



DEFINING MOMENTS

Process Tool

Rescued

Summary

Just over a year ago, Jim Mellado, president of the Willow Creek Association, and his son Davy were involved in a near-fatal drowning accident, and, as a result, Jim had some serious medical complications. They are now both fully recovered. Jim recently spoke about the incident and his journey back to physical and emotional health at a weekend service at Willow Creek Community Church. In this edition of *Defining Moments*, you will hear Jim's message from that service, and then Jim will join host Nancy Beach and Willow Creek senior pastor Bill Hybels to talk more about his experience.

Outline

I. At the Beach

In July of 2007, Jim and his family were on vacation in Baja California visiting extended family. One sunny day, the family was going to do some shopping and then head to the beach, which Jim's 13-year-old son, Davy, had been eager to do all week. They shopped longer than anticipated, so rather than going to a well-populated beach that was out of their way, they decided to head toward their destination for the evening and possibly stop at a beach along the way.

They found a beach that was a little deserted — it had a lifeguard stand but no lifeguard. They planned to play in the shallow end for a few minutes and then continue on their way. Although Jim sensed that the waves looked a little odd, he and his son jumped in and started bodysurfing while the rest of the family strolled on the beach.

After a little while, Jim noticed that Davy had gotten a layer of waves deeper into the ocean. He started to get nervous but thought that Davy would be able to catch the next wave in. Then, before Jim realized what was happening, both he and Davy were moving quite rapidly away from the beach into the ocean. Jim's nervousness turned into real concern. Jim decided to swim toward Davy to get them both turned around, but when he reached him, he could see that Davy knew something was wrong. Davy was struggling to keep afloat, and as another swell of water went over him, he mumbled the words: "I can't. Help."

Jim's real concern turned to chilling terror and absolute panic. Davy grabbed Jim's forearm, as he clung to him, he stopped swimming, and they both went under. They were so far out that Jim doubted that anyone would hear them if they yelled. Jim concluded that he and Davy didn't have the strength to return and that they were about to die, perhaps in five or 10 minutes at the most.

II. After the Rescue

After they reached the shore, Jim thought the terrible ordeal was over. He immediately collapsed and started vomiting. He didn't think it was a big deal at the time. As a former Olympic decathlete, he had pushed his body to the limit before. Although he told his family to let him lie down and he'd be fine, he was cold, his peripheral vision was getting dark, and he was struggling to stay conscious. His family took him to a doctor, who said that it might take some time for his body to recover, but he should be fine with rest.

Jim struggled to keep food down for the next few days, but to avoid ruining the rest of the family's vacation time, he told himself that he just needed some more rest. By the time they flew back to Chicago, Jim noticed that his midsection was starting to swell, and he was feeling increasingly uncomfortable. When he went to his family doctor the first morning back in Chicago, they told him to go to the emergency room immediately.

In the emergency room, the doctor told him that he was experiencing acute renal failure and needed dialysis. They weren't sure why, but his kidneys had shut down. Jim was later transferred to another hospital, where they learned that because of the extreme physical exertion, too much muscle breakdown had occurred, putting too much protein in his bloodstream. The protein clogged the tubes in his kidneys and caused them to shut down. The doctors weren't sure if the condition would be permanent or not.

Jim went through two more rounds of dialysis, and after a week and a half, his kidneys did turn back on. The doctors told him that there was minimal permanent scarring and that his kidneys should have a normal life expectancy.

III. Three Themes

A week later, two of Jim's closest friends, John and Nancy Ortberg, visited him. John challenged Jim to do two things. The first was to write down what happened before the details started to get fuzzy, because his family would want to reflect on this in the future. John also said that Jim's body would likely recover in less time than his soul would need to move on, so his second challenge was to not jump back into his job and old pace of life without fully processing what had happened.

Jim has been processing and reflecting on the accident over the past months, and three themes have started to emerge.

A. Hope

When Jim concluded that he and Davy were moments away from drowning, a million thoughts seemed to flash through his mind. He was experiencing the "fight or flight" response, in which the body takes reserves from anywhere it can in order to preserve life. It floods the bloodstream with adrenaline, screaming at the muscles to do more than the conscious brain thinks is possible. The brain becomes a thunderstorm of electrical activity, processing multiple times more information per second than it normally does. Time itself seems to slow down. Later, Jim and his wife would disagree on how long the incident lasted — Jim thought 30 to 45 minutes, while she assured him that it was less than 15.

As he and Davy were struggling to stay above water, Jim looked at his wife and two daughters on the shore and pictured them at a double funeral. He and Davy were about to die but no one knew.

Jim was angry that they could lose their lives for such a throwaway experience. It was supposed to be just a 15-minute dip in the Pacific Ocean. Jim was even angrier at himself because he had let his son get into this situation and hadn't acted on his nervousness about the waves.

Jim didn't consciously cry out to God to save them, and he's not sure why. What happened wasn't God's fault. In that moment, he didn't think that God would save them even if he asked. Jim was sad and hopeless. He wondered if Davy's death would be his last memory or if his death would be Davy's.

Then, his focus went to Davy. Jim sternly looked at him and told him that they couldn't panic. Jim needed Davy to swim and not cling to him — he was too big for Jim to hold up. Jim decided that if anybody was going to make it back, it was Davy. Jim was expendable; Davy was not.

What happened next saved their lives: Davy acted on Jim's words. His panic turned to resolve, and he started swimming again. That birthed a small glimmer of hope. Jim didn't have enough energy to save a victim, but he could help a contributor. Jim still didn't have enough hope to believe that they would make it back, but he did have enough to try.

1. In any desperate situation, no matter how hopeless, just enough hope to try is all you need.
2. Hope's greatest potency comes when we're in the deepest trouble.
3. The beauty of hope is that we don't need much of it — just a speck to help us get going in the right direction.
 - a. Most of us know the general direction we need to go with our problems; it's just that we don't see or believe in the full outcome, so we often give up prematurely.
 - b. Jim may not have believed that they could get back, but he knew which way to go.
4. The miraculous thing is that when we get going, more hope comes along the way, at just the right time, in just the right amount for you to take another step.
 - a. When Moses and the Israelites were in the desert, God provided manna for them each morning, but only enough for that day.
 - b. God was building their faith to believe in His daily provision.
 - c. When we start heading in the right direction, God provides more hope, more grace, more resources, more insight — but we have to get started and move on what we know.
 - d. We can all start heading in God's direction, even if we don't have the full answer for how we're going to make it.
 - e. Isaiah 40:31 says that "those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength ..." (NIV).
5. Where do you need a speck of hope in your life?
 - a. Whatever the case may be, you don't need enough hope that it will get fully resolved — you only need hope enough to make the next move.
 - b. God will meet you along the way with what you need.

Jim took a deep breath and went under water. He grabbed Davy's swim trunks in one hand and put his other hand under Davy's arm, and he paddled under the water until he ran out of breath. When he came up again, he started yelling for help. Eventually his family heard him, and knowing that they knew Jim and Davy were in trouble gave Jim another infusion of hope.

Jim went under the water again and paddled and pushed Davy as far as he could. When he came up again, he saw his cousin Andre signaling him to swim parallel to the beach to get out of the current. Then, Andre started walking out into the water on a sandbar as far as he could go, which cut the distance they needed to swim by a third. By pushing Davy at an angle toward Andre, Jim started to make some progress.

When they had only 15 feet left to go, Jim's legs began to fail. Davy made the final push on his own and reached Andre. Jim didn't think that he could make it himself, but he was at peace knowing that his son was safe. A swell of water came over Jim, and he couldn't stay above water. As he went under, his feet touched the sand, and he thought for the first time that he could make it. Moments later, he reached Andre, who carried him back to the beach.

B. God's Goodness

Jim received many e-mails, notes, and cards of encouragement from those who were praying for him and his family. The most significant answer to prayer happened as he was sitting in the dialysis room. He tried praying for healing, but he couldn't. When he saw the others for whom dialysis was a normal part of their lives, he wondered, "Why not me? Would God stop being good if that happened?" Both he and his wife, Leanne, were almost simultaneously flooded with the peace that God's goodness was not dependent on his kidneys ever working again.

1. Romans 8:28 says, "And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose" (KJV).
 - a. Jim grew up seeing this verse to be true all around him — when his dad was wrongly incarcerated in Panama and when his mom almost passed away from internal bleeding.
 - b. More recently, he's seen its truth in a member of his small group, Joy.

Twenty-two years ago, Joy had a stroke, which created a set of circumstances that helped lead her to Jesus. After she came to Christ, she prayed for four years that God would heal her, and when He didn't, she became angry with Him. After several years, she reached a point of acceptance and hope, knowing that God is still good and that He would stay true to His promise to make good come out of it.

- c. Once Jesus and his disciples were in a boat when a great storm came up.
 - 1) Jesus was sleeping, and the disciples, thinking they were all going to die, woke him up, and he calmed the storm.
 - 2) Jim has often wondered if Jesus was really asleep, or if he was waiting to see how they were going to react to the storm.
 - 3) Jim wants to live a life that is not in denial of the storm but has the assurance that with Jesus in his boat, he'll be all right.
2. Jeremiah 29:11 says, "'For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the LORD, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future'" (NIV).
 - a. It doesn't matter how bad the circumstances are — nothing is beyond the reach of God's expertise at making good come out of anything when we put those circumstances into His hands.
 - b. Tough times are ahead for all of us, so remember this promise.

C. Love

Thinking that he was about to witness the death of his son turned Jim into a raving lunatic, willing to sacrifice himself if it meant saving his son. The first thing he did when he realized that he couldn't get Davy all the way back was muster all the strength he had and throw Davy as far as he could toward the shore. When he went only about three feet, Jim realized that he needed another plan.

After the incident, Davy was fine physically, but he was processing a lot of emotions, struggling to get the thoughts of those terrifying moments out of his head. When Davy journaled about that day, he wrote about the look of true, powerful love on his father's face, which encouraged him to press on. When he reached the sandbar and looked back to see his father still in the water, he knew that Jim would be OK, because Jim knew that Davy was safe.

1. There's nothing that Davy could have done to make Jim willing to sacrifice himself for him — it was simply that Davy was his son.
2. Not all sacrifice comes without strings attached.
 - a. In the movie *Saving Private Ryan*, Captain John Miller had the task of bringing Private Ryan home from enemy territory, because three of his brothers had already been killed in the war.
 - b. Captain Miller ended up sacrificing his own life for Private Ryan, but as he was dying, he told Private Ryan, "Earn this."
 - c. Years later, as an old man, Private Ryan begged his wife to tell him that he was a good man, that he had earned the sacrifice made for his life.
3. Jim is so grateful that Davy knows there is nothing that he ever needs to do to earn Jim's love or sacrifice.
4. God's love for you is worlds beyond Jim's love for Davy.
 - a. God doesn't say to earn it; He says to enjoy it.
 - b. Enjoy and accept God's forgiveness of your sin.
5. Even if you weren't a believer, you'd know a bit about God if you've ever experienced hope, goodness, or love — because He's the source of all of those things.
6. God wants you to love Him, not just what comes from Him.

IV. Looking Back

A. The Importance of Processing

1. Jim's initial reaction after the accident was that it was no big deal — he just wanted to get on with life.
 - a. He didn't want to cancel any plans or fly back early.
 - b. Later in the vacation, he even told Leanne to make sure that Davy got in the pool.
 - c. It was a "get back in the saddle" mentality.
 - d. When the problems with his kidneys developed, he couldn't ignore the physical side of it any longer, but when he got out of the hospital, he still wanted to just get back to everyday life.

- e. John Ortberg encouraged him to let his soul get back on track, just like his body had to.
 - 1) He challenged Jim to write down everything that happened in as much detail as possible and to have an open-ended receiver to let God do whatever He wanted to do in his life regarding this significant episode.
 - 2) John told him that he would likely discover God in new ways.
- 2. Jim is not sure that his process time is over even now.
 - a. He has processed what happened through numerous conversations with his wife, children, family, friends, and small group.
 - b. When significant things happen and you have to put significant energy to keep those thoughts and memories at bay, they find a way to not stay at bay.
 - 1) The challenge for Jim was to not run from those thoughts or emotions.
 - 2) There were times, like at work, when he couldn't process them right then, so he needed outlets in other venues to deal with them so that he could function in the rest of his life that needed to go on.
 - 3) The challenge was the balance between getting back to his usual activities and making sure that he wasn't leaving unprocessed emotions unprocessed.
- 3. Jim already had people in place to help him process.
 - a. He especially leaned on three or four people with whom he had deep, enduring, full-disclosure friendships.
 - 1) Jim loves these people and knows they love him.
 - 2) Some of them have been in a group with him for 16 years.
 - b. When church leaders have issues that take them out of vocational ministry, it's often because they didn't have even one full-disclosure friendship.
 - 1) They didn't have people who could walk with them and help them deal with the issues of life and leadership.
 - 2) If pastors had even one friendship like that, it would have a significant impact on their longevity.
 - 3) It's sad that anyone would sign up for a long-term ministry calling without the support system in place that is required to fulfill that calling.
- 4. Often when pastors or teachers have a defining moment, they want to turn it into a message right away, before they've done the work of processing it.
 - a. If a leader talks about something powerful in their life prematurely, they may think that talking about it in a sermon is the same thing as processing it.
 - b. Because they've gotten it off their chest, they think it's behind them.
 - c. Talking to the congregation is not the same as journaling or unpacking the experience with trusted friends.
 - d. If it's a powerful experience, you should think of the process time in terms of months, not days.
 - 1) When Bill's father died suddenly, Bill was shocked how for months the grief kept coming in waves.
 - 2) He made a note to himself that whenever something powerful happened to him in the future, he'd be slow to talk publicly about it and long to process it.
 - 3) If God speaks strongly to you about something, you may want to discipline yourself not to talk about it publicly for a period of time so that if additional insights come, it will be more thoughtful when you do talk about it.

- e. Although teaching is not one of Jim's main gifts, this message was not difficult for him to put together, because it was the culmination of hundreds of hours of conversations.
5. When leaders have a defining experience, they often want to get right back to the work of ministry.
 - a. There is a real tension between the benefits of getting back to the routines of your life and the need to process.
 - b. In some ways, God heals us by getting us in a more normalized environment.
 - c. We need to do some abnormal things to try to take in what has happened and some normal things, because it's the combination of the two that eventually grants healing.
 6. Sometimes life-altering experiences are obvious, but we also need to recognize the signs of those that are less obvious.
 - a. Whenever you have to spend a lot of time and energy keeping thoughts and feelings about something at bay, that's an indicator that you're probably not giving it its due.
 - b. You likely need to lean into it rather than run away from it.
 - c. Individuals respond differently to similar situations.

B. Bill's Reflections on Jim's Story

1. Bill wanted this message to become an edition of *Defining Moments* so it would be a report back to all those who prayed for Jim about how God answered those prayers.
2. This experience has had a significant impact on Bill — both because of his personal friendship with Jim and because of the ministry that they do together.
3. He's seen how every day with a good friend or a ministry colleague is a gift.

C. Closing Thoughts

1. God is an expert at making good come out of anything.
2. For Jim, the scale of how bad problems can be has been reclassified.
 - a. He thinks about problems differently and hopes about solutions differently.
 - b. The concept that all you need is a speck of hope is something that he's lived with almost every day since.
 - c. Leaders often over-dramatize decisions.
3. Christ came to set us free, but many of us don't live that way.
 - a. We put so much on ourselves that our burdens become not light but crushing.
 - b. Living with Christ means living free.
 - c. You plus Jesus in any circumstance defines safety and security.
4. Life is a fragile gift.

c. What next move or moves are you able to make? Write two or three ideas below.

d. Choose one the next moves that you listed, and commit to putting it into action in the next two weeks. (You may want to ask a team member or trusted friend to hold you accountable for your action step.)

3. Romans 8:28 reminds us that God works all things for the good of those who love Him. Think of a time when you have experienced God turning something bad into good in your life.
 - a. Take the next 10 minutes to reflect on that experience and journal about it below.

- b. Write a prayer in the space below, thanking God for his goodness in that situation and asking Him for the faith to continue to trust in His goodness during the tough times you may face in the future.

