

Morningsong

Chapter Nine:

1. Mona and Adam have had a difficult and painful conversation. There has been an awkward silence between them. Yet Mona can feel his presence as they stand near each other. He feels warm and inviting. She “wills him to speak again – to say anything that will erase the silence of the car...”

Why do we hesitate to speak in times like these? What emotions could lie behind the silence?

2. Can you think of a time when you were silent when you wanted more than anything to have the silence broken? Formulate the words you would use to break the silence and begin reconciliation if you didn't allow your emotions to get in the way.

3. Adam is the one to break the silence, paving the way for Mona to respond when she is ready. “Whatever you want to say to me later, I want you to know that I see messes as part of life. We're all broken, and some of us are a little more cracked than others. You don't scare me, and your family doesn't scare me, but maybe knowing that frightens you more than you'd like to admit.” He gives her a gift by ending his words with, “It's okay. It doesn't matter what anyone else says. Know your own heart and don't speak it until you're ready.”

Why do you think it is a gift to allow someone to think things through and wait to speak their heart until they are ready? Lamentations 3:22-28 speaks of waiting on the Lord in silence. Are you able to give this gift to someone in a tough situation? Have you received it?

4. Hallie studies Aunt Mona and Adam at the Thanksgiving table. She asks what Adam finds appealing about Aunt Mona. “Did he like her short, spiky hair, or did he think she was prettier before the accident? Wasn't it getting to be a drag, driving all the way over from Aplington every Saturday just to see her? Had she ever told him about the time she and Stacy and Hallie had gone out in the middle of the night and wrapped the neighborhood cars in toilet paper?”

Mona was embarrassed. Why are we embarrassed by the outspoken tendencies of kids?

Morningsong

5. Ellen had been hateful toward Mona, even as Mona had sought to help her. But Ellen hit rock bottom, and cried out to her sister, “In spite of all the horrible things I’ve said and all the reasons I’ve given you to want to push me as far away from you as possible, I’m asking if I can stay in Stewartville, Mona. I have nowhere else to go, and I can’t do this alone. I’m asking you to help me. I don’t even think I know what that means....I need help and I’m scared.”

It takes courage to “own up” and cry for help. How should a Christian respond? Read Colossians 3:12 and write the words you would use if you were Mona.

6. Mona feels the first glimmer of hope as Ellen reaches out, adding “It would mean a lot to me if you’d come...”

Are there words you are starving to hear from someone? Words someone may be starving to hear from you? How would you lovingly share you need for those words with that person? Or how would you loving share the words you need to share? Write your answer below. Then pray about following through with your words in the near future of your life.

7. Mona has been putting off a medical test following up on the progress of her brain since her accident. But Harold, who cares for her, calls her out on this. Mona is angry. She says to herself, “My choices are mine and nobody else’s!”

Are our choices really our own? Are they made in isolation without affecting the people in our lives? Why or why not?

8. As Harold, Hallie and Adam each let Mona know what they think about her procrastination over medical tests, Mona again tells them she is in charge of her own decisions. Hallie giggles, “I wish I had a tape recorder so I could play that back to you sometime. You’ve been in my face for the past two years, preaching to me about facing the tough things, and I imagine an hour from now you’re going to be preaching the same thing to my mother.”

Sometimes it is easier to give than to receive whether it is advice, help, or even gifts. Why is that true? If you feel good when you give, how might it feel for someone else to give? Do you allow this to work both ways? Read Acts 20:34-36, then write your answer.

Morningsong

9. Harold continues loving Mona and standing strong in his stance about her medical tests, even though she is angry. He says, "I learned too late that love does hard things when someone is struggling."

What do you think this statement means? Have you had to do some hard things with someone who was struggling in your life? Has anyone who loves you had to do this for you? Read Ephesians Chapter 4 and see if you think God is in agreement.

10. Because of their circumstances, God has asked Harold to do an extraordinary thing. Harold says, "The Lord's asked me to open my home to Ellen and Hallie for a time."

Harold is both giving a gift and taking a risk. When do you think it would be appropriate to do something like this? Is there a time when it wouldn't?

11. How would you know if God was speaking to you about taking a risk and giving a gift – or if it was your own voice? What are some of the ways God speaks to us?

Morningsong

Chapter Ten:

1. Ellen has deeply wounded her daughter. Because of Ellen's alcoholism Hallie has had to learn many sad truths. She has not been able to depend on her parent. Instead, she is placed in the role of parenting her mother. Alcoholism has also cost Hallie her grades, normal social activities, and deep responsibilities beyond her years. Ultimately it has destroyed Hallie's trust in her mother, and at this point Hallie has chosen to close the door of her heart.

Ellen would like to change all of that, but Mona wisely tells her, "I know she doesn't want to talk to you right now, but she's angry, and you have to give her permission to be angry. You can't change her, Ellen. You can only change you."

Have you ever been faced with the realization that you cannot change someone (whether or not you hurt them) but had to make some changes in yourself as a result?

2. When Harold volunteers to give Ellen and Hallie a place to stay for free, Ellen cannot believe it. Her belief is common in our culture; "Nobody does something for nothing." God very often asks Christians to act in ways counter to culture. Read Romans 12:2-8. How is Harold honoring God? Have there been situations when you were asked to reach out in ways that seemed strange to others in our culture?

3. The author describes Harold as loving God by loving people. Do you believe this is true? If so, how does this belief system manifest itself in the course of our daily lives?

4. Again, Ellen is shocked at the idea that Harold "just goes around loving people and doing good things for them because they need it."

Is doing things for people because they need it a requirement for being a Christian? Read Romans 12:9-13.

Morningsong

5. Are there times when we should set boundaries for our giving? If so, what might some of those boundaries be?

6. As so often happens, one generation passes on pain to another. Ellen's father did not show her the love of a father in the way God longs for all fathers to relate to their children. Sadly, when this happens it is hard for a person to conceptualize a loving heavenly Father. But God, as He always does, uses all things for His glory.

In our story God is showing Ellen who He really is through her feelings for her very own child. Mona helps Ellen to see this by telling her, "You understand what it's like to love your child so much you'd die for her, Ellen. It's part of God's heart. He's letting you see in yourself. He loves us so much He doesn't want to leave us on our own to be flushed away in our vomit. With more love than every mother's and father's heart, He died to give us an escape from the brokenness we bring to the world."

Read Romans 8:28-39. Can you look back through your life and ponder times when God has been showing His love for you, even in the most painful of circumstances?

7. Mona had been very wise with Ellen and Hallie. But when it came to her own life it wasn't so easy to work through the issues. Mona had been keeping Adam at arm's length. Deep down she was afraid. When Adam lovingly challenged her to explore her own feelings she "decided to choose the tangible list that floated into her brain and push aside the part about fears."

Is this a wise thing to do? Why or why not? Read Philippians 4:8,9. How would this Scripture help Mona work through her issues? How could it help you?

8. Each of us learns to react and behave in certain ways through the experiences of our lives. Mona's first reaction when she "hit a wall" was to "cut Adam out of the crisis." Why do you think she reacted that way? What is your first instinctive reaction with others in your life? Why?

9. Adam has come to love Mona. But Mona believes her life is too complicated, so she says she's "making the choice for him" not to be more deeply involved in her life.

Morningsong

Can we ever really make choices for other people? Why or why not?

10. Adam tells Mona, “People who care say and do tough things for the people they love. It’s what you do for Ellen and Hallie. People who care don’t just stand on the edges of other people’s lives and send Hallmark cards when I crisis hits.”

How readily do you “say and do thoughtful things for the people you love?” Are there times when you get more deeply involved? Are there times when it is more appropriate to send a card? How do you decide? Read Philippians 4:10-14 as you consider your answer.

Morningsong

Chapter Eleven:

1. Ellen has finally had to see herself as she really is, without the alcohol to numb her senses and kill her pain. As she looks into the mirror, “Her mother’s face stared back at her, ravaged by drugs and emaciated by disease. The sunken gray eyes held the heartbreak of a sixty-year-old woman.” She lets her mind go over the memories of her mother, good and bad.

Why is it that we often become what we saw in our parents? Is there anything you use to numb your senses and kill your pain? Alcohol? Work? Food? Volunteering? Sinking your entire life into that of your children, spouse, or someone else? Other?

2. There’s nothing left for Ellen but to face herself alone before God. She can no longer even hear the loving voice of her mother. She has nothing left of herself to gift to her own daughter, Hallie.

What has taken her mother’s voice from her memory? What has taken her own voice from Hallie?

3. Ellen has been receiving anonymous letters from someone who is giving her spiritual advice. As she prepares to enter rehab, the letter consoles, “*When we leave our loved ones behind it’s easy to think we’re abandoning them. But even though you’ll be separated from Hallie you’ll be in her thoughts and her heart every day. Deep inside, she knows that by going away, you’re doing your best to stay with her. A mother doesn’t need to be beside her daughter to guide her in what’s right. Sometimes just living what’s true is our greatest act of love.*”

What do you think this means? Do you agree? Why or why not?

4. As Harold prepares to receive Ellen and Hallie into his home he feels a little overwhelmed. “But God had painted the picture pretty clear. Open the door, and the Lord would nudge them through.”

Sometimes a simple act of obedience doesn’t seem like enough, so we try harder, and do more. And sometimes a simple act seems like it makes no sense, so we fail to do it. What is your tendency? Do you strive too hard? Do you fail to take the simple step and let God do the rest?

Morningsong

5. Ellen was learning that, “Some hurts would always be there. Life didn’t erase pain or memories.” How do we go on living with our hurts, pain, and memories?

Read 2 Corinthians 1:3-5. On the lines below write what this means for you in any parts of you that still hurt.

6. The author weaves the idea that there are things that can be learned from painful memories and hurts if we don’t let anger and bitterness scar over the wounds. She believes there are gifts in the pain if we can look beyond the now and unclench our hands to receive them.

What do you think she means? Do you agree?

7. If you agree with the idea that there are gifts in our pain and memories, what gifts have you received – or could receive – from yours? Read Romans 5:1-5 and consider how this can apply to your life.

8. Ellen thanks Adam for driving her to rehab. Included with her thanks is also a “thanks for not preaching. I heard it all when I was a kid, and believe it or not, a lot of it’s still in my head, even though I’ve tried to wash it away with a few thousand bottles of liquor.” As she speaks Adam understands all too well how she feels. “He remembered walking hand-in-hand with the pain and not knowing how to tear his hand from its grip. He remembered the void of believing he would never come back.”

Are there any messages in your head you’d like to wash away? Since you can’t wash them away, list some ways you can help your heart and mind heal.

9. Adam admits to Ellen as they part that “yes, I did walk away for awhile. From God, from my family, from life. The only thing that brought me back was getting honest with God and with

Morningsong

myself. He let me suffer, so I gave myself permission to be a victim. Then one day, I realized that anger is its own slow death, and started pouring it all out to Him.”

Have you ever walked away from God? How did it feel? How did your decision affect your life?

10. Adam tells Ellen, “You and I are more alike than you think. I kept my anger on the inside and went dead. You just wear yours on the outside and invite the fight.”

How do you deal with anger? Do you know people who are like Adam? Like Ellen? If so, how do you relate to them?

Morningsong

Chapter Twelve:

1. Shortly after she is admitted to rehab, Ellen calls her Mona and requests that they take a trip together later so they can talk. Mona recalls how many times she's hope to talk to Ellen, only to have the door shut, and she is feeling some old suspicions.

How should Mona handle this change? How should she deal with her suspicions?

2. The rehab staff want Ellen to begin to "build bridges" with people before she finishes the program and leaves the facility. What does "building bridges" mean? Why would this be important for Ellen?

3. Ellen admits she's not sure she will really want to take the trip and have those talks once she leaves rehab. But she says she "wants to believe that when she gets there she'll want to do it."

As a certain school of thought in counseling circles goes, "Act first and the feelings will follow." Do you agree? If so, what challenges would a person in this situation face?

4. Do you ever argue with yourself? Mona does. First she thinks about whether or not she should ignore the pain and keep trying to convince herself she's all she needs. Then she checks that thought with the idea that Adam's "lost one wife. Why would he stick around to watch another woman shrivel up and wither away?" Finally, she comes back to square one, asking herself, "When are you finally going to end it for his sake and get this whole mess over with?"

Is there any benefit to arguing with yourself? Why or why not?

5. Adam is kind, and he thinks it's nothing special. He thinks it is just what he does. But Mona says, "That is where you're wrong. It is special. You care about people. You notice details. It's second nature to you, and it can be a little...unnerving."

Morningsong

It is hard to accept kindness when we have known much pain. Is it hard for you?

6. It seems that simple things – small acts of kindness, and noticing the needs of others – are often unnoticed as special giftedness in those who do them. They don't make a big splash, and the results aren't always dramatic.

Do you know anyone whose gift is to work quietly in the daily lives of others with the small things? Could it be that this is your gift? It seems God must have thought this gift was important. Why do you think this is true? Consider 1 Corinthians 12:7-11 in your answer.

7. Mona reveals some of the reasons for her fear of a relationship with Adam. It takes courage, but she presses on, admitting, "We grew up breathing shame like most people breathe air. We were never good enough for my dad – no one ever was. So I became the good daughter, and Ellen became the rebel. Life became one big effort to earn Dad's approval."

Have you experienced a similar upbringing? Are you more like Mona or Ellen? How has that influenced your life and relationships?

8. Mona goes on to say that she failed to get her dad's approval, but "worshipping success and perfectionism were approved addictions in the church where my mother took us. Those became my drugs. And once I knew Jesus Satan convinced me that I had to keep working for God's approval."

Has your church been accepting of overwork and perfectionism? Or are there healthy boundaries for how much time and responsibility a person is allowed to take on?

9. How do we truly gain God's approval? Read Ephesians 2:1-9 and respond.

Morningsong

10. Mona admits, “Adam, I’m trying to tell you how hard it is for me to trust and not to control everything and everyone in my world.”

Take an honest look at your life. Are you controlling? If so, does that involve control of activities or people, or both? If not, is there anyone in your life who is controlling? How do you relate to that person?
