amazing as the events themselves. We have heard story after story of people who were deeply touched by what happened and how God used it to stir something up in them, whether it was renewing their passion for Him, for their spouse or their children. It impacted so many people in so many different ways.

But those are their stories to tell. I'll only speak to a few things that God has taught me through all of this.

The Church

Christ's love is made tangible by His church. I have always known this but I have never been on the receiving end of it like this before. I've never felt more loved or more supported than I did during those dark days. Even though, at times, I felt all alone, there was never a moment when I really was. God had surrounded me with His people and it was an experience that has shaped me forever.

False Saviors

Experiences like this can expose you. Pain divulges things about you that you would never have otherwise known. It reveals where your hope and your trust truly are. I'm about to get brutally honest with you. God showed me that night, when I thought I was losing my wife, that I based so much of my security and identity on her that I was making her into an idol in my life. And by idol, I mean a false Savior - someone other than God that I was leaning on to satisfy the deepest longings of my heart. I needed to see that. So much of my self-confidence comes directly from the fact that there is an amazing woman who loves me and believes in me. Before her, I was nowhere near as confident as I am now. I take on things that I wouldn't have dreamed of before, because I know she is with me, supporting me. And, while that's not a bad thing in itself, what my heart wants to do with that is. The idols that our hearts erect are rarely bad things. They are almost always good things that we make into ultimate things. Tim Keller says it this way, "*Our need for worth is so powerful that whatever we base our identity and*

value on we essentially 'deify.' We will look to it with all the passion and intensity of worship and devotion...." You see, for me to base my identity and self worth on her is to focus my worship on her. To make her, in effect, a god in my life.

I recently heard Pastor Tullian Tchividjian say "If you fix your joy on something other than God than suffering drives you away from your source of joy. But if you fix your joy on God than suffering actually drives you deeper into your source of joy.... Suffering cannot rob you of joy, only idolatry can." So, sometimes when it feels like God is killing us, He's actually saving us. He is kind enough to use pain to expose our false functional Saviors and help us redirect our worship in a way that leads us to joy that transcends circumstances.

The gospel tells me that there is One whose love for me is even stronger than hers. It assures me that there is One whose approval of me means more than hers ever could and has already been unconditionally secured for me, not by what I do but by what Christ has done for me. But I turn to her instead of to God. Don't get me wrong. It's a good thing to deeply love your spouse. It's a good thing to need your spouse. But it's a completely different thing to expect your spouse to provide for you the things that only God can truly provide. She is an amazing woman and I am more convinced of my love for her than I ever have been. But I have been reminded that there is only one eternal foundation that I can build my life and hope on and if I try to build it on her, she will only be crushed under the weight of impossible expectations. I love her best by loving Jesus more than her. That is a drastically hard lesson to learn.

Healing

Healing is always about God and never about us. There have been several well-meaning people who have said things like "God just knew that your kids needed you" or "God just couldn't take someone so amazing, so early" or something to that effect. What they are saying, whether they mean it or not, is there's something about Erin, or about our family, that's so great that God gave us special treatment. That we deserved healing and grace. This would also imply, if you carry it all the way out, that those who were not healed and those who have lost their mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, and children were not deserving of healing. No one would say that outright, but in a way that is exactly what you are saying when you make the healing about the character of the person. Erin was not given life because she is awesome. She was given life because God is good and sovereign and He chose to flex in such a way that showed his power over death in this situation. But, you need to know that He would still be just as good and sovereign and powerful if he had taken her that night. You can read this in Erin's own words in her amazing blog post *30 Years and 30 Days*, where she compares and contrasts the death of her mother, 30 years ago, to her own near death experience.

A Shout That Rouses The Deaf

God has continued to show us more and more reasons for why this happened the way it did. He is still using it to change people, to open up hearts to the gospel and to shape us as individuals and as a family more into the image of Christ. I have come to love this story. It's deeply woven into the fabric of my heart and it has reshaped me in more ways than I can recount. C.S. Lewis wrote in his book brilliant work *The Problem of Pain*, "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks to us in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: It is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world."

God has shouted at us through this experience. He did more work in one night to chisel away at my pride and self-centeredness than has been accomplished over years of steady growth. And He has seen fit to use it to shout to others as well.

I don't wish painful circumstances on any of you but I do hope that you will someday know Him like I do. It's well worth whatever path you had to take to get there, no matter how rocky it may be.