

*Losing Religion,
Finding Grace*



Kendra Fletcher

“Someone has said that the hard places of life will either make you hard and mean or drive you to Jesus. That’s true, but there’s more than that. Sometimes the dark will teach you about yourself, about God’s love, and about amazing grace. There are those who have been there and teach the rest of us what they found so we can find it too. That’s what Kendra Fletcher has done in a wonderful and refreshing way. As I read this book I cried, I laughed, and I sang ‘The Hallelujah Chorus!’ This is a book that just might change your life!”

Steve Brown, Key Life radio broadcaster; author of *Hidden Agendas* and *How to Talk So People Will Listen*

“Compelling, compassionate, convicting describe the story behind *Lost and Found*. Yet, as readers, we are lead to such a profound, transforming understanding of the infinite love and grace of God, our hearts are filled with relief as we are reminded that we do not have to earn his eternal love and companionship, but that his goodness and mercy follow us every step of our lives. Kendra’s story brings life-giving beauty through each page.”

Sally Clarkson, blogger; speaker; author

“In days where worldly prosperity gospel tries to convince us that suffering doesn’t exist, and religious moral behaviorism says, ‘God owes me,’ Kendra Fletcher reveals the beauty and grace of God found in the midst of real pain in honest people. Her testimony of God using the catastrophes of life to draw her back to himself encourages us to see the hope that we are all longing for and can find in Jesus. This book is a page-turner of true hope and joy in a real world.”

Jim Applegate, Pastor at Redeemer Church, Modesto, CA

“The message Kendra has to share is one that can only be described as ‘desperately needed.’ In a society laden with self-sufficiency and self-dependency, our souls are starving for the tenderness of being cared for by someone who *truly* loves us . . . not for what we can do for him, but because of his unrelenting grace. Experiencing heartbreak and trials beyond her wildest nightmares, Kendra shares how God reached down and helped her lose her religion and find the grace that was hers all along. He has that very same grace for each one of us. Kendra’s story helps us see what it looks like so we can embrace it as well.”

Durenda Wilson, Author of *The Unhurried Homeschooler*

“Too many believers aren’t desperately needy for Jesus. They feel like they are good enough on their own. Through her tragic but beautiful story, Kendra describes how she powerfully encountered the God she thought she knew . . . a God who is close, gracious, and necessary for our every breath. *Lost and Found* is for anyone who desires a fresh encounter with God in their own story.”

Barrett Johnson, Founder of INFO for Families; author of *The Talk(s)*

“Kendra’s story of her journey to the cross drops keys of freedom into the hands of beautiful rowdy prisoners as she turns our eyes to the one and only Savior who sets the captives free. Read *Lost and Found* and share it with others, then watch as the prison doors swing open. A truly gospel-centered, Christ-exalting read.”

Kimm Crandall, Author of *Christ in the Chaos* and *Beloved Mess*

“In his great kindness and love, the Lord frequently speaks to us with occurrences that are so much louder than words we’re familiar with. He does this because he cherishes us and wants to free us from our false trusts: trusts in something other than his grace, trusts in the identity we’ve dressed ourselves in, trusts in our own abilities to self-righteously pull it off. Though this freedom is delightful we always militate against it, because we’re terrified of losing what we think we can’t live without. My friend Kendra Fletcher has been given that freedom and I’m so thankful; but the way that it came to her was as hard as anything I’ve ever read. Let me encourage you to dive deeply into Kendra’s story and see the wonderful freedom that comes from loss and being found.”

Elyse M. Fitzpatrick, Author of *Because He Loves Me*

LOST AND FOUND

LOSING RELIGION, FINDING GRACE

Kendra Fletcher



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To Fletch, who helped me in so many practical ways to finish this book, and who asked me repeatedly if my eyes were on Jesus as I wrote it. You point me to him more faithfully than anyone I know.

To Hayden, Nate, Jack, Abby, Caroline, Annesley, Christian, and Joe, who lived these stories and many more. May you always know that you are worthy because Jesus is worthy.

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CHAPTER 1

Perhaps the most surprising aspect of writing our own stories is coming face-to-face with what we fear in telling them. Honesty, even with ourselves, is hard fought, and yet the beauty of being freed from self-deception is really quite glorious!

—Kristen Kill

I found my baby in a coma. On a hot summer day in June 2008, while kids ran in the sprinklers, the air conditioner kicked on before 9 a.m. and the temperature pushed itself over the triple-digit line, I found my tiny baby boy hanging onto his tiny little life by a still tinier thread.

I was expecting this day to be like every other summer day: the kids in the pool, the laundry piled up with beach towels times ten of us. I washed, they dried their dripping bodies, I washed again. It's part of the ebb and flow in the domestic life of our bigger-than-average family. Our home sometimes feels like a freeway with teens in and out, families lingering on the back porch, door hinges squeaking as we go from kitchen to backyard with bowls of watermelon, glasses of ice water, salads, and burgers for the grill.

I'd fed most of the kids their breakfast that day, probably a bowl of cornflakes because no one wants a hot meal when the temperature is already heading for 100 degrees. I checked my watch. Nine hours seemed like an awfully long stretch of sleep for

a seven-week-old, so I quickened my pace as I climbed the stairs to see if I could hear him. No baby noises—no crying, no little newborn squeaks, no sniffy breathing. I quietly pushed open my bedroom door to check on him. He was there in his miniature Moses basket, a thin white cotton blanket bunched up beside him. He was barely breathing. It was obvious that something was amiss. His skin was too cold for such a sticky June morning, his breaths were quick and shallow, and his eyes seemed to stare at nothing.

There was no way I could have prepared for the shock of that moment. It felt like I'd stepped onto the Tilt-a-Whirl, with the walls closing in, as if the bedroom was going to swallow me. I felt like I was walking through mud, in slow motion, down each step of the staircase, one at a time. Even after years of mothering seven other children, I desperately peered at my nine-year-old daughter with pleading eyes and asked her, "Do you think we should call 9-1-1?" I'm not sure why I thought she would possess more wisdom than I, but I wasn't thinking clearly. Who can think clearly in the midst of such an unexpected crisis?

I sputtered out the words to the calm, wise woman on the other end of the line. "My baby! He's not responding!" I said as I held his limp body in my arms. She was cool, collected, asking me questions and reassuring me that the paramedics were on their way. Three minutes, maybe, had gone by, and then four men, laden with medical equipment and prepared for the worst, entered my front door like a force. They instantly knew what I was struggling to come to terms with: this baby boy was very, very sick.

I stood in the entry hall, looking up at my thirteen-year-old son standing at the top of the stairs. I asked him to call his dad at work to inform him that we had called 9-1-1 for Joe. We packed tiny Joe into his car seat for the ride to the hospital and I stepped up high into the passenger seat of the ambulance as the driver took control. The paramedics were doing everything they could to keep Joe alive in the back, and the driver was politely asking me trivial questions to keep me calm. "Thirteen," I heard the older paramedic

in the back yell forward. “His blood sugar is thirteen. Call the hospital; they’ll want to know before we arrive.”

“What’s normal?” I asked the driver sitting next to me. “Sixty,” was the quiet reply, and then nothing else. There wasn’t anything else to say, really. He reached under the dash, turned on the siren and flashing lights, and we headed toward the emergency room at breakneck speed.

Inside that ambulance, we rode on in silence. Everyone was holding their breath and tiny Joe was too subdued for a seven-week-old riding in an unfamiliar vehicle with a screaming siren and three strange men hovering over him.

By the time the ambulance reached the city hospital twenty minutes from our home, my husband Fletch was there waiting for us. We did what we normally do in stressful circumstances, both of us snapping into business mode, he with a sharp humor that tends to put everyone at ease except us. We were dazed.

We soon found ourselves in the frenetic emergency room of our local hospital, where they were unequipped to help such a seriously ill newborn, where they ultimately could not do anything for him, where the charge nurse barked to everyone around her, “Get this baby transferred or we will lose him!”

Within an hour, we had called our family, sent out emails and text messages to those we hadn’t been able to reach, and updated our blogs. By late that afternoon, Joe’s story was bouncing around the Internet, and hundreds of people were praying for us. We began to get emails from strangers—concerned blog readers who had stories of hope to tell us or prayers to offer. At that point, of course, no one knew what was going on inside little Joe’s body. There was no one to trust but God.

There had been fires raging on the coast of California that summer, and the smoke that settled into our agricultural valley meant that we could not rush Joe anywhere by helicopter. Instead, he was put into an acute-care ambulance, buckled into a gurney meant for an adult-sized body, and rushed seventy miles away to

Valley Children's Hospital. We were not allowed to be with him, so we followed behind. I'm not sure we said one word to each other the whole way there.

It was midnight by the time we arrived in the pediatric intensive care unit, answering probing questions from a gentle pediatric acute care physician who knew no more about Joe's status than we did. Working from the information and test results gleaned that morning at our local hospital, Dr. Montes couldn't see a clear diagnostic path. This kind and thoughtful South American physician puzzled with us, his head down and his hands wringing as he thought of what to ask next. No, we hadn't seen any signs of illness the night before. No, no one else at home is ill. Yes, he is a normal, healthy baby who has behaved just as our other seven normal, healthy babies had at seven weeks. "This just doesn't make sense." Moments of painful silence, then, "What about diarrhea?"

"Yes, he's had awful diapers today. I changed at least five in the ER," Fletch replied.

"That wasn't in the report they sent with him!" Dr. Montes seemed both worried and relieved.

Suddenly here was the diagnostic clue he was lacking, and Dr. Montes immediately stood to rush out of the room, a concentrated purpose in his step. "Sleep with your cell phones," he called back at us. "He may not make it through the night."

But he did. We awoke the next morning and looked at each other, amazed, and then we got dressed in the fastest race of our lives. We met Dr. Montes at the doorway of Joe's room in the pediatric intensive care unit (PICU) and, after we covered ourselves in blue gowns, booties, and surgical masks, Dr. Montes gently explained to us that Joe had been diagnosed with a deadly enterovirus.

No one knows how our baby Joe contracted the virus, but we know there was an outbreak of enterovirus-71 that summer in Taiwan. Taiwan! California is across the largest ocean in the world, and yet somehow, our tiny baby became infected with a deadly virus that rapidly wreaked havoc on his whole system. His body was in the throes of liver failure, kidney failure, heart damage, and brain damage.

One morning early on in our PICU stay, we arrived on the floor to discover the second hospitalist there, Dr. Kallas, hovering over Joe's bed and staring at his urine output bag, his brow furrowed and his pen tapping his chin. A tanned Greek man with a large gold chain around his neck, Dr. Kallas's deep brown eyes exuded care and concern for each of his little patients.

"It's stupid pee," he told us. "What we want to see is 'smart pee,' you know, because then we can be sure that the kidneys are doing their job. What Joe's kidneys are expending is stupid pee; they aren't doing their job of flushing out the bad stuff, and so what we see in the bag is nothing, really. Fluid. Stupid, not smart."

For days, we stood alert on "smart pee watch," imploring our friends and family to please pray for smart pee. It seemed so serious and not at all funny at the time, but now, of course, the thought of spending our days watching a urine bag and praying its contents would emerge from his bladder a darker color, reminds us of the grace of God in the small things during those intense days.

Then there were the wires. Hundreds of them attached to Joe's itty bitty head, like a baby Rastafarian with colorful dreadlocks and a skullcap. Neurologists, both in the hospital's monitoring room and around the world, could monitor Joe's brain activity to see what exactly was going on in there. He was having hundreds of seizures per hour, which of course raised the level of concern and drove home the extent of his brain damage. We were given a little clicker that was connected to his brain wave monitor and instructed to click it every time we saw any shaking or seizure-like movement in Joe. The neurologist keeping watch over that screen in another area of the hospital would then be able to draw an educated correlation between what we were seeing in our child and what they were observing on the screen.

He'd be a vegetable. Maybe. At the very least, he'd be completely blind because the dehydration and hydrocephalus he'd sustained had left a massive cavity in his occipital lobe, the part of the brain that controls sight and balance.

As we watched our baby losing his life, we began to lose our own. We could see, right in front of our eyes, on a screen, in a urine bag filled with stupid pee, how critically ill Joe was, but we did not yet understand how very lost we were, or our own desperate need to be found.