

Challenger

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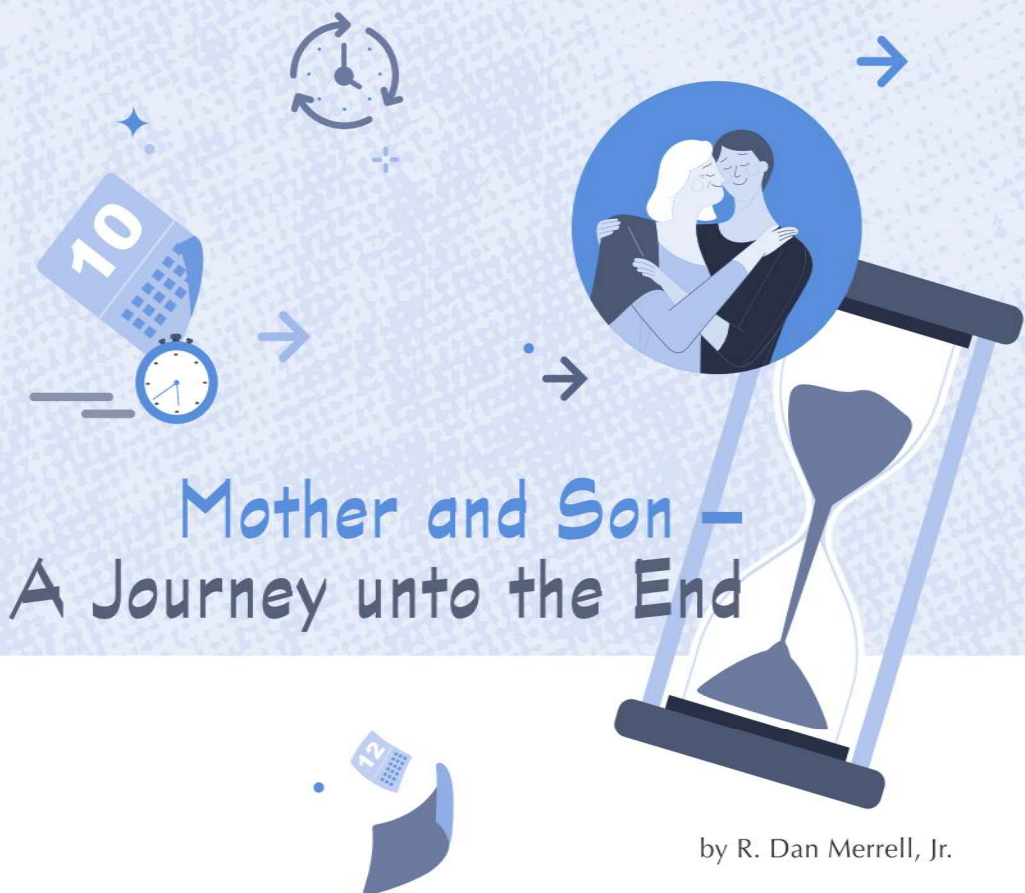
Mother and Son – A Journey unto the End

/ G. E. M. — A Precious Life
/ Rescue in Calamity
/ Growing on the Hill
/ A Miracle Touch

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Mother and Son – A Journey unto the End

by R. Dan Merrell, Jr.

February 2, 1960

Let the record state that...

On this day in a small town in America, the beloved marmot designated "Punxsutawney Phil" made his way from his comfy den to the frozen solid front porch of his underground home, stuck his furry head out into the bleak midwinter and quickly turned tail back down the tunnel. No shadow. More cold. (Groundhog Day.)

On this day all around the world, Catholics around the world celebrated

Candlemas, commemorating the presentation of Jesus Christ at the Temple in Jerusalem.

On this day in the America, millions of TV dinners were shoveled into gurgling gullets while families watched *Gunsmoke*, *Andy Griffith*, *Candid Camera*, *Perry Mason* or *My Three Sons* in their den.

And finally...

On this day, I was just one of 293,818 bundles of joy dropped from the Heavenly Father to mother earth. Two hundred and four of these little



bundles of joy were born at exactly the same minute I was. But according to records, I was the only one of them born at 10:43 a.m. at the Anderson Infirmary in Meridian, Mississippi, Dr. Dan R. Thornton presiding.

I was the firstborn son of Rondal Dan and Betty Jo Merrell, from Tulsa, Oklahoma. They were your average WASPs (White Anglo-Saxon Protestants) who had waited a little later in life to have kids. Mom was 32. Dad was 31. They had been married for 12 years prior to my joining their family. Pop was a Southern Baptist preacher and Mom

was his faithful companion, working dutifully alongside him wherever he pastored.

My parents named me Rondal Dan Merrell, Jr. My dad told me I was born with a thick head of raven black hair and was surprisingly beautiful. *"You looked just like me, son,"* he would say, *"...spitting image."* Dad always bragged that Dr. Thornton allowed *him* to deliver the slap of life. *"I'm the one who woke you up to this world, boy,"* he would remind me, quite proud. Then he'd break into a robust version of Jim Reeves' song "Welcome to My World." Pop was

always quoting somebody or singing favorite songs. He loved country and western music best and knew gospel hymns by heart. Thinking about him singing to me, well, it chokes me up a bit. I miss those golden tenor tones of his.

As for my mother—dear, sweet Betty Jo Caughron (her maiden name)—she was the first to hold me, calm me down, and welcome me proper into this wonderfully cruel world. I imagine she was warm. And she smelled good. And I recognized her voice. And somehow, in some miraculous way, her tender touch felt like home. Even though home had been inside her just minutes before, home outside her was going to be OK, as long as Momma was there to hold me—to whisper in my tiny ears, to kiss my scrunched-up face and hug my six-pound, twelve-ounce body. And she did all that and more, never letting go of this often-wayward kid for the next 58 years.

Nobody remembers anything about their years as a baby. But thanks to Mom's *The Story of Our Baby* book, I can revisit those days anytime I want!

I know the names of everyone who attended baby showers and every single thing (from blankets to booties) those people gave us at those showers. I said my first words ("da-da," then "ma-ma") six and a half months into my life and took my first step half a year later. This book

chronicles everything from when I began holding my own bottle to when I lost my first tooth. Right after the listing of my early playmates and favorite toys (books at 1 year, record player at 2 years, golf clubs at 3 years), there is a little poem titled "Little Son" by Corrine Clark. It's a bit sappy but it is in MY DAD'S HANDWRITING!! How awesome is that!

I don't know how you feel about your parents, your childhood and life in general. But I'd like to trumpet that God super blessed me with a great momma who loved me with all her heart to the very end. Her love and loyalty and bravery and defiance of the worst Alzheimer's could dish out continues to inspire me every minute of my life.

My dad and I had a rocky relationship most of our lives, until we were both forced to care for Mom. And that's when this curly-haired, dimple-faced kid fell in love with his dad. Both are gone to heaven now, hanging with the angels. I talk to them all the time, just in case they might be listening.

When my dad and brother passed away, I was the primary caregiver for my mom. And so, as God and life would have it, I ended up doing all the things for Momma late in her life that she did for me early in mine. I fed her, dressed her, slept by her side on the floor every night, and even waved goodbye as she took her last

breath in my arms. I took care of her every day for two and a half years. And it was, and always will be, the greatest job I've ever had.

So, let the record state...that my momma started me off well, and that I showed up to help her finish well. The Bible says that if you train up a child right, that kid won't abandon that training when they're older. I may have screwed up in spades all my life, but I was there for her at the end when she needed me to take care of her.

I didn't write everything down in these last years, but maybe that's what I'm doing now.

So, if you're a parent, go ahead and keep a record! Make sure those memories are awesome for your babies! If you're a kid, step up when it's your turn to take care of your folks.

And remember, remember, remember all they did for you in your earliest days. And it won't be hard—it will be a privilege!

February 2, 2020

The day was quiet. No pomp or parties, just lunch with family. And laughter and tears. Alone, I reflected on my life and pondered.

At sixty years of age, would my mother be proud of me? Is God?

I find it interesting that *Momma kept no record of my wrongs, my blunders or shortcomings*. Now, that is love! And that is exactly what every believer in Jesus Christ can look forward to.

"He has removed our sins as far from us as the east is from the west" (Psalm 103:12 NLT).

So, let the record state...that my "born again" book will only focus on the good I did for Christ in this life. Like Mom's *The Story of Our Baby*, God's record of my brief time on this earth will be lovingly transcribed, intricately detailed, and forever focused on what made Him proud. Here's hoping it's a long and satisfying read. I'm working hard to make it so. ■



Dan Merrell has enjoyed a 30-year career in the entertainment business, running sales and marketing

for, among others, Big Idea Productions' VeggieTales franchise. In 2015, Dan branched out into development and production, launching his own company, Missionary Kid Media, with a desire to utilize his experience in media to bring more engaging programming to discerning households. Dan and his wife, Debbie, live in Nashville, Tennessee, with their greyhound, Shaggy.

G. E. M. — A Precious Life



by Dianne Mentzel

Doctors said that Gary would not live beyond 18 years of age, but he lived to be 53. Gary's camp counselors often said there was no physical reason he was still with us. But Gary survived—on love and hope! He was always looking forward to the next thing.

Our Special Child

When my husband and I were expecting our first child, we were so happy and had no reason to expect any problems. Right after Gary Everett Mentzel—we called him our “GEM”—was born, he let out a shrill cry and then was suddenly quiet. At Gary's six-month checkup, the doctor told us that Gary could not track a flashlight beam, but he assured us,

“He's just slow but will catch up.” But as Gary grew, we noticed his little legs could not support him to stand up in his crib. He also had nystagmus, causing his eyes to move back and forth rapidly.

A neurologist first told us that Gary's brain had been damaged during delivery and a recovery would not be likely. We later learned that the actual diagnosis was “Pelizaeus-Merzbacher Disease,” a genetic disorder in the leukocytosis dystrophy family. A person with this disease usually experiences weak muscle tone, muscle stiffness, problems with movement and balance, and involuntary jerking. The disease is passed from mother to son. After Gary and I were both tested, it was

confirmed that I was the carrier. This was further confirmed when our daughter's son developed the same symptoms as Gary.

When learning of Gary's prognosis at the doctor's office, my sister held Gary while I cried. Emotions overcame me, but it was a relief to know what we were dealing with. We could place him in therapy, but attending school would not be an option for his first eleven years. So, I began working with him myself.

My mother-in-law sent me a poem which helped me realize that Gary was God's special child whom He had entrusted to us to raise.

"Heaven's Very Special Child"

by Edna Massimilla

They will not realize right away

*The leading role they're
asked to play;*

*But with this child sent from above,
Comes stronger faith,
and richer love.*

The news that there was no cure for Gary's condition stunned me. But God got my attention! I knew only He could help. In my teens, I had gone to church occasionally but with marriage and a career, my husband and I felt we needed to keep Sundays for ourselves. Now, however, we

needed church! We began attending, and through Bible Study Fellowship, I learned the Easter story—and opened my heart to receive Jesus as my Lord and Savior!

Twenty months after Gary was born, God added to our family another baby boy, followed by two girls. During the years our children were young, life was challenging as Gary required almost total care. But God was faithful. We took Gary to therapy three times a week and to a school clinic every three months to assess his progress and readiness to be placed in a school. I hoped and prayed each time that he would be accepted. When the clinic doctor saw that the school staff had no intention of admitting Gary despite his recommendation, he advised us to put Gary in a state hospital so that we could make a life for our other three children. But I declined, believing that God had given us Gary for a reason, and we were not giving him away without finding out that reason.

A Path Opens

Little did we know what God had in store. A program for multiple-handicapped children was soon to begin in Oakland, and Gary was to be one of the original twelve students in the program. Each day, I drove Gary



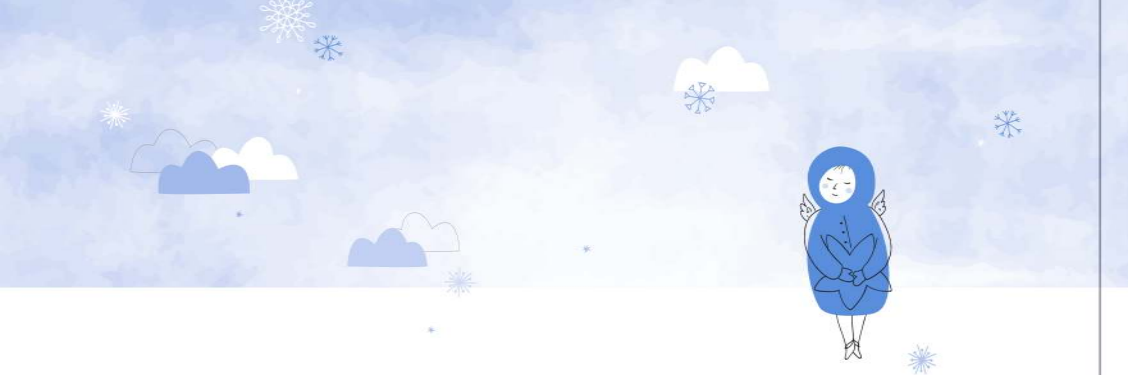
and three others to the Cerebral Palsy Center in Oakland. This program was on a one-year pilot basis and needed to be approved by voters to become permanent. To raise public interest on the issue, we printed articles in the newspaper with Gary's picture and the caption: "A wonderful new world opens up for Gary," telling the value of the program and why it should continue.

A number of parents went to Sacramento to petition for this program. I went with a new friend, Joyce, who also had a son in the same program. We met with one committee after another, and the toughest one was the finance committee led by George Miller. It was a hot day in May, and we had been there for four hours when Mr. Miller stepped to the microphone and suggested adjourning and resuming the following day. Joyce took my hand and we prayed. Within seconds, Mr. Miller stepped back to the microphone and said he had just heard there were parents of handicapped children present. Then he added that if the rest of the committee didn't mind giving up their lunch hour, he would stay and hear the parents' bill. The bill passed effortlessly! As a new believer, I was in awe that God was in charge of the government of Sacramento! Today, there are multiple development centers all over California, as well as a regional center, where parents can go to find help.

All of Gary's life he had a deep faith in God. One of his first bus drivers was a Christian and listened to KFAX, a Christian radio station, during the commute to school. One night as I was putting Gary to bed, I noticed that he was attempting to turn the knob on his radio to KFAX, despite having great difficulty coordinating his motor movements. At that time, I felt led to talk with Gary about God's love and purpose for his life. We prayed together and he opened his heart to receive Christ. Later, when his brother Brad was visiting, Gary asked, "Brad, do you love God?" Surprised by the question, Brad responded, "Do you, Gary?" "Oh, yes, with all of my heart!" was his sweet reply.

God directed our paths and provided for Gary's needs in so many ways. Summer after summer, Gary was able to attend the Easter Seal camp for children like himself, as well as the Christian Berets Camp. At these camps, Gary got to enjoy regular camp activities with other kids, as well as daily Bible study. The camp weeks in the summers provided a wonderful opportunity and time for my husband and me to get away for a vacation with our other children. We also took Gary to a program at a group home where he participated in weekly Bible studies. His wonderful teacher created many unique experiences for the kids with disabilities. When Gary was 21 and needed to leave the program, his





teacher had a special graduation ceremony just for him, including a cap and gown.

Life On His Own

Once after speaking at a Christian Women's Club, I was approached by a young woman who confessed that after her parents died, she was left to care for her handicapped sister, and she resented it. This got me to thinking about what would happen to Gary after my husband and I died. Should we leave our other children the responsibility of caring for Gary?

Remembering the scripture, *"Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God"* (Philippians 4:6, NKJV), my husband and I prayed. The first answer to our prayer came through Gary himself. One day he asked, "When am I moving out like my brother and sisters?" The next answer came when Gary's social worker found a beautiful home in San Pablo, which we all agreed was the perfect place for Gary. So, at age 35,

Gary began his new life apart from us. It meant he would have a new day program which was far more suited to his interests and capabilities, and he was with friends he had known in earlier years. For the following 18 years of Gary's life, my husband and I were able to oversee his care from afar and bring him home for frequent visits. God had answered our prayer above anything we had asked.

Gary's Touch

During Gary's later years he had back pain most of the time and could not walk or sit on his own, but he never complained. A pain pump was eventually inserted in his back that was refilled periodically, which helped relieve some discomfort. Gary loved people and had a great sense of humor. His smiles attracted many people. God provided Gary a wonderful caregiver, a young man named Issil, who was very much like his beloved brother, Brad. They did many special things together—played pool, ate lunch with neighbors, and watched Gary's favorite movie, "Hello Dolly."

One night, we were awakened at 2 a.m. by a call from Issil telling us that Gary had been taken to the hospital. When we got there, Gary was unresponsive. But knowing that the subconscious can still hear, I reassured him that we were there and, more importantly, so was Jesus.

Gary went into cardiac arrest, and the doctor cautioned us that he had been without oxygen for some time. We gave permission to remove the tubes if needed, but they never did remove them. So, we prayed and waited.

While I sat and read my Bible, I was amazed at the verse I was reading: 1 Thessalonians 4:13, paraphrased: "Why do you grieve as those who have no hope? Don't you know those who die in Christ will rise with Him?" I could see God's promise being fulfilled right then. While we were gone momentarily to get a bite to eat, with Issil holding his hands, Gary gave him a squeeze, and just like that, he was gone from this world to be with Jesus.

At his memorial service, many people spoke of how Gary had touched their lives. God's reason for extending Gary's years on earth became evident. Our other children's lives were endlessly touched by Gary. Janine went into working with handicapped children because she wanted other children to experience their lives as fully as Gary did.

Shari said she felt that anyone who did not have someone like Gary in their home was missing out. And Brad, who loved Gary so dearly, often comments that Gary's love for God causes him to assess his own relationship with God. Issil, Gary's caregiver, says that because of Gary, his life changed. God had given a gift to Gary and Issil by allowing them to spend the last moments together before God took Gary to be with Him.

The end of the poem, "Heaven's Special Child," goes on to say:

*And soon they'll know
the privilege given
In caring for this gift from Heaven.
Their precious charge,
so meek and mild,
Is Heaven's very special child. ■*



Dianne Mentzel was a discussion leader for Bible Study Fellowship, spokesperson for Christian Women's Club around Northern California, and a chairperson of the club's first opening in Castro Valley. She also chaired and contacted churches in the prayer support group for one of Billy Graham's movies. She is now serving as a discussion leader in (WOW) Women of the Word Bible study in Castro Valley. She is a mother of a disabled son and three other children.



by Kelly Yu*

Yu: Rev. Ho, you're a pastor with a special burden for Chinese churches to become involved in ministry to victims of disaster. What in your background has brought you to this position?

Ho: I was born in Hong Kong, went abroad to study in Canada as a secondary student, and while there, became a believer in Jesus Christ and accepted Him as my Savior. After university study in Alberta, I worked

for Hong Kong Shanghai Bank before God called me to study theology at Regent Theological Seminary. Later, I went on to get my doctorate in pastoral care from Fuller Seminary. I served in several different churches and in 2018 was called by God to become lead pastor at Joyful Chinese Baptist Church in San Francisco. I thank God that He has led me by His blessed hand ever since, and I want to be of service to Him in whatever capacity I can.

I'm convicted that whatever church you're in, there should be an emphasis on devotional theology (studying the Bible and applying its spiritual principles to your life) and on mission ministry. That is why when I see a community of people who encounter a devastating disaster, my top priority is to show compassion to the victims with the love of Jesus Christ. I really thank God that, after serving at Joyful Chinese Baptist Church for only a few months, I had the opportunity to participate in a rescue mission for the inhabitants of Paradise, California, during the immense wildfire that destroyed the area in 2018.

Yu: Do you think the special burden you have for churches to be involved in rescue missions is related to your upbringing?

Ho: I don't think so. It is probably related to my church pastoral care

experiences. The 2018 California wildfire disaster was not my first participation in rescue missions. I have always firmly believed in so-called "social services"—that, as Christians, we should be actively involved in ministering to those in need. And as a church leader, I feel I must lead my congregation to respond with actions to meet urgent needs of a hurting society. When I first started pastoring over 20 years ago, I was not yet aware of what we should do to help people when fires or storms bring disaster. But after seeing the tremendous needs of affected victims who become homeless and are left with misery and poverty, I determined to lead my Chinese congregations in rescue missions. Five years ago, I became involved in a disaster relief effort in Nepal, joining a mission team consisting of five medical doctors who helped nearly 1,000 affected inhabitants there.



*Pastor Ho's team from
Sunset Church*



People from different churches serve as a team

Yu: Seeing increasing frequencies of natural disasters and human tragedies occurring, and realizing that our Creator God is kind and merciful, how do you explain the reasons why He allows such calamities to take place?

Ho: Indeed, many people raise questions about the reasons, including myself. Certainly, our God is loving and kind. The Bible clearly reminds us in Genesis chapter 1, that from the beginning of creation, God never meant for people to suffer. The original world was splendid and perfect, and God entrusted humankind with the privilege of governing the earth. Yet, Genesis 3 describes the first man and woman committing sins and departing from God. As a result, curses and suffering followed: the man, by toiling and sweating to exhaustion, would make his living, and the woman, by painful labor in childbirth, would be subject

to her husband all her life. Thus, by departing from God's way, they lost the blessings God intended to give them. However, God did not abandon the people He created. He provided a plan for their redemption so that anyone, through repentance and faith in Jesus Christ, can have peace with God.

Yu: In 2018, when the disastrous wildfires erupted in Paradise, California, you, as pastor, pleaded with your brothers and sisters in your Chinese church to volunteer to help the affected victims in the devastated areas. How did they respond?

Ho: At first, they had never thought of taking action to help. This was because in the past few decades, there has been a lack of pastoral pleas for involvement in rescue missions among Chinese churches worldwide. I believe there are several reasons for this. Usually the rescue mission fields have not been within the area of the Chinese community. So, the Chinese have not felt it had a direct relevance for them. In other words, "others' business is none of our business." But mostly, there hasn't been encouragement to see rescue missions as a calling of the church. Traditionally, Chinese churches have not put emphasis on caring for the needs of society, especially caring for ethnic groups that are different from ours.



When I first pleaded with our brothers and sisters to participate in a disaster rescue mission, the initial response was scanty. But praise God! When they saw their pastor taking the lead in taking action, some believers responded positively, asking what they could do to help. As a result, our first rescue team numbered 12 believers, and our second team jumped to 20 believers!

Yu: Did your group join up with other teams in the rescue mission effort?

Ho: We were very grateful to work with Samaritan's Purse International Relief Association, an excellent and well-organized establishment! If we had chosen to go on our own, we would have been at a loss to know what to do and how to connect with the victims. No one knew anything about us and perhaps would not let us step into their community! Luckily, at the time the wildfire initially started, Samaritan's Purse had already dispatched workers to do the connecting and promotional work. The local TV channel allowed an interview to tell the local people in the disaster area that some church rescuers were there to help and to invite other volunteers to join them in the rescue work. This organization also set up a hotline phone service so that nearby disaster victims had a way to reach us.

When we first arrived at the disaster region, Samaritan's Purse

organization gave us a special training session, telling us what we could do and what we could not do. They also advised us to wear protective clothing. Following that, they divided us into teams of 10 people, with plans to begin work the next day. Because the sky usually turned dark after 4 p.m., we could only render help to possibly one house in the morning and a second or third house in the afternoon. The owners of the houses had to be present at the site to let us in to work.

Yu: Rev. Ho, how did you feel upon arriving at the disaster site?

Ho: The town where we rendered help was named "Paradise," yet what we saw was more like "Hell." When our truck drove us to the central disaster region and I saw the devastation, I was overwhelmed by feelings of compassion and pity, to the point that I just wanted to cry. If we felt these emotions, I could only imagine how the real disaster victims must be feeling! It was as if we were there to attend a "funeral service"—to pay final tribute, along with the disaster victims, to a wasteland, say a memorial prayer at the burned houses one by one, and share a deep remorse and sorrow for the loss. A further look revealed some mementos of previous glories—shiny wood floors that had been covered by grandiose carpets and solid floors built from huge marble slabs, along with numerous messy household



A burned motorcycle

items. At the sight, I could not control my tears of sorrow.

Yu: While working in the disaster zone, what did you experience?

Ho: When we entered some of the houses, the owners would want to tell us about the original internal house design, even the arrangement of household items within the house. It seemed important to them that we knew the original house was beautiful. Sometimes some of our teammates would kneel and pick up pieces of stones or jewelry, with the hope of retrieving some precious treasure for the owner. What moved me most was to enter an affected house together with the owner, who was seeing his destroyed home for the first time, and to witness his sorrow at that tragic moment.

The Samaritan's Purse organization prepared a Bible for each of the homeowners, bearing the signatures

and some encouraging words from each of the volunteers. The volunteers would hold hands together with the family and pray for each household. At that moment, there would invariably be shedding of tears—such a moving scene! Perhaps what was needed most were not material items but the words of God and the consolation and presence of God!

Yu: How did the brothers and sisters from your church perform in doing the rescue mission work?

Ho: I witnessed the brothers and sisters helping the owners dig away shattered remains of construction materials in the hopes of retrieving some item they treasured. One owner pleaded: "There is a wedding ring I treasure very much. Please help me find it!" But to find anything there was not that easy. Often when a fire of this nature starts, it is accompanied by an explosion so that everything is blown far away and can never be

recovered. Even so, our brothers and sisters were more than willing to try their best to help the homeowners find something that was missing. They also seized the opportunity to talk to the owners, pray with them, and most importantly, tell them the gospel of Jesus Christ. I witnessed the genuine surrendering of themselves to give their best to God as they worked with the disaster victims, experiencing to some degree, the same sentiments of suffering and misery that haunted the victims.

Yu: After returning home from the disaster region, what were their perceptions and what did they learn?

Ho: Our brothers and sisters felt the volunteer work they did was very meaningful. They mentioned several lessons they learned that were impressive. They became aware that the home they possessed at present could one day be lost—reduced to ashes in the flicker of a moment. So, they began to question the wisdom of buying more material things, asking: “Should I buy that 70-inch gigantic TV set or that genuine Italian leather sofa? One day they could be turned into ashes!”

Our brothers and sisters awoke to the reality that to treasure personal relationships among one another is the most important thing! They had witnessed a lady who had not only lost her house but her younger sister had also burned to death! She had lost the preciousness of a close relative whom she treasured above all else. Our volunteers came to a real awareness of how important personal relationships are—that we should make the most use of the present moment to treasure loved ones closest to us.

Yu: Rev. Ho, what was your most unforgettable experience through this?

Ho: I can never forget one day, after finishing my rescue work in one of the burned houses, everyone was there, clasping hands together to pray for the family, and the Bible was being handed over to the master of the house. At that moment, God inspired me to ask, “Would you allow me to sing a hymn?” Everyone answered unanimously, “Sure! Why not?” So, I sang the hymn “God Will Make A Way,” composed by Don Moen. After finishing the hymn, I



heard the gentleman next to me, a volunteer from another church, weeping uncontrollably! The picture was really, really splendidly moving! Here we were, not just rescuing disaster victims, we were, at the same time, working together as brothers and sisters of different origins, under the light of love within the body of Christ, to edify, encourage, and work in harmony to help the desperate ones in need.

I especially thank the Lord that some of the disaster victims we helped accepted Jesus Christ as their Lord. There were others who had not been to church for a long time and were now willing to worship again and read their Bibles. All these things really touched my heart deeply.

Yu: What are some practical ways you encourage brothers and sisters in Chinese churches to participate in similar disaster rescue missions?

Ho: I plead with churches to enthusiastically participate in volunteer efforts at critical times of disaster. Details of how to get involved can be found at www.samaritanspurse.org. Participation is very flexible, even to spending just one or two days at a time. However, you have to pay your own room and board, unless you are willing to volunteer for one whole week (5 working days) whereby you will be offered free room and board by this organization. Participants need

only to provide their background information for probable money handling on the “volunteer” website space, then Samaritan’s Purse organization will provide the applicant with an ID number to enable him/her to report for service duties in the disaster region. Upon arrival, many things can be done according to the instructions of this organization.

Generally speaking, Chinese churches have neglected becoming involved in social welfare, including rescue missions to help victims during a disaster. Churches need instruction and encouragement from pastors who lead by example. Chinese believers need to serve needy victims of disaster in one accord, hand in hand, alongside volunteers from other churches and other ethnic believers. The love of Christ unites us, and to Him be the glory! ■

**This interview with Rev. Paul Pak-Cheong Ho, lead pastor and pioneer of Chinese churches’ disaster relief missions, was conducted by Kwok Hoi Wong (Kelly Yu), contract editor of Chinese Christian Mission. The article was published in Chinese Christian Mission’s magazine Proclaim (Nov.–Dec. Issue, 2019) and was translated into English for Challenger by Kelly’s husband, Philip Yu, a violin teacher and retired educational consultant. The couple lives in New Jersey and attends Rutgers Community Christian Church.*



Growing on the Hill

by Kendall Herb

Winter is coming to an end. The sun begins to linger. Spring, around the corner, brings birds' melodies and cool soaking rain. Anticipation. Tender green shoots start to break through the earth. New growth, out of a season of deep rest. And we are thankful.

"Let us acknowledge the Lord; let us press on to acknowledge him. As surely as the sun rises, he will appear; he will come to us like the winter rains, like the spring rains that water the earth" (Hosea 6:3).

Local Agriculture with a Global Purpose

Twenty minutes south of Dallas, off a busy highway, tucked behind grocery store warehouses and county truck yards, is a small grassy hill. There are fences, two barns, and a couple of white farmhouses. Cows and a few

sheep dot the hill. Chickens peck at beetles under the old pecan tree. Stretching down the hillside are flowerbeds blanketed with fresh hay mulch, ready and waiting.

Two summers ago, on this grassy hill dotted with grazing animals, three families met. From different backgrounds and with varied gifts, God had led each of us down a different path to the same place—to this very hill. We carried different tools in our hands, but God had planted a similar dream in each heart. And the seed of the dream started to take root.

This is the Hill where my family and I now live. Located on Mars Road, it is named Mars Hill Farm, after the hill in first-century Athens where people gathered for religious conversations. My husband, Jonathan, journeyed through school with a degree in

business and then fell in love with agriculture. As one of the managers of Mars Hill Farm, he is the brains behind the farming operation. I work with him, planting, harvesting, and testing new ideas. We are passionate about the sustainable farming methods laid out in the Bible and want to teach others how to replicate this model. We have found that farming stirs our affections for Jesus Christ, and it is to His glory that we strive for excellence in our work.

Our New Neighbors

Far off on a hill much like ours, in the country of Syria, war and devastation grew year after year. Towns were demolished. Buildings became mountains of broken cement and rebar. Families split apart. The government seemed more foe than friend. Chaos reigned. With little opportunity left for growth and flourishing, two men gathered their wives and children and said goodbye to uncles, aunts, cousins, mothers, and fathers. They left heart and home to take refuge somewhere. Somewhere with opportunities. After short stays in other places, they ended up in a land known for its opportunities.

Thousands of families from far off, war-torn hills and homes have sought refuge in Dallas, Texas. Men, women, and children, escaping with

little but their lives, looked for a safe, sheltered place to land. These are our new neighbors—down the road, past the county truck yards, and a few minutes up that busy highway. They could use our welcome. And maybe a job. We three families (with the similar dream in our hearts) have had the privilege of helping some of these people from the broken places in the world.

Settling into the unfamiliar, these neighbors try to make a home for their families. Surrounded by strange foods, smells, customs, beliefs, and government, they are held back by an unknown language, creating a barrier to conversation, answers, and employment. They have many hurdles to jump through. On home soil, the Syrian men were independent, capable, successful. On foreign ground, they are deemed by many to be dependent and incapable. A liability. But because of God, we know differently and we see differently.



Kendall and family



The Farm



"The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the Lord your God" (Leviticus 19:34).

Reaping the Harvest

Today, twenty minutes south of Dallas, off a busy highway, tucked behind grocery store warehouses and county truck yards, the unassuming small grassy hill has come to life.

Cows and sheep still graze and chickens peck at beetles under the old pecan tree. The sprawling rows of flower beds still lay ready and waiting for seeds to be tucked in the earth. But now, able hands from all around the world dig in deep together. Relationships are being cultivated between unlikely neighbors. English lessons happen over familiar cups of hot tea. Each neighbor shares in the cultivating work, side by side. There is nothing special about the hill. It is not a better hill than any other or an especially beautiful one. But we pray that God will grow beautiful things in the hearts of the new neighbors who work side by side on this very hill. We are hopeful that God will make known the truth about His Son who died on another far-away hill long ago.

Another spring will come with everything it holds. Cool mornings. Rainy days. And before we know it, it will give way to the full-blown heat

of summer—sunshine lengthening our days. The time to plant the seeds is past, and by God's grace, new things will grow. The season of anticipation is with us—a season of cultivation leading to a season of hopeful harvest. We trust in the one God over all the hills and all the seasons. And we are thankful.

"And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up" (Galatians 6:9, ESV). ■



Kendall Herb and her husband Jonathan, along with two other Christian couples, run the operations at Mars Hill Farm.

The Farm exists to provide jobs for refugees, fresh food and flowers to Dallasites, and to form strong connections between the two. Believing that by providing people in difficult situations with steady, familiar work and enabling them to use valuable skills honed thousands of miles away, they can help refugees transition into a productive new life in America. They also offer a portion of land free of charge to any refugee who wants to farm it. Open on Fridays and Saturdays, visitors can meet the employees and the refugees working their own plots, and pick-your-own of whatever is growing—herbs, tomatoes, and of course, flowers. Kendall and Jonathan are parents of four (almost five) children.



A few years later, the endometrial implants returned—this time on my intestines! Although the surgeon had scraped my abdominal cavity of implants, evidently there were some left on my intestines—or maybe they had migrated to that location since the surgery. My excruciating condition was deemed inoperable due to the possibility of peritonitis, a life-threatening inflammation and infection of the tissue that lines the inner wall of the abdomen, which can lead to sepsis, multiple organ failure, and death.

One Sunday, many years later, although I was in the throes of my usual 6-days-per-month agony since the surgery, I wanted—for reasons I can't recall now—to visit a small, run-down church across town. When I put my hand on the rusty church doorknob, I felt a surge of anticipation, like God was up to something!

The young pastor's message was about the devil beating up Christians. At the end of the service, he asked anyone who felt that Satan was attacking them to come down front for prayer. I wasn't planning to go to the altar because I saw my problem as purely physical, but the person sitting beside me nudged me into the aisle. So, standing at the altar, looking down at the floor, I felt a hand on my shoulder. A lady beside me began praying earnestly for me to be healed! I didn't know anyone at this church, and they didn't know

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me. After the prayer time was over, I looked to my right and saw a very tiny older lady standing beside me. I thanked her for her prayer but really didn't expect anything to happen. An hour later, at home, standing in front of my kitchen sink, I realized the pain was gone. I was completely astonished!

After the miracle occurred, I thought maybe this lady was an angel, but it turned out that she worked at Walmart! In the weeks that followed, I discovered that her personal life was far from a cake walk. She was in the throes of horrific family problems, but God used her to be the agent of my miraculous healing!

I thank and praise God for His mercy. He can use any of us as agents of His will at any time. I'm sure glad this dear elderly lady got out of bed—despite her own problems—and came to church that morning. She was in the right place at the right time, and God used her in a mighty way! A few weeks later, I felt a tiny twinge of discomfort and asked her about it. She said it was just the devil and that I *had* been healed. She was absolutely right. The small symptom quickly disappeared and my residual endometriosis never returned to trouble me again. This reminds me of Acts 10:38, “...God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Ghost and with power: who went about doing good, and healing all that were oppressed of the devil.”



I don't know why God, in His sovereignty, sometimes heals instantaneously, when at other times, He just says that His grace is sufficient. 2 Corinthians 12:8–10 (KJV) — *"For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong."* Even if we are not healed, we can still trust in God's goodness and almighty plan, knowing that there will be no more pain or suffering in Heaven! ■



Dominie Bush and her husband Don live in St. Augustine, Florida. She is a traveling piano teacher, a keyboardist

at Community Bible Church, and a music instructor at Ark Baptist College. She also edits Christian books and magazine articles. A book that helped her heal emotionally from her ordeal was Taste of Tears, Touch of God by Ann Kiemel Anderson, who also had experienced the pain and problems of infertility.

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A Miracle Touch



by Dominie Bush

Experiencing extreme pain and mental fog 29 out of 30 days a month is a terrible way to live. I suffered from endometriosis, a disorder in which tissue that normally lines the uterus also grows outside the uterus. Cyclical bleeding and inflammation from these endometrial implants cause scar tissue and adhesions. Having endured this painful condition from ages 17–34, in 1985 I decided to have surgery.

Getting rid of the endometriosis first involved a D&C, a surgical procedure in which an instrument is used to scrape the uterine lining. Then a month later, I had a complete hysterectomy. After the surgery, I went through mind-bending menopause caused by the removal of my ovaries. Doctors tried various estrogen products, but I couldn't tolerate any of them.



(Continued on page 21)

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