

Announcer: Welcome to The Carey Nieuwhof Leadership Podcast, a podcast all about leadership, change, and personal growth. The goal? To help you lead like never before in your church or in your business. Now, your host, Carey Nieuwhof.

Carey Nieuwhof: Well, hey, everybody. Welcome to Episode 228 of the podcast. My name is Carey Nieuwhof, and I hope our time together today helps you lead like never before. Well, I'm very excited that ... well, for two reasons today. Number one, that we're doing more than just four episodes a month, for the most part, these days, and number two, that today's Thursday release features, well, a regular guest now on the podcast and just an amazing leader and fantastic person and friend, Craig Groeschel. When Craig's Hope in the Dark released, we touched base, and I said, "I would just love to talk to you about how to process pain and grief and loss." Man, we go all over the place in this interview.

Carey Nieuwhof: I don't know how many of you have read Sam Chand's book, but at the very beginning of Leadership Pain, Craig tells a story just about some kind of self-inflicted wounds that happened early in his leadership. I think we all have our share of those. It's a powerful, powerful segment of the interview, and then we jump into his latest book, Hope in the Dark, which is just an amazing resource. We talk about the content, how to process grief with your congregation, how do you set expectations properly, and so much more. I think you're going to love it. Craig Groeschel really needs no introduction. He is the founding pastor of Life Church, and they have been leading the way for so many leaders, for so many years. He's a New York Time's best-selling author of multiple books and just a great guy. I've enjoyed all the time that I've spent with Craig, and today's no exception.

Carey Nieuwhof: Hey, guys, I just want you to think a little bit about what's coming up, because we got Christmas coming up, and I said to Craig, "Hope in the Dark is going to be a book that I gift on a regular basis." You may want to think about that, and then also, we are coming into the first Christmas season where Didn't See It Coming is available. So many of you have been so encouraging with the book. So, if you head on over to didntseeitcomingbook.com, if you haven't got a copy yet, you can get yours. It's my book on overcoming the seven greatest challenges that no one expects and everyone experiences. It's all those things that just kind of sink people.

Carey Nieuwhof: It's not just a leadership book. I thought I was writing a leadership book. No. This has turned into a people book. Maybe there's someone on your list that would love a book for Christmas or another leader or you want to gift your team or that kind of thing, head on over to didntseeitcomingbook.com. This is the first Christmas the book is available. We're really excited for that. If you want to know the impact it's having on people, just head over to Amazon, click through to Amazon, and read through the reviews. We're pushing 300 reviews now, and it's just amazing to see how people are having emotional reactions to some of the subjects that we cover, things like cynicism and compromise, burnout, emptiness. These seem to be the universal things that define our age and who

we are as people, but they don't need to, not in a negative way. So, that's what the book's all about.

Carey Nieuwhof: Anyway, head on over to didntseeitcomingbook.com. You can learn a lot more, and if you want to buy them for the team, there are bulk sales available through Amazon and through other places like Givington's and so on, so we'd love to help you with that. Hey, guys, without further ado, let's jump into a powerful, raw, and real conversation with my friend, Craig Groeschel.

Carey Nieuwhof: Well, Craig Groeschel, welcome back to the podcast. It's amazing to have you again.

Craig Groeschel: Carey, I love being on with you, man. I'm a big fan of your podcast, your work. Your content is amazing, and your new book, man, it's fantastic. Congratulations on all the different ways you're impacting lives.

Carey Nieuwhof: You were telling me you're halfway through the audio version, so that means a lot.

Craig Groeschel: I am.

Carey Nieuwhof: Yeah.

Craig Groeschel: Yeah, I like ... Of course, I worked ahead of time to give it a review, but now I'm in the audio, enjoying it in the gym the way I like to, just going through it slowly. It's really well done.

Carey Nieuwhof: We all do that. I've got to ask you a question. Is this a bad time to have the conversation?

Craig Groeschel: You were listening to the Never Split the Difference podcast.

Carey Nieuwhof: You picked up. You picked up on that. Yeah, and I must say, you put me over the edge on audio books because you've told me a couple times that that is your number one way to consume, and I've been like podcast, podcast, podcast, podcast, but I flipped the switch a couple months ago. The first one I listened to ... Leaders, if you have not heard ... First of all, if you haven't heard Craig's podcast, you better subscribe. I never miss an episode, but you started adding bonus episodes, and I think your first was with Chris Voss from Never Split the Difference. It was incredible, and-

Craig Groeschel: That's a great book. I've listened to that one three times, which is ... I don't do that often. It's really well done.

Carey Nieuwhof: So, then I'm not going to put you on the spot if I say why did I start off ... and, I mean, that was a joke, but if I just called you out of the blue, why would I not say, "Hey, Craig. Is this a good time to talk?"

Craig Groeschel: Because when you give me the freedom to say no up front, that actually helps me feel empowered. Therefore, I'm more open to talk to you, which is counterintuitive, but that's what Voss teaches.

Carey Nieuwhof: Bingo. I've shared the book with numerous friends who now, when I call them and I say, "Hey, man. Is this a bad time?" they're like, "Oh, stop it."

Craig Groeschel: I do that all the time now, too, because I always said, "Hey, is it a good time?" That makes people feel more vulnerable, and so it's not a bad time.

Carey Nieuwhof: How do you expect me to do that? Another great question about that.

Craig Groeschel: Now you've got me solving your problem.

Carey Nieuwhof: Exactly. No, it's a fantastic book. It's a great interview. If you want the quick entry into some of the key principles, we'll link to that in the show notes on this one, but I had to play that game with you just for fun. Craig, we're going to talk about your new book, Hope in the Dark, which I think I would say ... Yeah, I can say this. I've read a lot of books on suffering. It's my favorite, and I'm going to be-

Carey Nieuwhof: ... handing it out many, many, many times, but I want to go back to a short piece that you wrote for Sam Chand's book a couple years ago, Leadership Pain. That book actually opens up with a couple of pages of you just sharing some of the deepest pain that you went through as a young leader, and I think it's fair to characterize it as probably largely self-inflicted pain, just early leadership mistakes that you made. You had to fire people. You almost had a church split early on over a theological difference, when Life Church was very young. A tough relationship with a mentor ended early with a suicide. There's so many leaders ... When I read that ... I remember when the book came out, I was like, "Oh my gosh. Wow." That's a lot to endure. How did you, as a leader, experience God in those seasons ... and we all have them ... where the pain is self-inflicted?

Craig Groeschel: Well, Dr. Chand, first of all, his book is great. It was years and years ago, I heard him teach and he talked about having a pain threshold, and I never will forget. He said, "Sometimes we inadvertently will keep our ministries, our organizations smaller because we're so intent on avoiding pain that we don't step into the things that help create the growth and the momentum and such." He talked about how basically when you do more, you're going to hurt more. I remember just kind of crying all the way through that talk because I was hurting so much.

Craig Groeschel: You ask how did I experience God's presence when the pain was self-inflicted? I think as much as anything, I experienced his grace, because there's so many different types of pain, and a lot of what we go through is someone else's fault or because of sin and brokenness in the world, but sometimes we just bring it on ourselves. It's almost like double pain, then. One, we have the pain of

whatever we're facing, the bad consequence, and the second thing is the pain of our own bad decision, the regret, the guilt, the shame. Sometimes I feel ashamed of my bad decisions as a leader, and it could be simply a bad hire, bringing the wrong person on, but I'm embarrassed that I didn't see more clearly. I'm embarrassed that I didn't fix it earlier.

Craig Groeschel: It's in those times where I brought it on that I just sense God showing me he's forgiven me, his grace is with me, he still will sustain me. The interesting thing is ... I don't know who said it. It wasn't me first, but God never wastes a hurt, or God never wastes a pain. I think that, so often, the leaders that we become is a direct result of the pain that we've endured. I make fewer of those same mistakes today because of what I learned through the pain in the past. So, I wouldn't say God caused it all, but I know that God used it all to help shape me to become more like Christ and become more effective as a leader.

Carey Nieuwhof: You had a mentor speak into your life when you were probably in your early 20s, mid-20s, starting Life Church or before starting Life Church. You were expecting an encouraging word, as mentors should give, and he looked you in the eye and said, "Craig, God is going to break you."

Craig Groeschel: Yeah.

Carey Nieuwhof: I had a similar experience in seminary. One of my favorite proffs ... We're talking about the blue jays. He just ... the weather or whatever. Out of the blue, I think it was a prophetic moment ... he just put his hand on my shoulder, looked me right in the eyes and said, "Carey, God is going to use you, but before he uses you, he's going to break you." For years, I lived in fear. Every time there was a slight ... somebody dinged my car in a parking lot, I'd be like, "Is this the breaking, Lord?" because I was terrified of seeing ... right?

Carey Nieuwhof: But I think it happened for me, honestly, in my late 30s, early 40s, and burnout, which I write about in *Didn't See It Coming*. I'm a different man on the other side, like Jacob wrestled the angel, and the angel overcame. How has that moment ... because there's a lot of leaders listening right now who listen to your podcast, read your books, follow you, who are like, "Yeah. You know what? Honestly, I've got some self-inflected stuff here," because you can blame the church. You can blame the board, and sometimes it is external circumstances. How does God use our breaking?

Craig Groeschel: So, my mentor was Gary Walter, and I sat across from him when he told me that. It was before we started the church, and it was like a prophetic promise. It was probably one of the most sobering ... kind of like your seminary experience, Carey. I just believed it, and I had the same exact scenario where every time something bad would happen, I would even ask him, "Is this it? Is this it?" Later on, he said, "When you really are broken, you won't have to ask it. If you've been broken, you'll know that God's gotten through to you." I don't know.

There's great theologians who've quote ... I can't tell you exactly who said it, but those God uses greatly breaks deeply, something like that.

Carey Nieuwhof: Yeah.

Craig Groeschel: I really do believe in that. Peter is maybe one of the best examples in scripture, the guy who is probably the most brash and bold about that he's never going to deny Jesus, that he's going to be faithful to him until the end. Even if all the other losers don't, Peter's ... I'm in your corner, Jesus. Then three times, he denies him. Well, who did God choose to be the guest speaker, essentially, on the day of Pentecost? That was the one who'd failed greatly but was forgiven much. I think that's the biggest thing. So often people, from a distance, will think the most effective leaders tend to get it right the most often.

Craig Groeschel: I actually think the most effective leaders get it right after mistakes most often. It's not that you make fewer mistakes than other people. It may even be that you make more mistakes, but you recognize them early and you correct quickly. That's really important, is we want to learn ... because if we continue in the direction, compounding a mistake, then it gets more and more complicated. But you want to recognize it early on, and then you want to correct it quickly. I think self-inflicted pain, mistakes, failures, I think those are often the catalysts that create the leaders and shape us to become who God wants us to become.

Carey Nieuwhof: When you look back on that season, which was a really dark season for you, as a young, budding leader, how did you not just throw in the towel? Because it was like beyond a trifecta. You had maybe four or five things happen at the same time, with the death of a mentor, staff exiting, an almost church split. I mean, it was a cluster. How did you just say, "Okay. Clearly this is not for me. I'm done. I don't have the gifts. I'm throwing in the towel"?

Craig Groeschel: It was chaos, but honestly, it's still often chaos. The difference is it's chaos in a mature organization. At that time, it was chaos in an infant organization. We weren't really sure if the boat would continue to float back then, so that's what made it more difficult. There's still ... I always kind of say, sort of jokingly but not, if you're not hurting, you're not leading.

Carey Nieuwhof: Yeah.

Craig Groeschel: Just the more responsibility you have, the more complications tend to come with it. So, it's still chaos today, and it wasn't just that time, but now I'm almost 23 years into Life Church and almost 28 years into full-time ministry. I would say that semi-regularly ... I don't think about seriously quitting, but I kind of look out the window and wonder, "If I wasn't on this train, what else would I do?" I actually don't mind doing that because I think what it does is it helps me to choose to stay on the train. It's not like I'm staying on here because I have to, but if I did do something else, what would it be? I could do this. I could do that. I could do this. Wouldn't that be nice? Wouldn't that be easier? Then it kind of re-

grounds me to the point where I wasn't called to easy. I was called to do this, and I'm called to be faithful.

Craig Groeschel: It wasn't just that time, but it's multiple times through the journey that ... I've never really seriously said, "Hey. I think I might quit," but often times, "I wonder what it would be like to do something else." That's proven to be a helpful tool to re-ground me over the years.

Carey Nieuwhof: I think that probably surprises a lot of leaders to hear you say that, and you could actually dig ditches, you know? Isn't that the biblical question? What am I going to do? Dig ditches?

Craig Groeschel: You just dig ditches.

Carey Nieuwhof: But you could because you work out. I'd last half a day and get fired.

Craig Groeschel: Oh, I don't like digging, but I could probably drive a big backhoe if I practiced.

Carey Nieuwhof: I don't want to ask a question that pokes too deeply at current stuff, but could you give us ... because a lot of leaders ... and I've written about this. We've talked about this ... they look at Life Church. They look at you and go, "Craig has no issues. He works out every day at 3:30 without ..." Can you give us a glimpse into what the chaos is right now?

Craig Groeschel: There's so much going on all the time that it's a real regular conversation in our home. What do we need to change to stay current? If you want me to be really transparent, I will. The leadership end of it's always complicated. This year, we've been able to launch five new locations in five different states. That's kind of the easy part, meaning that there's great people. The systems are there. That doesn't create a lot of wear and tear on me. There are other people that that creates long hours for, but that's the fruit of years and years of labor.

Craig Groeschel: Where I'm feeling the pressure is I feel like I'm hitting an emotional ceiling, that there's so many complications around me with people that I care about, but emotionally I'm having to dig deeper to have the capacity to handle all the situations. I've got a couple of daughters, married, a third one looking like she's heading that way, and I thought I'd give my daughters away, but what I realized is I actually added son-in-laws that are great, great, Godly men, but they're my children now too. So, I'm not giving them away and getting easier. I'm adding to the family and having more dynamics, and then new generations of grandkids emerging into it. There's just so many moving parts, and with six children recognizing the multiplication factor of we're just trying to stay on top of things right now, it's so hard to be in so many different places and dealing with all the emotional complexities.

Craig Groeschel: So, the way that hits me, Carey, is spiritually it seems like when I'm dealing with emotional issues, it's like it draws on my spiritual battery, so my spiritual battery

gets low. What it used to take to charge it, it seems to take more now. I'm working longer hours, harder hours, and I'm also finding new ways to engage spiritually. I'm kind of having to put more work in to keep the spiritual passion alive. I wish I could say it was the opposite, but that's the way it is.

Carey Nieuwhof: I appreciate that, and I think a lot of people can resonate with that. It's funny. I'm reading Eugene Peterson. We're recording this the week that we learned of his passing, and reading Paul Miller's book on prayer. I would say I'm not very good at prayer. If you look at my spiritual gift inventory, it's third from the bottom, slightly above mercy and helps, so the terrible profile.

Craig Groeschel: Isn't that intimidating when you're a pastor and you're not good at praying?

Carey Nieuwhof: It's the opposite of what I should be, and it's not that I don't pray. He gives a lot of permission in that book like, "Yeah. You're going to be scattered. You're going to be distracted," because I'm 15 seconds in, and I've got a to-do list. I think it's amazing that you're leaning in that direction, and I think it's when we check out. We talked about that the last time you were on the podcast. You just had a big milestone birthday. I passed it a couple years ago, and I watched a lot of guys in their 50s, when I was in my 30s, kind of check out. You know what I mean? They just hit cruise control. I just really admire the fact that you're leaning in and you're digging deep and you're flagging your own issues rather than having your team have to do it for you.

Craig Groeschel: Yeah, thank you. I think being surrounded with people who can speak openly into your life really matters, and so I've got good friends with me that are helping. I just think we have to fight for self-awareness. We have to fight to tell the truth because it's so easy to lie to ourselves. As pastors, I think we feel so much pressure to have the answers and have it together that if we fake that, then we become inauthentic and then the battery drains quickly. So, I think there's a lot of power in transparency and self-awareness that really can help us stay spiritually connected to the vine, when otherwise the pull of this world is really strong, and it's easy to get distracted.

Carey Nieuwhof: Well, like you said when we were messaging back and forth about this podcast, feel free to ask the leadership questions. I do want to talk about Hope in the Dark because I think it's such a rich book, but-

Craig Groeschel: Thank you.

Carey Nieuwhof: ... I want to flag some of this for a future conversation. This is already a very rich time together. About Hope in the Dark, it's got a very unique story. I'm sure some of the leaders will already be familiar with the story. It's a book you wrote years and years and years ago that became very personal and never published, just stuck it in a hard drive somewhere or whatever.

Craig Groeschel: Right.

Carey Nieuwhof: But do you want to walk us through the story of the original one and then why it became so relevant again last year?

Craig Groeschel: Sure. Adrian and Danny, they're a couple that serve our church, and Adrian is on our team. They lost a baby, and so I wrote what started out to be a letter to their family. They were really hurting and kind of rattled, and so it became kind of a long letter. I gave it to them years and years and years ago, and it really ministered to them in a great way. I thought, "Thank God you used it," and I left that on a computer. Then years went by and my second daughter, Mandy, was about to get married, and right before her wedding, she got mono, which we were pretty disappointed about just for her sake because we knew that would really complicate her wedding and her honeymoon. But we were 100% confident, give it a few weeks, six, eight weeks at the most, and she'd be fully recovered.

Craig Groeschel: Well, she didn't recover. In fact, she got a lot worse and had to quit her job and all sorts of complications. I found myself really hurting for her as a dad in that and kind of questioning God, "Why now? Why her?" that kind of stuff. So I thought, "Well, I'll read that letter I wrote for Adrian and Danny. Just see what I said to them, and maybe it'll help me." The letter that I wrote to them seemed like a letter somebody else wrote for me. I cried all the way through it. It really spoke to me, so I asked my publishers if I could ... I sent them that letter and said, "Could I use that as a foundation to write a book in the middle of what we're going through with Mandy, as just a dad and a pastor who is asking the same questions that people ask when they're hurting, and can I document our journey through this? Hopefully it'll create a resource that'll be helpful to people." So, that's how the book came about.

Carey Nieuwhof: Wow. You know, it's a very emotional book, a very emotional book, and I think it provides a real glimpse ... and I think a lot of leaders I have ... I'm a close follow on social. Not a stalker but I read a lot of what you're doing. Was it earlier this year or last summer or maybe different times that you asked for leaders, "Would you please pray for my daughter, Mandy?" You went out and got special treatment for her, best doctors kind of scenario, as any parent would want to do for their children. Do you want to bring us up to date on the different stages you've gone through with her? Because it's still unresolved, is it not?

Craig Groeschel: It is. One of the most meaningful things to me, and I can't even put it into words how much it means, but people that I don't know all over, in different parts of the country, when I bump into them somewhere that maybe know the story from social media or whatever, will ask and genuinely say they've been praying for Mandy. They know her by name. I can never express, as a dad and as a Christian, how much it means to have the family of Jesus around the world, having different people pray for her and then care enough to ask about her. That's so moving.

Craig Groeschel: So, we've been to a lot of different doctors. She's on a real natural treatment plan right now, and she may eat five or six things. I mean, it's super limited what she eats. She does some retraining of her brain. She takes hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of dollars worth of supplements a month, and the great news is, is that she's seeing some improvement. Last night, we had family photos and she was able to be up on her feet for about an hour and a half. That was about enough, but that was something a year ago she couldn't have done. So, she can get out of the house and go do an activity, like go to church or something, and not be in bed all the next day. Her baseline year over year is significantly better. The distance between now and her actually re-engaging in work is still quite a bit of distance, but we're thankful the trajectory's moving in the right direction, and she's full of faith, and so are we, that she's going to get back to full strength.

Carey Nieuwhof: One of the tensions you have to manage personally is this invitation ... and we've all been there, as Christians, as church leaders. I mean, I know we have a lot of business leaders listening too, but if you have any faith, you're in that space where you're praying to God, "I want you to heal my daughter. I want you to change this situation." Yet, here we have an unresolved prayer. How have you and your family been able to manage that personally?

Craig Groeschel: It's been up and down. As you know, because you've written books, when you write a book, you turn it in early, and-

Carey Nieuwhof: Yeah.

Craig Groeschel: ... often more than a year. What I totally hoped was I turn the book in, and then late in the process, I would add an extra chapter at the end and say, "Now here's the end of the story, and she's better now." I fully expected to do that, and that didn't happen. Now here we are, almost two and a half years later, and there's still no resolution. There are times when we're kind of above that in our faith, and there are other times when, honestly, you just start wondering, "Is she ever going to get through?" So, it's all over the place emotionally. We try to manage our emotions, and so on a good day, our emotions are in check and we have faith and believe, and then there are other days where it's more of a struggle.

Craig Groeschel: Interestingly enough, she seems to handle it, at times, better than we do as parents. One of the more meaningful things she said to me when I told her, I said, "I'm really proud of the way you're enduring this," she said, "Oh, daddy. I'm not enduring this." She said, "That implies kind of a passive response to something that's happening to you." She said, "I've chosen to embrace this and try to experience the goodness of God in the middle of what I'm going through," and she really has. I mean, she's a little powerhouse. She's documented her journey on a YouTube channel that has ... It may have 8,000 followers now. She just has collected a lot of people with chronic illness around the world that are hurting and need hope. If it's done anything, it's helped us be aware of just how

many people everywhere, all around this ... hurting every single day, physically and emotionally. It's given us more compassion and understanding, and hopefully the grace to stand with some other people that are in really dark places right now.

Carey Nieuwhof: I remember there was a day where you not only called the wider church to pray, but your church to pray, and people gathered around Mandy and laid hands on her, the whole deal. We're often in that place, as spiritual leaders, as church leaders, as pastors, where we are praying in faith. I don't know if you've ever had this, but I remember ... and this is not a situation of Mandy, a young, barely 20-year-old woman who's fully alive except for this condition, but I've been in hospital rooms where the family is saying, "We need to pray for healing," and it's pretty clear the 85-year-old is palliative, like we've got hours left. That puts us in a tense place.

Carey Nieuwhof: How do you manage that navigation? Because you know as well as anybody does that there are so many people who are not in church anymore because they prayed for healing for somebody or for themselves and they feel their prayer wasn't answered, and poof, there goes their faith. That's a very tough thing to manage not only personally, but for your church and for the people that you're responsible for. How are you leading Life Church through that tension and the message through the book?

Craig Groeschel: That's a great and super important question, and it's really complicated-

Carey Nieuwhof: Yeah.

Craig Groeschel: ... as well because we want to ... All things are possible with God.

Carey Nieuwhof: Yes.

Craig Groeschel: As a pastor, one thing I do try to do is try to help people see that physical healing from an illness isn't the only miracle or the highest form of miracle and be real clear that people always die, even Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, and then one day he didn't. One day Lazarus died, and his body is still in the grave. We have to keep that in front of people a little bit. In no way does that undermine the possibility that God could heal, but at the same time, we don't want to elevate that type of physical miracle over the other miracles. It could be the miracle of God's grace that sustains us in the middle of a loss. It could be the miracle of the body of Christ coming around us and helping us feel God's love through his people.

Craig Groeschel: In the prayers, if you want to get real technical, what I do ... and this is super intentional ... is I never don't ask for healing, but I kind of will qualify it at times, and I'll ask for God to heal a person who's sick and then I'll pray for the doctors, because I believe that often times God uses ... not often, a lot of times God uses doctors and medicine and wisdom to help people get better, so I'll include that

and not say, "We're just looking for a miracle that may happen right now," but the miracle may take three months and God might use a doctor to bring the miracle. Then I'll give some sort of a, in the prayer, "And no matter what, God, we choose to trust you, and we pray for your grace and strength to help people when they're weak."

Craig Groeschel: It's not like I'm trying to water down any faith, but I'm trying to circle the whole thing and to pastor people through what could happen that's beyond our ability to control. I know that there are some people and some church camps that would criticize that and say that would be a lack of faith. I also know a lot of people that have died from treatable situations because they only had faith and didn't go to the doctor. So, I'm willing to take that criticism, and I feel like that's a part of wisdom in pastoring, is helping care for people, not discounting that God could do anything, and we're going to ask for miracles. But at the same time, not demanding a miracle, that if we don't get it, that crushes somebody's faith. I know you live in that same tension every day.

Carey Nieuwhof: Yeah, and it's a very real tension. What you're doing, to a large extent, with Hope in the Dark and in your own family situation and all the situations you walk through with people, is you're staring into the jaws of a theodicy, the question of if God is so good, why do we suffer, and why do we have a world that doesn't look like God is good? Right? I mean, that's the subtitle of the book, Believing God Is Good When Life Is Not. I think a lot of people, the spirit of our age, have thought about that. When I saw your subtitle, I thought they'd flip it, believing life is good when God is not.

Craig Groeschel: Wow.

Carey Nieuwhof: I think that's where ...

Craig Groeschel: Yeah.

Carey Nieuwhof: That's where people would automatically go. What are you learning about the theodicy? What are you learning about suffering and this tension of believing in the goodness of God when it's just brutal?

Craig Groeschel: I don't think we truly experience the goodness of God when life is good, because then we're experiencing the goodness of life. I think we experience the goodness of God when the pain of this world becomes real. I think that it's so much more fun and easy to preach the, "God works all things together for good, and God has a purpose for you and a plan for your life." It's more difficult to preach the, "In this world, you will have trouble, and consider it pure joy my brothers when you face trials of any kind, because the testing your faith develops perseverance." I think that if we enjoy God on the mountaintops, I think we get to know him intimately in the valleys. That's kind of where our family is right now.

Craig Groeschel: There are so many things in our life that's good and up and to the right, but there is so much pain that we're experiencing qualities of God that are rich and meaningful and life transformative that we would not experience if all of our kids were healthy and there were no problems right now.

Carey Nieuwhof: What are some of the most meaningful things in this season that you're in right now that people have said to you that have helped or done for you that have helped? Because I think a lot of us are on the outside looking in going, "Gosh, I don't know what to say. I don't want to offend them. I want to help." What are some things that you would say, "Wow. I will take that all day, every day. Thank you"?

Craig Groeschel: One of the things I just kind of want to say is what we're going through is not nearly as difficult as what a lot of people are, so I don't want to-

Carey Nieuwhof: Yes.

Craig Groeschel: Mandy hadn't died. I just want to acknowledge it's a trial, but there's a lot of people that are hurting a lot worse that would be listening even to this right now. If I told you thousands of people suggest doctors and treatments, that'd probably be a gross understatement.

Carey Nieuwhof: Really?

Craig Groeschel: It's thousands and thousands. We're grateful for every single one, but honestly, we feel like we have incredible advice. Mandy's actually doing an online class, getting a degree. She can probably, if not already, teach on this. She is a student, and she's bright, and she will be able to. So, that's meaningful, but it doesn't move the needle as much as ... Honestly, every time I've talked to you, you've asked. I talked to a pastor this morning and he asked about her. It's just people caring that means so much, and then it kind of helps us enjoy it. We had the whole family over last night. I'm usually stressed with the chaos, and I've just ... We're going to roll with it and just enjoy the moment.

Craig Groeschel: Part of that's, I think, being 50 years of age and this stage of life, but I'm trying to take imperfect moments and enjoy the perfection of God and perfect moments more than ever before. It's really fun to do that. I'm embracing it.

Carey Nieuwhof: It's good to know that you're not the only one who gets stressed out by chaos. We just had a grand puppy. We don't have grandchildren. We had a grand puppy on the weekend, and we love him, but it's like, "Okay. Time to clean the floors."

Craig Groeschel: It's always very stressful.

Carey Nieuwhof: You kind of went there. What are some unhelpful things? Because I think we've all been the recipient of unhelpful things that people say or do, so without naming names or specifics, but-

Craig Groeschel: Well, I think the obvious ... and we don't get much of this, but I know some people do, is, "If you only had faith, God would heal you. You must be doing something wrong." That kind of stuff is just brutal. We have not gotten much of that at all. I think kind of emphatic advice, which is, "This thing's going to do it," and putting pressure on somebody. We get a little bit of that. "You have to call this doctor, and you have to do this treatment." That can be tough. But honestly, there's not much that's been negative from people. We feel embraced and loved by people like crazy, and we do more giving than receiving as pastors, right?

Carey Nieuwhof: Yeah.

Craig Groeschel: That's our calling. So, to be in the receiving end of the love for the body of Christ has been one of the most refreshing things that I've had in 28 years of ministry. I couldn't be more thankful for God's people.

Carey Nieuwhof: In the book, you talk about the church suffering because we'd offer up easy answers to tough questions about suffering, which I think is very fair. Are there any questions ... Think about this from a preaching standpoint, a talking to a friend over coffee standpoint. Are there any questions ... or maybe better, which questions about suffering that we ought to avoid, and which ones remain unanswerable to you?

Craig Groeschel: Some things I've learned from Mandy is ... because she has to deal with ... Any time she goes out, if she sees a dozen people, close to a dozen will ask her. Asking, "Are you better?" is kind of like asking, "Is this a good time?" It puts you on this place where you feel pressure to either lie or to be depressed, because often time you're not better. With Mandy, she's coached me to say, "Hey. Have you had some wins you want to share?" Let's talk about where there's a win, where there's something good rather than, "Are you better yet?" because no, she's not better yet.

Carey Nieuwhof: That's a good question.

Craig Groeschel: I think the other thing is, "How can I help you?" When you hear that a lot, a lot of people will find it difficult to actually say anything. Intuitively, what we're trying to do now is just trying to just dive in and do some things to help, because sometimes the dishes will pile up because her husband's working 60 hours, and she can't physically get up and do the dishes. So, hey, we'll go over and spend 45 minutes and just kind of straighten up the house, and let's not just say ... or let's go pick her up and go spend some time with her. Instead of just, "Is there anything I can do?" actually taking initiative and doing something can go a long way to make a difference for people that are hurting that way.

Carey Nieuwhof: I've been really challenged on that. I had an opportunity to interview your good friends Levi and Jennie Lusko about the loss of their daughter, and I asked-

Craig Groeschel: Yeah.

Carey Nieuwhof: ... them the same question, and they said, "You know what? 'How can I help?' or, 'If you need help, let me know,' is not that helpful." It takes a lot more work to actually make a casserole or bring over a roast or something or just say, "You know, we'll take the kids for an hour," than it does to ask a question, but that's pretty convicting.

Craig Groeschel: And then to go over the distance is another thing too. For example ...

Carey Nieuwhof: Yeah.

Craig Groeschel: ... when someone dies, they do have casseroles sometimes for the first week or two, and then six months later, they've been home alone for weeks at a time, and no one's checked on them. Sometimes it's out of sight, out of mind. What I'll do, Carey, is just put a reminder on my calendar three months from today to check on this family who had a loss.

Carey Nieuwhof: Oh, that's good.

Craig Groeschel: So, when everyone else goes home, we might ... We may have to be that strategic about it, which is planning ahead of time not to forget by putting a reminder somewhere, but staying engaged months later rather than just in the middle of the trauma.

Carey Nieuwhof: This is a bit of a personally motivated question, but one of the things I realized contributed to my burnout a dozen years ago was what my counselors and spiritual directors would call ungrieved losses, that ministry and life is a series of losses. I'm a guy. We only have two emotions, happy and angry. So, I didn't grieve my losses particularly well, and they all kind of came uncorked in the summer of 2006, but I was surprised. As a guy who's written a couple books myself, sometimes you're looking for stories. Right? Every other page of this book has got someone you know who was sick or lost their job or died or got a divorce or struggling through addiction. It is just filled with story after ... You had no trouble coming up with content of people who are in suffering.

Carey Nieuwhof: When you think about even your role as a pastor, take the family out of it for just a moment, how do you grieve your losses? When there is that much hurt, what do you do that makes sure that that doesn't just sneak up on you one day and take you out?

Craig Groeschel: I wouldn't say I always get it right, but I do think that is a problem for leaders. How do you lead when you're hurting? How do you lead when you're grieving?

Carey Nieuwhof: Yeah.

Craig Groeschel: I think the thing we have to remember is that we're children of God before we're leaders of people. If we get the order mixed up, then we're not going to be healthy over time. It's not easy to grieve publicly or to grieve while in public. Let's even just put it that way.

Carey Nieuwhof: Yeah.

Craig Groeschel: To grieve privately while living a public life, but I don't know. I've found that being transparent actually not only allows people to minister to me, but it also ministers to them when they can find out that a pastor goes through things just like everybody else. It's shocking for us. They're like, "You're a real person?" Yes, but some people don't see that. Even they want to believe it, but they don't really quite believe it. Their life's better than ... They don't have problems like everybody else. So, allowing them to minister to us blesses us, and it also can minister to them too, because they get the joy of giving, and they also get to see someone else wrestle with the questions that they wrestle with and still try to cling to God even when they're going through a difficult time.

Carey Nieuwhof: You touch on this in the book, Hope in the Dark, but depression and mental illness. I often say to the people close to me, "If there's one question I want to ask in heaven ..." and I firmly believe all of our questions on Earth will melt away once we see what's really going on, but it would be like, "What's the deal with mental illness and bipolar?" I don't get it. It almost seems intractable. One of the definitions of depression that I've read that seems to resonate is depression involves a loss of hope. How do you bring hope in the dark when someone is in that dark? Are there different guidelines for people struggling with mental illness? I understand that is a big canopy term that means a thousand different things, from schizophrenia to bipolar to split personality disorder, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera, but any thoughts on that?

Craig Groeschel: Yeah. It's a little bit above my pay grade, meaning I'm not an expert at all.

Carey Nieuwhof: Me too.

Craig Groeschel: What I do know is that, from a pastoral standpoint, I think we have to recognize that preaching and telling someone to have faith or read the Bible does not solve every problem. I know that even saying that out loud right now will flare up and get a lot of criticism most likely from some people who listen to your podcast, but yeah, I'll stand by it. It doesn't solve every problem. If you're \$20,000 in debt, preaching and having faith doesn't make your debt go away. Right? I mean, you have to earn more and you have to pay it off. So, that doesn't solve every problem. If you've got a mental illness, if you've got biological reasons that contribute to depression, then just telling somebody to have more faith, it can be counterproductive in their life.

Craig Groeschel: What we want to do is we want to say, "Continue to have faith, but let's also go to a doctor." I don't think things are as bad now, Carey. 25 years ago, I went to counseling. I remember talking about that and people were like, "You went to counseling? That's not spiritual, and you shouldn't need that. You're a pastor, and that's not really Christian." I think that's ridiculous. If you go to a good counselor, you could call it discipleship all day long. It's someone with wisdom, who's looking at you objectively and giving you spiritual advice, or maybe even not spiritual, maybe just real-world practical advice that helps you get better.

Craig Groeschel: So, I would just say to everybody, not only don't be afraid of counseling or therapy, but step into it. Some people think to take any form of medicine to help with mental anxiety or depression or whatever is unspiritual. I think that God can use the wisdom of doctors that help eliminate chemical imbalances in the body and help correct the brain. I think that can be an answer to prayer. I don't think it's unspiritual at all. I think, in the church world, we probably need a little bit more awareness, a little more grace, a little more compassion for those who are suffering. It may not be demon possession. It may not be a lack of faith. It may just be a real physical situation that we need to have grace for, and then help them get good advice, both spiritual and physical, that can help bring healing.

Carey Nieuwhof: Thank you for saying that, and thank you for going there. I agree. I'm glad that ... I remember you went 25 years ago or whatever. I think it was 15 ... No, no, it was 20 years ago I went to a counselor for the first time, and I remember being mortally afraid of telling anybody because of the stigma around it and exactly the reasons you said. It's like, "Well, you're a pastor. You're supposed to have it all together." My joke is ... and this was pride, too. I sent people to counseling. I don't go to counseling. But when I soon realized that all the issues in our marriage were not my wife but me, then there was something to work on.

Craig Groeschel: She was right.

Carey Nieuwhof: She was absolutely right. She's 100% right, Craig, totally. So, I really admire your writing. I read a lot of books, as you do, or listen to a lot of books, but you have a very lucid style, and it's an easy read, but it is not a shallow read at all. Tell me about your writing process. How have you developed ... You've written how many books now? Lots.

Craig Groeschel: I think that was the 15th.

Carey Nieuwhof: Yeah.

Craig Groeschel: Yeah. It's a lot different than the first three or four. The first few were really, really painful. The great thing is I ... I'm guessing you've probably had some good editors. Some are better than others.

Carey Nieuwhof: Yeah.

Craig Groeschel: Early on, I was blessed to work with some people that were ... One guy and one lady in particular, they were really coaches to me. They refused to do anything. They coached me on everything. So, I'd send them a document and I'd hope it would come back better, and it wouldn't come back with changes. It would come back with suggestions-

Carey Nieuwhof: Oh, boy.

Craig Groeschel: ... for me to make it better. That really, really helped. In writing, what I tried to do in the book *Hope in the Dark* is I tried to be so honest that the publishers would tell me to pull back because it would be offensive rather than be pastoral and safe. They did at points even say, "Hey. If you say that, you're probably going to be criticized," and I knew that I was probably getting closer to honesty there than I was otherwise.

Craig Groeschel: If I feel like I'm writing in a way that's not going to be criticized, then I feel like my writing's not effective, that I've got to be transparent enough and vulnerable enough that I'm going to say some things that would cross the lines of traditional conservative Christian thinking, because anybody can write a safe book, but to write one that's vulnerable and connects with the heart, I think you have to ask some questions that maybe don't feel safe to ask, wade into some areas that seem theologically tricky, leave some questions unanswered. Say there are some things we can't answer and have some of that kind of tension to help grab the heart of a reader. Then you have to work real hard to do it all the way through.

Craig Groeschel: If you'll notice, this book is shorter. The next book I have coming out, shorter. I really believe a lot of books are way too long. Now I'm kind of like, "Why write a 60,000-word book when you can just say it in 20,000?" So, what I want to do is I want every word to count, and I'm fighting for shorter books now. I'd rather have a short one that's filled with high-quality content than one that's longer that wastes anybody's time.

Carey Nieuwhof: Oh, you're the best. 20 minute-

Craig Groeschel: Nobody cares about that, what I just said, but I do. I hate when I'm reading a great book that's three times as long as it should be.

Carey Nieuwhof: Yes.

Craig Groeschel: You know?

Carey Nieuwhof: I hear what you're saying. I mean, you do that on your podcast, too. Would you say that you are more vulnerable today than you were a decade ago, or 15 years ago, as a leader?

Craig Groeschel: I'd say 100%. In fact, even right now, I'm saying some stuff. I'm thinking, "Should I have said that? Should I have said that?" But, one, I trust you. Two, I value your audience. I think the older I get, the less time I have for fake. That's the nicest way to say it. I could think of other things, but I won't.

Carey Nieuwhof: No.

Craig Groeschel: I just ... Don't you? Don't you? I mean-

Carey Nieuwhof: Oh, yeah.

Craig Groeschel: If we can be friends, let's be real.

Carey Nieuwhof: My kids read manuscripts of my book and they're like, "Dad, you're naked," and I'm like, "Yeah." But I've noticed that in your leadership, having followed you almost since the beginning of Life Church, for years at a distance, I just think you're getting more passionate. I think you're getting more vulnerable. I think you are wearing your emotions on your sleeve a lot more than you used to, and I find that very endearing. I find that ... Well, as you say, not a leader who's right, but a leader who's real. I think that realness really encapsulates what our world needs, because we all think we're alone, and we're not.

Craig Groeschel: You're right. I appreciate what you do so much, too, because you bring heart and you bring emotion out of people, and as communicators, we tend to think that content changes lives. I actually think content that creates emotion changes lives, because content just gets us to think, but emotion gets us to act. So, I want content that creates emotion. I guess the older I get, the more people I care about, and we've got deep, long, decades of friendships and people around us, and then they have kids that we care about. There's the joy of caring more, but there's the weight and the burden of it. That's why I think I feel so emotional in this season of life. As a guy that's not naturally that way, I'm trying not to fight it off, but let it mature and become whatever it's supposed to become.

Carey Nieuwhof: I wonder if there's a certain point, Craig, at which you've been around the block a couple times, and you're just tired of seeing people struggle through the same issues again and again, or maybe some of the things that you struggled with as a young leader, and I think that's prompting me to be more vulnerable and more open. Anything similar going on with you?

Craig Groeschel: I think a little bit of that and also more prophetic, which is just tell me what you think. Let's just cut through all the whatever, and let's just ... and maybe it's because the schedule's so intense, too, but I think that when you're dealing with a lot of complex issues and you care about a lot of people, then to disengage the emotions makes the experience disingenuous, so I want to keep the emotions there. But at the same time, I don't want to be in a room with people that we don't connect with as much. I want to like the people I'm around more. To do

that, we have to be kind of prophetic. The more successful you become in any form of leadership, the more people tend to tell you what you want to hear rather than what's true. I like the way our mutual friend Andy Stanley says it. How does he say it? If you never listen to what people have to say, you'll-

Carey Nieuwhof: Yeah. Oh, yeah. How does he say it? Only he can say it that way.

Craig Groeschel: I know.

Carey Nieuwhof: I know what it is. It's-

Craig Groeschel: If you don't listen, you'll eventually be surrounded by people who have nothing to say.

Carey Nieuwhof: Bingo. Yeah.

Craig Groeschel: Something like that.

Carey Nieuwhof: Leaders who refuse to listen are eventually surrounded by people who have nothing to say.

Craig Groeschel: Correct. So, I want to fight to listen so that people around me will have permission to tell the truth. I need truth from them, and I want to give them truth. If we want to get preacher-y, the truth will set you free, but that's what I want. I want friends. I want vulnerability. I want truth. I want to be direct, and let's do it in 20 minutes or less because a podcast is all I've got. Let's get in and mix it up.

Carey Nieuwhof: We just did three podcasts in this episode. My last question for you before I let you go this round, you ran out of stock on your book. I know you and I were messaging back and forth on that when that happened. Was it out of stock for three weeks?

Craig Groeschel: It was out of stock on Amazon for three weeks and out of stock on shelves for four weeks, and then it was-

Carey Nieuwhof: Wow.

Craig Groeschel: ... back for a couple of days and out again.

Carey Nieuwhof: My goodness. So, it outsold the print run, basically, right?

Craig Groeschel: It outsold the print runs, yes.

Carey Nieuwhof: How did you handle that as a leader? Because that was immensely frustrating, I'm sure. Was there any way in which that was an opportunity? Because leaders

... I mean, you teach on this all the time, right? Scarcity can be a source of innovation.

Craig Groeschel: I kept looking at ... I reminded myself of Christmas toys that would run out, and then this will date me, but everybody wants a Tickle Me Elmo-

Carey Nieuwhof: Yeah.

Craig Groeschel: ... or whatever it is. I had everybody tell me, "This is great. The book's out." It's actually not great when you want to be able to provide what people want, but yeah. I think it's ultimately, in what we do, we can't let what's available or not available for two weeks or three weeks, whatever, slow us down. We're in this for the long haul. Thankfully, there should be books available today, and the good news is whether the book's available or not, real hope is available every day everywhere through Jesus, and so he's got that covered whether my little book's on the shelf or not.

Carey Nieuwhof: I can't thank you enough for more time together today. Does the book have a website, or do they just go to craiggroeschel.com, or where can people find one?

Craig Groeschel: Yeah. You can go to craiggroeschel.com or most places books are sold. There's no website, but it is called Hope in the Dark: Believing God Is Good When Life Is Not.

Carey Nieuwhof: Once again, Craig, thank you so much.

Craig Groeschel: Hey, thank you, and I just want to say to you, the content you create, both in bringing leaders from around the world and just delivering it straight to our iPhones consistently is a gift, but also the way you think and write. Often times, when I'm researching, I'll type in different things, and your blog will come up high on Google right in front of me on really key, critical leadership issues. You have a great ability to make big ideas simple and complex in a way that is easy to digest and move the needle. So, I just want to tell your listeners, make this a regular part of your development. Listen to this podcast. Tell people about it. I think, Carey, you're one of the best out there, and I'm honored to have you as a friend and to learn from you.

Carey Nieuwhof: Well, it's absolutely mutual, Craig. I've learned so much from you over the last 23 years of my own leadership, and really cherish this relationship and the generous amount of time that you invest again and again in leaders and today, for my listeners. Thank you.

Craig Groeschel: Hey, thank you, sir.

Carey Nieuwhof: Wow. That was real. That was honest. Don't you just find that that's the kind of conversation you need some days just to keep you in the game? That goes right

back to the heart for this podcast, that I wanted to bring those backroom conversations into your earbuds. Craig, just thanks for being so open. If you have not picked up Hope in the Dark, it is a fantastic book. You can learn more just by going to the show notes. Go to careynieuwhof.com/episode228 and you'll find everything there, all the links, some quotes from Craig, and a whole lot more.

Carey Nieuwhof: I also read a blog, and we don't talk about that very much on the podcast. You know how you kind of have lanes and it's like, "Oh, this is my podcast guy," but I also do a lot of writing. You can find out more just by heading over to where the show notes are, and you can subscribe via email. That way you always get the podcast via email, and that way you always get any blog posts that we write or anything else we put out. You can find that at careynieuwhof.com. If you can't spell that, which I understand, just go to leadlikeneverbefore.com and you'll find everything there. Craig's been on the podcast a number of other times, so we will link to all of his past episodes as well. They're all worth listening to, and we cover different subjects every time.

Carey Nieuwhof: Guys, I just want to say thank you. We are about a month and a bit away from Christmas. I know it gets busy for you, and so we're going to be cheering for you. We're going to be bringing you great resources that I hope can help. In the meantime, we're back next Tuesday with a fresh episode. In fact, I am going to have a conversation with ... Are you read for this? ... Larry Osborne. Larry Osborne is back, and we talk about ... well, among other things ... why he never uses an alarm clock, the key to staying fresh in leadership for decades, and the hardest part of raising up new leaders. Here's an excerpt.

Larry Osborne: I was very much the outlier. I still probably am the outlier today, but there's nothing like 13,000 people in your church to cause people to not let cause call you an outlier. Okay?

Carey Nieuwhof: Right, right, right.

Larry Osborne: The sad thing is when we had 150 and had grown by one in three years, no one listened.

Carey Nieuwhof: Right.

Larry Osborne: Then when you start hitting multiple thousands or write a few books, then people pay you to tell them. It's like, "Dude, I used to tell you this for free."

Carey Nieuwhof: There is a lot of truth in that.

Larry Osborne: Yeah, and the sad part is there's a lot of wisdom out there that's not yet backed up by big numbers, and we don't listen.

Carey Nieuwhof: So, that is next Tuesday. Of course, if you subscribe wherever you get your podcasts, you'll get that automatically. Thanks so much for listening, and I hope our time together today has helped you lead like never before.

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