Bob: It was a winter day in January of 2004. It started out like any other winter day for Michael Spehn, but there were circumstances that took place that day that would change the course of his life forever.

Michael: Cathy didn’t come in right away; and finally, she did. She was holding her head. I said, “What’s wrong?”  And she said, “I’ve got a really bad headache.”  Not knowing where else to go—who do you see for a headache?—we just simply walked into the ER at the hospital in our town. They did a scan. They found a tumor in her brain—glioblastoma multiforme—which is essentially primary brain cancer. It was only 17 days after we walked into the ER that she passed away.

Bob: This is FamilyLife Today for Tuesday, June 10th. Our host is the President of FamilyLife®, Dennis Rainey, and I’m Bob Lepine. Michael Spehn joins us today to tell us about the last 17 days he spent with his wife, Cathy, about the plans that God had for him after she was gone. Stay tuned.

And welcome to FamilyLife Today. Thanks for joining us on the Tuesday edition. We’re talking about a tough subject today. This was actually a story told a little more than a week ago on a Hallmark® Channel movie called The Color of Rain. It’s a movie based on a true story. The true story talks about the reality of death which, obviously, is hard for those of us who are left behind; but in reality, it’s a day of celebration for the one who knows Christ when that person takes his final breath.

Dennis: It really is, and it’s interesting how there can be a great love story come out of the valley of the shadow of death; but we’ve got one today. Michael and Gina Spehn join us again on FamilyLife Today. Gina, Michael, welcome back to the broadcast.

Michael: Thank you—great to be here.

Gina: Thank you.

Dennis: Michael is the owner of Spehn Photography and Design in the Detroit area. You also have a bit of a foundation that you’ve established; right?
Michael: We do. The New Day Foundation for Families is a nonprofit in the Detroit area.

Dennis: And it’s designed to help families where there is a loss of a spouse due to cancer.

Michael: Correct. Yes—families with small children, who essentially have gone through exactly what our families have gone through. We’re able to provide financial services for them to meet their financial needs as well as just provide fellowship from others who have gone through it.

Bob: Well, and we’ve had the chance this week, already, to hear Gina share a little bit about her own experience with the loss of her husband, Matt, when he was 36 years old—went home to be with the Lord on Christmas Day.

What our listeners haven’t realized is that your experience with the valley of the shadow was going to come right on the heels of that. Both of you have shared this story in a book that you’ve written called *The Color of Rain*, but let me back up. You didn’t know Matt, although you guys were members of the same church. You just never met one another; right?

Michael: Correct. I had never met Matt or Gina. I had heard of them, of course. We, as our church body, had prayed for them. Cathy, my wife—we were married more than 12 years. Cathy grew up with Matt Kell. They grew up in the same town, attended the same school—actually, all through grammar school, high school, and college—and went off to have their own families. I knew of the Kells, but I hadn’t had the pleasure of meeting them.

Bob: And you were aware that this tragedy was going on and that Matt was dying. It was just—

Michael: Yes.

Bob: —a matter of days and everybody was praying for them.

Michael: They were. Then, Cathy, of course, attended his funeral the week after Christmas. I stayed home with our kids. Our children were still very small—4, 7, and 9—at the time. She attended his funeral which, by the way, was an extraordinary celebration of his faith and of his life. It was not your typical funeral. She came home profoundly moved by what she experienced at Matt Kell’s funeral.

Dennis: Tell us how you met Cathy.

Michael: Cathy and I met in Chicago. She had just graduated from Michigan State. I was living and working in the city I grew up in—in Chicago. She and I met on the city's
north side and married about two years later. This was back in 1993. Soon after that—both of us had grown up in the Midwest—and we pretty much had had enough of the Midwest cold. So, we headed out west to Orange County, California, where we started a business and began to have children. God blessed us with three kids—a daughter and two sons.

Bob: So, how did you ever leave Orange County to get back to Detroit, Michigan?

Michael: Well, can you imagine the moving vans—the guy’s, from the moving van, face when I said: “I’m leaving Newport Beach, California. I’m going to Michigan.”

Bob: He said, “Are you sure?!” [Laughter]

Michael: “Nobody actually moves into Michigan. It’s—

Dennis: Oh, yes, they do. It’s beautiful there!

Michael: I said, “Well, I’m the guy.” But you know, we were—by then, our children were school-age or almost school-age. We had a young son who hadn’t started school yet; but—and at the time, also, the business that we were involved in was our own business, but it was in partnership with my father.

Although we had thrived for almost—well, a little longer than a decade—we had fallen on some difficult times. Then, my dad and I actually had a bit of a falling out. We were ultimately estranged from one another—didn’t speak for almost three years. So, moving back to Michigan coincided with some of those broken relationships. It was really a terrible, terrible shame and just heartbreak within our own family.

Dennis: Michael, there was another situation with your father—that started much earlier, when you were a little boy—that I just found really powerful because of the statement—at least, what you were thinking, as a boy—in response to some actions your father was about to take.

Michael: Well, like so many children of the 70s, my folks were married for more than 20 years. Then, they ultimately split up; but when I was just young—I was 10/11 years old and spending a lot of time with my dad, as young boys that age do—

Dennis: He was your hero?

Michael: He was, and frankly, still is. He was a giant of a man and a phenomenal father in so many ways. And he and I were driving—just the two of us, one day. I remember it like it was yesterday. He looked over at me—and I was in the front seat next to him. He said: “You know, someday your mom and I might split up. You know that; right?”
Dennis: As a ten-year-old boy, you wrote in your book what you really thought about that. Do you remember what you said?

Michael: Yes, it was—first of all, “Are you crazy?” second of all, “Keep it to yourself.” [Laughter]

Dennis: Right.

Michael: “I want it to go on,”—you know—I’m a child. “I don’t want to be confronted with such things. I want to keep riding my bike, and playing with my friends, and essentially know that I have a normal family.”

Dennis: There is another twist to this story that we’re going to hear a little bit later on. For a man in life—to be a husband and a father—he needs a healthy relationship, if at all possible, with his dad.

Michael: He does.

Bob: And that relationship had gone sour when you were in California. Part of moving back to Michigan was just some distance and separation; right?

Michael: It was. It was. At some time—and I don’t know if this is unique to men, but I’ve only been a man. So, this is my only perspective—is that sometimes, you’ve got to go to your respective corners and take a break. I thought that it would be a very short break. I thought this would reconcile itself, so to speak.

Bob: But it was a three-year period.

Michael: It went on and on. As I said in the book—there is a line in the book where I always thought that I would have time to reconcile with my father. I always thought that there would be time to repair that relationship. It’s just that: “In the meantime, I had my life to lead: I was a husband. I was a father. I was a coach of a basketball team. I was in business.” In the meantime, I had these other things to do. “Eventually, my relationship with my father would work itself out.”

Bob: Or, at least, that’s what you thought.

Michael: What I didn’t realize—it was going to be a very long meantime.

Bob: Yes, but there was an event that precipitated the reconciliation with your dad. That happened on a day when your wife came and said, “I’m not feeling well.”

Michael: Yes. This was something that happened only three weeks after my wife, Cathy, attended Matt Kell’s funeral—her childhood friend. So, just three weeks later, she was driving the kids home from school. The kids all ran past me and went off to
their play. Cathy didn’t come in right away. Finally, she did. She was holding her head. I said, “What’s wrong?” She said, “I’ve got a really bad headache.” She had, occasionally, migraines—from time to time—nothing unusual.

And I tried to dismiss it as being something along those lines. She said, “No, this is different.” And it went away ultimately. It came back the next day / went away. We did that for about a week-and-a-half; and it came back and it stayed. And not knowing where else to go—who do you see for a headache?—we just simply walked into the ER at the hospital in our town. They did a scan.

They found a tumor in her brain. They transferred her, by ambulance, to a specializing hospital—a hospital that could handle something like this in the middle of the night. She never came home. They tried to figure out protocols to treat it: First was to formally diagnosis with a biopsy, which was a couple of days later; but at the same time, her left side of her body began to lose motion and feeling—part of the growing of the tumor was affecting her motion.

So, here is a woman who—37 years old, wife and mother, prime of her life and outwardly the picture of health—walks into an ER on a Friday evening; by Sunday, she has been diagnosed with inoperable brain cancer and can’t move the left side of her body.

Bob: And here you are, as a husband and a father, processing your own grief—trying to care for your wife, in the midst of this. You’ve got three kids at home that you’ve got to figure out: “How do I explain to them what’s going on with Mom?”

Michael: Yes. For those 17 days, we really anticipated bringing her home. I mean, we even had begun sort of remodeling our bedroom upstairs so she could receive treatment and just not leave that room because we anticipated buying her some time.

Bob: You were thinking three months / six months. What were—

Michael: We were thinking, “Well”—we were hoping for six months / a year. All the statistics had said brain cancer—you average prognosis is 14 months. We knew this was in a bad place, and it was very fast moving; but we thought that we’d bring her home from the hospital.

So, anytime I was dealing with our children, it was “Mom’s very sick.” They would ask, “Is she going to die?” The truth was I didn’t know. I tried to use very precise language with the children—that was truthful—because I didn’t know if she was going to die or if she was going to receive some miracle from God. I didn’t know if I would—I don’t know when the next bus coming around the corner is going to take me home.

Dennis: Right.
Michael: So, the truth was, for my children: “I don’t know if Mom’s going to die. I do know that it’s bad; and she’s very, very sick. The doctors are working very hard to help her.” So, we used language like that.

Bob: How long from when you were making these plans to bring her home until the day you said, “She’s not going to be able to come home”?

Michael: It was the day she died—was very unexpected. In fact, I arrived at the hospital at 9 am to—we had a rehab session scheduled to help her with some occupational stuff—how to brush your teeth, how to get in and out of a car.

But she developed a bleed—a hemorrhage—which is very common with tumors in the brain. Eventually, they grow to the point where they nick an artery or some sort of blood vessel. And that’s what happened in the early morning hours of February 27th, the day she died.

Bob: So, you had been planning for an extended goodbye—

Michael: Yes.

Bob: —that she didn’t get.

Michael: Exactly. Finally, that day—and it’s described in detail in the book—that final day—sort of hour-by-hour account of what occurred. In the final hours, we were saying—we realized that her time was short now—that this was going to be her last day. So, the two of us were essentially saying the things that husbands and wives do in those hours. And this was a pain-racked struggle of a day for her. She really hadn’t opened her eyes in hours. So, we were just talking through that.

Out of nowhere, she grabbed my hand and said, “Michael, call Gina Kell.” That was startling to me.

Dennis: Now, again, Gina Kell was the widow—

Michael: Yes.

Dennis: —of the funeral that she had attended—

Michael: Yes.

Dennis: —some weeks prior.

Michael: Six weeks earlier. I had never met the Kells. I knew who they were. I knew of them, and I really tried to dismiss that out of hand: “We’re not talking about things like
that right now, Cath. Don’t worry about things like that.” She opened her eyes for the first time in hours. She grasped my hand just a little tighter; and she said, “Michael, call Gina Kell. She’ll help you.” For a moment, I don’t imagine that she had any of this in mind—that Gina and I would fall in love, and become married, and all the rest of it.

But I do believe that her faith—and just her nature was such that—she knew that there was power in connection. She knew that there was God in relationship. She also knew that I was a stubborn Chicagoan, who’d likely hunker down and try to ride this storm out all by myself—which is a very typical response of men. And she was encouraging me—I mean, among the last things she told me to do was to call Gina.

**Bob:** Seventeen days before she died, when you got the diagnosis, where did you turn for help?

**Michael:** My faith-walk was a shaky one at best, outwardly, anyway. So, I realized—there was a moment of tearful clarity as I was headed to the hospital one day. I—instead of turning left, I turned right and literally drove in circles.

I realized that I needed to reach out to my father—had not spoken to him in three years. There was a distance there that was shattering to—not only my whole family—but to my soul. And now, literally, at this darkest moment of my life, I needed my father. As I wrote in the book, I needed my father—both of them. I realized that I needed my father. All I needed to do was tell him, and he would be there. And I literally—I reached out to him, and he was on the next plane. And in so many ways, that was the beginning of the reconciliation of me and my dad and me and my Heavenly Father.

**Dennis:** And in those 17 days—all of the past disagreements, the hurts, the disappointments, the unmet expectations—perhaps, some anger and bitterness, I’m sure—were brought into proper perspective as you came near death.

**Michael:** It was in a moment he arrived at the hospital. He flew out from California. We opened the hospital door. Two men—who for three years could not let their egos get out of the way—suddenly, put all of that down, and simply hugged each other, and told each other that they were there for one another. Everything that came before that moment no longer mattered. The only thing that mattered was now and what was next.

**Bob:** And did you ever double back and unpack that damage or was it like: “That doesn’t need to be…”

**Michael:** Never!

**Bob:** It’s just—
Michael: It was squandered past. It was unnecessary baggage that found its way to the curb, and was picked up by the emotional garbage men of the world, and was never revisited again, and didn’t need to. It was not important.

Bob: And with regard to your relationship with your Heavenly Father—

Michael: Yes.

Bob: —the reconciliation that took place in those days—a lot of guys facing what you were facing would have gone the other direction. They’d have gone left instead of right—

Michael: Yes.

Bob: —away from God instead of toward Him.

Michael: And I wish that I had a nice literal explanation for all of that, but I do remember a couple of moments. It was—one, a neighbor, who was a very close friend of my wife’s—and she was very angry with God. She asked me, “How can you not be mad at God?” I said, without thinking—I said: “How can I be mad at Him? This is when I need Him the most.” And it just was true. It just was plainly true—that, suddenly, my faith made sense to me.

And I don’t believe, for a second, that it was the death of my wife that was responsible for that. It was really her life. It was as if—now that she was no longer in the room with me and was left in my heart and in my soul—that her life made sense to me. Her life of love and of faith rang clear to me, and that helped me understand the Word of God.

Dennis: And the final moments of Cathy’s life—how did that happen? How did she slip into eternity?

Michael: That was not quite the same experience that Gina had with Matt. Cathy was racked with pain. It was a torturous experience that last day—some of which is described in our book; but then, finally, she relinquished and said, “I want to stop fighting.” We said goodbye to each other, and they were able to take her out of pain. It was about six hours later that she finally took her last breath, and she was surrounded by my—her parents, of course—myself, and my brother, who had arrived from Chicago to be with me, and my dad at her side.

Dennis: As I’m listening to, really, both of your stories—I’ll show you. I’ll open my Bible here. These are funeral programs. There’s my mom’s. There are a couple of friends that I knew. There is a 12-year-old little girl. And the reason I keep those in my Bible—I think I’ve shared this with our listening audience before—Ecclesiastes, Chapter 7—I’ll just read it. It says: “A good name is better than precious ointment, and the day of death
better than the day of birth. It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting, for this is the end of all mankind, and the living will take it to heart.”

One of the reasons Bob and I were so honored to be able to share your story with our listeners is because, I think, all of us—in the midst of the blitz of busy days, and busy lives, and things whirling and buzzing by us—need to pause and be reminded of the value of the people God’s called us to love. We really do need to pause, as you two have reminded us, and just say: “You’re a gift. This day is a gift, and our God has given us both. Let’s seize the moment. Let’s not just stay busy; but let’s encounter God, the Father, and let’s also love one another well.” And you guys have done a great job of sharing that.

Bob: Well, and of course, the story doesn’t end there too. We still have to hear how God brought the two of you together. I guess the people who saw the movie on the Hallmark Channel already know the story—or folks who have a copy of your book, The Color of Rain already know the story. If you don’t already know the story, we’ll get to that; or you can get a copy of the book, The Color of Rain. We’ve got it in our FamilyLife Today Resource Center.

Go online, at FamilyLifeToday.com. Click the link in the upper left-hand corner that says, “Go Deeper.” It’ll take you right to where you need to go to get a copy of The Color of Rain by Michael and Gina Spehn. Again, the website: FamilyLifeToday.com; or call 1-800- “F” as in family, “L” as in life, and then the word, “TODAY.” You can order the book from us over the phone if you’d like.

While you are on the website, let me also draw your attention to the special offer that our team has put together for those of you who are interested in getting together with a group of guys this summer—maybe fathers and teenage sons—and going through the Stepping Up® video series. Our team has agreed that, if you will buy the DVDs, we’ll buy the workbooks for five of the guys who are coming to your group.

Get the details about the special offer for the Stepping Up video series and think about taking a group of guys through it this summer—or fathers and sons getting together and going through it. Go to FamilyLifeToday.com. Again, click the link at the top of the page that says, “Go Deeper.” And the information you need about the video series is available on our website. Of course, you can order from us online as well.

You know, I’ve been encouraged over the last several weeks as we’ve had listeners calling us, or going online, or writing to us to say: “We heard about the matching-gift funds that were made available to FamilyLife. We’d been thinking about making a donation, and this was just the additional incentive we needed to get us to go ahead and write the check,” or, “…make the call,” or, “…go online.”

We’ve had matching-gift funds that have been available for the last several weeks—a group that agreed to match every donation we receive, between now and Father’s Day,
up to a total of $410,000. It’s just been encouraging to see how listeners have been responding to that. The matching-gift fund expires, as I said, on Father’s Day. So, if you’d like to make a donation and have your donation matched, go to FamilyLifeToday.com and click the link that says, “I Care,” to make an online donation. Or call 1-800-FL-TODAY. Make a donation over the phone. Or you can write a check and mail it to FamilyLife Today at Post Office Box 7111, Little Rock, AR. And the zip code is 72223.

Now, tomorrow, we’re going to hear the rest of the story. We’re going to hear how God brought Michael and Gina Spehn together and how you guys blended your family. I guess folks who have already seen the movie know how the story ended, but I hope our listeners can join us back tomorrow to hear you guys share the details.

I want to thank our engineer today, Keith Lynch, and our entire broadcast production team. On behalf of our host, Dennis Rainey, I’m Bob Lepine. We will see you back next time for another edition of FamilyLife Today.

FamilyLife Today is a production of FamilyLife of Little Rock, Arkansas. Help for today. Hope for tomorrow.

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