

Grandpa's Last Lesson

By Kirsten Ekstrand

I watched in awe as Grandpa patched the bicycle inner tube. He had been busy repairing the combine so he and Dad could start the harvest, but all of that changed the minute I brought over my purple bicycle with a flat tire. Nine-year-old girls with pigtails poking out of their bike helmets must have a way with old men, because I'm pretty sure there was nothing my grandpa wouldn't have done for me that day. As he handed the repaired bicycle back to me and told me to be careful, I never dreamed that a day would come when he would forget how to use an air compressor to inflate a tire. I couldn't imagine a harvest where Grandpa wasn't in the thick of things, carefully working with all the intricate moving parts of the farm machinery and knowing exactly what needed to be done next.

Now, 10 years later, everything has changed. Grandpa has Alzheimer's. The gentle, gray-haired man who used to repair combines and bikes now has trouble remembering the difference between a ratchet wrench and a socket set. Grandpa's diagnosis has driven me to my knees, causing me to question God's wisdom and timing. In a society where a person's value is so dependent on mental and physical abilities, I look into his eyes and see that he would still do anything for his granddaughter. I have had to learn to accept God's sovereignty and treasure every moment my grandfather has left.

Grandpa has lived 10 minutes away from me since I was four years old. He was always around the farm, helping Dad with whatever he could. We joked that he didn't know the meaning of the word "retirement." He spent hours repairing farm machinery, helping with hog chores, and teaching me and my siblings how to do yard work. He ate dinner with us almost

every day, and I remember taking a sack lunch to him when he couldn't take a break from the field work. I used to ride in the combine or tractor with him, sitting on a paint can and loving every moment I spent with Grandpa.

As I got busier, I saw my grandfather less and less. I became preoccupied with my schedule, and as high school hurried by and college began, I was blindsided by the realization that something had changed. When talking on the phone with my mom during my first semester of college, she told me that Grandpa couldn't remember how to run the hydraulics on the tractor he had owned for over 40 years. He had taught Dad how to drive it, and now Dad had to teach him. This incident forced me to realize that I was going to have to cope with losing my grandfather to dementia, watching him fade away inch by inch.

Grandpa always grasped games and activities quickly. Now he needs help playing a simple game my 7-year-old sister understands. Grandpa served in county politics for years, actively discussing the ins and outs of issues with the adults in the family and explaining to me what was involved. Now, a glazed look comes over his face when we start discussing politics. Occasionally, he dares to ask a question, but it is often the question that someone else just asked a few moments ago. We explain the concept to him, and he nods as though he understands. Then he retreats into silence. Grandpa should be at the head of the conversation; instead, he's always five steps behind.

Grandpa has always been the one to explain things to me. I remember when I was 15, taking driver's education. I spent my extra time at my grandparents' house that month because they lived only a few blocks from the school. Grandpa was constantly finding a pamphlet on good driving or asking what I'd learned that day. "When you drive in bad weather, it's so

important to remember..." he would begin. He then proceeded to share with me wisdom gleaned from a half-century of driving experience.

I wish I had treasured those moments while I could, before we had to take away Grandpa's car keys so he would not make judgment errors of his own. I remember riding in the car with him in downtown Chicago just a year ago. "Turn here, Grandpa," I told him from the back seat. "Are you sure?" he asked, hesitating so long that the car behind us started honking. Grandpa made enough risky hesitations and decisions that I wished that I had asked to drive. Could this be the same grandfather who had known the Iowa map backwards and forwards? I shuddered a little, wondering why God would allow something like this to happen. My grandpa was losing his mind, and I started to wonder if God was also losing His.

As Grandpa's incidents of confusion became more serious and grew closer together, my anger toward God began to build. Both my mom's parents have suffered from dementia, so I have a unique understanding of where this disease ends. I'd always convinced myself that Grandpa would die suddenly. He would have a heart attack one day while stepping out of a tractor and that would be the end. My last memories of him would be of the grandpa I'd always known, not a shell of what he once was.

But God chose to allow Alzheimer's disease. It still seems ridiculously unfair – why would God allow such a godly, wise man to lose his ability to think? Why would a man who has given his family a beautiful heritage of faith have all those memories taken away when he reaches old age? Scripture calls old age a blessing, so why would God choose to permit such a vicious disease? God is sovereign, but I cannot understand why God is allowing Grandpa to die

this way. His Alzheimer's has caused me to surrender to God in a way I never dreamed possible, recognizing that God does not have to explain His reasoning to me.

As I accept God's sovereignty, I have had to battle between a desire to spend as much time with Grandpa as I can while he is coherent, and an urge to run away from the painful truth as fast and as far as I can. But ignoring reality is never an acceptance of God's plan and purpose. Grandpa's Alzheimer's has stretched my faith and caused it to grow tremendously as I learn to trust God's purposes in a new way. I'll never understand why God allowed this disease, but I do understand that He asks me to let go of my anger and simply make the most of the time Grandpa still has.

Society tells me Grandpa has changed, he's not valuable and he's not what he used to be. But I know better. Alzheimer's may have robbed him of his memory, coherence, and ability to think clearly, but Grandpa's value as a person, his faith in Jesus, and his love for his family are just as present ever. All I have to do is look in his eyes and realize my grandpa is still in there somewhere, just as smitten with his granddaughter as he was 10 years ago.

Someday, when Grandpa has gone to be with his Savior, I will look back and treasure every memory we made together. I will remember him patiently listening to my childish chatter, and years later, telling me the same story three times in one conversation, the details growing less clear with each retelling. I will recall riding in his tractor on a paint can, and the times we drove him when he could not drive himself. I will think about how he repaired my bicycle tire, and how much he still loves me.

Just because Grandpa's forgotten doesn't mean that I have.