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A Song of Praise While We Weep

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A Song of Praise While We Weep

by Phuc An Nguyen

In the early morning of April 6, 2019, a tragic car crash killed four members of my family: my husband, Binh, our 12-year-old daughter, Lizzy, Binh's adoptive mother, Diane, and her sister, Evelyn. It happened when the Dodge Caravan we were traveling in rear ended an eighteen-wheeler that was transporting steel pipes. Our 14-year-old daughter, Bethany, and I survived, but we were critically injured.

A Pleasant Night Drive

The tragic day's saga began as our family of four left a rainy Seattle, Washington, on the afternoon of April 5. We flew to Austin, Texas, to meet up with Binh's adoptive mom to enjoy a few days of vacation aboard a Carnival Cruise out of Galveston.

Our flight arrived a short time before midnight. I thought we were to get

a rental car but was surprised to see Diane and Aunt Evelyn there to pick us up in Diane's Dodge Caravan. Evelyn had a funeral to go to near Galveston, so she was going to take us to the cruise port and then use the van while we were on the cruise.

After gathering our luggage, we headed to the parking lot. Evelyn went to the driver's door and insisted on driving. We gave in to her demand and got in, Bethany sitting in the left seat of the back row and Lizzy in the middle seat between Bethany and me. I buckled myself in and told the girls to buckle themselves in. Lizzy couldn't find her seatbelt, so I searched and found it, pulled it down and clicked—but it missed. This seatbelt was different, and we couldn't figure out how it worked. Thinking that there was not much traffic on the road at this time of night, and with night driving so pleasant, I left my daughter improperly belted as we headed onto the road. Then, giving Lizzy a little hug, I leaned to the side to catch some sleep. In the front, the three adults were talking and catching up.

The Crash

The next thing I was aware of was Bethany pleading for me to help unbuckle her seatbelt. Unbuckling mine and reaching over to help her, I realized Lizzy was not in the seat she had been sitting in. Immediately, I thought about the fact that she

had not been properly belted in. Expecting the worst, I looked to the front of the vehicle to search for her. My Lizzy was lying motionless, face down on the floor! The van's headlights were shining on the rear of a black, eighteen-wheeler. The shattered windshield and smashed front reminded me of those horrific accident scenes in movies. But even in my stupor, I realized this was no movie or night mirage! We had crashed! My younger daughter might be dead, and the van could catch on fire at any moment! I looked to the driver's seat, to Aunt Evelyn, and she was leaning over the steering wheel motionless, like Lizzy. I knew that she too might be dead.

After fumbling in the dark, I got Bethany's seatbelt undone, and a man pulled her out through the broken window. He also helped me up and carefully maneuvered me between the aisle of the seats so that I wouldn't step on Lizzy. As he pulled me out, we crossed over the second row of seats where my husband was seated. Urging him to hurry and get out of the van, I was unaware that he was not moving.

While trying to catch my breath, I heard Diane calling for help. I came to the passenger's door to open it for her, but the door was jammed and would not open. The man tried to open it too, but with no success. Hearing the sound of a siren, I told Diane to hold on as the

first responders were coming. Then, seeing Bethany kneeling with her head down to the ground like she was praying, I dropped down beside her. But instead of praying, we were both struggling to breathe. Laboring and gasping for air, we told each other to stay awake—not to fall asleep!

The first responders arrived and quickly assessed our injuries. Scissors tore loudly through my favorite Huskies' hoodie from the top down. An oxygen mask was placed over my nose and mouth. The cool air flowed into my lungs, and I felt relief. I was not going to suffocate.

Awaking

The next memory I have is waking up at the hospital with Uncle Steve, mom Diane's youngest brother and a twin to Aunt Evelyn. He asked me if I knew where I was, and I told him that I knew I was in a hospital and our van had crashed. He nodded and told me of my injuries: perforated stomach, three broken ribs, broken collar bone, and compression fractured L1 of the lumbar vertebrae. He asked what I remembered of the accident. I told him that Lizzy and Evelyn may have died, given the nature of the crash and how I had seen them. I asked about Diane. He shook his head and said she did not make it. She was severely injured and passed away in the ambulance on the way to the hospital. "I'm so sorry!" I told him, for in that accident, he had lost

both of his sisters.

Uncle Steve continued: "Bethany is all right and is at Dell Children's Hospital here in Austin, not far from here." He told me of her injuries, which were similar to mine, and that the most concern the doctors had for her was the fractured L1 of the lumbar vertebrae. Since I was at Dell Seton Medical Center in Austin, I assumed that my husband was fine and staying at the children's hospital with Bethany. I asked how Binh was holding up, knowing that our daughter Lizzy, and his mom and aunt had died. Uncle Steve held my hand, looked intently at me, and shaking his head, said, "Binh didn't make it out either. He died at the scene along with Lizzy."

In that moment, everything went silent! Light had gone out. A thick darkness covered me.

Ring in my ears to this day is Uncle Steve asking if I knew Psalm 23. I remembered it in Vietnamese and did my best to follow along. We said it together, slowly but firmly, as a statement of faith:

"The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures, He leads me beside quiet waters, he refreshes my soul. He guides me along the right paths for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your

rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever."

Comforted by the Word of God, I drifted into a deep sleep. Uncle Steve left Dell Seton and went to be with Bethany.

A Comforting Promise

God is so good to give comfort in the midst of our grief. After having surgery to clean out my organs—a result of the perforated stomach—developed a severe internal infection. One day, as I had to wait a long time in the lab, I asked a nurse if she might print out Psalms 50 to 60 for me to read. She misunderstood my request and instead printed Psalm 119:50–60. The first line was *"My comfort in my suffering is this: your promise preserves my life."* What a

verse to bring comfort at that time! Overjoyed that the Lord had spoken to me through this verse, I began telling the nurse my situation. I told her about the accident, the loss of my loved ones, and the injuries. Stunned, she exclaimed, "Oh, my God! I'm so sorry! I can't imagine what you've just been through!"

The truth is, I did not know how I was going to get through this. I had suffered so much loss and grief, beyond anyone's comprehension—the loss of my husband and child, loss of my mother-in-law and aunt, and the loss of the health of me and my daughter. I also had many concerns and challenges to face: How would we live? Would the doctors be able to fix Bethany's fractured spine, or would she be confined to a wheelchair for the rest of her life? What would be our "new normal" when we got to go home? The burials, how would be pay for them? But God's ways are mysterious. Through the nurse's misunderstanding my request and this verse, God was reminding



Phuc An and Bethany



Phuc An, Lizzy, Bethany, and Binh

me that I could find comfort in Him. Though our devastations and challenges were unbearable, I could trust Him and His promises. He is sovereign, good, and loving, and He would orchestrate everything to give us a hope and a future.

Amazing Peace

Many of my friends were shocked to learn what had happened to us and questioned why God would allow the accident to take the lives of my loved ones. I have no answer for them except to say that God has the right over His creation. We are not God and don't know why He chose to bring my husband, our daughter, his adoptive mom, and his aunt to their heavenly home in such a tragic way. The Word of God in Isaiah 55:8–9 says: *"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."*

I don't know—and I may never know "why"—but that does not change the outcome. I can go through pain and suffering only when I trust God and lean on Him, for He is a good God. I marvel at why my daughter's spinal cord did not break when her L1 lumbar vertebra was fractured. How is it that her spinal cord was not damaged as the man pulled her through the broken window? Why

didn't my L1 lumbar vertebra not collapse as it had a compression fracture which prohibited it from any twisting or bending motion? How is it that my daughter and I could go through this experience of losing everything we held dear and not be bitter toward life and toward God? Where does such grace, peace, and strength come from?

Our answer is because the Lord God whom we trust is the One True Living God, and He is in control. He allowed the accident to take place, but He protected us, healed us, and is providing for us. He prepared a place in heaven for Binh, Lizzy, Diane, and Evelyn, and He has promised us eternal life where we will be with our loved ones again. The Lord provided the best place for my husband and daughter's burial through the military at no cost to us. The celebration service of their lives was beautiful and honoring in the presence of over 800 friends and family who showed their love, sympathy, and support. God has given us the peace that surpasses all understanding which continues to guard our hearts and minds.

At the Two-year Mark

Since the crash, thanks to our Great Physician, Bethany and I have experienced both physical and emotional healing. Bethany has resumed her usual activities as any normal, healthy teenager, enjoying

hiking, running, and swimming. She is a junior in high school, taking dual-credit classes to obtain early college credit. Involvement in Christian ministries has been a great outlet for my grief—cooking for the College Talk program through our church and participating in International Christian Fellowship. Daily prayer and fellowship with my Lord Jesus sustain me, as does the love and support of many Christian friends and family.

In 2003, when Binh and I married, he was not expressive with words of love. But he was a kind, sweet, and generous person, always ready to open his heart, home, and wallet for family, friends, and the needy. Binh had come to the U.S. in 1975, along with an older sister, with a group of orphans from the Cam Ranh Christian Orphanage in Vietnam. Because of his background, Binh always had a heart for the downtrodden. (Binh's adoptive mother had been a missionary in Vietnam, met Binh in the orphanage when he was a toddler, and fell in love with him. Texas law did not permit her to officially adopt Binh until he was an adult, but they always considered themselves to be family.)

Proud to be an American, after high school, Binh joined the U.S. Navy where he served nine years as an electronics technician ET2 on the USS Ford. When his ship docked at Everett Navy Base for good in

1996, he took a new position as telecommunications manager at the Naval Air Station on Whidbey Island, where he worked until his death.

To honor Binh and Lizzy, each year at Christmastime, our larger family fills shoe boxes with toys for kids around the world through Samaritan's Purse. We are comforted in knowing that—though not in this life—we will see our precious loved ones again in the next.

As Bethany and I and our larger family have traveled the path of loss, we are resting in God's sovereignty. The Bible tells us that our God loves us so much that He gave "*His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life*" (John 3:16). So, because He did not spare His Son, but delivered Him up for us, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things—joy in our suffering, strength in our weakness, hope in our despair, and a song of praise while we weep? ■



Phuc An Nguyen lives in Mukilteo, Washington, with her daughter, Bethany. Her work as a defensive driving instructor has helped her overcome recurring visions of the accident, as she trains others in the rules of safe driving. Phuc An attends The Alliance Church of Mukilteo, where she leads a daily morning prayer time.



by Matt Humphries

It was a typical Friday afternoon at the Humphries' house in Saigon, Vietnam. Mary Humphries was busy in the kitchen cooking and getting ready for her guests that evening. She made sure the ribs were cooked just right, the green beans were properly seasoned, the top of the bread was brown but

not too brown, and that there was enough cherry pie to feed a small army. And before too long, a "small army" did arrive—approximately 90 American servicemen and women who were fighting in a war far from home and who looked forward to a homecooked meal every Friday night that Mary and other women from

the Vietnam Baptist Mission helped prepare. There was heartfelt sharing at these Friday Night Fellowships, a great deal of laughter and often tears.

Mary and her husband, Jim, had answered God's call to foreign missions, and in the summer of 1966 arrived in Saigon, along with their three children, ranging in age from 7 months to 8 years. Jim pastored Trinity Baptist Church, whose members were about 95% military people stationed in and around Saigon. Jim preached the gospel and served as encourager and counselor to many of the men who served in the war. Mary served alongside Jim, fully his partner, as they provided the spiritual food of God's Word and offered words of comfort or encouragement during some difficult days of the war. Mary was always seen singing in the choir and teaching children of missionaries and expatriates in Sunday school.

Mom's Legacy

This Mary was my mom, and these are precious memories I have as a young boy growing up during the six years our family lived in Vietnam. Mom was born in Springdale, Arkansas, on May 10, 1933. She graduated with honors from the University of Arkansas with a degree in home economics. Soon after getting a job teaching in Lubbock, Texas, she met my dad. Shortly after they married, Dad felt called into the ministry. They moved to Fort Worth, Texas,

for Dad to attend seminary while Mom taught home economics in middle school to support them during this time.

Throughout Mom's life and ministry, she was known for several things. Everyone who ever ate a meal at the Humphries' house would testify that Mom was an outstanding cook. Her cooking drew people to our home and to Wednesday night suppers at the churches Dad pastored.

Mom was also known for her wisdom. Reading the Bible was part of her daily routine, so people would come to her with their problems, and she would counsel them from her experience and from God's Word. When people questioned how she could have taken her young children to a country like Vietnam with a war going on, her response was always that it was safer to be in God's will. She entrusted her family into God's hand. I remember times when mortars or small rockets would hit the city of Saigon near our house, and the explosions would shake our windows. Mom and Dad would take us kids downstairs and put mattresses over us in case our house was hit! Mom was always calm, assuring us and praying.

Mom longed for people all over the world to know Jesus as their Lord and Savior, as she did. After our family returned to the States, Mom became active in the Women's Missionary

Union (WMU), an organization that supports missionaries around the world by enlisting prayer support and educating local churches about missions. Mom dove into this task with great enthusiasm, as she did most things. She loved educating church members about the vital importance of missions in the Christian life. Serving as president of the Texas WMU for two years was truly a labor of love, for it fit Mom's personality well. She was able to communicate her heart's desire that people around the world know and experience the saving, redeeming love of Jesus Christ.

The Beginning Signs

Around nine years ago, some changes started to occur in this smart, attractive, and fun person that we all loved and had depended on

down through the years. At that time, my wife Stella and I and our two children were living in East Asia. I was a medical doctor, and we were serving as missionaries with the same mission board my parents had served under. To keep up with our stateside family, we made frequent phone calls. Talks with Mom were special, as we would chat about things going on in our daily lives. But now, Mom began telling me things she had told me just a few days before. Sometimes, she would get confused. My brother and sister told me that Mom was having trouble with her memory, and I recognized the signs—the beginning, slow, onslaught of Alzheimer's.

Three years later, my family returned to the U.S. and settled in Tyler, Texas, where my parents lived, as did my brother, Mark, and his family. Mom and Dad were still living at home,



*Mary visits with
Vietnamese friends*



*During COVID, Matt and wife Stella visit Mary
through the fence at her nursing facility*



and it was still a happy place. Mom was often misplacing things and spending a lot of time looking for her keys and glasses. Always a good driver—sometimes reminding us of her excellent driving record: “I have never gotten a ticket”—she began getting anxious while driving and was much less confident than before. Once she was driving and hit another car with the left front part of her car. We got the car fixed and about two minutes after leaving the repair shop, I got a call from Mom. She had had another accident with a dent in the exact same place that had just been fixed! After that, she did not drive again.

Faith and Fading Memory

As Mom’s memory continued to decline, her doctor confirmed that she had what we all suspected—Alzheimer’s disease. Things that Mom could do naturally before, now became stressful to her. Planning and preparing a meal and going to the grocery store caused anxiety as she would get lost in the grocery store and forget what she was shopping for. During this time, my father was also ill, having episodes of fever with no strength for several days. So, Mom and Dad moved into an independent living facility in Tyler. Mom was very happy about this, as she no longer needed to shop and prepare meals, and there were activities in this facility that she could be involved in. She loved to share Bible verses

with other residents, and everyone seemed to love her. On Sundays, we would pick her and Dad up and take them to church, which they both really enjoyed because they could visit with their friends.

After two years, when Dad’s health declined to the point they needed assisted living, they had to move. With fewer activities at the new facility, it was harder on Mom. Her memory had declined some, but her cheerful personality remained the same. She had always been a walker, and walking seemed to help relieve her anxiety. She would walk many times around the building both outside and in the halls and was known as “the lady who walks.”

Six months before my father passed away, both Mom and Dad moved into a memory care unit. Mom seemed less anxious when she was near Dad. So much of her life had been devoted to serving alongside my father, and in his later years, taking care of him. The night the hospice nurse called to tell me that Dad had passed away, I told Mom and she looked sad, but was calm. I will always remember her lovingly looking at Dad and then tenderly kissing him goodbye on his forehead. She had been his lifelong partner and was truly devoted to him for as long as he lived.

Losing her life partner was not easy for Mom, although by this time her memory was not good. When

we came to visit her, she would often ask where Dad was. With her memory failing more, and with Dad gone, her anxiety began to increase, especially in the evening hours. She still walked, but she often needed anxiety medication. Though Mom's memory was failing, her faith remained strong. When any of the nurses or aides seemed worried about something, Mom would quote Philippians 4:6–7 to them: *“Do not be anxious about anything but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”* Later, when Mom became anxious, one of the nurses or aides would quote this verse back to her. It was amazing that in the months near her death, when Mom could not remember what she told us 30 seconds before, she could quote the 23rd Psalm confidently and rapidly without making a single mistake.

Music had been a big part of Mom's life, and it was a great comfort to her up to the very end. My sister, Tracy, would often play the piano, and Mom and other residents of the memory care unit would gather around and enthusiastically sing old hymns such as “The Old Rugged Cross,” “I’ll Fly Away,” “Because He Lives,” and “Victory in Jesus.” Dad had loved to sing these songs too.

The Pandemic Changed Everything

About six months after Dad passed away, a new challenge struck that has affected countless lives across America and the world—the COVID pandemic. Before COVID, my siblings and I and our families would frequently visit Mom. With COVID came restrictions so that we could not go into the assisted living facility to visit her. We could stand outside the fence of the facility, wearing a mask and keeping a distance, and see her when she came out to the back yard of the facility. After moving into memory care, one of the residents got COVID, and we could not see Mom at all. She would sometimes have to stay in her room and was not able to even walk in the halls of the facility. We got phone calls about her increasing anxiety and agitation from the staff, and we got many phone calls from Mom! She had her cell phone, and there were many days when she would repeatedly call one of us and repeat the same things she had told us just a minute earlier. Sometimes when she called, she was frightened and said that people were out to get her. She was upset, and we could not go into the facility and comfort her or even see her! This was a very difficult time for her and for us. Even today, it brings tears to my eyes.

Another move for Mom turned out to be a great blessing. Tracy was

working with several assisted living facilities in Denton, Texas, that had memory care units, and she got permission to move Mom to one of the facilities there. Since Tracy worked for them, she could visit Mom almost every day, and there were quite a few activities for the residents. Initially, Mom seemed traumatized from the isolation she had suffered, but after several weeks, she seemed a lot happier, especially getting to see Tracy often.

For several months things were going well, but Mom's Alzheimer's began to progress more rapidly, and we started seeing some pretty big changes. She could always recognize us up until the end of her life, for which we were very thankful, but she could not remember much else. She became more anxious and near

the end of her life would walk up and down the hall repeatedly saying "Help, help!" One week before she passed away, she told her nurse that she was ready to see Jesus. She had a stroke a couple of days later and rapidly declined after that. She became more unresponsive, and a few days later passed away.

Saying Goodbye

Mark was working in the Dallas area during the last few days of Mom's life, so he was able to visit her every day. Tracy was there with her the entire time until she died. My family and I came to Denton on the day she eventually passed away. She was being kept comfortable by meds given by the hospice nurse. We spent some time with her, and I was able to pray with her one last time. Not long after that, she went to be with the Lord and to be reunited with my father.



Mary and Jim with their children and grandchildren

Mom's funeral service was indeed a celebration of her life and all that the Lord had done for her and for all of us. Missionaries who served with us in Vietnam were there. Women she worked with in the Texas WMU were there. Family, friends, and church members were there. A good friend of ours, who is Vietnamese, spoke at the funeral. He said that if Mom and Dad had not answered the call of God to go to Vietnam, he and his family may not have become Christians. They may not have moved to America, where they have lived for many years and raised their families. Today they are active members in a Vietnamese church in Houston.

I am so thankful that my parents loved God above all else. They obeyed Him, and loved each other, their family, and others with the kind of love that only comes from God. May we follow their footsteps which lead to Jesus. *"In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world"* (John 16:33b). ■



Matt Humphries practices medicine at the Bethesda Health Clinic in Tyler, Texas. He and his wife, Stella, served as missionaries in East Asia for 15 years. They have two sons, Timothy and Jonathan.

Some Lessons Very Hard

by Ron Harris

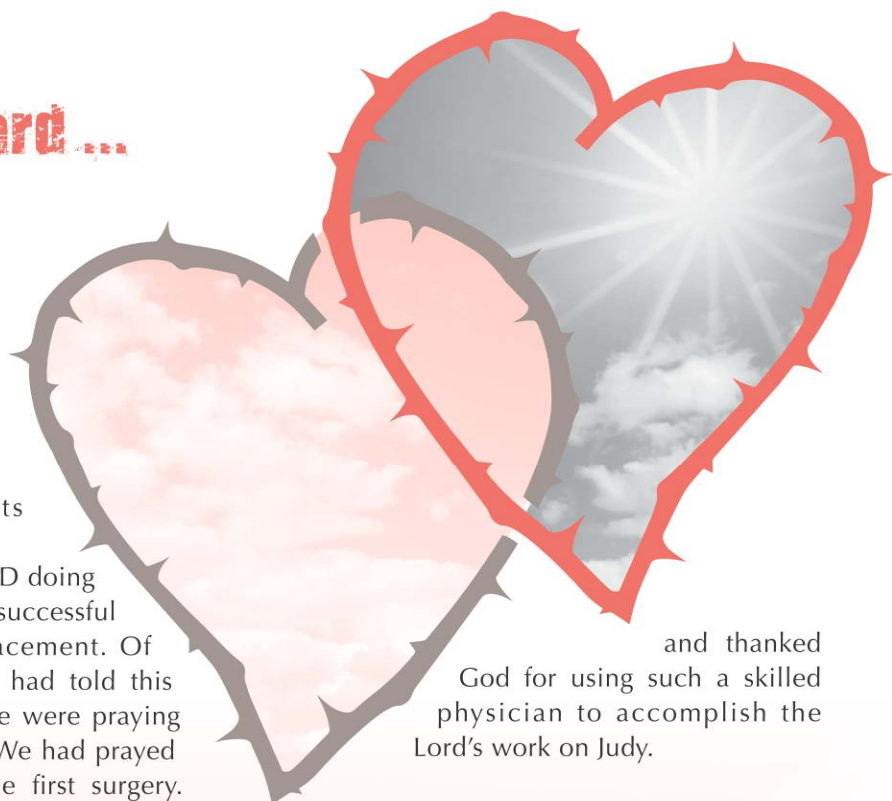
Some lessons are hard—very hard! And, for a believer, these lessons underscore what we know to be true: God's ways are not our ways.

It will soon be a full year that my sweet wife, Judy, has struggled physically. Four hip replacement surgeries in eight weeks. First, it was a very successful surgery. But even though Judy was being careful, the evening she got home from that surgery, she fell and shattered her femur, the bone attached to that titanium hip. When I heard Judy fall, and when I saw her on the kitchen floor, the only thing I could say was, "O God, O God!" It was a time the Holy Spirit had to interpret my cry into a meaningful prayer.

Judy's orthopedic surgeon would later say, "She shattered the femur—and did a really good job of it!"

The surgeon, who is from India, was concerned about getting all the bone

are Hard...



fragments
back in
place AND doing
another successful
hip replacement. Of
course, I had told this
doctor we were praying
for him. We had prayed
before the first surgery.
Then, I asked where he was
from in India. When he told
me Chennai, I quickly told him there
was a man in Chennai, one of our
ministry partners, who was praying
for him. He was surprised.

Two days later, this excellent
doctor performed the second,
more complicated surgery. When
he came out to the waiting room,
his first words—after assuring me
that Judy was fine—were, “I think
Someone was guiding me during that
procedure.” I assured him that this
was true and asked him if I could pray
and thank our Lord for that guidance.
I put my arm around this good man

and thanked
God for using such a skilled
physician to accomplish the
Lord’s work on Judy.

About two weeks later at a follow up
appointment in the doctor’s office,
I had one of my scariest moments.
As Judy got up from a wheelchair to
get on the exam table, she fainted.
The doctor and I grabbed her and
got her on the table. My wife was
not responsive. She wasn’t breathing
properly. I called her name again and
again. Finally, she took a big breath
and began to respond. And I sighed
a prayer.

A trip to the ER followed where they
tried unsuccessfully to put the hip
back in place. It was the same later
in the day in the operating room. And
that led to the third hip replacement.

Some Lessons are Hard... Very Hard...

Just a few weeks later, Judy seemed to be doing well. But getting back into bed one night—something she had done over and over—she heard her hip pop. It was dislocated again. Surgery again. The fourth major surgery in eight weeks.

Total it up: five hospital stays (including a rehab hospital), four ambulance trips (all in two months), then the long process of physical therapy to get Judy back to full mobility.

When we got Judy home, everything had to be relocated to one floor of our house since she couldn't climb stairs. It was through those early days that we recognized Judy was experiencing times of confusion. The medical teams and our primary physician all attributed it to the multiple surgeries and the anesthesia, or the antibiotics, or pain medication, or... We all felt she would get past that as time went on.

What else could possibly happen? Well, in February, Texas was hit with some of its coldest winter days ever. Water pipes froze and burst, flooding many homes, including that one floor we were living on. Two to three inches of water flooded that floor, and we were forced to move into a hotel to stay while our house was pretty much totally rebuilt. None of us expected it to end up being a stay of over six months. Only recently have we been able to move back home.

As the days went on, it became obvious that the confusion and brain fog Judy was experiencing was something more than just the result of medications. In April, while I was in Ukraine holding a media training conference, it became clear that Judy's confusion was becoming more severe. That entailed another trip to the emergency room. Tests and scans revealed that there was excess fluid on the brain, and it was pressing in and causing a form of dementia. The term is hydrocephalus. By God's grace, we were led to a gifted brain surgeon who performed a procedure to take care of that problem. Like a miracle of God, Judy's mental capacity returned to normal, and she is gaining more and more mobility. A day or two after the brain surgery, I was able to tell her, "I've got my wife back."

Through it all, God has been teaching us. These have been hard lessons for Judy and me—but powerful lessons.

As I have shared this story of our life, I have not done this for sympathy or pity for Judy and me. At every turn, through every trial, we have seen God's hand at work. I could tell you of miracle after miracle we observed even in the midst of very hard days. Again and again, we could declare, God is good!

One of the main lessons we have learned is that our Lord's ways are so far above us.



Judy at the hospital



Ron and Judy

“Oh, how great are God’s riches and wisdom and knowledge! How impossible it is for us to understand his decisions and his ways!” (Romans 11:33, NLT).

I had multiple opportunities to pray with the medical team that was taking care of Judy. One physician assistant was from Laos—a Buddhist. As we got to know him, we asked him to our church Christmas program. He came and brought his wife and children. He told me he was excited, since his children had never been in a church, only in a temple. They heard the story of God’s love that night. A seed was planted.

We discovered that the Lord was giving us assignments all during these days. The assignment to interact with people we would not otherwise meet and to reflect God’s love to them.

1 Peter 3:15 says we should be ready to share with others the source of our hope. I was able to share with many of the medical personnel we met though this ordeal our thanks for them—but that our ultimate hope was found in Jesus.

Multiple times, we saw God bring people across our path and into our lives that we would never have met without the trials we were experiencing. A building contractor working on our home—we prayed for him. He accepted our invitation to come to our church Palm Sunday service. He brought his wife and two teenage boys. They heard the gospel. Seeds were planted.

Hotel people where we lived for six months became like family. We prayed with—and for—several of them. They brought us flowers and

handmade cards, thanking us for the joy we brought. And we told them where our joy comes from. Therapists, home health people, and many others. It was amazing to see the Lord at work in this way.

We learned another lesson—one we had known theoretically but were now seeing “up close and personal.” Through the years, we have sung this hymn:

“Turn your eyes upon Jesus.
Look full in His wonderful face.
And the things of earth will grow
strangely dim
In the light of His glory and grace.”

Now, the more we understood that the Lord was bringing us new assignments, the less we thought about our “problems.” The more we used these unusual encounters to share our hope in a loving God, the more our afflictions diminished. We came to understand these trials were God’s opportunities to let His love and grace be reflected into the lives of people we would never have met were it not for our struggles.

The things we faced this past year have come nowhere near what the Apostle Paul dealt with throughout his life. But we understand much better his perspective about afflictions.

“For our present troubles are small and won’t last very long. Yet they produce for us a glory that vastly

outweighs them and will last forever! So, we don’t look at the troubles we can see now; rather, we fix our gaze on things that cannot be seen. For the things we see now will soon be gone, but the things we cannot see will last forever” (2 Corinthians 4:17–18 NLT).

A hard lesson? Absolutely! Not one I would want Judy or me to have to go through again. But we have a real sense of joy that God can use our “light afflictions” to bring glory to our Lord and allow us to share our hope with those He brings into our lives.

*“...the things of earth will grow
strangely dim
In the light of His glory and grace.”*

To God be the glory! ■



Dr. Ron Harris is the president of MEDIAAlliance International, a ministry that trains and mentors Christian media leaders around the globe. His wife, Judy, is a piano teacher and an accompanist at First Baptist Church, Dallas. Judy and Ron are active at First Dallas in many areas. They have four adult children and eight grandchildren.

My friend's church held altar calls at the end of Sunday services. Becoming weary of my friend's urgings, I went forward to pray with a church leader. I mumbled a prayer that included asking God to "make me good," but most of all, I just wanted to go home. The deacon with whom I prayed must have discerned that there was something lacking in my intentions, and he pulled me aside after the service to share some Bible verses with me. I nodded in assent to everything he said, but I really did not understand. He sent me home with some verses to meditate on.

The next Sunday, my emotions were overwhelmed with a sense of dread, combined with anger at my friend who kept urging me to make a public profession of faith. During the altar call, I again went forward and prayed in tears. I was afraid of hell and was concerned about the souls of my parents, who did not go to church. My tearful prayer must have sounded convincing because the church leaders presented me before the church with others who had come forward, and I was baptized shortly thereafter.

Though I believed myself to be a Christian, was accepted into membership at my friend's church, and had been baptized, I still had little desire for the things of God. Before long, I stopped going to church, and our family moved to another state. After my parents

divorced, when I was 17, I lived my young adult years in ungodliness. At irregular times I would read the Bible, but there was no desire for holiness. On the contrary, I spent time in bars with people who were living as homosexuals, became a loud proponent of abortion, and was depressed much of the time to the point that I often considered suicide.

When my mother became a Christian in her fifties, she would attempt to witness of the grace of God in Christ to me. But I clung to my sinfulness. I was married at the time but was mostly unhappy. I truly felt that if my circumstances were better, then I would be better. I blamed everyone else for my problems and even turned my anger towards God. In 1997, when the consequences of my sin became unbearable, I attempted suicide. After the attempt—to try to heal emotionally—I moved in with my mom and stepdad. I attended church with them and found the church members to be friendly. They all seemed to be living orderly, comfortable lives, and I wanted what they all seemed to have! So, I made another public profession of faith in Christ, and, for a few months was joyfully active in the church. But in less than a year, I was back walking in my old sinful ways. My profession of faith hadn't resulted in what I considered to be a better life. My circumstances hadn't greatly improved. I had gotten a job that I didn't like, and my marriage had

ended in divorce. So, involvement in the church soon ceased.

The Power of the Word

A few years later, I was on my second marriage and living in Central Florida. The members of a nearby church were going door to door in the neighborhood, and they invited us to church. When they found we were not attending any church, they asked if I had a relationship with God. I told them confidently that I was a Christian, truly believing that I was. They expressed joy and gave me information about church services. All this time, while still harboring anger in my heart towards God, I had a nagging idea that I should be in church and actively living for God. I began questioning if I really was a Christian. Several months after that invite, I began attending this church, became a member, and grew more convicted about the time I had spent apart from God.

This church, Calvary Baptist of Winter Garden, was different from others that I had attended. To be presented for membership, one had to give a testimony to the church deacons. I told them how I had not been in church for a long time and wanted to make things right. I admitted that I had not been living for God but that I had made a public profession of faith years ago. One of the deacons, in asking for clarification, gently said "So, you came to the point where you realized that you are a sinner deserving hell and that Christ died for you?" The words "deserving hell" alarmed me, but I nodded in assent. They allowed me to join the church, but I was offended by the thought of "deserving hell." I thought to myself, "I'm not that bad!"

But those words haunted me. I kept thinking of my inconsistent walk with God. I was troubled by the parable of the soils where Jesus likened the seed that fell on stony ground



Patricia and Michael

to “the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away” (Matthew 13:20–21, ESV). And I trembled at the verses in Matthew 7:21–23 about those who proclaim Jesus as Lord and yet fail to enter heaven.

During my time at this church, someone introduced me to Ray Comfort’s evangelical ministry (Living Waters/Way of the Master). Watching one of the evangelical videos produced by that ministry, I began to feel convicted of sin in a way I never had before. Both my church and Ray Comfort’s ministry faithfully used the law of God (as Jesus and the Apostle Paul did) to bring about the knowledge of sin (Romans 3:20) and to bring sinners to Christ (Galatians 3:34). For example, in the videos, Ray would interview people on the street, asking them about the ten commandments. If someone insisted that they hadn’t murdered anyone, Ray would remind them that Jesus likened unrighteous anger towards a brother with murder (Matthew 5:22). If someone admitted to lying and tried to justify themselves by saying “Everyone does it,” Ray would remind them that God’s standard is the one by which we will be judged, and God proclaims that all liars have their part in a lake of fire (Revelation 21:8). I began to realize that I was a

When the Cross of Christ Starts to Make Sense

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murderer at heart and that I would stand before God a condemned criminal! The cross of Christ started to make sense to me! Christ died in my place, taking the punishment that I justly deserved for breaking God's holy law, and Christ rose again for my justification.

When I considered my guilt before God, the circumstances of life seemed to grow pale in comparison with enduring an eternal hell apart from the gracious Lord and Savior who gave His life for me! While I still had some unanswered questions about the things of God, my thought had become "I am not going to wait until I understand or agree with it all—I need God's mercy now before it is too late!" I prayed for God to forgive my sins and to grant me understanding in His good time. It was then, around the year 2012, that I became a true Christian.

Not too long after being born again, the circumstances of this present life actually grew worse. My second husband moved out and filed for divorce, and a year later, my elderly dad who had been helping me with expenses, died. Yet, through all these troubles, I would not leave my Savior! He had granted to me eternal life, and I understood that there was life in no other name (John 6:68; Acts 4:12). God had been very gracious to me, showing great patience with me all these years!



A Relationship That's Eternal

My church family was a great help to me during these trying times. I eventually moved back to North Florida, living with my mom again briefly before the Lord provided me a job and rental housing in the Saint Augustine area, and united me with a new church where I could serve. At this church, I met a man who is now my husband, with whom I worship my God and Savior Jesus Christ. There are still trials in my life. My life is not perfect. However, now that I have an eternal relationship with the Creator of the Universe, I can trust His wisdom and receive His strength to face whatever the rest of my days may bring. This present life is a vapor (James 4:14), but life in Christ is eternal. The sins of this world seem to be ever multiplying, but take courage, fellow Christian soldiers! Remember this fact: Our God is a saving God! If He was willing to save me, He can save anyone. To Him be the glory forever and ever! ■



Patricia Manucy lives in Northeast Florida with her husband Michael and works as a bookkeeper and IT tech for a local crisis

pregnancy center. She and Michael are active members at Community Bible Church and enjoy studying the Bible together.

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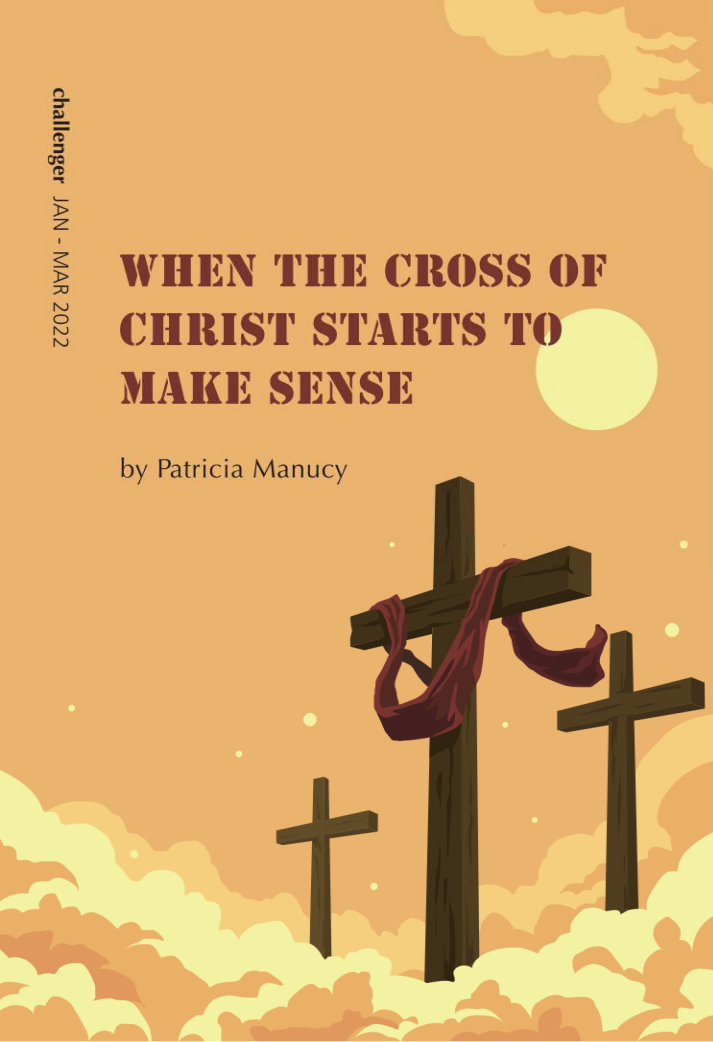


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WHEN THE CROSS OF CHRIST STARTS TO MAKE SENSE

by Patricia Manucy



A Nod Toward Believing

Though I was not raised in a Christian family that went to church, I did not doubt that God existed. I believed that all people were headed to either heaven or hell. As a preteen, due to a friend's insistence, I attended her church and went to youth meetings. But I dreaded those times. I had a real sense of fear while I was there.



(Continued on page 19)

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