

# The Castle

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Several years ago, I had the privilege of spending the night in a 450 year old castle in rural Sweden. It was a bucket list item I had never actually dreamed I would experience. Upon arrival, the host spent over an hour leading a tour of all the guests around the castle and discussing the points of interest. There was a two-story library jammed with books, a grand banquet hall, salons with huge dark carved furniture and walls of ancestral oil portraits. The dungeon had a fascinating tale of a dinner guest who offended his host and was dispatched to the dungeon during the meal where he starved to death within a few weeks. The explanation of the moat, which was encircled the castle, was another fascinating saga.

All the guest rooms of the castle had once been used as bedrooms for the castle visitors and family for hundreds of years. The layout was relatively unchanged. A small chute with a well-fitted door closure was still in the narrow entry passage which opened into the bed chamber. Servants used the chute to dispose of human waste and washing water each morning and evening. The chute led to tunnels connected to several larger tubes running under the outer walls of the castle which ultimately emptied into the moat. The moat was an open cesspool as well as a deterrent to any who might want to storm the castle by day or night. The moat's design ensured the demise of both horse and rider with the steep sides and width. I have seen castle moats with draw bridges in movies before, but I did not have the full understanding of the joint role of waste disposal and service as the first line of defense for those who lived within.

The moat also served as a method to enclose the family from unwanted suitors or visitor to the castle. Single daughters often were given the protective security of the draw bridge. The raised bridge

guaranteed their lady-like status prior to marriage. Widows often self-isolated in a similar manor for their remaining years.

Yikes, I could only imagine the smell at the end of a hot summer day being a repellent to anyone who might want to breach the castle facade. Taking a stroll on the outside of the castle during the first two-hundred years would have included a bombardment of a noxious breezes from the stagnate moat. Certainly, that scent would have caused the faint of heart to flee to a more pleasant location.

As I reflect on the castle and moat, I see parallels to those who are struggling long term with their grief. They have yielded to the significant loss and have become isolated in the continuing despair of their loss. They have, if you will indulge me, dug a moat to surround their being. They seem to have regularly added to the toxic mix of emotions that separate them from living life well, after a loss. The moat is filled singularly or jointly with sadness, anger, blame, revenge, shame, unforgiveness, questioning, disappointment, lost dreams, hopelessness, guilt, resentment, and other negative and energy draining emotions. Stirred often by the intoxicating draw of self-pity, the lord of their castle (the griever) has created a barrier of endless suffering. No one nor thing can cross to offer aid because the bridge is raised creating isolation. The griever's condition is based on the refusal to lower the bridge to hope, brought to them through their Christian faith. If they would lower the bridge by trusting God, life could be and should be better emotionally. Of course, the presence of the loss will always be in their memory. To bridge the gap of loss with prayer and trust will be lowering the bridge opening opportunities to restoration and repurposed living.

Looking back at loss as a piece of the whole, not the whole of the piece, takes courage. A barricaded existence is a very sad way to live. God is ready and waiting to show all who grieve the new direction to living abundantly.

When we look back at God's Model, the hope of a resurrected life is the clear message. After the journey through the dark period, the feelings of a life shattered by shock which bares with it a tattered tapestry of life, the inclination to just give in to the despair feels somehow justified. The time of self-care and recovery which will lead to a repurposed life can feel like too much of an effort. The griever gets stuck in the "Friday Afternoon" feelings. A resurrected life is a choice, not an inevitable outcome. It is a season not a destination when we grieve. God's healing balm is promised in Isaiah 61:1-3 when He says: *...to bestow on them the oil of gladness instead of mourning, a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.* (NIV) His trade in program offers the griever a path through the valley of the shadow of death to join Him at the banquet table of life. (Psalm 23)

Lower the draw bridge, allow others to enter your life. See opportunities to create joy for yourself and others. Be thankful. Drain the moat of negative thought while planting it with sweet fragranced vines of contentment. Bravely move into new experiences and find new friends who help you thrive, not add to your sadness. Seek opportunities to worship God and to serve others who need your insight and wisdom. Pray, asking God to lift the burden of loss and grief and fill you with contentment. Ask Him to remove the questions and heavy emotions and create in you a new heart for life. He is so amazingly faithful. Your hope is in the Lord. (Psalm 33: 20-22) Take Him up on His offer to sooth you and ease your pain with his compassion. He knows what it feels like to lose someone or something precious. Invite Him to cross your bridge, to come over the moat of loss and enter your heart with peace.

By Sharon Fox

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