Bob: As you would expect, after suddenly losing his wife a year ago, Jonathan Pitts says there's a lot that he has had to process.

Jonathan: There are days we sit down for dinner, and I don't want to be present. I'm kind of just missing my wife; I'm kind of annoyed. I don't get really angry, but my anger is probably just annoyance. Several times I've found myself being annoyed at what's happening around me. And it's really just kind of anger—like I'm dealing with having lost my wife. It's just being there, in the yuckiness, and being okay with being there with your kids and them processing. That's actually the hardest thing for me—is watching my girls have to process the same thing that I'm processing.

Bob: This is FamilyLife Today for Monday, May 20th. Our hosts are Dave and Ann Wilson; I'm Bob Lepine. Jonathan Pitts takes us into his own dark night of the soul today and shares with us some of the lessons he's learned there. Stay with us.

And welcome to FamilyLife Today. Thanks for joining us. We're going to learn a lot about marriage this week, but we're also headed to some sacred ground/some holy ground today—to a place that nobody in marriage looks forward to going to.

Dave: No; and it's an incredible story. I mean, something you never dream could happen; and we're going to talk about it today. It's one of your worst nightmares that could ever happen; and yet, God met you in the middle of that. We're going to head there.

Bob: Jonathan Pitts joins us on FamilyLife Today. Welcome back.

Jonathan: It's good to be with you again.

Bob: We are remembering that, when you were here last, it was you and your wife, Wynter. We talked about your book on raising daughters and had a great time. And then, we were stunned with the news of her home-going. You were more stunned than we were, because it came completely out of the blue; didn't it?

Jonathan: Yes; it did. We had no idea/no issues. Her heart just failed in a moment; and the next, she was gone. You know, what's beautiful about is—it was the most traumatic
experience of my life; but for her, I believe it was the most glorious—taking a nap, she just slid into heaven.

**Bob:** Take us back to that day—

**Jonathan:** Sure.

**Bob:** —and just walk us through. You had just submitted to the publisher your manuscript for your new book on marriage, called *Emptied*.

And by the way, I should say for those who don't know—Jonathan lives in Franklin, Tennessee. He's an executive pastor at a church in Franklin. His daughter is a movie star—can we say that?—right?

**Jonathan:** You can say that. [Laughter]

**Bob:** She was the little girl in the movie, *War Room*, who did the double-dutch. She is one of four daughters—the oldest of four.

You had just submitted the manuscript for the book, and it was a normal day for you?

**Jonathan:** Yes; just to back up a little bit—we had made the decision to leave Dallas. I had worked for Dr. Tony Evans for ten years and my wife had kind of launched her ministry and spent about seven or eight years kind of building her ministry. We just felt like God was calling us into a new season—together, we felt it. So on July 6, of 2018, we sold our house in Dallas. July 9th, we bought our house in Franklin; July 10th, we moved in.

We spent four nights in the home before we went on a week of vacation to Iowa to visit my family. Had family pictures—all of my nieces and nephews; my parents—my whole family there; entire family took pictures. Went back to Dallas for a week for me to finish my role with Dr. Evans. Wynter was finishing up her last book; and she was late, as she normally was. [Laughter] And with this marriage book—that we didn't feel, necessarily—we didn’t feel like professionals to write a marriage book; but our publisher just said, “Hey, I want you to write a ‘Join us in the journey,’”—not a ‘how-to.’”

We said—prayed about it—and said we could do that. We just documented our story—the good, the bad—

**Bob:** —the ugly. [Laughter]

**Jonathan:** There's some ugly in there—specifically, from me—and God's grace that met it. Ultimately, that day was one of my last days with the *Urban Alternative*. The last thing I did before leaving the office—it was 3:45—was I signed off on the final edited manuscript; turned it in to *Harvest House*, our publisher; and then I'd go home. We were in transition; we were actually staying at Wynter's cousin's house at the time.
Thankfully, we were in Dallas; because our support base/our family was there. And it was actually a place that we raised our kids in. So Priscilla Shirer—her cousin/her best friend—we were at the house they had just moved out of that was still furnished. She told me on my way home from work—she said, “I'm not feeling really good; but I really need you to dig in tonight, cause I need to finish this book.” I knew what that meant, cause she had done several before—it means: “Put your big boy pants on; and take care of these kids, and get dinner, and all that.”

I went home, ready to do that; and she laid down for a nap, which was really customary in the summer when the kids were home. I remember going in the bedroom, just to check on her—see if she wanted to eat dinner. And she said, “I think I just need to lay here.” I went back again, and I realized she was having a cardiac event. You know, it was really traumatic for me, and my three youngest girls were there. I'm really grateful for the fact that what was traumatic for me was actually relatively easy and simple for her—her heart stopped; her brain stopped getting oxygen; and she went home to be with Jesus.

It was a lot after that—you know, walking with my girls through that and walking myself through that. You know, what's really funny is realizing you're in this place, as a believer—and I think we get here a lot times—where our flesh wants to freak out, like whether we're dealing with our kids or our spouse/whatever the situation is. And then you have this still, small voice—the voice of God/the Holy Spirit—just whispering to you, “I'm here.” And I, literally, felt that—like I felt like, “I have a choice to make between freaking out and trusting that God's with me in this moment,”—I leaned into that.

And that, literally, was my strength, having to talk to the girls at the hospital and everything else that would transpire. Really, these last eight months, people are like, “How are you doing this?” I'm like, “I'm not; it's God.”

I've learned Philippians 4:13: “I can do all things through Him who gives me strength.” That verse, to me, was “coffee cup.” Even as what I believe—the pretty mature believer I believe I am—I've leaned into that verse, realizing that it's not God gives me the strength, it's really that He IS my strength in all things/in all circumstances—no matter what it is—Paul is talking about all these different circumstances and all he's gone through and “It's Christ in me, the hope of glory,”—it's, literally, all I have.

Ann: You're living it, now, every day.

Bob: Part of the irony of all of this is that you'd just finished a book on marriage—your story. And now, for the last—almost a year—this is what you've been talking about—your marriage; revisiting this day, regularly. I mean, this is not the first time, you've done an interview, where you've had to sit down and talk about this. Are there times when it's like, “I don't want to tell that story again”?
Jonathan: You know, honestly, for me; no. I probably realized it within a few days of what I’d done—like turning the book in and she dies.

Our 15th anniversary was June 27, 2018. She died on July 24, so we had a 15 year/27 day marriage. I wasn’t very creative; but for whatever reason, God gave me this creative juice on my 15-year anniversary to surprise my wife with this dance at this mansion, which we recorded. I recorded us dancing to this song, and God gave me that as a gift. The first gift I have is looking in my wife’s eyes on this video, as I watch it; and I watch it routinely. And seeing the joy in her eyes, as I for the first time, really surprised her, like I really wanted to surprise her. God gave that to me as a gift.

Then, He gave me this book. For me, it was like this reminder that only God has the opportunity to open and close books/start chapters; end chapters. What's beautiful for me—I go to my counselor, which I’ve done routinely—she actually just texted me today. I don't go into her office with tears for a job undone. I wasn't perfect by any stretch, but I was really intentional/we were intentional in marriage. I feel like God gave me this book, for whatever reason—our story is kind of a story of God's grace, writ large, in a marriage.

God's kind of using our story and our marriage to kind of show people the reality of what's really there—like that you don't know how many years you have/you don't know how many days you have. Instead of trying to be perfect, be really intentional—He's, for whatever reason, is using it. For me, I don't understand why He'd take the mom of my four girls—why He’d take—I'd want 30 years, 45 years, 60 years with her. I don’t understand why He'd take her home, but I trust that He's good in it. The fact that I'm doing this now is some level of energy and hope for me that God is intentionally using it, so it's an honor to talk about her life. It's a joy to talk about her life; it's a joy to talk about what we had.

I realize even more—like I loved—our marriage was amazing. We weren't perfect, and we had struggles just like anybody else; but we had a really good relationship. We had an increasing level of intimacy, day by day/year by year, in our marriage, which was the beauty to me. She was more my best friend at 15 years and 27 days than she ever was before. Every day, it got a little bit better. We were still human; and we still struggled; and we still argued; and we had all those things that everybody else has; but the reality is that God was growing us in friendship and relationship as we were committed to doing marriage His way.

Bob: I want to grab onto something that you said—you just kind of went quickly past it, but I think our listeners need to hear this. You said, “I'm meeting regularly with my counselor.” This was something that you purposed to do, maybe, even before you felt a need to do it. You were smart enough to know “I'm probably going to need somebody who can walk me through this season,” rather than just, “Oh, I can handle this on my own.”
Jonathan: I actually think I can do a lot of things on my own. I remember, like within hours of my wife passing, saying, “Okay; I can do this.” I'm just an achiever by nature; it's just kind of how God’s wired me. I have this sense that I can do more things than I actually can do; and so I can burn myself out doing those things, when it comes to work—things like that. And at the same time, I'm also not really good at processing, emotionally. For me, sitting down with a counselor was an attempt to process what was happening and bring down to a real level what I was actually going through. I think a part of it is also shock—like you've just lost your wife and your best friend.

What's really neat is my counselor—one of the first things she said to me, which was really helpful for me, is that people in grief either have a tendency to stay in the past and never want to come out of the past from where they were, or they run as fast as they can into the future.

My tendency, in grief, is to run; so my counselor's really been helpful to me by helping me just slow down and be present. She says, “God is in the present, so how do you be present?” My goal, in counseling—and my goal, really, every day is—just showing up for life right now—being there with God right now; being there for my own emotions right now; being there for my girls right now—and not thinking about, you know, just going to the past, because it was amazing and God was good in it; and thinking about hope for the future—but being present for what God has me in right now.

Dave: How do you, as a dad—how have you been present to help your children?

Jonathan: You know, the Scripture: “The Lord is close to the brokenhearted,”—I kind of really resented like people were texting me that Scripture, and in cards, and all of that. I got to a point, where I was kind of annoyed getting it; but what I realized, over time, is that that's not actually talking about some spirit in “Never-never land.” That is, literally, God working through His people and sending you help.

One of the beauties for me is that I've been able to be present, because God would just send me wave after wave—I call it “floating on His grace”—like He has just sent me His grace, over and over again. My oldest sister, the day of my wife's funeral, says, “Hey Jonathan, if you need me, I'm like there,”—never been married; never had kids. She's just a living testimony of what singlehood can be. She's been praying for family, and God plopped her into a ready-made family that needed her. And now, she's finding value in that; and we're finding value in her.

God's been gracious to give me opportunity just to be present, in terms of time; but for me, it's been putting away distractions—so it's putting down my phone. It's just kind of yucky, to be honest with you. There are days when we sit down for dinner and I don't want to be present—I'm missing my wife; I'm kind of annoyed. I don't get really angry, but my anger is probably just annoyance—like when I feel annoyed, it's me being angry. Several times, I've found myself being annoyed at what's happening around me; and it's really just anger. I'm dealing with having lost my wife; so it's just being there in the
yuckiness, and being okay with being there with your kids, and them processing. That's actually the hardest thing for me—is watching my girls have to process the same thing that I'm processing.

Dave: So, you had 15 years; and she was only 38—right?—when she died. Regrets?—do you have any?

Jonathan: The only regret I have is not realizing the incredible woman I married, earlier, at the level I did when she passed. You know, Wynter was a very quiet girl/a very introverted girl. I remember her telling me—she told me when we were 21 years old—we were engaged to be married—and she says, “I think I want to write a book.” I’m like, “Well, what do you want to write a book about?” She’s like, “I don’t know.” I actually received that as not being achiever-oriented enough—like: “You need to know what you want to write about."

She was just this girl that trusted God at a very high level. She said, “No,” to a lot of things because she only said, “Yes,” to things that she knew she was called to do. Oftentimes, I would look at that laid-back nature of hers as something for me to fix—like I was trying to be the savior. It was really this immature, self-righteous, young Christian guy that God was like, literally, breaking down, day by day/mistake by mistake. He showed me my own brokenness. The more that happened, the more I realized the giant that my wife was. I wish I would have just known that earlier to be able to support it earlier.

My greatest joy in life, so far, besides having our kids together, is actually running a ministry together—that I was able to support her in—like her writings, her magazine, her ministry. I was able to support her in that; it's a great joy for me. If I had realized, even earlier, who I had married, I would have been more appreciative of those moments so much more rather than butting heads, trying to fix her, when God's like, “Dude, you’re the one that needs fixing”; you know? [Laughter] So, that's probably my regret.

Bob: As you have thought about the future—and the possibility of another wife/another marriage—how have you processed that? What's your thinking along those lines?

Jonathan: I've had lots of thoughts about that. Because of my girls, and because of my ability—as just my humanness and, maybe, even my wiring to kind of move forward faster—I've intentionally forced myself to kind of slow down the thought process—to be present/to be where I am. I'm just trying, like in anything else, to wait on God for His timing and for all that He has for me and whatever that looks like.

Bob: I have to read to you what showed up on Instagram on January 29th. What's significant about January 29th?

Jonathan: That's Wynter's birthday; it would have been her 39th birthday.
Bob: So, on Instagram, your oldest daughter writes:

Happy, happy birthday to the woman who shaped me into who I am today. I miss you like crazy. I wish you were here; but I know you're in heaven, having a lot more fun and taking way better naps. Sometimes, I wish the pain would go away and things could be normal again; but the reality is—it can't. And if that's in God's plan, no matter how hard it is to accept or agree with, Thy will be done.

Six months have gone by without you now, and the pain still feels like yesterday; but when I imagine the smile on your face now, I can't be mad. I hope you're enjoying your first birthday in heaven; I will celebrate today. Love you, and miss you, and see you soon.

Jonathan: Thanks for making me cry, Bob.

Ann: Me, too, Bob.

Dave: All of us—

Bob: The incredible maturity and faith of a 14-year-old, who can write that, is a living testimony to the woman that your wife was and the mother that your wife was. Kids don't say things like that unless moms and dads have been there to help teach them that truth over time.

Dave: Yes; and I was going to say—it's a testimony to you, Jonathan; because you're walking with her now, without her mom. You've led her, through the valley, to the hand of God. I don't know her—I just know her through that post—and I'm like, "Wow; that is maturity beyond a 14 year old."

Jonathan: Yes; those girls are—starting with Alena, who is a natural leader—I mean, they're four of the strongest people I know. They've, literally, lost their mom, moved to a new state/a new school—everything's new. I'm just watching them, I think, just lean into the purposes of God in a way that we've tried to teach them. Now, they're having to say, "Okay; I'm either going to do it or I'm not." God has used Alena in amazing ways. At ten years old, she's in War Room; so she's been used for kingdom purposes beyond her years. All my girls are incredibly special, but she's an incredibly articulate writer. God's using it, and I don't take any credit for it—I give it all to my wife and to God.

It's been fun to watch them and even like to fail. I mean, when you're leading through anything, there's going to be failures; and you fall and you get back up. In a lot of ways, I feel like I've not been perfect, even through this process; but they've been gracious with me, and they've been soldiers. It's been really neat to watch them: one, just do hard things; but then, two, just trust a big God.
Ann: One of the things that I feel like, as a mom, is we don't always, when we're in the midst of it, we don't always understand the impact that we're making at the time. I know that, as moms, we can feel discouraged; we can wonder if they're even listening. We wonder if we're doing anything that's making a dent in who they are.

Can you speak to the listeners that are thinking, “Are they hearing me?” What I'm hearing is that Wynter really impacted your entire home—she set the atmosphere for the home. What did that look like?—and how do you see a woman impacting a home?

Jonathan: I'll go back to—Alena's five years old—Kaitlyn is two-and-a-half, and the twins were newborns. Wynter is frustrated, because she's changing diapers her whole day. I'm traveling, and her whole day is just absorbed by being a mom. She got to the end of herself one day, and she told this story all the time: She went into her closet and she wrote down the Scripture, “Delight yourself in the Lord, and He will give you the desires of your heart.” She wrote that on a 3-by-5 card and posted it in her closet.

Ann: Psalm 37:4

Jonathan: I didn't give the reference; I didn't know it—Psalm 37:4—I need to know that when I'm doing interviews; but anyway—

Dave: Probably every mom knows that. [Laughter]

Ann: I know that verse; yes.

Jonathan: Anyway, that—it's not like she didn't know that Scripture; but that day, she decided to lean into that Scripture. What that meant for her was—only what God had put right in front of her, which was her four girls—and shepherding their hearts and doing all those things, which I was obviously committed to as well.

In owning that, it would be about two years later that God would, basically, give her this desire to start writing for our girls. Her writing for our girls, as she leaned into shepherding our girls' hearts and discipling those, would be the beginning of her ministry—For Girls Like You—and all of her writings. She was faithful to show up in that moment and God would make it something just so much larger than she ever thought it could have been. And now, her 14-year-old daughter writing something like that, which was—she just poured into them.

Even now, as writers—I'm traveling with one right now—but I was traveling with another one on Friday—Olivia, my baby/my fourth; my youngest twin—she wrote like 1,050 words in 24 hours. I'm like, “What nine-year-old writes over a thousand words?”—just wrote a story. It's like their mom poured that desire/that gift into them. It's just neat to watch.
That’s a very small example; but she was pouring into them, continually. As she delighted herself in the Lord, God gave her the desires of her heart; and now, she’s in heaven, experiencing them, leaning into that. I’m really proud of her. I mean, it’s really—I’m just really proud of her—of who she was.

**Ann:** Beautiful.

**Bob:** I love the way you describe the book, *Emptied*. You said you didn’t feel like you could write a “how-to” book on marriage, but you could write: “Here’s our journey,” and “Here are the messes; and in the messes, there’s a lot to learn.” I’m grateful for this; I hope our listeners will get a copy of the book and go through it.

They're going to learn a lot about the two of you; but they're also going to learn about the faithfulness of God in a marriage relationship and how, when you stumble—because they're going to see how you've stumbled, and they're going to see themselves in these pages—and in the process, learn: “Okay; God's with you in that. He can pick you up; He can dust you off. He can send you back in the right direction.”

We’ve got copies of Jonathan’s book, *Emptied: Experiencing the Fullness of a Poured-Out Marriage*, in our FamilyLife Today Resource Center. Go online at FamilyLifeToday.com to order your copy of the book. Or call, if you’d like to order by phone: 1-800 FL-TODAY. Again, our website is FamilyLifeToday.com; or you can call 1-800-358-6329—that's 1-800-"F" as in family, “L” as in life, and then the word, “TODAY.”

You know, I'm so grateful for Jonathan's willingness to take us back into what was a challenging journey for him—still is a challenging journey. David Robbins, the President of FamilyLife® is here with us—a lot of lessons we can take away from just reflecting on Wynter's short life.

**David:** Yes; I mean, I'd sit in and cry a little bit, you know, hearing the conversation. It makes me reflect—just the profound reminder that life is so short, and what we are intentional about will be part of our legacy. Their marriage/their relationship—the way they invest in their kids/the way Wynter invested in her kids—it was defined by intentionality.

**Bob:** Right.

**David:** We are limited creatures—and God was the One who made us that way—and we can only do so much. Often, at least in my case, what I'm capable of is often very much less than what I think it is. [Laughter]

Jonathan and Wynter's story, I hope, makes us all pause today and ask the question, with a sense of urgency, “This week, what will I be intentional about doing with the relationships that matter most in my life?”—my relationship with God, my relationship with my spouse, my relationship with my kids.
and neighbors—“How will I be intentional?”

**Bob:** “What matters?” and “How do I focus my life on what really matters?—not just for this life, but for eternity?”

**David:** Yes.

**Bob:** Thank you, David.

You know, that’s really at the heart of what we’re trying to accomplish every day, here, at *FamilyLife Today*. We want to help you refocus your heart, your marriage, your family on what really matters—help reprioritize and realign your life around God and His Word. We’re grateful for those of you who are partners with us in this effort. *FamilyLife Today* is a listener-supported ministry. The cost associated with producing and syndicating this daily radio program, maintaining our website—all that we do, here, at *FamilyLife*: our events/our resources—you make that possible every time you donate to support the ongoing work of *FamilyLife Today*.

We want to say, “Thank you,” to those of you support us regularly, especially our Legacy Partners, who give monthly. Your monthly support is *so vital* to the ongoing work of *FamilyLife Today*. In fact, we’re hoping, this month, that many of our regular listeners will consider taking that step and becoming a monthly Legacy Partner.

Right now, we have a matching-gift opportunity that’s in place. Any donation you make this month is going to be matched, dollar for dollar, up to a total of $645,000. If you become a Legacy Partner this month, every donation you make for the next 12 months is going to be matched, dollar for dollar, from that matching-gift fund. In addition, we’re going to send you a *Weekend to Remember®* gift card, that you can use for yourself or give to a friend, so that you can attend an upcoming *Weekend to Remember* marriage getaway as our guest. We do that as a way of saying, “Thank you for your ongoing support of the ministry as a *FamilyLife* Legacy Partner.”

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Now, tomorrow, we’re going to talk more about how Jonathan Pitts has worked to pick up the pieces of his life since the death of his wife Wynter. And we’ll learn more about how to build a strong marriage relationship. In fact, we’re going back to the beginning of Jonathan and Wynter’s relationship and some of the mistakes they made, early on. I hope you can be with us for all of that.
I want to thank our engineer today, Keith Lynch, along with our entire broadcast production team. On behalf of our hosts, Dave and Ann Wilson, 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; a Cru® Ministry. Help for today. Hope for tomorrow.

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