

He Intends Victory



*Real-Life
stories of
Christians
living with*

HIV/AIDS

*& how Jesus
touched
them.*

by Dan Wooding

Foreword by Sheila Walsh

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Of Christians living with AIDS

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He Intends Victory
8 Pasteur
Irvine, California 92618
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Foreword

I have a friend who works in the leper colonies on the border between Thailand and Cambodia. A church was established as God has begun to move in the lives of those forsaken people. My friend has put flesh and blood on the gospel of Jesus Christ. He doesn't say, "Let me tell you how Jesus loves you." He says, "Let me show you." I asked him once what he considers to be the greatest change he has seen in the lives of these men and women. Without hesitation, he said, "Now, they can look you in the eyes. God has restored their dignity."

We live today in a generation of excess and abandon. Everything became permissible, and now, all across our country, there are wounded lives behind closed doors. When I was co-host of the 700 Club at the Christian Broadcasting Network, I received a letter from a fifteen-year-old boy. He told me he was gay, that he had had several homosexual lovers, but that he wanted to leave this lifestyle and live in a new way. He had watched the program the previous week and had prayed with me to give his life to Christ. I said on the show that if you had prayed and surrender your life to Christ, then tell someone and get involved in a good local church.

The following Sunday, full of joy and excitement over his new life this young man went to a church in his neighborhood and, at the end of the service, he went to talk with the pastor. He shared a little of his story and was told, "There's no room for 'fags' in this church."

He was writing to me to say goodbye. What I told him sounded good, but it didn't work in the cold, hard world. There was no address. I could only pray for God to be merciful to this broken boy.

AIDS is a deadly condition that has or will touch many of our lives. How will we respond? Some of the people you will meet in this book—or in your life—are victims of a blood transfusion or have partners with a double life. Others have fallen prey to this plague though lifestyle choices.

As a Christian, I believe the cause is irrelevant because the call remains the same: Love unconditionally as Christ has loved us.

Will we embrace the "lepers" of our day and see their dignity restored as their broken lives are bound up by the love of Calvary? Who will show them this love—you and me? We can spend the next year hiding away in our comfortable corners talking about the love of God, or we can follow the example of Pastor Bruce Sonnenberg who you will meet in this challenging book by Dan Wooding. We can get involved in the lives of those who need to be touched and held. We can let them see how Jesus loves them.

Sheila Walsh

Introduction

Jonathan's Rejection

Jonathan is eight. He has bright eyes and a brilliant smile. He also has AIDS. Infected when just eighteen hours old through a blood transfusion, Jonathan has learned to live with his mortality and is looking forward to "seeing Jesus and being made all better." Seeing your child struggle with AIDS is obviously a tremendous struggle. His mother, Sheila, sought support and acceptance from the churches in their Rocky Mountain community, knowing she could not continue to handle the stress alone. Three churches responded in the same way. "You may come to church, if you leave your son at home."

Hurt by rejection and unable to deal with the daily demands of AIDS, Sheila and Jonathan found compassion and mercy outside the church. As the epidemic expands, support groups for families dealing with AIDS are being formed so these critical needs can be met, but most of them are being organized by non-Christians.

"AIDS is a challenge unlike most others the 21st Century American church has faced," says Shepherd Smith, founder of Americans for a Sound AIDS/HIV Policy based in Washington, D.C. In his "The Church's Response to the Challenge of AIDS/HIV," Smith says, "Although the problem is enormous and multi-faceted, it grieves us to think that even one brave boy who loves Jesus has been turned away by the church. The tragedy is that there are thousands of Jonathans across the nation (around the world) whom the church has feared and rejected."

Smith goes on to say, "In contemporary society the demands on the local church are great and AIDS is often seen as just one more demand. But experts tell us that ... every person will know at least one individual infected by HIV. That means every church in the United States will ultimately have to address the issue."

My First Meeting With Herb Hall

The inscription in the brand-new Bible said it all. Herb Hall had written, "To Dan Wooding from Herb Hall. **He Intends Victory.**" Herb Hall heard a weekly broadcast I did with Austin Hill on KYMS radio in Orange, California, in which I had explained that my car had been broken into and my Bible had been stolen. Within hours, Herb was at my office in Garden Grove with a new Bible that he "felt led of God" to give to me. As I looked into the sparkling eyes of Herb, I was immediately impressed with this young man and his caring attitude.

A few months later, that Bible accompanied me to Essen, Germany, where I worked as a writer/broadcaster with Billy Graham for his historic Mission Europe crusade. The veteran crusader for Christ was conducting the most far-reaching mission of his nearly fifty years as an evangelist. Each night, Mr. Graham's sermons were interpreted into 44 languages and were transmitted by eight satellite up-links to 1,400 venues across Europe in fifty-six countries, including many in the former Soviet Union.

One of those interpreters was from the former Soviet republic of Georgia. He expressed his deep desire to own an English Bible, so I handed him Herb's Bible and a copy of Herb's incredible testimony, which you are about to read. Now, thousands of miles from Herb's home in Southern California, a Georgian Christian is being blessed by Herb's kindness.

My friendship with Herb led to Mike Hylton, who lived a victorious life in Christ, despite suffering from an extraordinary set of problems that would drive most of us to black despair. Then, Pastor Bruce Sonnenberg from The Village Church of Irvine came into my life. This loving cleric has set an example of Christ's love that

prompted me to want to write this book which I trust will impact your life as no other book, except the Bible, has ever done.

AIDS First Discovered

According to the Center for Disease Control in Atlanta, Georgia, AIDS was first described in June of 1981 as “an unusual disease that was causing primarily young homosexual men to lose their ability to fight off otherwise common and non-harmful diseases.” GRID (Gay Related Immune Deficiency), as it was first called, soon took the name of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome or AIDS. It was shown to affect anyone who was either sexually or through intravenous means infected by some agent, which caused the immune system to be compromised over time.

The causative agent for AIDS was a virus first discovered by Dr. Robert Gallo, an American, and Dr. Luc Montagnier, a Frenchman, who called their discoveries HTLV1 and LAV, respectively. Ultimately, the virus became known and is recognized today as the Human Immunodeficiency Virus, or HIV. After the discovery of the virus, a test for detecting its presence was soon developed. By understanding the properties of the antibodies the body produces to defend itself against HIV, scientists were able to establish its presence.

The discoveries of the virus and the tests for its antibodies have allowed us to understand a great deal about the modes of transmission, the progressive nature of infection, and the devastating effect it has on the body over time.

A Worldwide Epidemic

“Once the discovery of this disease was made in the early 1980s, scientists sought evidence of where it had originated to better understand its transmission characteristics, as well as gain insight into how to treat it and end its spread,” said Americans for a Sound AIDS/HIV Policy. “As information came in increasing amounts to the Centers for Disease Control, it became apparent that the United States was not the only country struggling with this newly discovered disease. Cases in Europe were soon identified and traced mostly to Central Africa. It is now believed that in all likelihood the HIV virus originated in Africa and has existed there for a number of decades.

“Because of urbanization and international travel, as well as expanded land and air communication links within developing countries, people infected with the virus had great mobility and were able to spread it not only within their own borders, but from nation to nation, and from continent to continent. The actual location of the virus origin may never be known, and it is an issue that deserves a great deal of speculation. At this point, energies may be expended in dealing with an ever-increasing epidemic of dramatic proportions.”

Many first heard of AIDS when movie star, Rock Hudson, died from complications of the disease. Hudson was followed by a string of celebrities like the famed pianist, Liberace, and Freddy Mercury, lead singer of the British group, Queen. As many in the church stood on the sidelines, stars such as Elizabeth Taylor and Elton John who was devastated with the death of his young friend, Ryan White, took up the cause of AIDS in the media.

Symptomatic AIDS is really the final stage of a disease process, which begins long before we see people who are physically ill. We now have glimpses of what the HIV epidemic looked like prior to our first recognizing symptomatic carriers in 1981 because of blood samples saved for other reasons. The most noteworthy study is what is known as the “Hepatitis B Cohort of San Francisco”.

In 1978, the public health community enrolled 6,800 homosexual men in San Francisco in a study of the spread of Hepatitis B. They saved the blood serum samples and were later able to go back and examine each of them after an antibody test for the AIDS virus (HIV) had been developed. What they found was quite remarkable. In 1978, three percent of that cohort was already infected with HIV. It grew to twelve percent in 1979, and by 1981 when the first AIDS cases had been discovered, 36 percent of that group were already infected. Astonishingly, nearly 80 percent of these men eventually became HIV+ and today most of them have died.

HIV is a slow-acting virus and those infected may not show symptoms for up to ten years from the time of infection. Consequently, the HIV epidemic today is mostly unseen because individuals who are infected with the virus do not yet have symptoms. Millions upon millions of people have been infected and died all around the world. Today's HIV infection has become the AIDS pandemic of the future. It is a truly deadly condition.

Dan Wooding
ASSIST
Garden Grove, CA

Chapter One

THE WORST OF TIMES

Herbert Hall

The Dark Side Of The Hall

Herb Hall's heart thumped wildly in his chest as he prepared to reveal his terrible secret. What made it so difficult was Pam, his best friend, looked so lovely as he gazed across the table of a restaurant in Garden Grove, California. The terror he felt had multiplied because he was facing what was to be the saddest, yet most courageous moment of his life.

It had been just a few months earlier he had thought about proposing marriage to Pam. As far as Herb was concerned, he wanted nothing more than to marry this person whom he loved more than anyone else in the world. In spite of that, taking a deep breath, he launched into his tragic monologue that would change their lives forever.

"Pam, there is something very, very serious I have to tell you," he started hesitantly, a mustache of sweat appearing on his upper lip. "There is a dark side of my past I've never told you about. I've brought you here tonight to tell you, and to give you some news you must hear." By now the color in his face was high and rising like the morning sun.

Pam shot him a quizzical glance. What on earth was he going to say? "Herb, let's enjoy dinner first and we can talk about things later," she said.

"No, we've got to talk about it now, because it is very, very serious," he persisted.

"Well let's at least order our food first," she said gently. "Then you can tell me what you have to say." Pam felt she needed to "buy" some time.

In The Beginning

Herbert Ray Hall was born on April 21, 1956, in the small midwestern town of Chetopa, Kansas. With a population of just 1,600, it was a long way from the city of Garden Grove in Orange County, Southern California. Garden Grove, which is home to more than 120,000 people of just about every nationality, is also the location of Robert Schuller's glittering Crystal Cathedral and Herb's new hometown. Herb, the youngest of six children, had four sisters—Judy, Margaret and twin sisters, Jeanne and Janice—and one brother, Mike. The twins were born April 10, 1955, and he was born April 21, 1956. "So my mom had three of us within a year and eleven days," he recalled. The winters in Chetopa were long and cold and the summers hot and humid.

Herb's first clash with misfortune took place when he was only two years old. He tripped while running

and cracked his head on the corner of a concrete step. This terrible misadventure blinded him for three days. “They didn’t know whether I would ever get my sight back, but happily it did return,” he recalled. “After that, every time I got hit on the head, I would black out, get nauseated, and lose my vision. It always made me really sick.”

Consequently, as a child, Herb led a sheltered life. “I couldn’t play sports,” he said. “I couldn’t do many things my friends did.” Being a sick and puny kid, Herb felt the “odd man out” in the school activities where being a sports jock was all-important to the girls. “I was in junior high when I started really noticing girls and wanting to go to dances and do all those things junior highers do, but I was always turned down by girls,” he remembers.

Because of this rejection, Herb found all of his school friends were guys. “I started having a physical attraction to them. I knew this was wrong and I really struggled with that, but I said to myself, ‘Well, I sure can’t tell anybody,’ and for all those years I didn’t,” he said.

“Mom was a devoted Christian,” he continued. “My dad was a backslidden Christian and didn’t go to church. We went to a little Southern Baptist church, the First Baptist Church, in Chetopa. I really didn’t want to go, but because of my mother, I went to Sunday School. When I was seven years old, I gave my life to Christ during an altar call by the pastor.” His relationship with Jesus Christ was a deep comfort to this confused child. The Savior was a true friend who did not reject him, like so many of the school kids.

Because of his continuing illness, Herb’s parents took him to the Kansas City Medical Center. Extensive tests were carried out and the doctors discovered he had brain scar tissue from the initial accident. The doctors told Herb’s parents that, because of this brain damage, he probably would not have the mental capacity to make it through high school.

It was while he was a first year student in high school his parents decided to head to Southern California. “Dad just couldn’t support the family in that small Kansas town, and Mom was originally from Southern California. All her family was there, so they decided we would move. That was really a culture shock for me,” he recalled.

All The Lonely People

Suddenly, Herb was thrust from a small town of just a few thousand people where everyone knew everyone else, into a metropolis of 17 million anonymous inhabitants. Even the freeway system that crisscrossed the Los Angeles basin encouraged people to live in isolation, moving from place to place alone in their cars.

“After we moved out here, I continued my lonely lifestyle, except for a few friends I made at the Nutwood Street Baptist Church in Garden Grove,” he said.

Despite the negative prognosis of the Kansas City medics, Herb graduated from high school on the Dean’s List. “I had a 3.0 average all the way through high school, so I really proved the doctors wrong,” said Herb. “God had a plan for my life and that was part of it.” After graduation, Herb went on to Golden West College, a junior college in Huntington Beach, California. Majoring in Administration of Justice, he again graduated successfully.

All the while, Herb continued to struggle with his homosexual desires, but he kept the problem to himself. “I didn’t do any better communicating with young women in Southern California than I did back in Kansas,” he remembers sadly.

Herb’s misfortunes continued while he was at Golden West. “I was involved in a serious car accident,” he recalled. Herb was driving home one stormy Sunday afternoon, the streets awash with water. He peered through the windshield as the wipers arched back and forth, vainly swatting at the steel-gray curtain of rain that tumbled out of the sky. Herb was in the left-hand turn lane. He happened to glance up. He saw the terrifying sight of an out-of-

control semi truck coming right at him. The vision froze as if it were a freeze-frame in a motion picture. The only thing Herb could remember was screaming out, “God, help me!” The semi came across two lanes of traffic and hit his car head-on, sending Herb careening and skidding out of control into a nearby cement block wall. In the shuddering impact, Herb’s head hit the jagged windshield. Pain called for his attention, but it was faint and far away.

He killed the car’s engine and sat for a long moment as his heart hammered in his chest. He shook his throbbing head and spots danced before his eyes as he tried to take in his close confrontation with death. Besides a nasty head injury, he also suffered back trauma. “I had three witnesses to the accident and every one of them said, ‘You should have been killed.’ One couple said they were doing forty miles per hour in their car when the truck had passed them like they were standing still. They had said to one another, ‘He’s going to end up killing somebody.’”

“Another person, who stopped at the light, saw the truck coming out of control. He ran the stoplight to get out of his way, but unfortunately I didn’t see him in time. The fact I survived the accident really showed me God had some purpose for my life.”

Despite this setback, Herb went on to California State University, Fullerton, where he got his Bachelor’s degree in Criminal Justice. He secured a part time job with Sears as a security officer, but he was still struggling with his feelings of homosexuality. “I also had other jobs, and all during these times I remained straight,” said Herb. “I am sure my colleagues didn’t suspect the turmoil going on in my life. After all, I didn’t act in an effeminate way or anything like that. I was really just behaving like an ordinary person. I am sure none of my family or friends had any clue of the sexual desires I was struggling with.”

Herb’s First Encounter

At the age of twenty-one, Herb finally succumbed to his desires. “I went into a Garden Grove ‘adult’ bookstore and I got involved in pornography,” he recalled sadly. “I watched some homosexual movies and, as I walked out of the place, a guy approached me and made a pass at me. That was really all I needed. I had my first homosexual encounter that night.”

Conscience-stricken, Herb went home. As a Christian, he knew what he had just done was wrong. “I felt really dirty. My heart was completely broken, and in the privacy of my bedroom, I prayed, ‘God, I’ll never do this again. Please help me to get over this,’” he said. “At the same time, I said to myself, ‘Hey, if I go and tell my family, friends, and the people at the church, they are not going to have anything to do with me.’ I was so afraid my church would kick me out. I told myself, ‘I’ll have the strength never to do this again.’”

It did not work out the way Herb had hoped. For the next ten years he felt an overwhelming compulsion to keep returning to the adult bookstores that dotted that seedy portion of Garden Grove Boulevard. “I got more deeply involved in pornography. Every time I went to one of these adult bookstores I would meet somebody, and I’d have a different sexual encounter each time. I would get into a car with him and we would drive to a neighborhood park, and do sexual acts and stuff. Once in a while I would go to a guy’s house.”

Herb’s sexual partners were usually anonymous. “I didn’t know these men and, usually, they were just one-time sex affairs. After about nine years of this, I was with one man who asked, ‘Have you ever heard of the bath houses?’ I said I hadn’t, and he said, ‘There is this bathhouse in Long Beach. If you will drive me down there, I’ll show you where it is.’”

“We drove there and I discovered it was a place where men go and have multiple sex partners. I paid the ten-dollar entrance fee and they gave me a membership card. Then you handed over eight or nine dollars each time you went back. They showed homosexual movies and had side rooms where people could go. I went to this place

for about six months. Each time—afterwards—I would feel really dirty. I still can hardly believe I got involved in something like that." Herb found his double life of trying to be a Christian and then performing unnatural sex acts with men, was tearing him apart.

"I had been in the life for about ten years and desperately wanted to break free," he recalled. "Anybody close to me still had no clue about my dark secret. My family, friends, and church just thought I was 'straight as an arrow.' They were not aware I was living a double life."

Because Herb was such an accomplished actor, nobody ever challenged him. "When I wasn't working, I went to church every Sunday," he said. "I would also go out with my straight friends from church most Saturday nights. We'd go to the movies and then afterwards, get something to eat. I had four or five really close friends, and they never had a clue of what I was doing. They never knew I was struggling with homosexuality. To them, I was 'straight' and since I worked security jobs, I appeared to be macho. I think it was really my friends that kept me going. If it hadn't been for them, I think I would have ended my life."

After a decade of living his double life, he found he couldn't cope anymore. In sheer desperation, he cried out to God, saying, "Lord, I can't live this way anymore. I don't want to be homosexual, and if my friends or family or church discover my secret, I'm dead. I'm going to take my life."

Herb went home from his job one bleak Saturday morning; determined suicide was the only solution to his agony. He had been prescribed "a whole bunch of pills" for depression and his constant headaches. In his bedroom at home, his eyes blinded with tears, he picked up a pen and wrote out a quick note to whoever would discover his lifeless body.

With trembling hands, he scribbled, "My life isn't worth living," and then downed a complete bottle of pills. With that he lay back on his bed at his parents' home and waited for death to come, to blot out the ceaseless pain.

As he began to slip into eternity, he heard the incessant ringing of the telephone in the kitchen. It was his former boss at Sears who had become concerned about Herb's depression when he worked there.

"She was a Christian and she knew I was really going through tormenting times and struggling with my job, though she didn't know about my homosexuality," said Herb. "My mom answered the phone and I vaguely heard her say, 'He's not feeling too well and he's in bed, but I'll see if he wants to talk to you.'"

Unaware of the life-and-death drama being played out behind the wall a few yards away, Mrs. Hall knocked at the bedroom door and said, "Herb, Nancy's on the phone, would you like to talk to her?" Since he did not answer, she entered the room. Suddenly, her eyes got as big as saucers as they fixed on the empty pill bottle and the suicide note.

She ran out of the room, told Nancy what she had discovered, and quickly called for help. The paramedics were soon on the scene working feverishly on Herb. They induced vomiting and rushed him to a nearby hospital. "I was admitted as a 'fifty-one-fifty,' the welfare institute's code that said I was a danger to myself," said Herb. "They put a seventy-two-hour psychiatric hold on me."

"God Can Deliver You"

One of his first visitors was Tony Britton, the pastor of the Nutwood Street Baptist Church. As he sat and gazed at Herb's ashen face, he said, "Herb, I don't know what you're struggling with. I don't know what your hurts are. I don't know what your pain is. But I do know God loves you, and He can forgive you for anything you've

ever done. He can deliver you from the hurts you've been carrying.”

For the first time since beginning his double life ten years before, Herb began to open up. “I told him about my homosexuality,” recalled Herb.

Herb was surprised at the pastor's understanding tone. “Well, Herb,” he said gently, “you know, we can get you help, and we will pray for you. God can deliver you from this problem. God can really help you and change your life for good.”

“After I was discharged from the hospital, I went through counseling for three years and God completely changed my life,” said Herb, his face now alight with joy. “During those three years, I was completely delivered from the homosexual lifestyle.”

Love At First Sight

For the first time in a decade, Herb Hall began to feel optimistic about his life. Then came an added bonus, “I fell in love with Pam, this wonderful woman at our church,” he said. “After a year, I knew I loved her so much. I vowed someday I would marry her.”

By this time, AIDS had been on the scene for a while, and Herb was aware he should be tested before he got married. Still, it held no terrors for him. He said to himself, “Hey, I'm a Christian. There is no way I can have AIDS.” So in October of 1989, he went in the Orange County Health Department in Santa Ana, California, and underwent the HIV test.

“There was a two-week waiting period after your blood was drawn, then you went back and they told you whether you tested positive or negative. A week had passed since the test and I was working in security for McDonnell-Douglas in Long Beach, California. One day, I got really sick and collapsed on the job.

“I was unconscious when they rushed me to the hospital. When I came to, I told the doctor I had taken an HIV test. He said, ‘What were the results?’ I said I didn't know—I hadn't gotten them back yet.’ His response was, ‘Well, your blood work is really looking good’ so he gave me a sense of hope that I wasn't HIV positive and the collapse was due to other causes.”

The Test Results

After being released from the hospital, Herb got up the courage to return to the Orange County Health Department for the results of his anonymous testing. It was now near the end of October 1989.

As his mother drove him to the Health Department a peculiar foreboding hung over Herb and nothing could alleviate this strange nervousness. “We stopped in front of the building and prayed together as we sat in the car,” Herb recalled. “Then I went in to get the results. For some reason, I knew in my heart the test was going to be positive, even though I tried to deny that terrible feeling.”

Herb gave the nurse his number and she said, “We're going to take you to this little room. Somebody will be in soon to go over your test results with you.” His heart was pounding unmercifully as he sat in the room for about five minutes. Then the door opened and a nurse entered clasping his file. “Mr. Hall,” she began, after clearing her throat, “I'm sorry to tell you your test came out positive.”

Herb's heart sank on hearing his death sentence—HIV-positive! The words echoed painfully in his mind.

The swiftness with which his world had dissolved was like a black pool of murk engulfing him. Tears stung his eyes and his face flushed crimson. "I did not know what to say," he recalled. "I managed to silently stumble out my response. 'God, this isn't fair. I've given my life back to You. I'm serving you. I've left that lifestyle and now this!'"

What also hit Herb then was his family and most of his friends from the church, didn't know anything about his past life. What was he to do?

"I knew I would have to tell everybody that not only had I been in a homosexual lifestyle, but that I now had AIDS," he said. "My mind became a blur." Herb was overcome with an overwhelming sense of futility and loneliness. Unable to comprehend the news, Herb shouted at the nurse, "The test is wrong! I want you to take it over again!"

Understanding his anguish, the woman explained the procedure that was used to test the blood. "They sent it through several other tests that came up positive. The tests are 99 percent accurate. There is no way we could have made a mistake with the tests. I'm really sorry, sir, but we know you are positive." The nurse said, "I want to give you a packet of information. It tells you about support groups and it tells you where to go for medical treatment."

To add to the humiliation of the moment, the nurse asked him, "Could you provide us with a list of everybody you've been with so you could notify them you've tested HIV positive?" Herb responded that he couldn't because "most of them were just one-time anonymous encounters."

Herb stumbled past the crowds of people at the health center and headed toward the car where his mother was waiting in anxious silence. Tears blinded his eyes as he climbed in and bleakly told her as the blood drained out of his face, "I've tested positive." His mother began to cry and between their heart-felt sobs, they both prayed God would somehow bring some good from this terrible predicament.

Herb set up an appointment with his personal doctor to have further blood tests done. "We're going to draw your blood, and check your T-cells," he told Herb.

At the time, Herb did not know anything about AIDS or what T-cells were. "My doctor explained that our T-cells are our immune system," said Herb. "He said they're what fight viruses and stuff that come into our body. When I went back about two weeks later to get the test results, the doctor told me, 'Herb, your T-cell count is only 170. An average person has a count of 1,200 to 1,500 T-cells. You're probably only going to live one more year.'"

It seemed to Herb the terrible news was never-ending. Only one year left to live! "This was back in 1989, so we have come a long way since then," he said. "But in 1989, this MD really didn't know a lot about AIDS." Still, Herb Hall faced an intolerable web of circumstance.

The Prodigal Returns

This latest setback made Herb decide that for whatever time he had left on this earth, he would never again be a phony. "I immediately went home and told all of my family," he said. "I gathered my parents and brother and sisters together and shared my terrible news with them."

He stated, "I'd lived that lifestyle for ten years. It had been a life of being a phony in everything. I am not going to live the life of a phony anymore. I'm going to tell people where I've been, what I've done, and that I have AIDS."

One by one, his family stood up and hugged him. The unlikely prodigal had returned to the fold!

Chapter Two

THE BEST OF TIMES

Herb thought his heart would break as he waited to tell Pam his terrible news. She sat quietly as they ordered their food. “Okay, Herb, tell me what you have to say,” she said, sipping from the glass of iced water. “I’m all ears.”

Herb took a large gulp of air, pushed his hair back with a nervous hand, and began—his face flushed with pain. “Pam, as I have already said, there has been a dark side about me that neither you nor anyone else knew about.”

There was a long awkward silence, but Herb pressed on, his voice barely audible over the noise of the restaurant. “You never knew that for ten years I led a double life,” he said. “I became hooked on homosexual pornography and eventually got involved in that lifestyle. I ‘went’ with a number of men whom I met outside adult bookstores.”

“I continued going to church, but this problem overwhelmed me and I was very weak-willed. Then, three years ago, I recommitted my life to Jesus Christ and came out of living that lie. God delivered me completely and, as you know, I fell in love with you. You are the most wonderful person I have ever met. I love you more than you will ever know.” By now, Pam’s eyes had begun to tear, but she never spoke.

“The worse part of this is that I have tested positively for AIDS. I went to get tested so I could ask you to marry me. Now we can’t be married or have children,” he said, his voice cracking hoarsely with emotion. Herb clasped his hands on the table and stared down at them.

Pam looked at Herb with stricken eyes and began to sob quietly, but was soon able to compose herself. She wasn’t feeling sorry for herself, but for her dear, dear, friend.

She marshaled her strength and wiped the tears from her face with a small, crumpled handkerchief. Finally, she told him in a hushed voice as her lower lip quivered with emotion, “Herb, you know I care about you no matter where you’ve been or what you’ve done. You will always be my friend. I will always be there for you. You can count on me to stick by you.”

For Herb Hall, these were the sweetest words he had ever heard. He reached across the table and gently touched her hand.

A Step Further

After the get-together with Pam, Herb decided to take his honesty one excruciating step further. He went to see Tony Britton at the Baptist church. “Tony, I want to go public with what has happened to me,” he told the pastor. “I want to tell the whole church.” The pastor was all for it.

“He called all the deacons and everybody together and we set up a Sunday night meeting so that I could share my story,” said Herb. “Before that I met separately with about ten of my best friends and I told them my news in advance. Each of them was sympathetic and reached out to me. They really showed me love and compassion. Naturally, they were shocked. They hadn’t had a clue as to what had been going on in my life.”

“That Sunday night, I went before the church. I told the whole congregation about the life I had been living, and how God had changed my life. I explained I had been out of ‘the life’ for three years, but I had been tested for AIDS. I was positive.”

One person got up and walked out of the church. “You know, he just couldn’t handle it and he never came back. Everyone else was supportive,” Herb said. “Many people came up to me afterwards. They were crying and they hugged me.”

Despite the support he was receiving, Herb began to feel a dragging sense of bewildered desolation concerning this situation, which he could not understand. He began searching for Christian support groups for people who were HIV-positive, but in 1989, there were none to be found. The only functioning groups were for homosexuals with AIDS, and he was unwilling to attend one of those because he knew he had been delivered from that lifestyle. He did not want to be back into that environment. “I’ve been clean for three years, and I don’t want to go back to that type of life,” he prayed.

“So I struggled with what to do. For a year, my friends really helped me get through, but I was depressed most of the time,” he recalled. “I was really moody, then after a year, my life again started to fall apart.”

He began to feel that his friends didn’t want him around anymore. “I wasn’t being invited to the activities that I used to attend,” he said. “Several of my friends got married and I could not realize at the time that their lives were changing—they were getting married and starting families. I just thought, ‘Hey, because of this disease, they don’t want me to be around any more. They’re not inviting me to parties and other functions because I have AIDS. They just don’t want me to be there. I just figured they hated me. I had become unplugged from those I loved and fell into a mood of bleak despair.”

To add to his woes, Herb began to believe he would be laid off from his job at McDonnell-Douglas due to cuts in the aerospace industry. His colleagues at the aircraft company were unaware he had AIDS, but they suspected he had a terminal illness after he had been admitted to the hospital and was away from the job for several weeks. “Before the lay off, they really reached out to me,” he said. “They gave me a position in the company that I could handle so I could continue to work. They were really super to me.”

The day the ax fell, his boss called him at his post in the parking lot and said, “Herb, we’re sending a car over to pick you up. We’re relieving you of your duties, but I want to talk to you.” Fearing the worst, Herb was driven over to his office. “Herb, I’ve heard some rumors that you have a terminal illness. Legally, you know, I can’t ask you what your illness is,” said his boss, folding his arms across his chest.

Herb remained silent.

“You have been a really good worker here. People really like you,” he continued. “Is it true that you are seriously ill?”

“Yes,” was all he could stiffly stammer out.

“Well, I just want to tell you this company will do everything possible to help you to continue to work,” he stated.

Relieved that he still had a job, he muttered a heartfelt, “Thank you,” to his boss.

He was then driven back to where he was working, but about an hour later, the phone rang again. It was the same man. “We’re sending another car over to pick you up,” he said. Herb’s heart skipped a beat. He thought, “Oh no, this is it. They’re going to get rid of me now.”

He returned to his boss' office where the man explained, "After you told me that you were really sick, I called the union steward and I also called the chief. They came to my office and we told them about your problem. There is a clause in the union contract that if a person is ill and the union and the company agree, we can give you a special position to help you out," he pressed on. "We're willing to do that. I also see you had a request for weekends off so you can go to church." Herb had asked for Sundays off, but it was about a year-and-a-half wait to get weekends off, as they had to go by seniority. "I think that is really needed," his boss said. "Starting this weekend, you'll have weekends off. You'll work the day shift—you know, Monday through Friday, and we will put you in a lobby."

Another reprieve. Again, he breathed a sigh of relief. "They made the job really easy for me," said Herb.

It was another year before Herb again felt he was about to be laid off. The news in the press was not good. The "Peace Dividend" with the former Soviet Union meant that the defense industry would suffer and the lay off would become inevitable.

The Approaching Ax

As the ax approached—and with the feeling that his friends had turned their back on him, Herb again began to believe that the only way out was to take his own life.

"I felt my friends didn't love me anymore," he said bleakly. "It seemed to me they didn't want me around, so I was really down."

At this low ebb, feeling weariness heavy with him, Herb decided to end it all with a gunshot to the mouth. "I carried a gun at my job so I knew I had the weapon to finish it all." He vowed, "Today I will take my life. My life is no longer worth living."

Herb lived in Corona, California at the time, about thirty minutes away from where he worked.

"When I drove home on the Riverside Freeway that day—it was Memorial Day weekend of 1990—I vowed that I would kill myself," he said

In one desperate plea for love and understanding, he called a young woman from his condo that was in the fellowship. The quarter tinkled down into the slot and the telephone began ringing at the end of the line. As she answered, he told her, in a discouraged voice, "Alicia, today I'm going to end my life." With that he hung up. Then he called Judy, his sister and told her the same thing.

"I got out of my condo in Corona because I knew they would call the police," he said. "I left my wallet at home so they couldn't identify me when I killed myself. I took just enough money to be able to go to a hotel with my gun," he said.

"I got in my car and I was driving on the freeway when, for the first time in my life, I felt God spoke to me in a verbal way," he recalled. "It was like the Lord said to me, 'Herb, when are you going to give your life to Me, one-hundred percent? When are you going to trust me for what I'm going to do in your life?' I'd never had the Lord speak to me that way before."

He drove off the freeway and stopped at a gas station where there were two pay phones. "I again called my sister and said, 'You know, Judy, I'm going to go check myself into the psychiatric ward of a hospital.'"

Judy responded, by asking, "Herb, where are you? I want to come get you."

“No,” he said insistently, “I’ll just drive myself there.” Then he asked Judy to call Alicia, give her the telephone number where he was and have her call him.

As he anxiously waited, a man pulled up to use the telephone. The man started to pick up the phone on which Herb was expecting his call.

“Excuse me, could you please use the other phone, I’m waiting for a call,” Herb said with tears in his eyes. The man turned to Herb, and said, “No problem.” Then he saw the tears streaming from Herb’s pained eyes. “There’s something wrong, isn’t there?” he suggested. “I’m a Christian and I work at a Christian radio station,” the man said in a deep, sonorous voice that suggested he was a broadcaster. To Herb, in his hour of need, God had just sent him an angel to take care of him.

“He stayed with me and prayed and talked until my sister arrived,” said Herb. “This man gave me his card but I ended up losing it. I never saw him again. I don’t know if he was an angel—whether he was real or not, but I do know that God had sent someone there to help me.”

Herb spent a week in the hospital as God began to deal with him. “I got out of the hospital and Pam called me. ‘Herb,’ she said, ‘I was listening to KYMS (a local Christian radio station) and I heard this pastor talk about a brand new HIV/AIDS support group they are going to start at his church—the Village Church of Irvine.’”

Pam gave him the telephone number and called. He reached the pastor, Bruce Sonnenberg. Bruce said, ‘We’re having our first group meeting this Thursday night.’ I attended the meeting along with three other people. I was touched that night. I remember asking Bruce, as I got ready to leave, ‘Bruce, how come you would start a support group like this?’ Bruce proceeded to tell me about a family that attended a church.

“A husband and a wife had a son whom they found out was homosexual and had AIDS. The son went to a different church in a different area and when the son told his church that he had AIDS the pastor said, ‘You’re not welcome here anymore.’ Bruce’s heart was touched and he went back to his congregation. ‘Jesus always reached out to the least, last, and lost,’ Bruce told the congregation, “and we will always be a church that reaches out like Jesus did. We will reach out to people with HIV and AIDS. If you agree with me, will you stand?” Bruce said time seemed to stand still as he waited for their response. The whole congregation stood.

“Bruce said the Lord put it on his heart to start an HIV/AIDS support group. At the time, Bruce was on the board of directors of the Orange County Rescue Mission and there were two or three people staying at the mission who were HIV positive. Bruce knew them, so he really had a heart to reach out to people with HIV and AIDS.

“When I went in the room that first time and met Bruce, it was like I had known him all of my life. He was so loving and so caring, it was just incredible. I had really never ever met a pastor like that. At first I thought, ‘Hey, churches and pastors don’t want to do anything with people with AIDS because they are so fearful—people are afraid they can contract AIDS by casual contact, by hugging somebody, you know, being in the same room.’ I expected Bruce to be like that. He was the total opposite.

“Bruce wasn’t afraid. He wasn’t afraid of being in the room with us knowing that we had AIDS. We went around the room that night and everybody gave their names and shared. We all shared how we contracted the disease. It was very interesting because I was the only person in the room that had contracted it through homosexual contact. The other people in the room had contracted it through drug use. Although everybody had the disease, I was worried everybody else in the room would hate me because I had been homosexual. But that really wasn’t the case. It was a neat time that night finding out how other people got the disease, sharing that we were all Christians and that we loved the Lord. After that meeting we started meeting every week at the Village Church.”

For Herb Hall, the years of exile were over. He was free at last!

Chapter Three

A GROUP OF TICKING TIME BOMBS

“I’m sorry to tell you,” said Bruce in his soft Californian accent, “George passed away last night.” It was a familiar announcement for the tightly knit HIV-positive group. “But, guys, remember the good news. He is now with the Lord. Let’s at least rejoice at that.”

Wry smiles creased the faces of those who were all too aware of the ticking time bomb inside their finite bodies. Taking care of each other was the key to the success of the support group; and as time went by Herb’s vision for a greater opportunity to minister began to form.

“One day, Bruce invited Don Smith to come to one of our meetings,” said Herb. Don had founded the Naaman’s Fellowship (named after Naaman, the leprous “Gentile” commander of the Old Testament) a Christian AIDS ministry in Long Beach. He shared that in his younger years he had been addicted to alcohol and prescription drugs. In time, he had given his life to the Lord and he went to the Union Rescue Mission in Los Angeles.

They helped him with his addictions, and Don ended up washing dishes and generally helping at the mission. He stayed with them for ten years and eventually he was appointed to the board of directors.

During that period, Don had seen many people with AIDS dying on the streets. Then, to bring home the horror of the disease, he had a really good friend, an addict, who was diagnosed with AIDS even though he had been clean and sober for a couple of years.

“Don watched helplessly as one after another died a terrible death,” Herb continued. He took the vision back to the mission and said, ‘we need to do something. These people, dying of AIDS, have no place to go.’”

So, the Union Rescue Mission gave Don Smith a grant and he initiated the Naaman’s Fellowship. Herb became a part of the outreach and was on their Board of Directors for two years. Besides providing accommodations, the fellowship also advised churches that didn’t know what to do with HIV-positive people in their congregations.

One Day At A Time

Herb was grateful to still be alive, despite the doctor’s prognosis and now he wanted to get even more involved with others suffering from this devastating disease.

“God had worked in my life,” Herb remembers. “And what was really neat was that over that year (after I went through severe depression, and saw that I was not going to die), I made a wonderful group of new friends,” he said. “I really love my old friends, but I had kept my eyes focused on them. I had all my hope in my friends and I was afraid of losing them. I believe God knew what was happening. I now know He doesn’t take something away from you that he doesn’t replace with something better.”

“I have more friends than ever, and God has placed many great people in my life. He has changed me. Today I live one day at a time.”

“I think of my good friend Barbara Johnson of ‘Spatula Ministries’ who had a homosexual son. They were estranged for many years and she started a ministry to help parents who struggle with having children who are homosexuals.” Herb says he likes to quote Barbara Johnson who has said, “Yesterday is a canceled check, tomorrow is a promissory note, but today is cash.”

He stated, “I’m happier now than I’ve ever been in my life. People don’t understand that. They ask, ‘Herb, how can you be so happy knowing that you have AIDS; that you may die soon?’ I respond by saying, ‘Because I’m a winner any way I go. If I die today, I’m going to be with the Lord and I’m going to have a brand new body. If God leaves me here, I’m going to continue sharing the Gospel and sharing His love with other people.’”

“So, today, I live the best days of my life! I wouldn’t change it for anything because of the walk I have with the Lord.”

The Time Is Now

Herb was beginning to feel it was the time to change churches. However, it was a big decision for him, as he had been attending the Nutwood Street Baptist Church for about twenty-three years.

“I prayed about leaving my church and going to the Village Church of Irvine. But, for a year God appeared to shut that door. After a lot of prayer, Herb spoke with Bruce about everything that was on his heart. “You know, Bruce, there are no other Christian support groups for HIV-positive people in Orange County,” said Herb. “I really believe we should start a non-profit organization to help people with this problem. I also feel the Village Church of Irvine has the vision to reach HIV and AIDS patients in Orange County,” he said. So he asked Bruce to pray “that God’s will be done.”

Bruce said without hesitation, “Herb, I spoke to the elders about you just last night.” He also shared with them the vision to start a then nameless ministry to the rejected AIDS community. “The elders want me to tell you they support you one hundred percent, and they are willing to let the ministry use office space, the phones, and the computers here at the Village Church,” he continued.

These heartening comments were a confirmation from the Lord and Herb felt it was time to move his church home as well. “Bruce,” said Herb, with tears welling up in his eyes, “I want to be a part of a church that is supporting our ministry and doing what this church is doing.” Bruce reached over and hugged Herb and Herb knew he had finally come home!

“It has been incredible the way the Village Church reached out and loved me,” said Herb.

He said his last day at the Nutwood Street Baptist Church was tinged with much sadness for him. “The pastor announced I was leaving the church to go to another to start a new ministry,” said Herb. “Several members who had supported me all along in the ministry told me, ‘Herb, we will continue to pray for you and support you.’” To this day they have. “As a result of their prayers and support I have seen God work mightily.”

He Intends Victory

The He Intends Victory ministry was finally launched in 1992. Herb had been “wracking his brain” for a name for the ministry. “I have a good friend, Mike Hylton, who’s a hemophiliac. He was the ones who came up with the name “He Intends Victory” for HIV,” recalled Herb.

“Mike is a devout Christian,” added Herb. “He has a lovely wife and three children. Mike blesses me and

touches my heart because he got the HIV virus through the blood supply. Mike did nothing immoral or anything like that to get the disease. If anybody should be angry it should be Mike, but Mike loves the Lord. He says, 'I know God has a plan to do something special with my life through all of this.' We asked Mike to be on our Board."

Mike McIntyre, another Village Church member also shared the vision and became the treasurer. "Since then we have added several more Board members including Jennifer Veary, Renee Austin, Terry Duffy, wife of radio talk show host Warren Duffy, and Dan Davis." The author also counts it a privilege to be on the Board. Four Board members are HIV positive.

He Intends Victory was established to lead the Body of Christ toward a compassionate, balanced, informed ministry to the HIV/AIDS community. He Intends Victory has a three-part statement of purpose:

- 1) To promote a spiritual awakening and faith in Jesus Christ as a living personal God within the HIV/AIDS community. Some do not know Jesus Christ and are heading at breakneck speed into a Christ-less eternity. "This," says Herb "is an opportunity for the church to act. We bring a strong message to the church that AIDS is not a plague—it's an opportunity. Our number-one focus is to share the Gospel with the least, the last, and the lost the way Christ did when He was on earth."
- 2) To educate and support churches and Christians in outreach opportunities to their HIV/AIDS members, their families, and the local community. "Most churches today," said Herb, "have turned their back on people with HIV and AIDS. Not because they don't care, but because of fear. We really believe that if we can educate the church to the fact that the virus is not casually transmitted and they don't have to fear the individual, then we can help the church set up AIDS policies. That way, they'll be able to do what God really wants them to do."
- 3) To provide a loving Christian witness at HIV/AIDS meetings, events, and conferences nationally and internationally. "We believe," Bruce Sonnenberg says, "that the Christian Church has on many occasions failed to reflect the heart of Jesus Christ toward those affected by HIV and AIDS because of fear, ignorance, or critical judgment. This must change. He Intends Victory has been created to answer and act upon the vital question: 'What would Jesus do?'"

"In one year, I saw ten people with AIDS give their lives to Jesus Christ before they died," Herb adds. "They are now with the Lord. It has indeed been a true miracle of God to see how He has allowed us to reach out to others."

Chapter Four

THE LEAST, THE LAST, AND THE LOST

Herb Hall certainly practices what he preaches, literally. He was ordained through the Village Church of Irvine, and he spends hours each week visiting dying AIDS patients, witnessing and ministering to them. The saddest part of his ministry, Herb says, is “seeing people die without accepting Jesus Christ as their personal Savior.” But, he has also witnessed many others make that life-changing commitment, some within hours or days of passing away.

Herb recalls one phone call from a lady who told him, “My friend Mike is dying of AIDS.” She asked if Herb would come see him. “He was in the last stages of AIDS and weighed only about eighty pounds. He looked like a skeleton. When I arrived, the girl who took care of him, said, she was going to go run some errands and would be back in about an hour.’ When she left I started telling Mike about my life and testimony and shared the Lord with him.”

After about an hour, Herb asked his new friend, “Wouldn’t you like to ask Jesus Christ into your life? Wouldn’t you like to have a completely new and different life and have peace as well?”

The dying young man looked up at him, tears streaming down his emaciated face, and said, “Herb, I can’t.” Mike responded, his voice cracking with emotion. “Three years ago, when I was well, a friend shared Jesus with me. I didn’t ask Him into my life then. I am sure God doesn’t want me now that I’m sick.”

“You know, my friend,” Herb said. “When Jesus was crucified, he hung between two thieves. One of them cursed and mocked him and called him every name in the book, but the other thief turned his head and said, ‘This man has done nothing. We got what we deserved. We’re criminals. We’ve killed people. But this man doesn’t deserve this punishment.’ And he said, ‘Jesus, when you come into your Kingdom, would you remember me?’ Jesus turned to that thief and said, ‘Today you will be with me in paradise.’”

Herb explained to Mike, “If that wasn’t a last-second decision, I don’t know what was. Jesus loved that thief, Mike, and He loves you today just as much as the thief two thousand years ago on the top of Calvary Hill.”

By now Mike was quietly weeping. “Please, Lord Jesus,” he said in a faint, weak voice, “come into my life and forgive me for the terrible things I have done.”

A Transformed Life

“For the last three months that he lived, Mike’s life was completely transformed,” recalled Herb. “I was only able to see him a couple of times after that, but on each occasion, he’d say, ‘Herb, I have Jesus in my heart, and I’m at peace!’”

When Mike passed away, Herb asked the girl who had been taking care of him how long she had known Mike? “About a year,” she said. This dedicated woman went on to tell Herb the story of how she and Mike had started a new job at the same time with the same company. “We became good friends and occasionally I would talk to Mike about the Lord, but he was involved in the New Age Movement,” she said. “He was into crystals and

pyramids and everything that goes with New Age thinking.”

One day, Mike got really sick and was rushed to the hospital. “I continued to visit him for about two weeks,” she recounted. “At first he wouldn’t tell me he had AIDS, but one day Mike opened up and told me the truth. He said, ‘I don’t want to die in a hospice all alone.’”

Sensing she needed to take immediate action, she talked to Mike’s dad, and he agreed to pay for an apartment for Mike. She quit her job and took care of Mike for a year. “If that’s not Christianity in action, I don’t know what is,” Herb said soberly.

Mike’s “caretaker” had the radio in the apartment tuned to a Christian radio station. “Do you think one of those pastors would come see me?” he asked her one day after listening to the steady ration of pious preachers.

“Over a period of a year, I called sixteen churches and never got a response from any of them,” she told Herb. When he heard this, Herb was heartbroken. “I know that Jesus would never have failed him like that,” said Herb. “He never turned his back on those who needed Him. In fact, just the opposite—He sought them out.” That was when she called the Village Church and spoke with Herb for the first time.

After he had given his life to Jesus Christ, Mike was forever changed. He asked her, “Please take all these pyramids and the crystals and throw them in the trash. They don’t work.” She was glad to report that she happily complied with his request. When each of his friends called on the phone, he would tell them proudly, “I have asked Jesus Christ into my life.” As she opened the shades each morning, Mike would say, “Please sing to me, ‘This is the Day That the Lord Has Made,’” which, of course, she did. “His face lit up with joy as I sang that dear song,” she told Herb.

Herb went on to state, “When I think of Mike today, I know he no longer has AIDS. He has a brand new body and he’s with the Lord Jesus Christ. I realize that we are all sinners saved by His grace. None of us is worthy, but it’s only through the blood of Jesus Christ that we can be saved. He bore the ‘price’ on the cross for our sins. Mike is now rejoicing in heaven. What an incredible thought!”

AIDS hospices in Southern California have become a second home for Herb Hall. “I visit people suffering with HIV and AIDS, and tell them, ‘I’m an ordained minister and I have AIDS myself.’” That latter comment inevitably gets their attention.

“I don’t ask how they got AIDS nor do I share the Gospel with them initially,” Herb explained. “First, I want to become their friend. After I’ve been back two or three times, most, people will ask me, ‘How is it you’re coming here to see me?’ Then I tell them, ‘Not only do I live with the same disease you do and know what you’re going through, but I’m also a Christian.’ I’m able to share the Gospel with many people.”

The Panda Bear And The Bible

At one facility in Garden Grove, Herb regularly visited a bedridden AIDS patient. “His name was Don and he was really sick,” said Herb, “I remember asking him one day, ‘Don, do you know Jesus Christ?’ Don turned to me and said brightly, ‘Oh yes, I asked the Lord into my heart a couple of days ago.’” He explained that someone had come to see him from the Vineyard Christian Fellowship in Anaheim and talked with him about the Lord. As a result Don had asked the Lord into his life.

“I went in the room one day and there was another patient there with Don. He was able to move around but he was very fragile looking. I asked him his name and he told me it was Michael. I happened to glance over to the nightstand and I saw a Bible on it. Above his bed, I saw a small wooden cross.”

Herb asked, “Michael, do you know Jesus Christ?”

Michael nodded his head. “I used to be a transsexual, but Jesus changed my life,” he said. “I can’t wait until I can get out of here so I can get back to my church.”

“What church is that?” Herb asked him.

“It’s the Vineyard,” he said.

Herb prayed with him that day, and as he got ready to leave, he turned and said, “Michael, is there anything you would like me to bring you?”

His face lit up like a lamp. “Herb, I would like a little panda bear.”

And Don added, “I’d like a bag of corn chips.”

“Okay,” said Herb, “when I come back I’ll bring them to you.”

“This was on a Tuesday, and on Friday I went shopping. I bought a little stuffed panda bear for Michael and a bag of corn chips for Don.”

Herb gave the panda bear to Mike and tears welled up in Mike’s eyes. Herb said, “Mike, let’s come up with a name for him.” Without hesitation, he said, “I’m gonna name him, ‘O God,’ because of what God has done in my life.”

Herb had trouble blinking back the tears in his own eyes. “I left that day really touched by the Lord, thinking of the Scripture in Matthew 25, where the Lord, said, ‘[What] you’ve done unto the least of My brethren, you’ve done unto me.’”

The following Monday, Herb got a telephone call from a nurse at the facility who told him, “Herb, I’m sorry to tell you the day after you gave Mike the panda bear, he passed away.”

Herb’s heart sank. “If it had been Don, I could have understood because he was the one that looked the sickest,” said Herb. “Michael had still been able to get around and was doing things. I was devastated.”

The nurse explained, “I didn’t want you to walk into the room and see Mike’s empty bed and have it hit you like a ton of bricks, so I thought I had better call you.”

Herb did return to the room where the two men had lived. “I walked in and the panda bear was still on Mike’s bed,” he recalled. “I looked at the nightstand and Mike’s Bible was still there and the little wooden cross was above the bed. That told me Mike didn’t have any family. When a relative dies, people normally come and take the personal effects out of the room. I took down the little wooden cross. I went to the nurse’s station and asked, ‘Mike didn’t have any family, did he?’ The nurse told me he had a distant relative in Oklahoma, but when they called her she said, ‘Just take his garbage and throw it away.’ That’s what she called it—garbage.”

Herb asked the nurse, “Could I have this little wooden cross? It means a lot to me.” She nodded her head and began to cry. “As I stood there, I said to myself, ‘You know, God, Mike didn’t deserve to die alone.’ The Lord spoke to my heart, ‘Herb, Mike didn’t die alone. I was with Mike when he died and Mike is with Me now.’”

Herb continued to see patients at this facility. One was Mark. Herb shared with him that he, too, has AIDS. They talked for an hour, and when he was about to leave, Herb said, “Mark, is there something you would like for me to bring you?”

He nodded, “Herb, I would like to have a Bible.”

“I’d never had an AIDS patient ask for a Bible before, and I didn’t have the money to buy one,” said Herb. “I knew that KBRT, which is a Christian radio station in Costa Mesa, had been giving away Rainbow Study Bibles as a promotion. I called my friend Tim Berends, ‘Would KBRT be willing to donate a Bible to this guy with AIDS?’”

“Sure,” said the 6’ 7” broadcaster. “Come down and get it.” Herb asked Tim, who co-hosted the Tim and Al show with Al Gross, if he would have all the employees at the station sign it and write a little note to Mark.

“I went that evening,” said Herb, “and picked up the Bible. The staff had filled the front and back of the Bible with little notes and Scripture verses to Mark. I took the Bible to him. He opened it and started to read the inscriptions. Tears began streamed down his cheeks as he exclaimed, ‘These people don’t even know me and they love me.’”

“I said to myself, ‘Surely this was the love of Christ in action.’”

“Will You Help My Friends?”

Herb was a guest on a Christian radio program speaking on the topic of HIV and AIDS. Shortly after it ended, he received a telephone call from a woman named Ann from the San Fernando Valley.

“God just touched my heart when I heard you on the broadcast,” she said. “You see, Herb, I have two friends who have AIDS and I don’t believe they know Jesus. I’m concerned about their salvation. One of them lives here in the ‘Valley’ while the other is in San Francisco. Would you be willing to visit them? I think your testimony would minister to them.”

Herb told the caller that he would “as long as they were open to seeing me.”

It was two years later when Herb heard again from Ann. She reminded him of the conversation and stated, “Herb, my friend Greg, who lives in San Francisco, is near death. I don’t know if he’s a Christian or not, but I do so much want Greg to be with Jesus.”

“Two days later,” Herb said, “Ann and I boarded the plane at Burbank Airport and Greg’s sister met us in San Francisco. She drove us to a wood-framed house. When we entered the house, we were shown into Greg’s room.

“He was a young man in his thirties and was asleep. Curled up, he looked like a skeleton.” Herb asked the nurse who was caring for him to call when Greg woke up. Two hours later, Herb received the call he had been waiting for. He went back in and smiled at him.

“Greg,” he said gently, “my name is Herb. I’m a minister and I too live with AIDS.”

Hardly able to move, Greg looked weakly at him and responded in a voice that was barely audible, “Really.”

With that, Herb shared the simple message of the Gospel with him. “Greg,” he went on, “do you know that you are dying?”

“Yes,” he mouthed weakly.

“Greg, do you know where you are going?”

A smile suddenly swept across his emaciated face. “Yes,” he responded without hesitation. “I’m going to be with Jesus, and you know Herb, I’m ready. I’m so sick I can’t get out of bed or do anything anymore. But, I know I’m going to be with Jesus, and I know I will have a new body. No more pain or suffering.”

Herb found it hard to choke back the tears. He was able to pray with him and he left the room knowing Greg knew Jesus and knowing Greg would soon be with Him. Three days later, Greg was in the presence of his Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

On the plane back to Burbank, Ann asked Herb to visit her other friend Mike in the San Fernando Valley. “When I arrived, I discovered Mike was bedridden,” said Herb. “I spent three hours with Mike. He shared with me the pain he had suffered as a small child when he saw his father die in the street on his police motorcycle and how he had never forgiven God for taking his dad.

“Mike wasn’t open to the Gospel. I shared with Mike the love God had for his dad and him, but his heart was bitter. Still, I was able to share with Mike a few times after that.

“After a year, Mike died. I never knew whether Mike asked Jesus into his heart or not. However, I do know that his friend Ann continued to share with him and minister to him. She was there to the end and we pray that in those final days and hours Mike made the decision to ask Jesus into his life.

“I will never forget the impact that Ann has made on my life. She forgot about herself and her own needs and unselfishly gave of herself to share the good news of Jesus Christ. She not only gave of herself but also her time and financial resources. What an example to us all.”

Open Doors

“I am thankful for the way God has changed my life,” Herb said. “I’m thankful for the doors I see Him continually open. Most of all, I am thankful to see people who had previously given up hope, give their lives to Jesus Christ. I see their lives change.”

Herb emphasizes that we are not all called to an AIDS ministry, but as Christians, we are all called to share the Gospel and reach out to the least, the last, and the lost when we have the opportunity to do so.

“I see my own future in a positive light because I know, even living with AIDS, I’m having the best days of my life,” he said. “I know if I were to die this very second, I would be in the presence of God. Even living with AIDS today, I know I have eternal life because I’m going to be with Jesus tomorrow.”

Looking Ahead

One day, Herb and Bruce were discussing Herb’s medical condition. “You know, Bruce,” said Herb, “I’ve only got 53 T-cells left. When I get down to the last one or so, I’ve decided to give each one of them a name.”

“And do you know what you plan to call the last one?” asked Bruce.

“Judas!” said Herb with a grin.

Postscript to the Herb Hall story-

Herb continued to share the Good News up to the end. Twice over the years Herb was diagnosed with just “1 year to live”. And both times he said to the doctor the same thing, “You know doctor, if I die in the next year, I go to heaven. And if I don’t, I’m going to share the hope of Jesus Christ to anyone who will listen. I’m a winner either way!” Herb really is the winner! HIV/AIDS became the vehicle for him to share his love and appreciation for God to everyone that would listen. On more than one occasion he was in a tense situation. He even had people say they hated him because he called himself a “former” homosexual. But he would just turn around with his big grin and say, “God loves you and so do I.” He wanted everyone to know that Jesus loves him or her. We even said once that we should subtitle this book “**Herb Intends Victory**”. We laughed a lot together. He would tell stories over and over and over again. Even if you said, “Herb, you’ve already told me this story, he would just go on until the end anyway.” But that was okay because you knew at the heart of it all was his love for God. Herb even made a video sharing the hope of Jesus Christ to be played at his funeral and chose which Gospel songs were to be sung. His service touched the hearts of everyone present.

Herb went home to be with the Lord on July 11, 2003. In the 13 years that he was involved with **He Intends Victory**, Herb traveled to over 25 countries, spoke on national TV and radio in many of these countries, met Church and government leaders, and shared the hope of Jesus Christ with millions. And as much as we miss him, we know that he is right there next to Jesus singing those old gospel songs.

Herb is survived by his mother, Lois, his 4 sisters and 1 brother and by countless friends all over the world.

CHAPTER FIVE

GOD’S LAN REVEALED

Jennifer Veary

Jennifer Holmstrom Veary was born in September 23, 1964, the youngest of four, in Waukegan, Illinois, a northwest suburb of Chicago. She fondly remembers her all-American childhood, owning horses and living in a house on three acres of land on the outskirts of town. She is proud of her mid-western upbringing and that her parents have celebrated their fortieth wedding anniversary.

Her childhood was “normal and fairly uneventful” according to Jennifer, although her mother was her kindergarten teacher. She chuckles as she recalls the only problem this caused: whether to call her “Mom” or “Mrs. Holmstrom.”

In her school years, Jennifer participated in band and swimming, as well as socialized with her many friends. She graduated from Waukegan East High School in 1982, and decided to pursue a career in nursing at Marquette University in Milwaukee, just one hour’s drive from her hometown.

With a determination to succeed, Jennifer finished her Bachelor’s degree in four years, a feat not easily accomplished at this tough Jesuit University.

“Being at Marquette placed me in a rather unusual situation,” she says. “I had been raised a Methodist, and had attended public schools, but now I was placed in an environment of what seemed to me to be hypocritical Catholicism.”

She witnessed people getting their “ticket punched” by attending mass at the local dorm. “Religion,” she went on, “appeared to not really mean much other than a good education.”

Following her graduation from Marquette in 1986, Jennifer got her first job in the Critical Care Unit at St. Mary Hospital in Milwaukee. “This was pretty unusual. The ‘units’ are typically fast-paced, intense settings, and they usually require you to have a year or two of experience,” said Jennifer.

One of her nursing instructors at Marquette had told her she would “probably never get a job in a hospital” as “homecare is where healthcare is heading.” Despite this, Jennifer worked at several hospitals in Milwaukee, in addition to part-time work as a flight nurse for a local air ambulance transportation company.

Early Landing For Romance

While she worked as a flying nurse she met a pilot named Rex. Within six months they were engaged, but then “disengaged” as Jennifer decided she was too independent “to have a man run my life!”

Jennifer wanted to see more of the country, so she accepted all-expenses paid traveling nurse position in Honolulu, Hawaii. Within three weeks she was sitting on the beach at Waikiki, wondering if life could be any better.

But after six wonderful months in Hawaii, Jennifer decided she didn’t like being so far away from home and her family. “I flew home for a short visit and then drove across country to Southern California,” Jennifer said, “to take a traveling nursing position at Cedars Sinai Hospital in Los Angeles.”

While she was at the famed hospital, she began dating a Respiratory Therapist from Iowa. “Scot had been in a severe car accident in the mid-seventies, had spent six months in a coma. He was not expected to live,” she continued. “Once he had made a remarkable recovery he headed for sunny Southern California.”

Again, though, this relationship began to “fizzle” and she took another traveling assignment at the UCLA Medical Center.

During a vacation break from UCLA, Jennifer and a girlfriend took a holiday to the Mexican resort of Cabo San Lucas. There she met Bob, a man who was a little older than her, and “just happened” to be from Seal Beach in Orange County, California. “Our relationship was, for me, like a dream come true,” said Jennifer. “On our return to Southern California, we continued to see each other. Our relationship was so great our feet hardly touched the ground. Life, again I thought, couldn’t get much better than this.”

So she could be closer to Bob, Jennifer moved to Newport Beach and started another traveling assignment, this time for the University of California, Irvine (UCI) Medical Center.

The Phone Call

“Things were going great in my life when, in January, 1991, Scot from Cedars Sinai called my Newport Beach apartment,” she recalled. “He said he had some bad news for me. Before I could respond he said, ‘Jennifer, I have AIDS.’”

All she could utter was, “Oh my God! Oh my God! Oh my God.” It was the only way she could react to such appalling news.

“I immediately called Bob and asked him to come over,” said Jennifer. “I then phoned Beth, my best friend who lives in Milwaukee, and told her about the phone call. Even though I was a registered nurse, I had no idea what to do next.

“Beth remained level-headed despite my hysterical phone call, and told me I had to get tested to find out if I too had contracted HIV. I knew what I had done had placed me at risk, so I already had a premonition I was infected even though I had not experienced any significant health problems to substantiate my fears.”

Pure Hell

Much to Jennifer’s surprise, Bob stood by her. Together they went to one of the local anonymous testing sites. “The next two weeks were pure hell for me, with my mind racing faster than my body could take,” she said. “I called in sick for a week, and finally quit my traveling assignment due to my own fears.”

Finally, the dreaded day arrived and Jennifer and Bob returned to the testing site to get the results. “The counselor would not allow Bob to be in the room when she gave me the results of the tests, but right afterwards, I opened the door and asked him to come in. He could see from the look on my face it had come back positive.”

Immediately, Bob was tested because he had shared an intimate relationship with Jennifer, and fortunately his results were negative. “He was not out of the woods yet, as he could have been infected in the previous six months and had not seroconverted yet,” she said. “But this was at least a small ray of sunshine in our lives.”

The next six months were spent in darkness, and Jennifer felt her life had crumbled around her. “I didn’t tell my family the news even though I was very close to them,” she said. “The mentality in the mid-west was not

conducive to support my condition, and I was afraid I would be rejected.

“Bob stayed with me during this time, although he didn’t really know what to do to support me other than to love me and stay by my side,” said Jennifer.

The anonymous testing center recommended Jennifer become involved in an Early Intervention Program, where she could determine how advanced the infection was. She was encouraged to discover that her “numbers” were extremely high, above normal, indicating her body was initially reacting to the infection. She gathered hope from this information, and began to look for a job and get her life back together again.

Jennifer interviewed for a job at a Managed Care Company in Huntington Beach, California. Because the company was anxious to get a nurse on the job quickly, they offered her the position, not knowing the battle that was raging within her.

“I started to pick up the pieces of my career, but I was still in denial both emotionally and spiritually,” said Jennifer. “It was hard to come out of this denial period because when I looked in the mirror, I looked like the same person I had always been.”

Beth, her friend from Milwaukee, was a committed Christian, and she supported her and prayed for her constantly during this period. She also made frequent trips to California to help Jennifer come to terms with the disease. During one of those visits, Jennifer and Beth took a walk along the golden sands of the beach at Corona del Mar.

As they walked, Jennifer turned to her friend and asked, “What is it you have that I don’t have which gives you such peace?”

Beth was shaken at the question, but she then revealed she had come to see Jennifer on a specific mission “I wanted to tell you about Jesus Christ, and the power of the forgiveness of the Lord,” she said.

“I was confused,” Jennifer says. “I had gone to church every Sunday as a child, I attended summer camps and youth groups, but I still really didn’t understand.”

After Beth left town, Jennifer began to research local churches, but nothing seemed to jell for her as she listened to the different preachers. Then, while she was visiting Bob in Seal Beach, she went on a bike ride around the town and heard some “wonderful music” coming from within the sanctuary of a church. She found out when the next service at Sea Coast Community Church would be and decided to stop by.

“I felt right at home as soon as I entered the front door,” Jennifer recalled. “The pastor, Doyle Surratt, got up to speak and I was amazed when, during one of the stories, he said he was raised in Mt. Prospect, a suburb of Chicago. I felt I had really stumbled onto something and could not wait to come back.”

After the service, Jennifer excitedly called Beth to tell her she had found a church that had really “clicked” for her. After telling her about the service, the music, and the pastor, they were astonished to discover that Beth’s husband John, had grown up three doors away from Doyle in Mt. Prospect and they had gone to school together in their early years.

“It was then I realized maybe God had a plan for my life,” said Jennifer.

She made an appointment with Doyle and shared that she felt God had placed him in her life. She informed him of her HIV status and how she had not yet been able to tell her family for fear of rejection.

“Doyle supported me and prayed for me and told me his church would not cast me out, but would in fact welcome me with open arms.”

Soon afterwards Jennifer made plans to return home and tell her parents and family about her situation. On a dreary day in October 1992, Jennifer finally sat down with her parents in Illinois and shared the whole story.

“As I shared, I knew I was finally at the point of dealing with it, and I was able to support them. We weren’t all a bunch of basket cases not knowing what to do,” said Jennifer. “I was out of my denial and able to educate them and walk them through the initial shock.

“That night, when I was about to go to bed, my father came to my room and asked, ‘So how long do you have?’ I laughed at the question and told my Dad “he could get hit by a truck on the way to work in the morning”. There was no way to know how long any of us had to live. I told him my counts were normal, the same as his, and I was going to be around for a while to fight this illness.”

By the time Jennifer woke up the following morning, her mother had already told the rest of her brothers and her sister about her long-held secret. “I was amazed at the response of my family. There was a lot of education that took place that weekend. I encountered only love and support, and none of the rejection I had so feared.”

Back in California, Jennifer continued to attend Sea Coast Community Church and eventually committed her life to Christ on April 16, 1993. She was baptized, along with Beth, in the Pacific Ocean by Pastor Doyle.

Jennifer began to attend a heterosexual support group at AIDS Services Foundation (ASF) in Orange County. It was there she met Herb Hall who told her about the Christian support group He Intends Victory which met at the Village Church of Irvine.

“I knew immediately I had found a home,” she said. “It was fellowship with others who were going through the same thing as I was, who also knew the love of God in their lives. That made the difference.”

This gave her the courage to start telling her friends about her HIV status. She was amazed how understanding they were.

Jennifer recently went to visit Scot. She says he looked great, much better than she thought he would, which was absolutely wonderful to see. She felt sorry for him as he felt really badly for infecting her with HIV. “I truly believe if he can see I forgive him, he will also see God can forgive him,” she stated. “There never really was any blame, not towards him nor toward God. I felt this was my lot, due to sin I had committed.”

She now understands the truth of the scripture found in John 8:7, “He who is without sin among you, let him throw the first stone.” She also quotes from Romans 3:23, “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”

Jennifer has now joined the Board of He Intends Victory and continues to be healthy. She is at peace with her life. Her family continues to support her and she also has a support network of Christian friends across the United States.

“It’s hard to believe that my 86-year-old grandfather is amongst my greatest supporters,” said Jennifer.

“God finally had to hit me on the head to get my attention, but look where it has taken me,” she went on. “I have a peace in my heart, and a purpose to my life, which a lot of people never find no matter how long they live.”

Chapter Six

“AS LONG AS WE BOTH SHALL LIVE”

When Jennifer discovered she was HIV positive, she worked as a traveling nurse in an Intensive Care Unit, so she immediately quit her job. “There was a lot of media attention given to healthcare workers being required to notify patients of their HIV status. I felt there was so much going on in my own head, that I couldn’t deal with that whole issue also, so I just quit,” she explained. “After several months, I found a job in managed care where I could still use my nursing skills and education, but did not provide direct patient care. This was one of the first of many blessings on this journey.”

Jennifer also felt torn between her relationship with Bob and with Jesus, even though Bob had supported her through the toughest time so far, getting the news she was HIV-positive.

“I knew in my heart this was not what God wanted in my life, and people should not be unequally yoked,” Jennifer explained.

So, after several years and many difficult struggles, Jennifer walked away from the relationship. She says it was one of the hardest things she ever did, because she now faced the disease on her own, as well as the possibility she would spend the rest of her life alone. Still, she knew all she needed was the love of Jesus to survive.

God had other plans for Jennifer, which began to unfold one day when she was out riding her bike. A man crossed the path in front of her. She did a double take as she thought he looked like one of the men she had seen at church. A closer look made her realize it wasn’t him after all. But all of sudden, thoughts of this man at church flooded her mind. Who was he and what was his story? Jennifer says, looking back, she never felt the presence of God like she did that day.

At church, the following Sunday, she hunted down the man she had thought she had seen during her bike ride. His name was Rusty. She approached him after the service and gave him a big hug! Her explanation took him aback. Jennifer told him she noticed he was always doing things for people and for the church, and never took credit for it, so he “deserved a hug!” They started to talk and found they both enjoyed bike riding. They set a date for the following weekend.

The following Wednesday night Pastor Doyle was chatting with Jennifer. He told her how awesome it was to see God working in her life, and how He could “turn around” such a horrible situation. After the conversation, Jennifer looked around, and saw Rusty. “Oh no!” she thought. He must have overheard! He knows I’m HIV positive!

She wondered if he had overheard the conversation and what his reaction would be. The next day, Jennifer couldn’t stand it anymore, so she called Rusty at home. He wasn’t there. She left a message on his answering machine. “If you know who this is, call me back right away! It’s urgent,” she said cryptically. The following day, the phone rang. It was Rusty. Of course, he had known who it was.

“What is so urgent?” he asked, puzzled about the message.

Jennifer told him, “We need to get together right way. Today. I need to tell you all about my situation!”

They made plans to meet that evening at a local Boston Market. At the restaurant Jennifer got straight to the point. “I need to tell you about my conversation with Doyle the other night. I’m HIV positive, but I’m OK. I’m healthy. And I met Jesus who has given me eternal life!” It all came tumbling out.

Rusty professed he had not overheard the conversation between Jennifer and Doyle. He sat quiet for a

moment, and then shocked Jennifer by saying, “My brother died from AIDS three years ago.”

Jennifer felt her face flush. He knows what this disease is all about, she thought. He’s seen the end of it, and he certainly isn’t going to want to deal with it! They shared a few more minutes of conversation, and then Rusty got paged back to work. “Well, you can cross that one off the list!” she said to herself.

The following week, there was a concert at church. Jennifer saw Rusty sitting in the center of the auditorium. She intentionally sat on the far right, thinking he didn’t want to have anything to do with her. After several minutes, Rusty got up and sat next to Jennifer.

It was, she says, all down hill after that! They fell in love immediately. On Jennifer’s birthday Rusty came to her apartment bearing the first chocolate cake he had ever baked. Then he filled a bowl with warm water and got down on his knees in front of her. He removed her shoes and socks, and washed her feet.

“It was one of the most loving gestures anyone had ever done for me,” she said. “I knew at that very moment that God was working in my life, and had given me this gift. I felt so undeserving!”

Soon after, Rusty took Jennifer and his parents out for an introductory dinner: a chance for his parents to get to know Jennifer. On the way home, Rusty pulled off the road near the ocean. He got out of the car, walked around and opened Jennifer’s door. He opened the glove compartment, and pulled out a small box. He handed it to Jennifer, and asked her to marry him. Jennifer couldn’t express the joy in her heart. Knowing God had a much greater plan for her than she could ever imagine! Next to His son, He had just provided her with the greatest gift of all.

Rusty and Jennifer approached Doyle to tell him they loved each other and wanted to get married. Doyle felt they should wait a year before taking these most important vows, so they began to plan their wedding for the following August 1997.

The biggest hurdle was going to be telling Rusty’s parents about Jennifer’s HIV status. How do you tell your mother, who’s only other son died from AIDS, you have asked a girl who is HIV positive to marry you? The following week, after many hours of prayer, and anticipating the worst, Rusty went to his parents’ home alone. He told his parents Jennifer was HIV positive, and he had asked her to marry him. They were both very happy! Rusty wept tears of joy, called Jennifer at work, and put her on the phone with his mother. She offered sincere congratulations!

Rusty also has two grown children from a previous marriage. His next task was to tell them about his future wife. He told them both over the phone, as they live outside of California. They knew Rusty had suffered a great deal of grief since his divorce two years before, and they had both seen a significant transformation in their father in the past two years, since he had started going to church. He had asked them both for forgiveness for not raising them in a Christian home, and for not being a better father. They were both very happy for him.

Rusty and Jennifer remained faithful to God during their engagement. They felt if they kept their relationship pure, as God had intended, He would be faithful to them in their marriage.

They were married on August 30, 1997. It was a day of great joy for both Jennifer and Rusty. Pastor Doyle performed the ceremony, and Pastor Bruce Sonnenberg serve them communion. When they recited their vows the usual “till death do us part” was omitted. Instead they shared “as long as we both shall live” knowing that each had a life of eternity reserved for them.

After the wedding, the long awaited moment came for Jennifer and Rusty, entering into a truly physical relationship, which would make them one. Jennifer says there was obviously much excitement after their long wait, but also some anxiety, about the fear of transmitting this awful disease to Rusty. But he stated his trust was in God,

and they continued to pray for His faithfulness in their life.

Jennifer says they have used condoms each time they are to become intimate with one another. She says it is an unfortunate consequence of her past actions. “But,” she reflects, “I am truly blessed to even have this relationship, and the love of this man who would literally put his life at risk to share his love with me.”

Another Crisis

In 1995, Jennifer entered a clinical trial at UCLA Medical Center. She had remained healthy until that time, and her blood counts were still relatively high. But she felt that after four years it was time to do something to halt the replication of the virus in her body.

The trial involved one or two medications, or the possibility of a placebo treatment. During the two years she was on the trial, they would reveal her T-cell count, but not her viral load, or the medications she was on. Her T-cell count continued to be stable during this time, and other blood counts indicated she was not on a placebo.

In September of 1997, one month after their marriage, Jennifer learned she had been on AZT and 3TC, and her viral load had remained “non-detectable” throughout the trial. Now, however, her viral load was starting to break through at low numbers, indicating she was starting to develop resistance to these medications.

Jennifer went to her private doctor and informed her of the results of the clinical trial. They decided it was time for her to begin some new medications, a triple cocktail which did not include a protease inhibitor. They would save this arm of medication in case Jennifer were to build up resistance to one of these other classes of medications, thus giving her future options.

One of the medications was Viramune, which has a fairly high percentage of eliciting a rash as a side effect, so for the first two weeks, she only took one pill a day. After that, she increased to the normal daily dose of two pills a day. On the third day of twice a day dosage, Jennifer noticed a rash on her arms. She knew it was probably a reaction to the medication, so she stopped taking it. That was on a Saturday.

That evening, Jennifer developed a fever of 104 degrees. She took Tylenol on and off through the night, and called her doctor the next morning. Her doctor was not on call that weekend, so the office paged the doctor on call. When he called back, she told him about the rash and the fever, and that she had stopped taking the Viramune the day before. He said she had done the right thing, and the only thing different he could do is start her on steroids. Jennifer informed him she had an appointment with her doctor the following morning at 10:45, so she would address it with her then. As the day went on, Jennifer continued to have a fever of 102-104.

The next morning, Rusty realized Jennifer was covered with lesions from the rash. He called her physician right away, despite Jennifer’s insistence it could wait until her 10:45 appointment. Jennifer’s doctor told Rusty to bring her to the Emergency Room right away. Jennifer says it was the first time Rusty learned about the stubbornness of a nurse who knows too much for her own good.

Jennifer was admitted to the hospital with a diagnosis of “Stevens Johnson Syndrome,” which can be caused by a drug reaction. She developed sores and lesions on all of her mucous membranes. She was not to be able to eat due to the sores in her mouth, so she was placed on steroids and IV fluids.

It took several months for Jennifer to recover, and as long as one year later she had problems with scar tissue in her eyes from the lesions. She has been told more than once she is lucky she survived this ordeal, as Stevens Johnson Syndrome has a significant mortality rate, and is known to cause blindness.

After her recovery, Jennifer started another triple drug cocktail. This one included a protease inhibitor. She says she feels great, and her immune system is as an uninfected person. Her last T-cell count was 982, and her viral load remains non-detectable.

Opening New Doors

In January of 1998, just five months after they were married, Jennifer and Rusty went along with Bruce and Herb from He Intends Victory to Vietnam. He Intends Victory had been invited to meet with the National AIDS Committee of Vietnam. This was going to be an extra-special trip for them since Rusty had been stationed in Vietnam during the war.

Rusty and Jennifer described it as a “life-changing experience.” They met several missionaries and the leader of the Vietnamese underground church. They met with the National AIDS Committee and toured a hospital in Hanoi that serves people with AIDS. Jennifer says they do not acknowledge the prevalence of AIDS in their society, and the fact it is transmitted sexually. They think it is only transmitted through IV drug use, which affects very few people on the outskirts of society. Jennifer said she was amazed at the end of the meeting with the National AIDS Committee, when someone stood up and asked what the dosage and frequency of AZT was.

“Here we are in 1998, with protease inhibitors and triple drug cocktails, and they are asking questions we were asking more than 10 years ago,” she said. “It really showed me how fortunate I am to be living in the United States where I have access to the latest technology and treatments.”

Since their return, they have continued to reach out to the Vietnamese people. They are both taking Vietnamese language lessons, and Rusty is teaching English to Vietnamese immigrants at a church in Southern California. Most of the attendees are Buddhist, but Rusty reaches out to them with the love of Jesus. Rusty and Jennifer recently sent some medical supplies to the Red Cross in Vietnam, and made a return trip in July of 1999.

The Healer’s Touch

Recently, Jennifer went to her ophthalmologist for a follow up exam of the scar tissue in her eyes. Her doctor decided, once again, he would need to perform a procedure to remove excess scar tissue. Toxic medication would then be applied to the area to prevent it from reoccurring.

After several weeks, the procedure was scheduled. Many strings had to be pulled for the medication to be obtained and covered by insurance. During this time, Jennifer and Rusty told friends and family about the upcoming procedure, and requested prayer.

On the day of the procedure, Rusty picked Jennifer up from work and drove her to the doctor’s office. They arrived and were brought into the surgical room. The nurses were all set up for the surgery, and Jennifer sat down in the “chair,” with Rusty at her side. The doctor came in. Jennifer told him she had actually been feeling better lately.

He said, “Well, let’s take a look.” They went into the exam room where he could examine her eyes with high-powered lenses. When he was finished, he pulled his chair back and sat in stunned silence for a moment. “What’s wrong?” Jennifer asked. He replied, “Your eye appears to have improved dramatically since I examined it several weeks ago. The inflammation is down, and the lesion of scar tissue is about 1/5 the size it was. The band of scar tissue across the lid that was causing your eyelid to buckle has flattened out. I can’t really see any reason to perform this procedure today.”

Tears filled her eyes as Jennifer and the doctor walked back into the surgery suite. They told Rusty and the nurses that everyone was going home. The surgery was cancelled! Jennifer looked at Rusty and said, “It had to be all that prayer.” Nothing else had changed in the past several weeks except the prayers of their friends and family.

The doctor said, “It was a good thing it took so long for us to get the medication and to get this scheduled.” “Yup,” Jennifer replied. “That’s the way God works to orchestrates His miracles in our lives”. Her faith was renewed and strengthened in the power of the Lord and the power of prayer!

Jennifer remains in contact with Scot, the man who transmitted the virus to her. She said she and her friend Beth have witnessed to him about the love of Jesus and the hope of eternal life. She told him she forgave him, and reminded him it was her actions that put her in the situation to have this virus transmitted to her. She knows now she was living outside of God’s will for her life, and this is the consequence she must bear.

Last year, she contacted him to say hello and see how he was doing. He had just been released from the hospital. He had gone in because they thought he had a bowel obstruction, so they performed surgery. After the surgery, his doctor told him that if he wasn’t willing to do anything to help himself, then there was nothing the doctor could do either.

After the doctor left, he lay there and thought, “If Jennifer can forgive me, how come I can’t forgive myself?” That day, he asked God for healing in his life. He told Jennifer things haven’t been the same since. He had become a Christian! Jennifer couldn’t believe it! He was finally living his life as though he had hope! She describes it as “an amazing transformation.” Jennifer is sending him a Bible on tape so he can still hear the gospel on those bad days when he can’t get out of bed!

Jennifer can hardly believe how good and faithful the Lord is. She recites Jeremiah 29:11 “and I know the plans that I have for you, says the Lord, plans to prosper you and not harm you, plans to give you a hope and future.” And she adds, “Nowhere in that verse does it state, only if you’re not HIV positive!”

Jennifer and Rusty have served for the last two years as fulltime workers with He Intends Victory Vietnam. Working amongst the poor and needy and especially to those with HIV/AIDS, both have ministered in churches, hospitals, prisons, and even a leper colony. Their hearts desire is that those facing HIV/AIDS will come to a personal understanding of God’s love through Jesus Christ. The following testimony is of Phat, our fulltime Vietnamese worker and co-worker with the Veary’s.

The Story of Phát

I was born in Quang Ninh, Viet Nam, where I lived for most of my life. When I was growing up, Viet Nam was very poor and undeveloped. I can remember my family usually ate boiled or steamed kaoliang and lumped flour, which was very smelly and full of small worms.

In 1989, many people in the northern provinces of Vietnam rushed out of the country illegally, with the hope that they would be able to have a better life in another country.

Working hard and living in poverty, my father made the daring decision to send three of his six sons out to let us find a way to save ourselves. He thought that we would be better off on our own, and have the opportunity to change our lives and our future. It was the thought of many people at that time, wanting to escape prolonged poverty. We could never have anticipated the journey we would take as we left for another country.

This journey began when I was 14. We had a very long voyage of 50 days with danger and exhaustion on the South China Sea. Many times we faced death, and life hung on a thread as we drifted with the waves, maybe alive or dead, endless sea ahead. There were thirty-two of us cramped in a fragile boat, whose edge was only about ten centimeters above the sea. The cabin of the boat was as large as a double bed so many of us had to sit outside on the hood, exposed day and night to the sun and rain.

We give many thanks to God, for He took care of us and gave mercy and peace to us during this journey. Were it not for Him, we would have all died as meals for fish or as prey for pirates. I can't help shivering when remembering it again.

Eventually, we arrived at the port of hope, Hong Kong – the city of magnificence and luxury. We could not help being astonished by the magnificent view of the very tall buildings, which rose up into the sky, challenging the storms. I could never have imagined this sight in my dreams; the vision was as if we were entering the Paradise.

And the city was much more beautiful at night than it was in the day. It looked like it was wearing a giant, gorgeous coat with many different colors sparkling mysteriously. As we enjoyed this moment of being so moved and amazed, we were whisked off into a big camp set up for Vietnamese illegal immigrants. It was called the Vietnamese Boatpeople Camp or Restricted Camp built and ruled by Hong Kong government. It looked like a very big industrial chicken barn surrounded by layers of barbed wire. It was more like a jail rather than a camp. Thousands of people were kept in the camp with troubled and struggling conditions. It was this camp where my youth passed behind iron bars, together with thousands of other young Vietnamese people.

I grew and became experienced in the ways of living at the Restricted Camp, which was like a minimized society. All kinds lived there, gangs of people under 'the law of the jungle', where only the larger fish eat and the stronger men kill. There were fights every day and many people were killed; a person's life could be taken away for only a small piece of meat. Along with the "innocent people" like myself, the Camp held gangsters, thieves, and convicted murderers, who all ran away to avoid punishment in Vietnam. They formed gangs to divide power and locations to be controlled. Our camp was famous for its severe fights and violence, which led to many bloody killings which took with it lots of innocent lives. As the days passed, everyone became insensitive to this, and grew accustomed to this troubled life. Whether we laughed or cried, it was with bitter tears.

Eight years of my life eventually passed by in the Camp. We waited patiently with great hope of getting permission to go to a third country. We survived on dreams of living a new life that was always imagined brighter and greener than what we had known. But we were all disillusioned with our dream-like future by the decisions of the UN Humane Program. This program sent boatpeople back to their countries. So finally, our life in the camp was concluded. Hong Kong government began to carry out the program and forced us to return home. At the end of 1996, I arrived back in Vietnam.

My hometown is located on the northern Vietnam border with China. There is a lot of activity through the border gate, Móng Cái, which is also next to the very famous tourist resort Hạ Long Bay. In the 1990's, as Vietnam national economy developed, it brought with it a breakout of "social evils". Because of the unique location of the province of Quang Ninh, prostitution, drug use and trafficking were the growing trend in this new way of life.

As I belonged to the younger generation, I returned to Vietnam and was quickly caught up in the midst of this mechanism of change. I had just been freed from the Hong Kong Restricted Camp where I lacked everything. My thirst for money and fame quickly resulted in many vices. I was able to buy anything as long as I had money, and my life began to spin in a cyclone. This included buying and using drugs. I always told myself that I was a good boy amongst bad friends. I was a good child at home and a kind person outside, so I was seen as an honest boy. No one could really know the person behind the nice cover.

At that time there began to be discovered a small number of people infected with HIV in Vietnam. But they were few, so their deaths were few, and people did not become aware of this significant danger. If it didn't affect their life, they didn't consider it important to be aware of the HIV/AIDS situation. As a result, young people like myself continued on the road of a sinful lifestyle, without realizing that we were standing on the brink of an abyss of terrible death. There was a seduction of words that went: "You won't be a man without enjoying drugs and women." It was this lifestyle that lured me into its trap.

In 1999, when many details about HIV/AIDS came out publicly in Vietnam, I started to realize the negative effects my current lifestyle may hold for my future. After careful consideration of my future, I made a major decision. I decided to leave my beloved hometown for Hanoi. There, I would finally be able to live a new life, to get a job, and most importantly, to get myself away from my bad friends.

But no matter how far I tried to run, I could not escape from the demon drugs. I left my hometown with the hope of leaving the lifestyle of drugs behind forever. Unfortunately, as the saying goes, it was “Out of the frying-pan into the fire.” It was in the luxurious capital city where I finally put my head into the noose.

After only two weeks in Hanoi, I met an old friend from Qung Ninh. He had moved to Hanoi just 6 months before me, and was now working in a big hotel. As “birds of a feather flock together”, he had the money and I had the time. He lured me into buying drugs with him and invited me to mainline them with him. Immediately I gave a strong refusal, saying that I had decided to quit. But soon after, I was persuaded by his subtle offers. With my compliant manner, I unwittingly had just shut the door to my future.

I really didn’t think about it any more until late 2001, when I heard that this friend had died from AIDS. Then it flashed in my mind as I remembered using the same cylinder with him that day. Although I washed it carefully with boiled water, it would possibly be my predestined shoot.

Then in April, of 2002, my mother needed to have an operation for a life-threatening disease. I was the one to donate blood to her because I had the same blood type. It was this situation that brought the moment where I was told the terrible news. Like being struck by a lightning bolt, I was stunned when the doctor told me that I was HIV positive.

I left the clinic telling myself that I must be brave, and have a sense of responsibility. But I could not get rid of the fear, which never, even for a second, left me in peace. I felt that I was being sentenced to death when I was still so young. I developed a great amount of regret for past living, but it was too late! I had given my body and soul to the demons for a moment of pleasure, and I now lived a lifetime of fear.

Night after night I heard Death’s call echoing in my head. I trembled cold with fear. The instinct for survival rose in me stronger than ever before. But the harder I tried to cling my life, the further away it seemed. Fear was my companion at all times, and plagued me with restless thoughts. I couldn’t eat or sleep. And when I did, I would wake up sweating from nightmares.

A lot of negative thinking came to me during this time. I felt as though everything in my future was lost. I was now hopeless in despair. My future was gloomy; what good could life be after the death sentence of HIV? For me it was unbearable to think about- being abandoned and looked down upon with scorn. I would never be able to get a job. As I thought about it, it drove me to the edge of madness! Being tired and weary of my life, I was now ready to let it run its final course. I decided that either I would buy a pile of sleeping pills and end my life, or return to the lifestyle of self-indulgence. I chose the latter to spend the rest of my life.

But I found that even the way I chose didn’t help. Every time I came back to myself after drugs and wine, I still had to face reality. There was nothing that could take away the emptiness, the loneliness, the unhappiness, and the fear in my heart. Living with Death’s call, I existed like a shadow of empty emotions. I was often in a bad mood, losing my temper easily, and trying to keep away from the rest of the world because of my hopeless feelings. But I kept on playing without thinking of the consequences, in a futile attempt at filling the emptiness in my heart.

In the midst of this life of emotional torture, my mother died of cancer. Now that I had lost my beloved mother, my unhappiness and misery were at their deepest level.

I returned to Hanoi after my mother’s funeral, not knowing how much longer I could take the pain in my life. After nights of tormented thoughts, I decided to tell my truth to a close friend of mine.

It was the day that my life was completely changed. Unexpectedly, my friend received my traumatic news of HIV with compassion. He never looked down on me or showed fear when he was with me. Through his acceptance, I began to feel at ease, and started to experience happiness again in a very small way. I began asking myself what was different about this friend- why he could understand when others could not. It was then that I discovered the truth about the Love of God.

You see, a year prior to this, I had “received” Jesus Christ through the encouragement of this friend. But I really had just joined them for fun and curiosity, without a real interest. I thought that religion was the last resort for miserable and desperate people. It was a lifebuoy to be grasped by the unfortunate and disenchanting.

Now my friend began to patiently show me my wrong ways of thinking, and sincerely encouraged me from his heart. Through this new discovery of God’s love, I began to realize that God loved me even when I was not yet born. He still loves me even though I have sinned against Him. He waited patiently for me until I confessed to Him and repented. He forgave all my sins. I rest knowing that He created me and He is ever faithful to me. He creates us for different purposes in his will. And He can glue all of us together as one, regardless of our colors, our ethnic

groups, our countries and languages. He can also heal all the wounds of wars, hate, grief, diseases, and separation because His Great Love overcomes all the darkness of this world.

The more I learned about God, the greater the peace that I experienced. I've learned that we cannot buy this regardless of how much money we have. It is not like the happiness of things in this world. That goes as quickly as it comes, like dew on grass, and cannot fill the emptiness of one's heart. It is real happiness that God freely gives us. It is a very precious gift, for everyone who really wants to receive it.

It is the light of God's love that lit up the darkness of my life. My life is no longer under dark clouds, and I have no fear of even the worst things. I truly believe that God forgave all my sins and that He is with me. God has a wonderful plan for me! He has opened a door to a new road for me to walk on in His grace and His mercy!

And even though it is not always going to be easy, I will not be alone for He is with me. After friends who I shared a room with found out about my HIV, the landlord asked me to move. All my housemates were afraid of HIV. But God has provided me with another place where I can live without worry.

I had another friend who told me about He Intends Victory, and a couple who was from America now living in Vietnam. When I met Rusty and Jennifer, I was very comfortable and found Jesus' love in their home. I am happy to come to their home because people I meet there don't look down on me and they encourage me in so many things. And they introduce me to other people who are not afraid of me because of HIV.

One night I went to their home and there were many people there from He Intends Victory in America. I was ashamed to tell everyone about my life, but God gave me courage to speak out. I told my testimony for the first time there, and I felt very happy to share what had been hidden in my soul. This was the first time that I let out all of the secrets of my life. After this I was greatly encouraged, and I have committed my life to God and to do His work here in Vietnam.

I started visiting people with AIDS at Bach Mai Hospital, and was amazed because they didn't believe me that I too lived with HIV. They were very afraid to talk to me because they are afraid that others will know their secrets. Visit after visit they see me, and now we are friends. They understand me and are no longer afraid to talk with me. They know that I want to help them to deal with HIV in their lives. I visit them because I want to share the hope that I have with everyone who lives with HIV. Sometimes I don't know what to say, so I just share about my life and my condition. I hope to start a support group so I can help many people living with HIV and AIDS know the hope they can have. They can have a new life with Jesus!

I thank God for the grace and gifts He has given me. It is so great that I cannot count! For His mercy and forgiveness brings me a hopeful life. I thank God for now I no longer live in misery and suffer because of this disease. He promises that he will provide peace for life to those who believe in Him and rely on Him. For He has won the Victory!

Phat continues forward in his quest to share hope with others infected with HIV/AIDS in Vietnam. He is involved with a discipleship class that is growing him deeper in his relationship with God, and also teaching him how to share the Good News with others. He recently had his first support group meeting in Hanoi with four HIV+ persons attending. We thank the Lord for Phat.

Chapter Seven

“NOTHING WOULD EVER BE THE SAME AGAIN”

Renee Austin

Renée Austin never guessed when she woke and dressed that summer day in August of 1995 that her life was about to change forever. She sat in a medical clinic in Southern California opposite the man who was to deliver the results of her HIV test. She was relaxed when he asked her how she was doing. She responded with a joke, “I don’t know, you tell me.” He stared at her blankly.

“He was very serious.” She recalled. “I thought, ‘Well, of course he’s straight faced. Being a comedian isn’t part of the job.’ We went into a small room and matched up the paperwork in his file with the number on my card to ensure that the results were really mine. Then he looked up at me and said, ‘Your test came back positive.’ Just like that.”

“In that one instant, my whole life changed. Nothing would ever be the same again. I felt like the world was spinning around me at a million miles an hour. It was the worst adrenaline rush I have ever experienced.”

Renée took a deep breath and said, “I’m going to shake my head, blink, and wake up... this is going to go away.” The medic continued to just look at her, so she pressed on. “This is real?” she asked. He simply nodded.

Family Ties

Renée was born in Garden Grove, California on May 9, 1971 — Mothers' Day. Sadly, her parents divorced before she was two, but she was not left without a father figure. "There was a man in my life that I called 'Uncle Bill,'" she said. "He was a friend of the family. On my first birthday, I took my first steps — to Bill. One day, when I was five, my mom picked me up from school and told me she had some news. She and 'Uncle Bill' were going to get married. I was thrilled as 'Uncle Bill' became 'Daddy Bill.'"

She continued an on and off relationship with "Daddy Craig" her "biological" father. "He was the shadowy figure throughout my childhood," she said. "I can recall asking my Mom, 'Why doesn't daddy come to see me?' or, having plans to go to his house for the weekend when he didn't show up. Although I had my step-dad and loved him like a 'real' father, I knew there was someone else who was supposed to love me, and apparently didn't.

"My mother and my stepfather's families had a lot in common. They both came from the East Coast and moved to California in the sixties with their parents and siblings. Upon coming to California, they broke ties to their extended family. As a result, I have never known what it's like to live in a large family. I never knew my grandfather on my mother's side or my stepfather's father. My mother and her mother went separate ways when I was about nine. The exception was my wonderful step-Grandmother. I never thought of her as being any different, in terms of not being related by blood. I was the only child in the family and she doted on me completely. She was the one who shuttled me back and forth from ballet rehearsal and never missed a performance. I was ten when she died of a heart attack. I still miss her today!

"My mother and stepfather were very hard working people. When I was about eight, my mother went back to school to get her degree. These were lean times for the family but we managed. We had a camper and we used to take off for the weekends and head to the mountains. I have great memories of road trips up and down the West Coast from Canada to Mexico. It wasn't until I was in my early twenties that I made it farther east than Utah!"

"In the middle of my mom's quest to complete her college education, she had a tubal pregnancy that burst. It was a very frightening time for me. No one was sure what the outcome would be. I can recall very clearly having the knowledge my mom might die. I stayed with my grandmother who was a Registered Nurse. She comforted me but was never one to sugar coat anything. After nine hours on the operating table and massive surgery, my Mom came through. It's a difficult thing to realize how fragile life is at the age of nine."

Renée went to private school from the age of two until fourth grade. "I made the decision that I wanted to go to public school like all of my friends," she said. "I was in for a shock! I found myself so far ahead of the other kids that school became boring. But my sixth grade was a challenging year. I had a teacher named Mrs. Marshall. She had huge glasses and her hair would look purple in the sun. She was mean, or at least that was what we all thought then. She pushed me harder academically than anyone else ever has. It was there I first heard the phrase that would follow me through school, 'Renée is very intelligent. If only she would apply herself.' Like I said, I was bored!"

"Mrs. Marshall decided around Christmas time that I would be the one to represent the sixth grade in the Christmas drama, performed in front of the whole school. I couldn't understand why she chose me! I begged, I pleaded, I cried, I yelled, I pouted but I found no way out. Not only was she determined that I would get up in front of the whole school and read my part, but I was to use dramatic hand gestures as well. Well, making broad sweeping movements with my arms while reciting some "Christmassy" message terrified me to the very core. The day came quickly, and I found myself popping up out of a giant decorated box with some profound Christmas message. When it was over, I couldn't believe it. Not only was I alive, not only were people applauding, but also I enjoyed doing it. From that day forward, I was hooked, destined to be the ham, the class clown, and later on in life, the life of the party."

Push and Pull

Renée was not sure when or how it happened but one summer, maybe when she was eight, she found herself on the way to “Daddy Craig’s” house. He had gotten remarried to wife number three, and she had two daughters. “All of a sudden it was like an only child’s dream come true, instant sisters!” she said. “The youngest was several years older than I, and all of us had blonde hair and blue eyes. We used to pretend we were real sisters. I would see them on occasional weekends throughout the year and at Christmas time. One summer, my step-mom took us to church for the Vacation Bible School. I had been baptized as an infant, but other than that I had never been to church before. I had a great time at the Bible School! At the end of the school I asked Jesus to come into my heart and be my personal Lord and Savior.”

“Something happened in the family that winter. I think my mom felt my stepsisters were not a good influence on me. As I said, they were several years older and had now discovered boys. They were telling me about some of their encounters with the opposite sex and my mom thought I was too young for that. I wasn’t allowed to spend time with them anymore. Shortly afterwards my father and step-mom divorced and I didn’t even know how to get in touch with them anymore. Without the influence of my step-mom, my father once again fell into the background of my life.”

Renée says that over the next fifteen years, she never doubted that God existed. She only questioned His involvement in her life.

Her family moved from Anaheim - the home of Disneyland — to Mission Viejo - a lovely south Orange County community — the summer before she started high school. “When I registered for the new school year, they decided, since I had been a straight A student in Jr. High, that I should be in the AP (advanced placement) courses,” she said. “I thought, ‘Oh great, not only am I going to be new, but I’ll be labeled a geek.’ Fortunately, it didn’t turn out that way. The school was a brand new high school and all the other students had transferred in from other districts, so everyone was new. It was easy to blend in.”

At the time, Renée still had the idea she would be a virgin when she got married. “I thought drugs were not only frightening but stupid, and alcohol just really didn’t hold much attraction either,” she said. “Then I started dating a boy named Sean. He was one of those guys who were always in trouble. I just thought he was misunderstood. My parents were very nervous about the path they thought I was taking. I tried to convince them that although some of my friends were a little crazy, I was still the good kid I had always been. It didn’t work. They became suspicious of everything I did. They had always been the typical overprotective, only-child parents, but things became worse. They didn’t trust me, and I didn’t think it was fair because I hadn’t yet abused their trust. They just didn’t like my choice of friends. We were coming to a standoff...

“One afternoon, I was at a friend’s house after school. My friend’s mother drove up and said my mom needed me at home and she would give me a ride. I remember being scared. I figured I was definitely in trouble for something. When we pulled up to the house, my dad’s car was in the driveway. He wasn’t usually home at this time of the day. Uh-oh, I thought, this must be major trouble! When I walked in the house, there were suitcases sitting in the middle of the living room. My mom came out of the kitchen and looked like she had been crying for days. She looked at me and said, ‘Your Aunt Rosemary is dead.’ I couldn’t believe it! Earlier in the week, my uncle had called the house from his home in Seattle wondering if we had heard from my aunt. They had been having some marital problems and had separated. She became depressed and checked herself into a hospital. He was calling because she had left the hospital a day earlier and no one had heard from her. At the time, I didn’t think much about it. Then my mom spoke the words, ‘She killed herself.’

“My mom told me they were leaving that evening to fly to Seattle. They gave me the option of going with

them, or staying at my friend's house. I was supposed to go to my first ever-formal dance in two days and it was finals week, so I decided to stay. I had already decided that if she didn't care enough to stay alive, why should I waste my time going to her funeral? I think back now and realize I probably didn't want to remember her that way. She had always been a beautiful, sensitive, young woman whom I adored. She was twenty six when she died, I was fifteen."

The friend Renée stayed with was a Christian. So was her mother. They spent the next several days trying to convince Renée that God is good and has a plan, even when we don't understand what is happening.

"I wanted no part of their God," she said. "My aunt had spoken to me about their God. She had even taught Sunday School. What good had God done for her? That was when the real anger started, the rage. I had already been angry with my parents, but now I was completely unglued. I felt God had taken so many people from me. I felt abandoned, and I even felt it must have been my fault. It was like the floodgates of rebellion opened and there was no turning back. In all my intelligence, and 'advanced' learning, there were no answers for the questions I was now asking. Not from my parents, nor from my teachers, and the answers of my Christian friend seemed too much of a cop-out. In my opinion, God became a way out for people who weren't strong enough to deal with reality. I hated Him almost as much as I hated myself."

Fill the Void

The next week, after her mother and stepfather had returned, they received another mysterious telephone call. "I answered the phone that afternoon and found myself speaking to some distant relative of my mother's who until that moment, I had never even heard of," said Renée. "My mom was out and I took a message. I remember thinking, 'If it's more bad news, I don't know how we'll get through this.' When my mom came home, she returned the call. She sat my father and me down and told me that exactly a week after my aunt hung herself, my mom's father, the grandfather I had never known, never even talked to, shot himself. The 'funny' thing was he hadn't heard about my aunt, his daughter. Apparently, he just had really lousy timing."

That was it for Renée. "I began to search for answers everywhere. I tried drugs, sex, alcohol, in fact anything I could think of that would fill the void. All the while, I maintained good grades and I got a job working as a file clerk and receptionist after school. I'm not sure if anyone knew the extent of what was going on inside of me. I kept up the façade just enough so I wouldn't be permanently on restriction or have to quit my job."

Renée coasted until she graduated from high school. She went on to junior college but dropped out to take a job at a law firm. It was her chance for freedom. She found herself making good money and renting a room in a nice house by the beach. She maintained the party lifestyle but was cautious enough to keep it confined to weekend "recreation." Only, not for long.

She left the job at the law firm to "go and goof off in Hollywood for a while." Renée had some friends in a band and one of the guys' girlfriends wanted to be roommates. "At the time my boyfriend was in the Navy and was away in Operation Desert Storm so I figured, why not?" she recalled. "That became my motto, 'Why Not?' Hollywood was all it's built up to be, one big party. I started using methamphetamines, 'crystal-meth' to overcome my insecurities and feed my self-destructive behavior. I also got a job at a publishing company and worked my way up over the next three years to Operations Manager. As much as I loved the party lifestyle, there was a part of me that needed to have the responsibility of a demanding job. I realize now that I used my job, my nice car, my nice apartment, and my good-looking boyfriend to validate myself. If I could make everyone else think I had it made, then maybe I would believe it"

Into the Void

It was while Renée was living in Hollywood she had her first HIV test. It was 1991 and the world was starting to realize that AIDS was not just a “gay” disease. “I had never used IV drugs nor been in a homosexual relationship, but at the time it was almost cool to be tested,” she said. “I went to the LA Free Clinic over by the Beverly Center and had the test. It came back negative. I made a decision though. In the week I waited for the test results it occurred to me what a serious thing I was dealing with, and maybe I should only have sex in a ‘monogamous relationship.’ What a victim of mass marketing I am! To think being in a monogamous relationship is going to keep anyone from contracting HIV! I had four ‘monogamous relationships’ in the next four years.

“I was living with my boyfriend when I met Tony. Tony was mysterious, he was handsome, and he was dealing drugs. I remember when I met him; he was very flirtatious. A mutual friend warned him there was no way I would have anything to do with him romantically. I wouldn’t ‘play like that’ because I was involved with someone else. Well, the drugs had already killed the relationship I was in, and it was only a matter of time before we buried it.

“My boyfriend at the time wasn’t really into drugs. He was an occasional, at a party kind of user. He started to get glimpses of just how deep my drug habit had become. One day he asked if I had a problem. He assured me that if I did, he would help me get through it, but if I didn’t want to give it up, we would be over. A couple of weeks later, I decided to try to kick the habit. I crashed hard. I woke up after thirteen hours of sleep totally disoriented. My boyfriend was lacing up his rollerblades. I thought he would be so happy I had made the decision to quit using. Instead he started to complain because it was a beautiful day and he didn’t want to spend it inside. He had made plans to go skating with a friend. I begged him to stay home with me. I figured we could watch old movies on TV and hang out on the couch together while I recuperated. He left. Within a few days he came home early from work and found drugs on our coffee table. When I got home, there was a note, and he was gone. He blamed me. I blamed him. In my mind, he had abandoned me. He came back several times to retrieve his belongings and I tried to pretend I didn’t care.

“I started a sexual relationship with Tony and was using more heavily than ever. I lost my job and eventually my car was repossessed. I found it interesting that the car lease company hung in there longer than my boyfriend. I had to move because I couldn’t afford my apartment anymore either. Eventually, even Tony cut me off, emotionally, as well as the drug supply. I had really started to care about him before I realized I was just one of a string of quite a few women in his life. For him, the conquest was over. For me, it was one more rejection. I had lost everything.”

By this time Renée had alienated all of her friends and family. “I felt like such a failure,” she said. “All those years I spent living the double life of drugs I had imagined that if anyone ever learned the truth, that I wasn’t smart enough, pretty enough, funny enough, then no one would love me, and now it was like my worst fears were confirmed. I felt like my world was destroyed and I could see no way out. I knew I was at the end. I decided to seek professional help. I went to a counseling center and met with someone who referred me to a psychiatrist. They determined I was clinically depressed and needed to be on medication. Great, I thought, more drugs. It was as if being sober, being the “real” me, would never be enough. I filled the prescription and went home.

“The next day I decided to take the pills, all of them at once. I rummaged through the medicine cabinet and gathered every pill I had in the house. I went into the kitchen with my pill bottles and poured myself a drink. I lifted my glass and offered up a toast to God. As I took each pill, one by one I launched my attack. I yelled, ‘I am done! Finished! I can’t take any more! I don’t care what you do to me! I don’t care where you send me! I can’t do this anymore!’

“I continued to yell and swallow pills until they were all gone. Then, I tried to cover every trace of what I had done in case someone came over. I put all of the bottles back into the medicine cabinet, labels forward, so no

one could see they were empty. I went to the couch and began a letter. One of the things for which I had been angry with my aunt Rosemary was she had not left me some sort of explanation. I didn't want to put anyone through that, so I tried to explain why I was giving up.

“Just then my friend Christopher came through the front door. My friends knew they didn't have to knock; they always just walked in. He was in the neighborhood walking his dog and figured he'd stop by and say hello.

“Chris was the reason I had taken pills instead of doing something more gruesome. His mom owned the apartment building I lived in and I knew whatever mess I made, he would probably be the one to clean it up. I figured pills were the neatest way to kill myself. I told him I wasn't in the mood for company and asked him to leave. He sensed something was wrong and started twenty questions. I kept assuring him everything was fine, I was just tired and wanted to be alone. He didn't give up. By this time his dog started going berserk, barking and trying to get loose. He told me he was going to take the dog home and he'd be back. Before he left, he took my keys off the table by the door so that I couldn't lock him out when he came back. I was becoming seriously frustrated with Chris.

“By the time he got back I was furious. I told him to leave, I begged him to leave, but he wouldn't budge. I really have no human explanation for why he was so persistent. I remember thinking, ‘Oh my God, he is going to watch me die.’ I became even more agitated and insistent that he “go away”.

“Finally he asked, ‘Why, did you swallow a bunch of pills or something?’

“I was shocked. ‘Yes!’ I answered, ‘Now will you go away?’

“‘No you didn't! He said. ‘There would be a bunch of pill bottles lying around and stuff.’

“‘You've seen way too many movies! Maybe I took all of the pills and put the bottles back in the medicine cabinet with the labels facing forward so someone like you wouldn't know what I had done!’ It was like something out of a movie, except I couldn't decide if it was a comedy or a tragedy.

“He went into the bathroom saying, ‘You did not take any pills...’ and then, ‘Oh! You did!’ He ran out of the bathroom shouting, ‘Come on, let's go to the hospital.’

“I was incredulous! ‘I did not swallow all those pills so that I could get up and go to the hospital with you! Would you please leave me alone!!!’

“He issued an ultimatum. ‘Either you do it the easy way, or the hard way.’

“‘I AM NOT GOING TO THE HOSPITAL WITH YOU!’

He ran out to call 911. I remember him saying, ‘You're not going to die. You're just going to get really sick and wish you had!’”

The next several minutes were a blur for Renée. Her apartment filled with paramedics. “They practically had to drag me down the stairs,” she said. “In the back of the ambulance they offered me some concoction that was supposed to make me vomit. I wouldn't drink it. The paramedic warned me things would be much worse for me in the hospital if I didn't. I still refused. I remember looking at him through my tears saying, ‘Man, I can't even do this right!’”

He was right; at the, it hospital was much worse. They inserted tubes through her nose, down her throat and into her stomach. She was in excruciating pain. “I kept begging them to leave me alone and let me die, but of course, they couldn't,” she said. “At one point I screamed so loud and thrashed about so much, they threatened to restrain me. I can't remember anything after that. I guess I must have blacked out.

“My next memory is of the Cardiac Intensive Care Unit. It was so quiet except for the occasional sound of the machinery. The doctors were concerned I had done serious damage to my heart with the medication so they put me in CCU.”

A Peace that Surpasses All Understanding

Prior to the suicide attempt, God had been trying to get Renée’s attention, but at the time she couldn’t believe it was God. “I can remember thinking I had finally snapped, I had gone over the edge and totally lost my mind,” she said. “I tried to explain it away; that it was mental illness or drugs. I now know that in addition to an infinite amount of patience, God has an incredible sense of humor. It is no coincidence I was in the ‘heart’ unit because that was exactly what I needed, a new heart! I realize now in my farewell speech to God I had finally surrendered to Him. He tells us He stands at the door and He knocks. Well, finally, in my last hour of desperation, I gave up my own will and opened the door for Him. It is tragic I had to get to that point before I stopped trying to do it on my own. But now I let Him take over. He began to speak to my heart and revealed himself to me while I was in the solitude of the hospital.”

When Renée got out of the hospital, she moved in with Christopher. She figured God had sent him to save her life, so it was the right thing to do. “We started having a romantic relationship,” she said. “In my eyes, I had to be with him because he saved my life. I have since learned that God will use a burning bush, or even a donkey to carry out His will.”

Regrettably Chris was also one of her drug using friends and it wasn’t long before she was back using again herself. But this time something was different. She felt convicted about what she was doing. “I started to realize how wrong it was and I desperately wanted to stop, but I didn’t know how,” she recalled. “Then Chris started beating me.”

“I knew what caused it; it was the drugs. He was on a cycle. He would use and everything would be fine for a few days, and then he would come down and go into psychotic rages. Not only was he violent, but also he was paranoid and very easily set off. Until then I had often wondered why women stayed in abusive relationships. Now I know. They think they deserve it. I thought it was my penance for everything I had done and this was God’s way of punishing me. Instead God was continuing to reveal Himself to me.”

“I recall one afternoon in particular. I was coming down from drugs and felt completely worthless. I knew I needed to stop but I just didn’t understand how I was going to. My life was not only just as bad as before I attempted suicide, but now I had Christopher to deal with. I had left Chris’s house and stayed with a friend for a couple of days. I remember trying to get up enough courage to go home. I thought for sure he would kill me this time. When I arrived, he wasn’t home. I went upstairs and got on my knees on the bed. I was in physical, emotional, and spiritual anguish. I couldn’t understand why God let me live, I was so miserable. I actually thought that maybe I had succeeded in killing myself and now I was in Hell. I felt claustrophobic in my skin. I wanted out so desperately! Once again, in the midst of my misery, I turned to Him. I started unloading on God. I asked all of the questions. I made all of the accusations. I pleaded with Him to forgive me and make some sense of my life, to take away the pain... Then it happened... the peace of God that surpasses all understanding entered my heart. In one instant, tears of pain and torment turned to tears of joy! I was actually laughing and crying at the same time.

“My life changed dramatically after that day. Christopher didn’t come home until the next day and when he did, even he noticed a change in me. He wasn’t even angry with me. It was as if God was giving me a break. Now I call it grace! When I look back, I realize God was trying to get through to Chris as well, but he wouldn’t give up his heart. He stopped using for a brief period of time and life was going pretty well. I started reading the Bible every day and having long conversations with Jesus. One day I was in the kitchen doing dishes and talking to the

Lord. Chris came in and told me I'd better not do that in front of the window or the neighbors would think I was crazy standing in there talking to myself. I learned how to pray without talking. It was all so new to me. Jesus was my best friend."

Renée decided she needed someone to talk to about some of the issues she had. She started going to a community-counseling center. "As part of the program, they encouraged HIV testing because a large portion of their clients were drug addicts," she said. "The testing program was always scheduled for Tuesdays at noon. I told my counselor I had just started a new job and couldn't possibly get off work to get an HIV test. Besides, I had never used IV drugs or been involved in a homosexual relationship. I didn't really feel I was at 'high risk' of infection. But, I told her; I would go if or when it was convenient.

"About six months later, I walked into her office and noticed a sign that said testing that month was to be on a Saturday. It was August of 1995."

A World Turned Upside Down

Renée drove to the counseling center where the local University was conducting the tests. "I don't remember being apprehensive about the test," she recalled. "I had started a new believer's class at my church, I had just been baptized a couple of weeks before. I was on top of the world. My life could not have been going better. I went in to the trailer and had the test. It was an anonymous testing site, which means they don't ask for your name. They assign you a number and tell you to come back the following week for your results.

"I didn't think about the test much that week. It was nothing like the last time. This time I knew what to expect. I was convinced it was going to be negative. After all, I was a Christian now, washed clean by the blood of the Lamb, white as snow, a new creation. What could possibly happen to me now? I did pray about mid-week. I said, 'Lord, you and I both know what I want the results to be - negative. But, if it's not, I'm not going back to my old life' At the time I was still convinced it would be negative, so I wasn't even sure why I was entertaining the thought of being HIV positive. I had already been as close to Hell as I'm ever going to get. I had wanted to die before but God had spared me, now I wanted to live!

"I was out running errands with a friend the following Saturday. We were driving and I said, 'Oh, I need to stop by and pick up the results to my HIV test.' We pulled up in the parking lot and decided he would wait in the car. 'I'll be back in a minute,' I said as I went up the steps..."and entered a world about to turn upside down.

After receiving the terrible news, after feeling the world spin around her, after trying to wake up, Renée shakily stumbled outside to get her friend.

"I opened the door of the trailer and looked out at my friend in the car," she said. "Some time had passed and he told me later he had become concerned. As he looked up at me through the windshield of the car, all I could do was nod my head. I saw his lips move, as he said, 'No way!' He came up the stairs and into the trailer with me and back into the room where the volunteer was waiting. My friend started asking questions. He asked if there was anything he needed to worry about. We had never been involved in a sexual relationship, but he is like a brother to me and we had spent a lot of time together, traveled together, eaten from the same dishes, drank from the same cups. We had just come from a fast-food place and I still had my drink with me. The volunteer picked up my cup, looked straight at my friend, and drank out of my straw. As he put it down he said, 'You won't get it like that.' I thought, 'Oh gross! That guy just drank out of my cup.'"

The volunteer went on to explain that HIV is not transmitted through what's known as "casual contact," such as holding hands, hugging, sharing a drink, telephones, toilet seats and drinking fountains. He gave her some telephone numbers and encouraged her to set up an appointment next week with someone for counseling. "They

drew some more blood to do a second test, just to be certain and also to find out what stage my immune system was at,” said Renée. “Never did I realize there was so much to learn about HIV!”

Now What?

To try to forget the horror of the news, Renée and her friend went down to the bay and rented some kayaks. “I have never paddled so far, or so hard in my life! My mind was swimming. I had gone into a ‘now what?’ mode. I kept asking the Lord, ‘Now what do I do?’ My friend was very encouraging. At one point he said, ‘Renée, you’re exactly the same person you were yesterday. You just know something new about yourself.’ He was right, I was still me.”

Renée planned her next steps. She felt it was important to notify her partners. Not only to find out where she got the HIV infection, but also to warn someone in case she had infected him or her. “As we returned the kayaks,” she said. “I looked over at the roller hockey rink that is next to the kayak rentals. There stood my ex-boyfriend. He coaches a kid’s roller hockey team and they happened to be playing there that day. We hadn’t spoken to each other in quite a while and it would have been awkward enough talking to him, but this was terrifying. He noticed my friend and I as we approached and looked surprised to see us. I was trying to act as normal as possible, but I was having a very hard time staying composed. I said, ‘I need to talk to you. Can you stop by my house after the game?’

‘What’s wrong?’

‘I don’t want to talk about it now. Can you please just come over after the game?’”

All of the color drained from her face and she started to get teary eyed. He continued by asking, “What’s wrong? Are you sick?”

“I don’t know, kind of, I guess,” Renée replied.

“What, do you have cancer or something?”

“No,” she said.

“Do you have AIDS?” he then asked pointedly.

“Yeah, kind of.” It was his turn to look stricken. He told Renée he would come over after the game, in about an hour. Six or seven hours later he finally showed up.

“He said one of the kids on the team had been injured and he had to go with him to the hospital,” said Renée. “I wasn’t sure I believed him. He asked a lot of questions that at the time I didn’t have the answers to. All I knew was that he needed to get tested. He wasn’t angry with me; he seemed very calm. At one point I asked, ‘What are you going to do if you have it?’ He said, ‘I don’t know. But I’m sure you’ll help me get through it.’

“By that time I was doing pretty well on the surface, but inside I was terrified I had given it to someone. I was pretty certain I knew whom I’d gotten it from, but I still had to talk to all four of the guys and let them know so they could get tested.

“The next day the same friend who was with me when I got the results had tickets for a pre-season football game between the San Diego Chargers vs. the San Francisco 49ers. I figured it would be a good idea for me to go. Maybe it would help me get my mind off of things. I cried pretty much through the whole game. I felt so isolated. I wanted to stand up and scream into the crowd of thousands, ‘Is anyone else here HIV positive?’ I was desperate to

find someone else who was going through what I was experiencing.

“I called in sick the next day to work. I figured I wasn’t lying. I called my mom that morning. I already had plans to go to a weeklong summer camp as a counselor that Friday and I told her I had taken the day off to pack and do some shopping. I asked her if she would come over and we could go to lunch.”

She had immediately sensed there was something going on by the sound of her daughter’s quivering voice. “What’s wrong?” she asked.

“Nothing Mom.”

“Renée, tell me what’s going on,” she demanded.

Renée told her she didn’t want to talk about it over the phone. Then her mother said, “Is it your HIV test results?” Renée didn’t know what to say. She had mentioned the test to her mom when she had seen her the week before. It had seemed like such meaningless conversation at the time.

“Mom, I don’t want to talk to you on the phone,” said Renée.

Her mother wouldn’t give up, however. “You know I don’t like surprises. Tell me what’s going on.”

Renée felt trapped. She didn’t want to tell her on the phone. She didn’t have a car at the time and couldn’t drive to her house. She was left with no alternative. “Yes, mom, the test came back positive.”

There was a deathly silence over the line and then she said, “I’m on my way over.”

Her mother and her stepfather lived 45 minutes to an hour drive away but her mother didn’t arrive for about three hours. “It was the second time someone had been caught in some sort of weird time warp in two days,” said Renée. “I guess they just needed time to deal with it on their own before seeing me. I don’t know... When she arrived she was a mess. She hugged me and just cried. I stood there and started reassuring and comforting her. I was still in a ‘now what?’ mode.

“Telling my mom had been next on my list and I was moving through the steps. On the outside, I was a rock. I had read the verse, ‘I can do all things through Christ Jesus who strengthens me’ before, but now I was living it! I once again received the ‘peace of God that surpasses all understanding.’ My mom and I spent the day together. We called my step-dad and asked him to come over after work, but we did not tell him what it was about. I guess my mom didn’t mind surprising him. It was terrible waiting for him to show up. I don’t remember much about telling him. I was very nervous and immediately tried to assure him I was okay. We went out to dinner afterwards. Funny, I can’t even remember the conversation. I’m not sure we talked about much at all.”

Renée went to work the next day and tried to act as normal as possible. She certainly wasn’t her usual chipper self, but everyone believed she had been sick the day before. “I decided I would wait to tell anyone at work until after I had the confirming test results,” she said. “It was a tough week. I called two of the other ex-boyfriends and let them know. Telling Chris went very well, much like the first guy, but the third was just about as bad as it could get. He had started to date a friend of mine and was convinced I was lying. He told my friend I had made it up to try and break them up and insisted he see the results in writing. I was in a difficult situation. I couldn’t believe the way he was acting yet I felt I owed it to her to comply with his demands. They were having a sexual relationship and I thought her life might depend on it. I felt I needed to do all I could to convince him to go get tested.

“When I went back Friday afternoon to get the confirming test results, I mentioned the situation to the person working at the center. He assured me I had fulfilled my responsibility by telling the guy and that was as far

as I needed to or should go. I had enough to deal with as it was. I couldn't shake the thought, though, that if this was what he needed to get tested, then I had to do it. I requested the results in writing. Within a few minutes he came back and there it was in black and white. Up until that point, I was a number, anonymous, but now there was my name and below it the words, 'Tested positive for the HIV virus.' It was my first step into going public. I ended up hand delivering the paper to my ex-boyfriend. He later told my friend that 'anyone could have typed that up on a computer' and he still didn't believe it. They did eventually go and get tested together and both were negative. Praise God!"

In His Will

"The day I received my second positive test result, they also provided me with some information about my immune system. It turns out I was still very healthy. I had a t-cell count of 774. Non-infected people generally have between 800 to 1200 T-cells. I was hoping they would tell me there was a mistake on the first test, but this was the next best news I could have received."

Renée was faced with another dilemma that afternoon. She told the man at the center she was supposed to leave the next morning for summer camp as a camp counselor.

"Great," he said, "that should be really good for you!"

"But what about the kids?" she asked.

He responded by asking Renée, "Are you going to have sex with them or share needles?"

"Of course not!" she replied.

"Then you don't have anything to worry about."

Renée talked to one of the camp directors that evening on the phone, still hoping for a way out. "She told me several of the other counselors had backed out at the last minute, and they were scrambling to fill the spaces," said Renée. "I prayed about it and decided to go. The guy from the center was right. It was the best thing I could have done. I was so busy looking after the kids and ministering to them that I had no time to feel sorry for myself. The camp was in the mountains with no telephones or television to distract me. God really used that time to restore my spirit and totally commit myself to accepting His will for my life, even if it includes HIV."

"I do not blame God being HIV+. I fully realize and accept that I am the one responsible for my actions. God has set down very specific guidelines for us to live by, not to keep us from having fun, but to keep us from being harmed. In no way do I think HIV is God's punishment for my sin, or His wrath, or even His judgment. It is simply a direct result of sin just as touching a hot stove will burn. The burn is not punishment for touching the stove. It is merely a consequence.

"When I look back now, I realize God had prepared me for the news. I was reading the book of Job when I got the test results back. For anyone who's ever read the book of Job, you'll understand why I didn't start questioning God or trying to blame Him for my misfortune. He is God and I am not. We are told to trust in the Lord with all our hearts and lean not on our own understanding, to acknowledge Him in all our ways and He will direct our paths. That is exactly what I did. By this time Jesus had me convinced that His ways are better than my ways and even when I don't or can't see it, He is working everything out for my good because I am His child and He loves me! Had I been tested even six months before, I can honestly say I don't know if I would have walked away from God. His timing is perfect!"

Renée had contacted three of the four men she had been in a sexual relationship with. The fourth was Tony. He was in Philadelphia at the time with no way for her to get in touch with him. “As the test results came in, it became clear that my suspicions were confirmed,” she said. “Everyone else was negative. I had contracted the HIV virus from Tony. I started asking around to try and find out if he knew he was positive or not. I had basically severed ties with the group I hung out with while he and I were together because they were still in the drug scene. Still, I was pretty sure he knew.

“I went to see a mutual friend of ours and we talked it over. Some time after Tony and I had first slept together, he told a group of us that he was HIV+. When I questioned him about it later, he said he had made it up. He said he was playing a joke on us and was trying to get rid of a girl who had been hanging around him. He thought it would scare her off, he said. I believed him. Now it seems like a bad story and I’m amazed I didn’t take it more seriously, but at the time I was high so I laughed and forgot about it. As I talked to this old friend, he confirmed Tony had known but couldn’t deal with the truth of it. So there it was. He knew.

“People have asked me if he could be criminally charged and I have heard some states considered it aggravated assault. There is also legislation in the works to make it a form of murder for someone who knows that he or she has HIV to have unprotected sex without informing the other person. By the time he had played his ‘joke,’ Tony and I had had unprotected sex numerous times.

“Just as I could not blame God for my being HIV positive, how could I blame Tony? The issue is not whether or not he knew; the issue is I engaged in premarital sex, which is against God’s law. I did not then, nor do I now feel any bitterness or anger towards Tony. I started praying for him because he didn’t know Jesus, my Savior. He had to go through this alone and I had Jesus.”

After Renée returned from the camp, she decided to “disclose” her situation to everyone at work. “Disclose is the politically correct term for letting everyone else in on the secret,” she explained. “I work in an industrial environment and as part of our annual training we are certified in First Aid and CPR. Because there is the off chance that we may be called someday to administer First Aid or CPR, the company also trains on Blood borne Pathogens. Ironically, I had taught the Blood borne Pathogen class only six months before. If I had worked in a normal office environment I might have waited longer but I felt an obligation to let everyone know so that if something were to happen, they would take the necessary precautions, like using latex gloves and other protective barriers.

“I told my boss first. God blessed me with a wonderful Christian boss who has helped me every step of the way in my walk with the Lord. I sat in his office and cried as I told him. It was almost as bad as telling my parents. I am sure he had some fear but he did a good job of being supportive. He asked me if I wanted to tell the guys. I said no and he seemed kind of shocked. I said, ‘You asked if I wanted to! No, I don’t want to, but I think I should.’ He volunteered to do it for me but I thought it would be better coming from me.”

Renée went around and told people in small groups. “There are eleven of us total,” she said. “I received some wonderful responses. One of the older guys whose wife is a nurse said, ‘Kid, if you need a hug, you just let me know!’ It was great. I had started to get over some of the fear when it all blew up in my face. One of the guys was definitely not okay with the situation. He was not someone I worked with on a regular basis, only half a dozen days a month or so and we worked in opposite ends of the building. He flipped out. He went to my boss and said he was going to have to quit. Then I went to my boss and offered to quit because I thought I should be the one to go rather than make his life miserable. I went into the ladies’ room and slumped to the floor. I stayed there for about a half an hour and cried. For the first time since the whole thing started I no longer felt like a human being. I was nothing more than a biohazard. I wasn’t a person anymore; I was an infectious disease.

“Fortunately for me and for him, he had a friend who was somehow involved in AIDS research. He called the friend and said he was going to quit. His friend told him he was being ridiculous. Then he called his father who

told him the same thing. To his credit, he decided if he was the only one freaking out, maybe he needed to learn more about it.

“About a month before, he and I had made plans to go to Disneyland together. By the time the day came, he was more knowledgeable about HIV than I was. At one point during our day at Disneyland, I teased him about taking me to Disneyland as part of the ‘Make a Wish Foundation.’ I had shared the Lord with him for some time and we had developed a friendship. That is one reason I had been so hurt by his reaction. When I tried to talk to him in the past he would tell me, ‘You sit up here in your office with your rose colored glasses on. Someday life is going to come up and hit you like a brick wall.’ He watched me over the next few months, coming to terms with being HIV-positive, and the peace and joy I had in Jesus despite the ‘brick wall.’

“It wasn’t long before he accepted the Lord. If God has used my living with HIV for that one man to see His grace and glory, then it is all worth it!”

Chapter Eight

“I RELY UPON YOUR LOVE”

Renée knew it was time to begin looking for an HIV support group. She still had the desire to meet other people who were dealing with the same issues. “HIV is a very solitary disease,” she said. “It’s as if there is a permanent barrier between me and everyone else in the world. People can be sympathetic and supportive, but they cannot know what it is to live my life for even one moment. I know HIV is not easy to accept at any age, but at twenty-four it was especially difficult. I was worried about life insurance when other people my age were worried about where to go on Saturday night.

“I recently read a book written by an actor who portrayed Jesus in a movie. He was describing the crucifixion scene. In the quest to make the scene look as real as possible, he would spend hours hanging from the cross, suspended only by two leather straps around his shoulders. He said sometimes he thought he couldn’t bear it for another moment, and he would pray that God would give him strength to last just one more second.

“During one period of extreme pain he looked out at the rest of the people present and realized how totally removed he was from them at that moment. They filmed, looked on, directed, but they could not in any way take away the loneliness, solitude, or pain of the cross. In the moments when I think I am alone with this disease, I am comforted by Jesus who knows my loneliness, my solitude, and my pain. Hebrews 12 says that Jesus, ‘for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame.’ We are that joy. He did not glory in the time spent on the cross, only what that suffering would accomplish. That He came and died to save us that we might spend eternity with Him is truly awesome!”

Renée attended her first support group meeting. Everyone else in the group were homosexual men. “A group of twenty-something people facing their mortality find a lot of things to share,” she said. “We had issues of

disclosure to friends and family, facing rejection, feeling disappointed in ourselves, wondering how and when we would die. We laughed together and we cried together. I found myself sharing the reason for my hope, but there came a time when I wanted to meet other people who had more in common with me. I knew there were other Christians out there who had sinned (Romans 3:23 says so!). I just didn't know any had gotten 'caught' like I had.

"I had no clue where to start looking for a Christian support group, so I called a Christian hospice. At the time I still figured I had one foot in the grave and totally associated AIDS with death. This was before the new medications came out and people started living longer. The woman at the hospice answered the phone and I told her I was looking for a Christian support group for people living with HIV. There was a long pause. She finally said she would have to look into it. She hadn't heard of any. I left her my name and phone number. She called back the next day and gave me the number of a group in Irvine called He Intends Victory.

"I called 1-800-HIV-HOPE that afternoon. I left a message and someone called me back the next day. They sent me a package with a book and some information. I read Herb Hall's story first and I cried all the way through it. I was so excited when I finished reading Herb's story I called him. There I was sobbing hysterically, thrilled that finally I knew someone else who loved Jesus, who knew what I was going through. When Herb answered the phone I started babbling about how great the story was, how good God is, and how excited I was to find someone else who knew how I felt. I think I overwhelmed him. He gave me the number of a woman named Jennifer and suggested I call her. He also told me when the next support group meeting was to be held. I decided not to call Jennifer yet but to just go to the next meeting.

"When I walked in that night I felt like I was home. Christians have a tendency to act like a bunch of ostriches and pretend reality doesn't exist. I think they are afraid if they admit they are in pain or something bad has happened to them, someone will think they are 'unspiritual.' Job had a group of friends like that... But here was this group, a group with a motto that Jesus intends victory. A group of Christians who are not afraid to admit bad days happen but have hope that Jesus will see us through.

"God promises He will never give us more than we can bear. I had never quite understood that before HIV. I think the tendency is to assume nothing horrible will ever happen because we don't think we could bear it. I have now come to realize that's not what it means at all. It means we will not have to bear it in our own strength. He gives us His strength for the journey. I know God has given me my friends at He Intends Victory as a source of His strength. We are called to bear one another's burdens, and do we ever! There are some tough issues I just can't imagine sharing with anyone else! We get together the first and third Thursdays of the month. The meetings can actually be quite fun sometimes. We eat, we laugh, we cry, and we pray. It is through this fellowship that God really ministers to each one of us. It was what was missing from the other support group. It is what makes our group so special!"

All things work together for good

When Renée first came to the group she knew God had a plan for her life. She wasn't sure what He was going to do yet, but she knew He was doing something. "I am forever questioning Him... Why? When? How? Where?" she said. "Why and how are probably the most frequently asked. But at that time in my life I had no answers. He was teaching me to be content in all circumstances and to learn that if I am in His will, I will always be exactly where I need to be. A wise man once told me that if God showed us the road ahead, we would never want to go. This was after I became a Christian but before I found out I was HIV+! I look back and say, 'He was absolutely right!'

"The day I received my positive test results I had sentenced myself to a life of singleness. As far as I was concerned, the dream of the house with the white picket fence, getting married, and having children was completely

shattered. I just did not see how God could possibly work that one out. I will admit, the thought made me sad but I accepted it. I threw myself into serving the Lord in any and every way possible.”

God gave Renée a “wonderful season of watching people come to know Him through His work in my life.” She was in awe at what was happening “It seemed like people were coming out of the woodwork and accepting Jesus as their savior,” she said. “I was overjoyed, amazed, and content, for the most part, though there were, and still are, times when I was impatient for Heaven. It still seemed though, I hadn’t quite found my purpose.”

One night at the HIV meeting someone mentioned an article they had seen about an organization looking for people whom are HIV+ to do community education. She called the next day. It turned out to be a program through the American Red Cross called “Positively Speaking.” Renée met with the people running the program and they added her to their list of speakers.

“It wasn’t long before I got a call requesting I speak at a local high school,” said Renée. “The training class for the program wasn’t scheduled for anytime in the near future, but they decided to send me anyway. When I think back on it, I know it was totally a God thing! Basically, the only instruction I had was to tell my story. It turned out it just happened to be at a Christian high school in South Orange County. I prayed through the whole first part of the presentation where they give information about the virus and how it is transmitted. Then it was my turn to speak. As I approached the stage in the auditorium filled with a couple hundred students, the Holy Spirit took over. I got up on stage, opened my mouth, and the words just flowed out. I started talking about my rebellion, the risks I took, the responsibility I took for my actions, and I told them all that Jesus had done in my life and how awesome He is.”

As Renée ended, the auditorium filled with applause. She opened the gathering up for questions and answers. A student stood up and asked, “Can we pray for you? Right now, can we just stop and pray for you?” Tears filled her eyes and she knew at that moment this was her purpose! She said this was God’s promise in Romans 8:28 fulfilled! That promise reads, “ALL things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are called according to his purpose.”

She noted, “Nowhere does it say ‘all things except HIV’ or ‘except the ones who took drugs or tried to kill themselves or those who had abortions.’ The only qualifier is that we love God and are in His will! Not long after Pastor Bruce approached me about going with He Intends Victory to an HIV and AIDS education seminar at a church and I joined the ministry of He Intends Victory.”

Out of the Box

By this time it was January of 1996 and Renée was in church at every opportunity. She also attended a home fellowship on Saturdays hosted by some friends from church. “One Saturday it was at Mike’s house,” she said. “I had never been to a study at his house before and I decided to go. When I arrived, there was the usual group of friends I knew, but there was one guy I had never met before. As the afternoon went on, I learned his name was Mark Austin and he was Mike’s roommate. I had never seen him before because he went to Calvary Chapel Costa Mesa and we went to Calvary Chapel Pacific Coast.

“The next Sunday morning I ended up going to the late service. Most of the crowd I hung out with went to the early service and had all gone on to breakfast. As I walked out to the parking lot I ran into Mike who had also decided to go to the late service. He told me he and his roommate Mark were going to Calvary Chapel Golden Springs that evening and invited me along. I had plans for the evening but I asked them when they were going and said I would call if anything changed. Well, the plans fell through, but I still wasn’t sure if I should call Mike or not. I pondered it for a while and finally decided to call at the last minute. I rushed over to their house, and we all drove

out to Diamond Bar together in Mike's car. When we arrived we dropped Mike's son at the nursery and found seats in the sanctuary. Pastor Raul Ries preached on Proverbs 5. He directly spoke to the young people and warned them of the consequences of sexual sin, including HIV.

"I started to cry. Not because he was talking about HIV, but because he was addressing it so appropriately! I had become discouraged with the church's tendency to link HIV almost exclusively to homosexuality; meanwhile the instances of teenagers becoming infected through premarital sex were growing exponentially. It was as if the church had said, 'It can't happen to you' and the kids bought it. Still, to this day, I think the greatest statement I can make is "It CAN happen to you." HIV does not discriminate. It does not care what color you are, what religion you are, what kind of a home you grew up in, what your sexual preferences are, and as long as people try to confine it to their perception, the rate of infections will continue to skyrocket."

When the sermon was over, Renée sat there sniffing and wiping her eyes. She suddenly became aware she was sitting next to someone who probably thought she had completely lost it. "Mike already knew I am HIV+ but Mark did not," she said. "When we left the sanctuary, Mike left Mark and I to go pick up his son. As Mark and I walked out toward the car, I decided to tell him. By the time we reached the car I had finished and he gave me a hug.

"He started sharing with me. He had been a medic in the Air Force when the whole epidemic had started. It was the early eighties and he was working on a transport plane one day. They took on a patient and Mark watched as they cleared a row behind the man and a row in front. They roped off the empty seats and put a sign on the back of the man's seat that said 'GRID'. Back then, no one knew what the virus was, they only knew that it seemed to be attacking gay men so they called it, 'Gay Related Immune Deficiency.' They also weren't sure how it was transmitted. Mark said he was at the back of the aircraft as the rest of the crew argued over who was going to have to tend the man. Mark decided he didn't care if caring for the man put him at risk, no human being deserved to be treated like that."

Over the course of the next six months Mark and Renée formed a friendship. She started going to Calvary Costa Mesa on Monday and Tuesday nights. "We would see each other and also at the home fellowship studies," she said.

Renée signed up for summer camp again that summer. This time she was going as a director, not a counselor. It was a difficult decision for her to make. "I told the organization I was HIV+, and after consulting with their corporate office, they told me I could continue on as a counselor if I chose. They supported any decision I made," she said. "They did ask me to be discreet, of course. I had already encountered some of the ignorance surrounding HIV and had seen the fear instilled in some people, so I decided I didn't want to run the risk of upsetting any of the parents, and took a position as a director. I was heavily recruiting my friends as counselors because we were low on staff. Mark was a natural."

"We had a pretty heavy training schedule before camp and Mark and I were soon inseparable. We were at my house one afternoon. Mark had been discussing going back to Florida, where he had been living before California. After he left I wondered why the thought of Mark leaving bothered me so much. The next night, we ran into each other at church and sat next to each other. It was a Monday night at Calvary Costa Mesa and Pastor Greg Laurie was teaching. About five minutes into the sermon I looked over at Mark and it hit me. 'Oh, my gosh! I am totally in love with him!'"

She couldn't focus on the rest of the message. Her mind was spinning. "I left as soon as the service was over," she said. "By the time I got home I was a basket case. Falling in love is supposed to be such a glorious thing! The sky is blue, the clouds part and the angels are singing. None of that for me. I was terrified! I had put God in a box and this didn't fit. I had decided getting married was too big for Him!"

The next month was a difficult time for Renée. “I tried to suppress my feelings, to refuse to hope for anything more than friendship with Mark, but every time we were together I realized more and more how much I cared for him,” she said. “It was agonizing. I confided in a friend who told me she was convinced he was in love with me. I can remember her telling me, ‘You should see his face light up when you walk into the room.’ I refused to believe her. The fear of rejection was too great; the risk of pain was too high.

“A couple of weeks after my big revelation I decided to observe him and see if there was anything to my friend’s statement. Mark is a very outgoing, friendly person. He treats every man he meets like a brother and every woman he meets like a sister. I really did not see a difference between how he treated me and how he treated the other women we knew. I decided the only way I would know for sure was if he kissed me. I told the Lord that was the only way there could be no mistake between friendship and love.”

A regular highlight for many Southern California Christians is Pastor Greg Laurie’s Harvest Crusade held at each year at the Edison Field, home of the Anaheim Angels baseball team. “We had both signed up to serve as decision follow-up counselors for people who had accepted the Lord that night. It was July 4th,” she said, “and we were down on the field amid thousands of people who had just made a decision for Christ. The fireworks show started and I was so full of joy I thought I would burst! I was blessed to counsel with several young girls, in their early teens, which had come on the field. I handed them New Believer’s Bibles, spoke to them about what it means to be a Christian, how to grow spiritually, and prayed with them. As we prayed together I added the silent prayer to the Lord that the girls would walk with Jesus and not have to go down the road I had traveled.”

When she was done Renée went to find Mark. He was as happy as she was. It has been a special evening. As they left, Mark began to sing his favorite praise song to Renée. It is called, “I Rely Upon Your Love.” She looked at him and she knew something special had happened that night.

“When we got back to my house, he walked me inside,” she said. “Once in the living room, he leaned over and kissed me. It was a very short, very chaste kiss, but it was exactly the signal I needed. He said, ‘I have fallen in love with you.’ I responded, ‘I love you too.’ We talked for hours that night. He had known he was in love with me for almost two months. It had taken me a month longer to catch on. We were both incredibly relieved it was finally out in the open. We discussed how neither of us believed in Christian ‘dating.’ Courtship, yes, but dating - no way.”

Questions

The next morning Renée panicked. She had finally gotten the answer she wanted, and now she was even more terrified than before! The implications of it all overwhelmed her. She was intimidated by the thought of spending the rest of her life with one person, with no opportunity to change her mind. “As long as we both shall live” is a big commitment. She had never been in a relationship for more than two years. She wasn’t sure it was possible. As she prayed, God assured her it is possible, and very much what He intends.

“We left for camp two weeks later,” said Renée. “We had not yet announced to all of our friends what was happening. We kept a low profile as we became adjusted to the relationship. Once we got up to the mountains, away from most of the people we hung out with on a regular basis, we were able to let it show a little. Midway through the week we had a carnival. One of the cabin groups had set up a mock marriage booth, complete with little plastic wedding bands. I happened to be standing near the booth when Mark approached. He knelt on one knee and said, ‘Renée, will you marry me?’ I thought he must be kidding, but as I answered, ‘Yes,’ I knew he wasn’t. He slid the little plastic wedding band on my ring finger and that was it. We were engaged. The rest of the week was wonderful. He had a great time with the kids and things were going well. We would pass each other during the day on the way to an activity and just give each other those big, goofy “I’m so in love” smiles. As the last day of camp

arrived, I knew we had to return to reality, but by this time the Lord had given us a total peace about our relationship and future together. We didn't have any answers for the questions we were sure our friends would ask, but we were sure we were in God's will."

Two days after they returned from camp, the questions started. A couple of friends approached Mark and Renée and said they were wondering what was going on between the two of them. They had noticed the two had been spending a great deal of time together and apparently acting pretty strangely around everyone. Mark looked at them and said, "We are going to get married." There it was, out in the open.

"After that, news began to travel fast," said Renée. "Everyone told me they were happy for us, but Mark got the other side of the interrogation. It was not until later he shared with me some of the things people had said to him. I am sure to this day he still has not told me everything, in the interest of sparing my feelings. I suppose they are normal questions a friend would ask someone who is intending to marry a woman living with a deadly infectious disease. It is still painful to think that instead of sharing our joy, there were people who were close to us questioning Mark about whether or not he should love me because I am HIV+. To the best of my knowledge, God does not exclude people living with HIV from being worthy of love or marriage, but I did not always feel that way. There was a time when I thought I was destined to spend the rest of my life alone, that I was not good enough for someone to want to marry. The Lord has used Mark in amazing ways in my life to prove me wrong. I am so grateful to God for His unconditional love and I am so blessed Mark is a man who is faithful to what God has called him."

Plans

They planned on getting married the following summer. Mark decided he wanted to surprise her with a wedding at camp. There is an outdoor chapel that sits in a clearing in the middle of the forest. "It is one of the most peaceful, beautiful places I know," she said. "He told me he could not tell me exactly when but it was going to be in the summer. It would require an enormous amount of planning and coordination from my friends and family but I figured they would be as excited as I was and enjoy the surprise. It was not the case. The idea was rejected by October and we were looking for 'Plan B.'"

In early November they were traveling in Mark's car and listening to a Christian radio station. The DJ was talking about his upcoming wedding anniversary and he mentioned the date: Saturday, December 21st. Before Renée could think about what she was saying, she exclaimed, "Mark, that's it! That's the date!"

He said, "It is?"

"Yes, December 21st. That's it!"

"It did not make any sense," Renée said, "but somehow I knew the Lord wanted us to have the wedding on that day. It was not long before Mark had received confirmation from the Lord as well. We did not have much time to plan: - six weeks to be exact.

"We discussed who would perform the ceremony. I was once again facing an HIV hurdle. I was afraid if we went to a pastor who did not know us, he would tell Mark he shouldn't marry me. That pretty much ruled out anyone at our church. Because of the size of the congregation, they assign pastors and have six-month pre-marital counseling program. I had heard the pastors deliberately discourage people from getting married because they feel if they can discourage you, then the relationship is not mature enough to last. I was not concerned we would be discouraged from getting married; instead I was concerned we had already faced enough opposition. I also wondered if I 'deserved' a husband."

They decided to ask Pastor Bruce Sonnenberg to marry them. "I felt we could trust him to base his

decision on spiritual discernment and not fear of the disease,” she said. “He was out of town for the next few days, but I wanted to call his office just to make sure that he would be in town on December 21. The church secretary confirmed he would be in town, but she said I would need to talk to him because the 21st was his wedding anniversary! I gave it to the Lord and waited for Bruce to call. When he returned he said he would be delighted to marry us. We set up an appointment schedule for our pre-marital counseling and were on our way.”

My Father’s Steady Arm

Mark had been in full-time ministry until several months before he became engaged. This meant they had very little money for the wedding. “We also had very little time. I learned what it means to pray unceasingly in those six weeks,” said Renée. “My parents helped a little but the majority of the cost would have to be paid by Mark and me.

“When I was in high school, I used to hang out at a beach in Laguna called Crescent Bay. At the top of the bluffs, overlooking the ocean was a park with a small amphitheater where weddings are held. It was a beautiful location, and it was inexpensive. It was perfect.”

Renée called her bridesmaids and informed them of the new date. “Yes, I was aware that the 21st was only four days before Christmas and I was also very much aware that six weeks was awfully short notice to plan a wedding,” she said. “Also, one of the girls would be almost eight months pregnant by that date. It seemed like a lot to ask, but the girls were great! I am eternally grateful for their sacrifice and support!

“I look back now and realize how smart God is! I was so incredibly busy with the wedding arrangements I hardly had time to freak out. It was still a difficult time for Mark, I think. I was continually questioning him asking, ‘Are you sure you want to do this?’ ‘Yes,’ he would say. ‘Are you really sure?’ I would ask. Again, he would answer ‘Yes.’”

Renée found she needed constant reassurance that he not only knew what he was getting into, but he was sure he wanted to take this huge step. “I still sometimes cannot comprehend the sacrifices he has made in taking on the challenge of loving a woman with HIV,” she said.

The day of the wedding finally came. Renée remembers praying that morning, “Lord, if this is not Your will, if I have somehow not heard You or misunderstood, please, shut the door on this wedding. It would break my heart but Jesus, I want what you want for me.” She did not feel a check from God and I continued with the wedding.

“As we arrived, I was slightly concerned about the weather,” she said. “It was overcast and a little chilly, not to mention windy. We had already been told what a bad idea it was to have an outdoors wedding at the end of December, but due to the finances, we hadn’t had much choice. God had given us the date, so, like every other detail of the wedding, I gave it to the Lord to handle.

“I watched the bridesmaids and the groomsmen begin their procession down the long sloping lawn towards the ocean. From where I stood, I could not see Mark. As I began my journey down the path, I was grateful for my dad’s steady arm. I thought I was going to pass out. We finally reached the bottom and as my dad was to hand me over to Mark, a gust of wind came up, and my veil was blown back from my face. I couldn’t help thinking it was my father in heaven presenting the bride to the bridegroom. As Mark and I faced Pastor Bruce and began to take our vows, the clouds suddenly parted and rays of sunlight streamed down on us. The clouds that had caused my distress suddenly became part of an awesome setting. Once again, my heavenly father had done exceedingly, abundantly, more than I could have asked or thought.”

As they proceeded with the vows, Mark made his pledge first. “I, Mark, take thee, Renée, to be my

wedded wife, and I do promise and covenant, before God and these witnesses, to be thy loving and faithful husband, in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, in sickness and in health; as long as we both shall live.”

Renée was somewhat composed until he reached “in sickness and in health.” “Mark and I have a glimpse of what the future may hold. He has made a commitment to love me through some of the worst imaginable circumstances, and God has given him the ability to do so.

“As it was my turn I found myself almost whispering ‘as long as we both shall live.’ I am grateful that Mark and I have an understanding of how precious our time together is. I pray that we would never take it, or each other, for granted.

“Marriage as God intends it is a true blessing. My greatest hope in reaching out to young adults through the ministry of He Intends Victory is they will somehow realize that sexual intimacy is a gift God intends for us to save for our wedding day. I do believe people can be “born again virgins,” not physically, but spiritually. Our God is a God of second, third, and even 490th chances. There is something to be said however, for the recipient of the gift being the first one to open the package.”

Renée says she and Mark had to make some tough decisions regarding the sex issue. “I would like to emphasize for any couple in which one person is HIV+ they need to seek the Lord for their own decisions about their sexual relationship,” she explained. “I can only speak for myself and Mark. Mark has a great deal of medical knowledge through his time spent as a medic in the Air Force and I have gained quite a lot of information through my experience. Before we got married, we studied together, consulted physicians and spoke with experts on HIV about potential risks of transmission of the HIV virus but, most importantly, we prayed about it. We have made the decision to have a sexually intimate relationship. We feel God has blessed our marriage and we trust that as long as we are in His will, He will continue to do so.

“Please do not think that we are naïve about the risks. We still take every precaution possible against transmitting the virus. It would be irresponsible not to. There are some couples that have made the decision to be abstinent in their marriage. As I said, each couple needs to make their own decision. If, someday, Mark and I make the decision not to have sex, we would still have an awesome marriage. Mark is my best friend! I know God has joined us together. I cannot imagine my life without him.”

He Intends Victory

For Renée, God has truly turned what are, for some people, the worst imaginable circumstances into the greatest blessing! A friend said to her one day, “You know, Renée, this is going to sound really strange, but this whole HIV thing has really brought out the best in you.” She was right! Paul the Apostle speaks of the thorn in his flesh. He prayed three times for God to remove it and the Lord answered, “My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness.”

“His strength is made perfect in my weakness,” Renée said. “I know God has the power to heal me. I have prayed that He would heal me. For now, He has chosen not to and I have found His grace truly is sufficient! I also know that one day I will go home to be with Jesus and I will be permanently healed.”

One of her favorite verses in the Bible is the last verse in the gospel of John — John 21:25. He says, “And there are also many other things which Jesus did, the which, if they should be written, every one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that should be written. Amen.”

Renée said, “That is the story of my life! There are so many things that Jesus has done, so many ways that He has demonstrated His love for me, that this book, nor all of the books in the world could contain them!”

Chapter Nine

BLOOD, SWEAT AND TEARS

Mike Hylton

It was in the spring of 1947 when Mrs. Manola Mitchell Hylton bolted up in bed at her Pulaski, Virginia home as she heard the insistent crying come from the bedroom of her one-year-old son, Mike. Wearily, she pushed aside the covers, rubbed her eyes, slid off the bed onto her feet, and went to investigate.

She checked the wind-up clock in the bedroom. It was two o'clock in the morning.

Maybe Mike's having a bad dream, she thought. A quick cuddle and a few words of encouragement would do the trick and he would drift off into uninterrupted sleep, she assured herself.

As a nurse, Mrs. Hylton was fully aware her son was not a healthy child, but she was totally unprepared for what was about to confront her as she groped her way through the darkness to his room.

She switched on the light and immediately gasped out in terror as she saw the blood covering the pillow and sheets of his bed.

"What's wrong, honey?" she said as she approached the terrified baby, his eyes red-rimmed from lack of sleep and his little body trembling with fear. Mike had fallen and had bitten his tongue earlier in the day. As long as she kept him quiet, the bleeding would stop, but as soon as Mike began to move about, his tongue would begin to bleed again. She feared the worst.

Mike's small face puckered woefully, etched with childhood frenzy. He was nearly covered with blood. The child sobbed helplessly.

Mr. Vivian Hylton rolled restlessly in bed and finally sat up as the noise of the commotion shattered his sleep. He scrambled to join his wife at their son's bedside. Being a hospital administrator, he had seen many terrible sights, but this was undoubtedly the worst as it involved his youngest son.

"Oh my God," he gasped. "What's wrong?"

Shivering with panic, Mrs. Hylton explained what had occurred. The disturbing thought sent a chill through both of them.

For one long year, Mrs. Hylton had prayed their young son had not inherited her father's bleeding disorder. After Mike was born, Mrs. Hylton noticed bruising when she changed his diapers. She could see the dark, angry bruises around her son's ankles. When he started to crawl and bruise his knees, she began to surmise they must be caused by the same disease her father had.

Now the evidence was overwhelming. Her father had died from complications of hemophilia early in life. The Hylton's had three sons and one daughter, and now it appeared her fourth and youngest child faced the same terrible illness.

After arranging for the other three children (Buddy, Bunny, and Johnny) to stay with a neighbor, Mr. and Mrs. Hylton drove their son to the only hospital in Pulaski. The emergency room staff worked swiftly to try to staunch the blood flow from Mike's injury. As the team and a physician worked, the couple waited anxiously. They could not see clearly because of the stinging tears in their eyes. Grief and desperation tore at their hearts.

Ultimately, Mike was given a blood transfusion that stopped the bleeding and allowed the necessary clot to form. Eventually, the doctor emerged from the examining room to brief them with the unwelcome news that their son most likely had hemophilia, a hereditary blood-clotting disorder.

"Your son's blood lacks the particular protein known as Factor VIII which is an essential element to cause clotting," the doctor explained in a language these two medical professionals fully understood. The doctor turned to Mr. Hylton, his hospital administrator, and spoke softly. "As you know, there is no cure for hemophilia." With that, he shook his head sadly and returned to care for his infant patient.

Mike Hylton was the first child in their tightly knit family to be smitten by the disease, but it was later discovered that his sister—now the mother of two sons—was a carrier of the disease.

"Women are basically the 'carriers' of the gene," Mike explained. "A recessive type gene is carried in one of the chromosomes that determines the sex of a child. My mother had the defective gene in one of her two X chromosomes, which was passed on to me. There was a fifty-fifty chance one of my two brothers or I would have hemophilia. There was also a fifty-fifty chance my sister would be a carrier. So out of four children, two of us (my sister and I) got the bad 'X' from our mother." Mike further explained, "A man with hemophilia (good Y chromosome, bad X chromosome) cannot pass the disease on to his sons because they will inherit only his good Y chromosome. However, all of the daughters of a man with hemophilia will be genetic carriers. My daughter, Courtney inherited two X chromosomes, one from my wife and one from me; only my 'X' had the defective gene. One of my sister's two sons also has hemophilia. My nephew is seventeen and is tragically infected with the AIDS virus."

Mike Hylton explained how this occurred: "The blood supply in America was contaminated with the AIDS virus through 1985. Hemophiliacs were getting their anti-hemophilic factor (AHF) medication from pharmaceutical companies. Prior to 1985, these manufactures got most of their blood from paid 'high risk' donors, including drug

abusers, alcoholics, homosexuals, and those from border areas in Texas. The blood industry, protected through so-called “blood shield” laws, avoided the implementation of a ‘new standard of care’ in testing the donors and the blood itself. The blood product I need, AHF, is produced from a vast pooling of blood from ten to forty thousand donors.”

“This blood was sold all over the world, and hemophiliacs have been infected on every continent. In the United States alone, there were 10,000 American hemophiliacs who were infected with the AIDS virus during this period. Many of my friends have already died. This could have and should have been avoided through better donor screening, use of a particular Hepatitis B antibody test earlier, or heat treatment of the AHF blood product itself!”

“Since 1985, the blood and hemophilia blood products have been cleaned up. Still, it’s a national catastrophe and the remaining hemophilia population has demanded a congressional investigation to see that it doesn’t happen again. I still remember the words of a good friend, Leo Murphy, who said, ‘Something has to be done now to find out what happened to us; we don’t have time to pussyfoot around.’ Leo died August 9, 1993 from AIDS by relying on the ‘hemophilia system’ to work correctly,” Mike said. “Leo died exactly seven days after another good friend of mine died. Her name was Janet. Leo died a week before another friend, Joe. When will it stop?” asked Mike.

“I pray for strength to continue Leo’s work to find out what really happened so we will know his death was not for naught! Leo was a board member of the Committee of Ten Thousand, ‘COTT,’ that has asked the FDA, the Red Cross, pharmaceutical companies, doctors, and many others— ‘WHY?’”

He added: “It was just like lining us up and shooting us with a machine gun, with FDA approved bullets, coated with the AIDS virus.”

Set Apart

Mike Hylton was born in Pulaski on July 29, 1946. Mike’s fondest childhood memories are of living in Inwood, West Virginia next to an active farm with dairy cattle, pigs, chickens, horses, and everything else that goes with farming. During the summers, Mike spent many hours driving the “gigantic” farm tractor as the neighboring farmer and his wife threw bails of hay onto the trailing hay wagon. At the young age of eight, all Mike had to do was to steer the giant tractor and ease his foot off the clutch ever so gently to move the hay wagon forward at a speed slow enough for the farmers to do their jobs. “I can still see and hear Isabel Dick screaming and laughing at me as she tried to keep her balance on top of the hay when I popped the clutch too fast and the tractor lurched forward,” Mike recalled. “I grew up on that farm and I must say those were the happiest days of my childhood. Burley and Isabel wouldn’t let me do any real physical work around the farm, but they always made me feel I was someone special.”

Mike discovered his hemophilia set him apart at school. “I couldn’t play sports and I had to be super careful with everything. If I relaxed, I paid the consequences.”

He was classified with “severe hemophilia,” meaning Mike’s body had less than one percent of the normal Factor VIII protein. If he had a bleeding episode, the only treatment available at the time was a direct blood transfusion from his father.

“I would be on one table and he’d be on another,” Mike explained. “I can still see my father lying there, the doctor drawing blood from him into a syringe, turning the lever and pushing it into me through an intravenous needle.”

This life-saving procedure took place each time Mike had a bloody nose or a hemorrhage in a knee, ankle,

elbow, or basically any other joint. “If I went untreated, it created excruciating pain as the joint filled up with blood,” Mike recalled. “Even if treated, the hemorrhage caused major joint damage.”

In most cases, the treatment would stop the bleeding process. Eventually the medical community devised a plasma treatment to simplify the procedure.

“They’d give me only the plasma which was separated from other donors’ blood.” he went on. “I didn’t need the red blood cells. The Factor VIII protein I needed was in the plasma.”

As hemophilia research became more sophisticated, scientists developed “cryoprecipitate.” “They froze the plasma and then thawed it. At a certain temperature, the Factor VIII protein would melt and they could remove it for later use in hemophilia treatment,” said Mike.

“So, instead of getting one or two bags of plasma, I would get about two-hundred milliliters of cryoprecipitate which was pooled from approximately ten donors. The process continued to be refined to where it is today. I’m now using a recombinant product that is genetically made which is not a blood product per se. The cost for the recombinant product for a single treatment is approximately \$2,500.”

With Mike’s severe hemophilia, the treatment is necessary every five to seven days. He can treat his own hemorrhages at home or while traveling and bring his clotting level up to thirty, fifty, or even a hundred percent. “My clotting factor percentage is zero to begin with. If I take 2,000 units (20 milliliters by volume) of the recombinant clotting factor, also called ‘concentrate,’ I’ll bring my clotting level up to between thirty and forty percent of normal. In six hours from that point I’m at fifteen percent, six hours from that point I’m at seven-and-a-half. It has roughly a six-hour half-life,” he said.

“I now have control over my treatment and within minutes I can inject ‘concentrate’ into my system to stop a hemorrhage. Self-infusion has allowed me to experience a new freedom not only from pain but also from confinement.”

The Making Of A Nightmare

While growing-up Mike managed to keep relatively healthy, although on occasions, he would be rushed to a local hospital with a severe hemorrhage. Mike recalls one horrible incident while traveling to Florida during spring break in 1968. Mike explained, “Take a twenty-four hour bus trip from Washington, D.C. to Daytona Beach, Florida; add an elbow hemorrhage somewhere near Richmond, Virginia; and you have the making of a nightmare. I had been looking forward to a fun-filled week in Daytona Beach. I knew I would have to be real careful not to injure myself and ruin the trip. I wasn’t gone for more than two hours when I noticed my right elbow hurt. The cushioned arm rest on my seat was gone and bare metal became the secret enemy.”

“I wasn’t going to get off the bus, find a hospital and spend my vacation trying to explain to the on-call doctor what was wrong and what I needed. I had been through that routine before. I had also been in pain many times before, but confinement on a crowded bus while trying to not hurt was pure ‘hell.’ The night was the worst. I remember moving to the far back of the bus, finding a corner, and silently crying the miles away.”

“Somewhere in Georgia at one of the multitude of bus stops along the way, I called my brother who was waiting for me in Florida,” Mike continued. “I gave John my arrival schedule, phone numbers of my doctors who were 1,000 miles away but knew what to do, and told John to contact a local hospital. I needed to have him ‘work it out’ so I received immediate treatment upon arrival. John knew I was in no condition to get caught up in ‘the system.’”

“Thank God, I spent only four days in bed. I even managed to get a whopper of a sunburn to take back to college for bragging rights,” he said.

First Love

“I was always a kind of shy fellow,” Mike admitted. “I didn’t date much in high school. Whenever I had a ‘bleed’ in my knee, ankle, or elbow, I would turn up in class with my arm in a sling or on crutches.” But on this day Mike decided to level with Sharon Fulk, his high school sweetheart. “By the age of forty, I’ll be in a wheelchair,” he told her one day. “But I want you to know and I would like you to become my wife.”

The couple had first met in a chemistry class at the local high school in Martinsburg, West Virginia.

“Bill Kogelschatz, a mutual friend, took it upon himself to bring Sharon and me together. Bill sat between us in chemistry class, and he would pass notes or make comments. We had this one chemistry instructor who was really an odd fellow. He decided I was disrupting the class. For a punishment he brought me up front and had me sit on a stool in the corner to humiliate me. So I met my wife by being shamed in front of the class. I think she felt sorry for me.”

Considering Mike’s hemophilia, their first date was entirely unexpected. “We climbed a mountain in Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, overlooking the junction of the Shenandoah and Potomac Rivers which was quite a feat as I was just coming off a knee hemorrhage at the time,” Mike stated.

Sadly, the romance broke up in 1963 when Mike moved to the Washington D.C. area. Mike finished high school, attended a community college, and acquired a degree in computer science. While he was studying in the nation’s capital, Sharon attended Shepherd College in Shepherdstown, West Virginia.

“Fortunately, we got back together. I proposed to her at the Candlelight Restaurant on the top of a hill in Martinsburg,” he recalled. “We talked about my hemophilia and what it meant to our future. Sharon was aware of the implications of marrying me. She knew because of the genetic condition, any daughter we may have would be a carrier.”

“We had very good communications regarding life in general. We were in love and hemophilia was just another element of our relationship.”

Choices

Mike was living with his parents in Silver Spring, Maryland, when the couple married in Martinsburg, West Virginia, on April 5, 1969. They spent their honeymoon at Virginia Beach. “Our honeymoon was special. We were in love and we both were virgins by choice. I’ve talked to many kids and adults regarding HIV, AIDS, sexual abstinence, and the choices they must make. Many people seem to believe that sexual activity prior to marriage is acceptable—kind of like trying out the merchandise before you buy. But take it from two people who waited, sex is not the fundamental component of a relationship. Love, commitment, and most importantly, God are the keys to a great relationship.

“For us, there was no merchandise, there were two people in love wanting more than anything not to hurt the other. Staying a virgin during the 1960s was a miracle in itself,” Mike continued. “Although I wasn’t thinking about or seeking God at the time, God never lost sight of me. Looking back, I see many times that God has honored

this decision in our marriage and in our walk with Jesus Christ.”

Mike continued: “We were married two months before Sharon finished her senior year at college with a degree in education,” he said. “We moved into an apartment in Rockville, Maryland and Sharon started teaching that fall at Parkland Junior High School in Rockville.”

It appeared to both of them in those early days of wedded bliss that a wonderful life lay ahead, but that turned out to be an illusion.

Chapter Ten

“MOVE WEST, YOUNG MAN”

Perspiration beaded Mike’s brow and his strained face turned a “fire-engine” red.

“Are you all right, honey?” Sharon anxiously asked her husband of a few weeks. She had just arrived home from attending classes some seventy-five miles away.

“No, I feel terrible.” Mike spoke in a whisper, his speech breathless. “I’ve hurt my shoulder somehow and the pain is so bad I can hardly stand it. The pain pills haven’t worked. I’ve been waiting for you.”

Only too aware that her husband was in serious trouble, Sharon immediately called his doctor and drove Mike to the National Institute of Health (NIH) in Bethesda, Maryland. Mike was a “regular” at NIH because he had been involved with their research into hemophilia since he was eleven-years-old. She knew he would get immediate attention there. Mike was in so much discomfort, Sharon had to stop the car numerous times along the way for him to get out and move around in an attempt to relieve some of the pain.

When they arrived, Mike was exhausted and groggy from the pain medication he had taken at home. Sharon cautiously helped Mike as he stumbled unsteadily to the transfusion treatment room. There, the NIH staff was waiting with the blood he needed to stop the hemorrhage and Mike did receive immediate care. With the hemorrhage now stopped, only time and rest would reduce the fluid in his swollen shoulder and relieve the pain. The doctor on call wanted to admit his half-conscious patient into the hospital. He was still in agonizing pain, but Mike knew he would be more comfortable at home once the pain started to decrease in intensity.

After a shot of Demerol and a two-hour restless, sleep-like trance at the Medical Center, Sharon returned home with her husband. They did not speak on the way home for Mike was still dazed from all the medication. Sharon was trying to assess the seriousness of what had just happened. For Sharon, this was just a foretaste of what

was to lie ahead.

Over the next few years, Mike was able to secure a succession of computer jobs. “When I was in college, I did an internship with a mortgage company in Washington, D.C. as a computer operator and programmer. After graduation, I became a programmer/analyst with the firm,” he recalled. “I thought I had the world by the tail, but I was too immature in the ways of the business world to fully understand what ‘they’ meant by ‘responsibility and commitment.’ In fact, I had a real attitude problem and eventually I was fired. I still marvel at how we tend to learn more from our mistakes than we do from our accomplishments. Looking back, I should have been fired months before they actually let me go.”

“The next company I went to work for was a small medical billing firm. I was their programmer/analyst. In fact, I was kind of the jack of all trades (account representative, computer operator, programmer, analyst, and courier.)”

It seemed that the couple were fated to stay in Maryland for the rest of their lives, but God had other plans. While working with the medical billing firm, Mike spotted an advertisement in the Washington Post for a computer expert. A large engineering and construction firm from San Francisco had placed it. The company was looking for someone with his particular computer skills to work at a local Maryland office. He sent in his resume and waited for their response. It was not long in coming.

The interview took place at Bechtel Power Corporation’s Maryland office in the aftermath of Hurricane Agnes, which had devastated much of the East Coast in early 1972. “I drove to the interview through terrible flooding,” he recalled. Darrel Snider seemed impressed with Mike’s skills and awarded him the job. He began a slow climb up the company ladder.

A Trip To Remember

God had not figured much in Mike Hylton’s life up until that time, but a dramatic change lay ahead for him. It began during a business trip to Bechtel’s home office in San Francisco. After his meetings, he flew down to the Los Angeles area to visit with his brother John, who had been a pilot with Trans World Airlines and was now an associate pastor under Chuck Smith’s leadership at Calvary Chapel in Costa Mesa.

“John had converted to Christianity during the days of the Jesus Movement and (without my knowledge) had spent many years praying for me,” Mike revealed. “He was an incredibly talented and gifted man who led the Wednesday night worship service at Calvary Chapel. John had also been a singer with the New Christy Minstrels.”

During his stay at John’s Costa Mesa home, Mike attended a potluck dinner with John, his wife, Mary Ann, and seven couples from Calvary Chapel.

“They all appeared to be very nice people but they really ‘worked on me’ that night,” Mike recalled. “They decided it was time I met Jesus Christ. I resisted their efforts with every fiber of my mind and body.”

As different people talked to Mike about surrendering his life to Jesus Christ he couldn’t comprehend what they were talking about.

“I had no problem in praying,” he said. “I’d always believed in God and I was sure there was this man known as Jesus Christ who was the Son of God.”

Mike shared his personal ideas on faith with those who were challenging him. One of the group then said pointedly, “Mike, you know, Satan believes that too. You’ve come so close, but there’s another dimension you

have to understand. Your salvation is wrapped up in it.”

It seemed to Mike that at the moment, almost everyone in the room was gunning for his soul. “However, I wasn’t intimidated or threatened,” he recalled. “I could see what they were saying was something they believed with real zest.”

Mike began to notice tears on some of the ladies’ faces that were watching the drama unravel. “They were standing in the background, and it suddenly hit me they were silently praying for this lost sinner,” he recalled. Mike, however, continued to rebut all that was said to him. “Still, I didn’t sleep much that night,” he remembers.

The following day, John drove his brother to the airport for his return flight to Maryland. As they cruised along on the San Diego Freeway towards Los Angeles International Airport, John, gripping the steering wheel tightly, said, “Mike, you really have to know the truth. You need to understand who Jesus Christ is—He is your Lord and Savior and He died on the cross for you. He loves you.”

His brother’s words echoed in the recesses of Mike’s brain and sounded like “Blah-blah, blah-blah, blah-blah. Pound, pound, pound. Beat, beat, beat.” Nevertheless, Mike heard a small voice speak to him from somewhere.

When John finally paused for breath, Mike said firmly, “John, if you would just shut up, I’d like to accept Jesus into my heart.”

John was speechless and nearly swerved with excitement. “This was somewhere on the freeway between Costa Mesa and LAX,” recalled Mike. “He pulled over and, as the traffic roared by, I prayed to ask Jesus Christ into my life.”

As his brother prayed, John could not hold back the tears that welled up in his eyes.

“Not a day has passed since that I didn’t know there was a change in me,” said Mike.

When he returned home, Mike shared with Sharon what had happened to him. “She was not a Christian at the time, but she could see there was something different about me,” he said.

Sharon’s time to surrender her life to Jesus Christ came a few years later during a visit to Redding, California, where John had moved. One day John casually asked Sharon, “How long have you been a Christian?”

Sharon responded, “I’m not! I’ve been involved in a home Bible study and everyone thinks I’m a Christian, but I know I haven’t invited Jesus into my heart.”

John pressed her. “Well, do you want to?” he asked.

“Yes,” she replied. So with that, John prayed with her and she too became a born-again Christian.

Mike and Sharon began to attend the same church in Fredrick, Maryland as their next-door neighbors, Nan and Ken Walker. The Hyltons, the Walkers, and eight other couples formed a home fellowship group. Over the years, this group has remained a spiritual influence in their lives. They still keep close contact with yearly visits and frequent correspondence. This mighty prayer group is only a phone call away. All of the women in the group also belonged to Community Bible Study, an international Bible study and ministry for women. During the difficult years to come, Sharon’s involvement in “CBS” would provide major spiritual support for the entire family.

Westward Leading

In 1981, Mike and Sharon felt a “leading of the Lord” and Mike transferred to the Los Angeles division of Bechtel Power Corporation. He had started in Maryland as a programmer/analyst and had worked his way into a position as programming supervisor. Upon his transfer to Los Angeles, Mike became the programming manager there.

“In the interim, Courtney, our daughter, was born in 1975,” said Mike. “In 1978, Sean was born. We spaced the children three years apart on purpose. About a year later we got a surprise; Sharon was pregnant again. Our second son, Todd, was born nineteen months after Sean. We now had three beautiful children.”

Like all hemophiliacs, Mike has endured problems with internal bleeding in his joints. “That’s the major difficulty,” he explained. “We don’t bleed to death from cutting ourselves while shaving as many people think.” As Mike’s hemophilia condition gradually worsened, he underwent a series of tricky operations.

“I had both of my knees replaced because of hemophilia arthropathy,” he said. “If you have one hemorrhage in a joint, the fluid causes degenerative changes. I’ve had hundreds of hemorrhages and consequently the joints became so damaged that both my knees had to be replaced.”

“During the recovery from my first knee replacement surgery, I experienced what I would call one of my first answers to prayer,” Mike said. Mike tolerated the surgery well but had been running a fever for a few days. It was obvious there was some infection his body was fighting off and the fever was weakening him. About the third evening Mike called Sharon and said, “I’m in trouble and I need help. Call your Community Bible Study prayer line and start the prayer chain going. I can’t take much more of this!” By morning, Mike’s fever had broken. Was this an answer to prayer? “No question in my mind,” Mike says. Was this a miracle? “No question in my mind about that, either.”

“I’ve also had terrible problems with my ankles and at one time, I was almost totally crippled. They can’t replace ankles, so both of them have been fused. I’ve had numerous operations on my elbows. The doctors were going to operate on my right elbow when I got really sick in 1991. They were also going to replace my right shoulder with a ball and socket and re-fuse my right ankle because I had broken a metal pin in it. My doctors and I finally decided against the operations. The way things were going, it appeared I would end up in a wheelchair as I had predicted.” Mike couldn’t use crutches because his arms, elbows and shoulders were so damaged.

Still, he is not bitter with the cross he has had to bear. “I would say, I’ve really been blessed from day one,” he said surprisingly. “I have had to deal with a lot of physical pain, but there have been so many blessings and they take precedence over everything I’ve been through.”

The transition from Maryland to Southern California was difficult for the family, but still they found a warm fellowship at Calvary Chapel. God was becoming “priority number one” in their lives. “Each of the children has consequently professed a knowledge and an acceptance of Jesus as their personal Savior,” Mike added proudly.

One by one, they have been saved. When Mike thinks of his brother John who baptized Sharon, Courtney, and Sean, he is reminded of the song, “Thank You” by Ray Boltz. Mike continues to give constant thanks to God for his brother’s faithfulness in his prayer life and witness for Mike’s family.

“I look at all the different people my brother has touched in my life and probably thousands of other people, and when I hear that song, I see him in my mind’s eye. I think, ‘Wouldn’t it be great if that’s how John was treated when he makes it to heaven?’ I can picture the Lord taking hold of John’s arm, and saying, ‘Great is your reward. Look at all the lives you touched.’”

Even so, Mike admits it wasn’t until 1991 that he really fully turned his life unreservedly over to Jesus Christ.

“I almost died from the complications of my medical condition,” he said. “Prior to that, I would walk up to a door, an opportunity, and I would decide what I thought God wanted. I had the Scripture to help me and I knew how to wait on the Lord. I had a foundation in the Christian faith, but I really wasn’t seeking the Lord’s direction for my life. Many of the things I did, I’m sure the Lord just honored and blessed, but it was me who decided them.”

“The analogy I use is I’d walk up to those doors and consciously pray, ‘Lord, which one do you want me to walk through? Door number one? Door number two? Door number three?’” Mike would step out in faith, and “put my shoulder up against door number two, push it open, and think, ‘Maybe there’s an opportunity there, a blessing, whatever.’ But it was all me doing it.”

“Since 1991 I now know what it means to let the Lord have His way in my life. I try to get out of the way and let Him work. It came about long after I was a Christian, no question about it, but I’m glad it came.”

Another Miracle

A “reality check” in Mike Hylton’s spiritual walk came in 1991 while he was playing table tennis (Ping-Pong) with another couple during a party in Garden Grove.

“I had a cast on my right leg because I was having ankle difficulty, and I was back-pedaling to catch my balance. I fell against a block wall and cracked my head,” Mike said. “Everybody, even the kids in the swimming pool underwater, heard it. I should have died.”

Mike believes his life was saved because some of the Christians at the party saw him back-pedaling, and were already praying for him before he hit the wall.

“The worst injury a person with hemophilia can sustain is a head injury,” he recalled. “I blacked out for a second or so and struggled to maintain consciousness.”

He was rushed home, took his injection of anti-hemophilic factor, and was then driven to the emergency room at Hoag Hospital in Newport Beach to have a CAT scan of his head. “Miraculously, they found no damage,” he said. “I had a little headache and that was all. The incident was a miracle in itself. The only way I can explain it is that protection occurred because of prayer of those who witnessed the accident. An instant healing had taken place or the hand of the Lord had cushioned my fall.”

PHOTOS

Chapter Eleven

“MIKE, YOU’VE GOT AIDS”

The doctor’s passing comment didn’t really hit home with Mike Hylton at the time.

“We don’t know what it means,” said the white-coated physician, allowing her hand to touch Mike’s arm, “but there are people, mostly gay men, dying out there of strange diseases and infections. We have discovered their T-cells are affected. I did a T-cell count on you and there is no question, Mr. Hylton, your T-cells are affected.”

Mike looked puzzled. “What do you mean my T-cell are affected?” he asked.

“We don’t know,” admitted the doctor. “All I can tell you is there is some chance the blood products you have received for your hemophilia may have been contaminated.”

As a board member of the Southern California Hemophilia Foundation, Mike Hylton had been following the harrowing story of how the blood supply had been corrupted resulting in the contraction of the AIDS virus by thousands of hemophiliacs around the world. But he was a Christian; surely this could not happen to him!

It was 1985 before the shocking truth was finally understood by both the doctor and by Mike.

The HIV Test

During a routine visit, Mike’s doctor suggested he take an HIV test.

“We’ve seen so many hemophiliacs develop AIDS or whatever this disease is.” she said, almost reflectively. “Your blood shows a change. We still don’t know what it means, but we do know men who are dying of AIDS have a change in their blood which results in the lowering of their T-4 and T-8 counts and the ratio between the two reverses.”

Mike took the test in which the medical laboratory could measure whether or not the HIV antibodies had developed in his bloodstream. He returned a few days later for the results. They were not good.

“Mike, we’ve expected this for a long time, and I know it’s not going to come as a shock to you,” the doctor began hesitantly. “I won’t beat about the bush. I’m sorry to tell you you’ve been infected with the AIDS virus.”

“What!” responded Mike, taking a deep breath and then slowly letting it out? Time seemed to stop for Mike and he could only repeat, “What?”

“Mike, you’re HIV positive,” said the physician, her normally composed face flushed.

Mike Hylton shook his head in disbelief. It was as though a knife had pierced his heart. He tried to speak, but nothing came out from his mouth. The small exam room in which they sat seemed to grow dark and cold.

Mike was all-alone on the two-hour drive home from the downtown Los Angeles hospital. After gathering his whirling thoughts, the next step was to tell Sharon the terrible news. Sharon was stunned, but the reality of the infection was mostly a confirmation of something they both had suspected. Mike asked Sharon to take the HIV test. The results came back negative. God’s grace was again realized.

Like almost everyone who has been told they are HIV-positive, Mike went through a process of denial. “It didn’t make any sense,” he recalled, “I knew—but I didn’t know. My ‘denial’ was to keep on going as if nothing else was wrong. I had fought hemophilia for so long this new ‘deal of the cards’ was just another annoyance. It wasn’t until about four years later when my T-cells dropped below 200 that I finally had to stop pretending another life threatening disease was not affecting me. Reality set in when I finally understood and accepted that this disease had the potential to infect my best friend, my wife! At that point,” Mike recalled, “Sharon and I started to face this new problem head on.”

Surely things couldn’t get any worse? Well, they could and they did!

He was forced to retire from his job in late 1985 because of his hemophilia, fatigue, and general failing health. “I took a medical disability after my second knee replacement and finding out I was HIV positive,” Mike explained. “I could have retired because of the hemophilia prior to 1985, but I kept going. Finally, I knew I didn’t have the strength or energy to continue with my work. Unknown to me at the time, my biggest problem, fatigue, was HIV-related. I battled for a time, but it finally overwhelmed me.”

Rock Bottom

The date Mike Hylton finally hit rock bottom—physically, emotionally and spiritually—was June 20, 1991.

“I told my doctors I had been progressively losing strength,” he remembered.

With each passing day, Mike became weaker and the two-year slide apparently couldn’t be reversed. “By February of 1991, I was so weak I could not even get out of bed or a chair without help,” he recalled. “I could not turn the key in the ignition of my car or open the refrigerator door at home. I didn’t have enough strength in my hand to hold the handle and pull.”

As Mike lay in bed, getting weaker by the minute, he could not lift his head off the pillow. The few times he managed to walk, he would stumble and fall. It did not appear Mike’s body could take much more.

As the final strength began to ebb, Mike had Sharon call his doctor. As she held the receiver he explained,

“Doc, I’ve got some big problems here.”

For Mike to acknowledge this was enough for his new physician, Dr. Logan. After speaking to Mike, the doctor immediately called ahead and had Mike admitted to Huntington Memorial Hospital in Pasadena on April 30, 1991.

“There they diagnosed that I also had polymyositis, a muscle inflammation, and they put me on steroids,” Mike recalled. “The new medication damaged the pancreas quickly, further complicating things by causing diabetes, glaucoma, and cataracts.

“They started an immuno-adsorption procedure, which is like dialysis. They also put me on diabetic oral medication, but it did not work. When I started insulin injections three times a day, things began to stabilize, but the new disease of polymyositis still continued.” Mike lost over sixty pounds. His whole body shook as a reaction to the high dose of Prednisone being prescribed. It was also found Mike was battling Hepatitis as well.

Black Thursday

Everything came crashing down on June 20th, 1991 — “Black Thursday” — as Mike named the fateful day. He looked so ill his eyes had sunk into their sockets and were surrounded by circles so dark they looked as if he had black eyes.

“I was released from the hospital to my Costa Mesa home and I was feeling extremely fatigued,” he said. “I was getting my dialysis-type treatments at the Huntington Hospital Hemophilia Treatment Center in Pasadena, but because of my condition, I found I couldn’t cope with the one-hundred mile commute twice a week. I switched doctors for some in Orange County to handle my HIV and my polymyositis.”

When Mike moved his medical care, a new set of circumstances evolved with his insurance company. “New doctors had to be authorized, and the insurance company stated, ‘We won’t continue to pay for Mr. Hylton’s treatments.’”

Mike received this news on Black Thursday. “I had been experiencing a continued decrease in strength. I had already informed my doctors that I felt I only had three months to live unless things reversed themselves,” he said. “I didn’t think I would survive past August.”

With death approaching, Mike prepared to die. He updated his will and put the rest of his affairs in order. “I was dying, there was no question about it,” he said. “And it was on Black Thursday I finally lost all hope.”

On June 20th, Mike called his brother, John, “I’ve got to see you and talk to you.” John sensed a real crisis and canceled a lunch appointment. They met for lunch at a restaurant near John Wayne Airport. It was then Mike broke down. “I had no control over my emotions,” he remembers. “I had no control over my life. I still believed in God, but I had lost all hope and was dying. As far as I was concerned, I was already dead.”

It turned out Black Thursday really wasn’t “black” after all. John told his brother he needed to take a step of faith and completely hand his life over to Jesus Christ.

“When I returned home,” Mike said, “I began to pray, ‘Lord, that’s it, I can’t cope any more. I can’t do it. I’m dying. I’m yours. Do with me what you wish.’”

Victory Thursday

“I had lost hope, but I never lost my faith. The Lord honored that, and from that point my life changed. Miracles of healing began. Then I heard the still, small voice of the Lord which I had come to recognize, telling me, ‘Mike, that wasn’t Black Thursday, buddy. That was Victory Thursday for you.’”

John had become a practicing attorney and had met an evangelistic couple from Garden Grove named Ralph and Lorine Curlee. This loving couple held a charismatic believers Bible study group in their home. “They had been praying for a Christian attorney to handle a legal matter when God directed them to John,” explained Mike.

After being with his distraught brother in the restaurant, John went to meet with Ralph and Lorine. Sensing a problem, they asked John if they could help him. When they heard about Mike’s desperate situation, they began fervent prayer and fasting for him, and started a prayer chain for Mike.

“They also put my name on all kinds of prayer lists all over the country,” recalled Mike. “By the following Monday, I already had a new lease on life. I sensed a change even in that short time. For me to be where I was on that Thursday (a point of no hope) and then by Monday to see such a change, an increase in strength which I had not had in about three years, was a miracle.”

Against All Hope

“This wonderful couple, whom I had not met, through their faith and prayers, helped me restore my ‘Hope For Tomorrow.’” When Mike eventually got together with them, he discovered “these people were filled with so much faith.”

One day Mike attended the Curlee’s Bible study and the attendees gathered around Mike and began to pray for him. “I received an inner healing of the soul which was tremendous. I no longer had to wonder, ‘Why do I have hemophilia? Why do I have HIV?’ I was ‘spiritually healed’ from everything,” he stated.

Sharon says a highlight of their life together was seeing what happened to her husband after Victory Thursday. Sharon recalled the transition. “He didn’t climb out of that black hole of despair, he was lifted out,” she said. “It was absolutely amazing. He’s always had a lot of faith, but I can’t even begin to touch the faith he has now. I am so pleased to see the way he’s handling things and to know it’s because of his faith. It is really an ongoing thing.

“It’s not a plateau. I see him involved in so many different things, and each project is constantly building his faith too.”

Mike Hylton decided he would fight his insurance company’s denial of his treatment. “Each apheresis procedure cost approximately \$3,000,” he said. “My blood is withdrawn and the plasma is separated from the red cells. The plasma is directed through a special column made by Imre Corporation where the antibodies that are destructive, that are running amuck, are extracted and then everything is given back to me,” he explained. “The process takes over three hours. On the following day, I receive 25 grams of gamma globulin over a four-hour period. The gamma globulin was to ‘jump-start’ my immune system and its administration cost approximately \$2,000. I won the battle with my insurance company and have had well over seventy of these procedures to keep me alive.”

Mike added, “My faith and hope are helping me fight all my illnesses. The Holy Spirit who lives within me has told me, ‘Mike, you’re worth it. The doctors and the pills aren’t keeping you alive. It’s just God.’”

“When the Lord wants to take me home, I’ll go home. I am to do what I can and I believe the doctors and the pills and the different people I run into as a result of this, are part of the overall picture.”

To help fight the progression of the virus' attack on his body, Mike has taken AZT, ddI, ddC, and d4T. Each of these has had to be stopped as drug complications began to appear. Mike has a list of approximately twenty drugs he is currently taking. With all this medication, he jokingly refers to his body as a "toxic waste dump," but knows his body is really the temple of the Holy Spirit.

During this period, Sharon had projected a great deal of strength. "She is not an emotional-type person," he said. "During this time I kept all of this secret, too. No one knew I was HIV-positive. Neither of us had been getting support from our friends or our church. We had not told them of the problems because we feared the church and maybe even some of our friends would not understand. We feared the support we so desperately needed would not be available. In particular, we mostly feared rejection.

"I think it was harder on Sharon and the children to see what I was going through physically, spiritually, and emotionally. Like probably everyone with some serious or terminal illness, I've been depressed enough to consider ending my life. The thought of suicide, however, is not an option. It might be the 'easy way out' but the repercussions on the loved ones left behind are so far-reaching as to make this option null and void.

"Regarding suicide, I shudder to think that one of my children, my wife, a family member, or a friend might feel some guilt in their mind during a passing notion of, 'If I had only done more or said something different....' Furthermore, God does not need my help—when He's ready to take me home, He will. When I surrendered all to the Lord, I became like an open book with everyone. God is in control and I have turned my life and my family over to God."

A Walking Medical Encyclopedia

Mike has become a walking medical encyclopedia. "Besides being diagnosed with hemophilia, polymyositis, hepatitis A, B and C, high blood pressure, diabetes, HIV, AIDS, cataracts and glaucoma, I was recently diagnosed with hypothyroidism," he said. "In addition, the doctors say I have liver disease, pancreatitis, peripheral neuropathy, and athlete's foot." He laughed as he ended his list with the last problem. "Otherwise," Mike continued, "I'm in pretty good shape."

He says he is reminded how well God made the human body, and how much the human body can really go through. "I know that the Lord is not going to burden us with more than we can tolerate," he said.

Hope For Tomorrow

As Mike Hylton began to pick up the threads of his life again, he remembered the time he had rented a single-engine plane and flew over the area where he lived in Maryland. As he watched the houses and the fields pass below, he suddenly saw the word "HOPE" etched into the grass of someone's yard.

Mike's heart leapt as he read it. As the plane got close to the field where he was to land, he said to himself, "HOPE! I think that's what I'll adopt as my middle name."

After a safe touchdown, he drove back to his home and began to sketch out a kind of logo with the words, "Hope For Tomorrow." The logo was finally completed many years later with the help of Don Newmire, a Christian artist. Mike explained, "The logo is a flaming torch with a red blood drop representing life, hemophilia, and the blood of Christ. Flowing into the blood is the word 'Hope' and the words 'For Tomorrow' form the base." Mike added, "I would say that even before I knew Jesus Christ as my personal savior, 'HOPE' was etched into my heart."

It was not long after this that Mike was able to put his new HOPE into action.

Mike had bought a house in Maryland with a half-acre lot in the back of the house. “One Saturday morning it was hot and the grass was two feet tall. I had a big riding tractor,” he recalled. “I got this thing out and I drove into the back yard. I looked at the task in front of me, and realized the grass was too thick for me to mow. So I went to the middle of the grass, lowered the blade of the mower, and I spelled out the word HOPE. Then I lifted the blade of the mower and took it back and parked it in the garage for two days. I don’t know why, but the word HOPE stayed with me as a gift from God even though I didn’t understand it at that time. I don’t know who may have seen this word from an airplane but I’m sure God blessed someone else needing the message I wrote in the field.”

Even though that particular day he was not able to cut the grass, he knew one day he would complete the task. After all, with the middle name of HOPE, Mike Hylton should be able to do anything, even if the situation looked absolutely—HOPELESS!

Chapter Twelve

HE INTENDS VICTORY

In many ways, it was not surprising to discover Mike Hylton suffered from what the world calls “homophobia” (a fear or disgust of homosexuals). After all, it was probably a gay man, or gay men, who passed on the AIDS virus to him through the tainted blood supply.

One day, however, the Lord convicted Mike of his long-lasting hostility after he made a sarcastic “gay” remark to Herb Hall during a get-together at the Village Church of Irvine.

Mike pulled Herb aside and said, “Herb, I made a comment recently that really bothered me!” Mike confessed to feeling a sudden spasm of remorse.

“Herb, being a true friend, had not responded to my joke, but it concerned me that I had offended this dear man. So I asked him to forgive me and tell me if I do it again.”

Mike first met Herb after becoming involved in a hemophilia support group for those who are HIV-positive. At these meetings, Mike always shared his “Hope For Tomorrow” slogan, with all who were there. “When I committed my life completely to Jesus Christ, I began to use it all the time,” he explained. “In every organization with which I got involved, I decided to state exactly where I was coming from. I told them we have left God out of our lives too long. I would say my faith and hope is in Jesus Christ. I believe there is going to be a cure, but it’s not going to come from a Doctor Salk. A Doctor Salk may eventually get the credit for it, but the cure will come directly from God.”

At one of the hemophilia/HIV support groups, Mike met Philip, a twenty-two-year old man who was living with AIDS and suffering from dementia.

“It was very sad to see,” said Mike. “The best thing I can say is Phil really didn’t know what was happening to him.”

The next meeting was in Mike’s home and he got into an intense discussion with Phil about homosexuality.

“There is nothing wrong with homosexuality,” Phil once again asserted haughtily, leering full into Mike’s friendly eyes and giving a little defensive laugh. This comment always caused Mike’s hackles to rise. A wrinkle of consternation passed over Mike’s face. As in previous discussions and after a few moments of eye-to-eye contact, Mike asked Phil brusquely, “What is sin? If there is nothing wrong with it, what is right, and what is wrong? What is the basis of your judgment?” Mike’s face had a flush on it and his eyes were throwing off sparks in every direction.

Mike’s brow darkened as he explained, “Phil was very dogmatic and opinionated, and since I didn’t have this group, homosexuals, under prayer, I didn’t have the Holy Spirit directing me. It was all me.” To those watching it was like they were witnessing some “apocalyptic” tennis match. “But later God showed me He had put me there to be a witness.” Mike added, “I wasn’t there by accident.”

Phil was not gay and apparently enjoyed stirring up Mike with his comments. Mike again opined, “Homosexuality is sin like adultery is sin, like cheating on your income taxes is sin.” Mike tried to explain that sin was part of our nature and he was not passing judgment on people, only on their actions. Mike based his definition of “sin” on the Bible’s teaching. Phil switched topics to his friend, Herb Hall, whom he had met at another support group.

“You might say this was Phil’s way of diverting the conversation,” recalled Mike. “But I know it was the Lord confirming that I needed to pray for this group.”

Mike sees the irony that it took a non-believer to make the connection between Herb and himself. “In the process, I later took Phil to the believers’ meeting at the Curlee’s where he accepted the Lord,” said Mike. “Phil is now with the Lord.”

“Phil said he viewed Herb as a ‘religious fanatic,’” said Mike.

He told Phil, “The next time you talk to Herb, please give him my phone number and ask him to call me.” Shortly afterwards, Herb called Mike at home and they talked for over two hours.

“It was incredible,” recalled Mike. “Our hearts, our calling, our desires, the voice of the Spirit, were so in tune I realized we hadn’t met by accident.”

Mike was shocked when Herb revealed he had come out of the gay lifestyle. Mike had such an aversion to people who were, or had been homosexual, and yet he had warmed to Herb, who seemed such a sincere person.

“Herb called me a couple of days before his very first HIV support group meeting at the Crystal Cathedral,” said Mike. “He told me he was with an organization called Naaman’s Fellowship that was working with HIV-positive street people.” Herb and Mike shared the understanding that their meeting was not by chance- it was planned by God.

Some time during the following months, Herb asked Mike to join the board of directors of Naaman’s Fellowship. Mike sought the Lord’s guidance, but he believed God was telling him, “Mike, you’re not to be on the board of Naaman’s. I want you to support Herb as a person.”

Mike explained, “Here was a man who was so gifted, so blessed, and the Lord had put us together for some reason. God told me He wanted me to be Herb’s ‘Silas’ like in Acts 15:40. I keep reminding myself of this relationship. I met Herb because of a miracle through a non-believer, and the Lord called me to be a counsel for Herb, a support, somebody he can go to, somebody he can cry with, somebody he can laugh with. However, the Lord may have given Herb to me as well for he is somebody I can laugh and cry with too.”

Homophobia

Mike remembers vividly when his homophobia finally left him. “I was in St. Louis at a MANN training conference. MANN stands for the Men’s Advocacy Network of the National Hemophilia Foundation.” He recalled, “There was Steve, a young fellow, about twenty, who I had noticed squirreling around. He introduced himself to the room of peers gathered together from our region of the United States. He explained he had hemophilia with an inhibitor. An inhibitor is something that keeps the medication to stop the bleeding from working. Your body recognizes it as a foreign substance and destroys it.” Steve also said he was gay.

“Normally the hair on my arms would have stood up,” said Mike. “Earlier when I had introduced myself to the group, I shared my faith with them. I introduced myself saying God is the power that keeps me going. When Steve told us his background I felt a deep compassion for him, and at that moment, the Lord took my homophobia away. God told me, ‘Mike, I love this man as much as I love you.’”

Mike Hylton was taken aback and his jaw dropped in unfeigned surprise. The man was gay and yet the Lord was telling him He loved him very much. Mike said his only thought of homosexuals, until then, was the repulsion he felt imagining two men having sex. Now he saw God loved a gay person and wanted to save and deliver that individual, as He did all sinners including himself.

As Mike contemplated his homophobia, he felt God reprimand him. “Mike, can’t you see you’ve been blind. You don’t understand My ability to love. You have blinded yourself, but it’s time to ‘see’ who I really AM.”

Mike began to try to reflect God’s love in all he did. “When people meet me, I want them to see ‘Jesus’, not me, as if I had a mirror angled for them to see heaven,” he said. “I don’t believe God wants me out on the street corner, thumping my chest and beating people over the head. He just wants me to reflect His love within the church and within the HIV community. That is where Herb’s heart is too. We are in total agreement that many churches are bound by fear and are not showing love or compassion to today’s leper as Jesus did some 2000 years ago,” Mike explained.

He Intends Victory

Mike was driving with Steve Willems, a friend and neighbor who had been the manager of Maranatha Village, a huge Christian bookstore in Santa Ana, when the “He Intends Victory” name was born.

“Our hearts had been knit together,” explained Mike. “I was HIV-positive and Steve was dealing with the sale and closure of Maranatha Village. We were both going through difficult times. I was extremely weak and needed somebody to talk to. I had not told Steve I was HIV-positive, but he was smart enough to know my health was very bad,” said Mike. “He never pried into my life, but I know he and his wife Joann, prayed for me. This was my first experience telling someone I was HIV-positive,” recalled Mike. “Steve said, ‘I know. Joann and I have been praying for you for years.’” Steve and Mike shared their desire to be used by God, to be tuned in to hear the Word of God.

“One day we were driving through Costa Mesa trying to come up with a name for the ministry I felt the Lord was calling me to,” said Mike. As we drove, suddenly, “whoomph”, the light hit the truck, like in the movie, ‘Close Encounters of the Third Kind,’ and Steve verbalized the words ‘He Intends Victory’—HIV. We both got goose bumps as he said those words. It was like the Lord was saying, ‘I intend victory for AIDS and you have become one of My messengers.’”

A couple of months later, Mike was asked to join a new ministry to those affected by AIDS by Bruce Sonnenberg and Herb Hall.

Mike recalls speaking at an AIDS seminar at the Village Church during the summer of 1992. Bruce had

written on the blackboard, “HIV, Human Immunodeficiency Virus.”

“When it was my turn,” said Mike, “I said, ‘Bruce, that’s wrong. Can I please change it?’ I scratched out the world’s definition of HIV and scribbled ‘He Intends Victory.’”

Mike told the group this is what God wants to accomplish with this virus.

“I really think victory is what He wants and victory is what He has given Herb, Bruce, and me,” said Mike. “The victory is to bring the message to those who are entrenched in sin, for the people dying of AIDS to be shown the love of God.” Mike said He Intends Victory also wants to demonstrate to churches how to reach out to those with HIV and AIDS. “But before we can effectively minister to any group or individual, we must be on our knees in prayer asking for the Lord’s will. It has been amazing to find people with that same calling, the same heart’s desire. He Intends Victory is our gift from God which we are to use for His glory,” Mike said.

Innocent Victim?

Some people take the view that Herb deserved to get the AIDS virus, but that Mike was an “innocent” victim. Mike responds by saying, “There is an idea out there about innocent victims of this disease, and to me it’s a distraction from the enemy. I’ve been diagnosed with AIDS, as has Herb. I also know hundreds of other people who are HIV-positive.

“I acquired HIV through blood products. Herb got it through a particular action or accident. Herb and I are not innocent victims. AIDS is a product of sin, not a judgment from God. We must stop categorizing one person’s sin (e.g., homosexuality) and matching it to another’s sin (e.g., lying) and then trying to determine a level of innocence. Let God judge the sinner and the sin. No one is ‘an innocent victim’ because we all fall short of the glory of God. We need to identify sin with the primary focus of restoring the sinner to God. Lying may or may not be as bad as homosexuality. Who’s to judge? Sin is sin!

“I may not have been involved in a particular sin, but this virus, like disease itself, is a product of man’s sin. I try to explain my concept of the term ‘innocent victim’ because within the hemophilia community you hear that a lot. I have heard others say homosexuals and drug users are the non-innocent victims,” Mike continued. “I know how I was infected with the AIDS virus, but regardless of how I was infected, I’m a sinful human being who God continues to love—somehow.”

A Message To The Church

Mike feels so much of the church is into politics, finger pointing, and the business of religion, it has allowed Satan “to keep us divided and distracted.”

He added: “If the enemy can keep us divided, we will not be on our knees seeking the Lord. We will spend our time fighting each other. It has become so obvious to me that we are in a relentless spiritual battle. When we start praying constantly, and seek the leading of the Lord, that is when change will occur. Every Christian has a calling and we all need to walk in the footprints of Jesus.”

His message to the church is contained in Romans 12:9-12: “Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil, cling to what is good, and be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourself. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, and faithful in prayer.”

Mike stated, “We have people dying of cancer, of alcoholism, and hunger. We have all kinds of disease and sickness. HIV/AIDS is just one. However, HIV/AIDS is an epidemic that has the potential to wipe out the coming generation. The enemy is after our children, our future,” Mike continued. “We must not allow this to happen. We must take a stand for God every day of the week—not just for a few hours on Sunday!”

“Yes, I see AIDS as far more threatening than alcoholism or cancer. AIDS reflects how bad off we are spiritually, and the churches, especially the churches, have got to stop fighting, and stop being afraid. I wish I could get down on my knees, but I can’t because of my illness. However, I truly believe we need to start ‘seriously’ seeking the direction of the Lord. Each person, each church, has a ministry the Lord wants for them. All other things are distractions the enemy uses to keep us off balance.”

“The church must put on the whole armor of God and reach out to people who are hurting. Many of the people who hurt now are HIV-positive and are dying in hospitals. I know the Lord is speaking to others saying, ‘Go! Minister to people.’ God is saying, ‘Share with them who I am. Tell them I love them. No matter what they’ve done, I will forgive them. I sent My Son to die for all of you.’”

“It will be a wonderful thing to see people really begin to seek God’s direction. Why is our faith so weak and our work so ineffective?” Mike asked. “Christian apathy! Christian apathy is a symptom of not seeking God. We must return to that place where we knew God and where we had real zeal and an overwhelming desire to please Him.

“I’m not saying everyone must go out and stand on a corner and thump a Bible and preach the end of the world. Just seek God’s leading. If God leads you down to the beach to talk with the kids who are skating who are half naked, then that is where God wants you. If he wants you to set up an HIV ministry, then set up an HIV ministry.”

Mike said, when he writes a computer program, “You have to make sure all the little daggers that can attack it are covered.” So one day Mike wrote down a list of priorities in his life. “God is number one,” he said. He listed being a husband/father as priority two, family, health, home and financially providing for his family was three and other family and friends was priority four. His church and then “He Intends Victory” is a further priority.

“When I look at my life I can only see right now and backwards,” said Mike. “I cannot see a minute from now, an hour, two days, or three. But, I can step back and try to look at myself from God’s perspective. That may sound strange but when God looks at me, I’m healed, physically. I’m healed! With whatever time period He sees Mike Hylton down here, I’m healed.”

“Through my faith in Jesus Christ, I am physically healed! It may not be manifested until the moment I go to be with my Lord, but that might happen two minutes from now. I continue to pray for healing for others and for myself. When God so chooses, we will be shown our healing.”

Sharon must also try to handle her husband’s many illnesses. “I don’t know that it’s really something you handle, per se,” she said. “It’s more like I accept the circumstances. Realizing that we are in God’s will shows us that God will provide and we just go on, day-by-day and try to stay focused on Him.”

“We could drown in any situation if we let ourselves take some other perspective, but I think you have to really be honest. You have to have hope and faith. Some days are good, and we do lots of things as a family unit. Those days are terrific.” As Sharon smiled, she said, “On the bad days we just avoid him.”

What would Sharon say to someone who has discovered they’re HIV positive and they’re terrified to tell someone in their church?

“I think if they really feel that way, they’re in the wrong place,” she said. “They could contact ‘He Intends

Victory.’ There are people in the ministry who understand and can help!”

The most loving church for the Hylton’s is a church 3,000 miles from their California home. “It’s a small country church in Virginia we attended for about nine months in 1988-1989. This was during a time when Mike’s health was failing and we thought the East Coast area might be the best place to raise the kids in the long run. The church was called the College Park Church of Christ in Winchester, Virginia,” she said.

“They are an extraordinary group of people, and we still get the church bulletin every Sunday. We know the prayer warriors at that church. We still get notes from people in the church, which is an encouragement. It’s great. Their pastor, Larry Veach, has a heart of gold and has ministered to our family in so many ways that only God could direct,” Sharon said.

Mike says he has never given up hope with his HIV condition. His T-cells have been down as low as sixty, but recently, after taking the d4T drug for a short time, his T-cells have risen to the mid 300’s.

“That is a miracle in itself,” he said. “I would say it is a tremendous jump.”

He sees his ministry as one to “promote an awakening and an awareness of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, within the church and the HIV-infected community.” He also wants to promote faith, hope, and love of a living and personal God. As for Mike, he believes more than ever that He intends victory for people with AIDS.

Would Mike name his last T-cell as Herb said he would? Mike responds without hesitation “Yes,” he says, “HOPE!”

Mike later asked each of his children the same question. “If you had AIDS, what would you name your last T-cell?” Mike said he had to hold back the tears as his sixteen-year-old son Todd replied, “I’d call mine DAVID. You know, Dad, David and Goliath.”

Postscript to Mike Hylton story

Mike Hylton was a fighter right up to the end. Now he is with Jesus. He died from heart failure, on November 19, 1998 at Hoag Memorial Hospital, Newport Beach, California. His wife Sharon, and three children Courtney, Sean, and Todd survive him.

“Mike was a hemophiliac who was infected by HIV, not by his own doing, but by the contaminated blood products he required for his survival,” said Pastor Sonnenberg in a tribute to his dear friend and associate. “But Mike’s attitude was one of honoring the Lord. He forgave those who transferred this deadly virus to him. Mike’s desire was that, through his life, Jesus Christ would be honored and glorified.”

“He spent the last eight years working with He Intends Victory, encouraging those who were affected by HIV and telling them their hope is in Jesus Christ. When Mike passed way on November 19, he moved on to his reward in heaven. He lives forever in Jesus Christ. The ministry Mike helped to establish will continue to reach out to millions around the world who are infected and their families. He has left for us an eternal legacy.”

Herb Hall added, “Mike Hylton was my best friend and my brother in Christ. He always stood by me when others didn’t and he always listened. Mike was the best friend a person could ever have.

“I knew Mike for almost ten years and never heard Mike complain about having AIDS. His response always was, ‘My life is in the arms of my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.’ Even now I can hear Mike saying, ‘What Would Jesus do?’ I think He too, would be on His knees praying for those with AIDS. He would reach out in love,

not withdraw in fear.”

Mike Hylton will be sorely missed by all of us in “He Intends Victory,” but we rejoice that he is now receiving his reward for his faithfulness. His wife Sharon is now one of our Board Directors serving the Lord all over the world.

Chapter Thirteen

STAND BY ME

Bruce Sonnenberg

Bruce Sonnenberg fought back the tears as he stood before his congregation with a heavy heart one Sunday morning. He wanted to share about a young man who had been asked to leave his church in Los Angeles after he had revealed to the pastor he was HIV-positive.

“We are a small congregation, but nonetheless, I need to know where you stand on the big issue of people with AIDS,” said Bruce, well aware he was about to ask his flock to do something which could split the church. “I want to know if this church is going to be a place where all people can come, and that includes those who are HIV-positive or have AIDS,” Bruce continued.

Some in the congregation shuffled nervously in their seats and you could cut the atmosphere with a knife.

“There are many things we don’t know about AIDS,” Bruce continued, “but one things I do know is that God loves these people, and when they are hurting, they need somewhere they can come. If you’re willing to stand with me and to love people with HIV+ and welcome them to this church, please stand.”

As perspiration beaded on the pastor’s forehead, there was a long, terrible silence. People seriously considered the request, and then one by one they rose to their feet until everyone in the 260-member congregation was standing.

As he allowed his eyes to sweep those before him, Bruce, his voice choking with emotion, said, “Thank you for showing the same compassion Jesus did to the lepers of his time.”

This incredible moment in time had solidified the church. Whatever other congregations in America decided, Bruce knew, beyond a doubt, that the Village Church of Irvine was going to stand-up for those who were hurting.

“From that time forward, we were really united in sharing the compassion of Jesus,” Bruce said.

The Unlikely Candidate

Bruce is an unlikely man to head up a ministry that works with people who are HIV-positive. Unlike Herb Hall and Renee Austin, he has never been promiscuous. Contrary to Mike Hylton’s experience, he does not have any life threatening illnesses. He has led a very ordinary life, which might be why God chose him to bring stability and love into the lives of so many who had reached the end of their rope. He reaches out to those who have experienced rejection from their friends, their family, and their churches.

Bruce was born September 29, 1948 in Ypsilanti, Michigan, where he lived until the family moved to Southern California in July of 1957. He was raised in a Christian home and accepted Jesus into his heart at a very young age. He also had an early understanding of death. In February of 1959 his mother Louise died suddenly of a brain tumor. “I was only ten years old, so of course it was a shock,” Bruce said. “But, I think God used this experience to open my heart to people who are suddenly confronted with death.”

One year later his father married Lorraine Behling who had been a Christian missionary to China and then

to Hong Kong since 1948. “She’s a wonderful woman,” Bruce says, “and she’s been a real example of Christ to me.”

In 1965, Bruce met Joni, an attractive young Californian who attended the same church. The pair fell in love and married in California over the Christmas holiday, 1969.

On the road to becoming a pastor, Bruce studied for a year at the International Bible College in San Antonio, Texas. “It was a very good school with wonderful people, but I quickly discovered they had a totally different theology than me,” Bruce said. “I was Trinitarian and they were Oneness, a perspective on the Godhead that I was unfamiliar with. But I soon learned they loved the same Jesus I did. I learned much about how to love people who were different than me while living in San Antonio and working with Teen Challenge, an outreach to IV drug abusers.”

In May of the next year, the couple decided to return to California, and Bruce continued his Biblical training at Southern California College, now Vanguard University, in Costa Mesa.

“While at SCC, I got involved with Calvary Chapel of Costa Mesa. I was asked to oversee the Children’s Ministry—kindergarten through the eighth grade,” recalled Bruce.

“Life became very hectic. Besides going to school fulltime **and** working full-time, I oversaw the children’s ministries on Sunday mornings and Sunday nights, and I handled the ‘After Glow’ of Kenn Gulliksen’s ministry on Friday evenings.” (Kenn is one of the first pastors of Calvary Chapel in Costa Mesa, California with Chuck Smith and founder of the Vineyard Churches with John Wimber). On top of all of this, the couple had two children during this time as well.

“After two years, I graduated from Southern California College with a Bachelors of Arts in Religion. Calvary Chapel was starting Maranatha Christian Academy, a new children’s ministry, and Chuck Smith, the senior pastor, asked if I would oversee it,” said Bruce. “I really didn’t feel called to do that. I knew God had called me to be a pastor.” So I thanked Chuck for the invitation but knew God was leading us elsewhere.

Riding High In Sky Valley

Bruce, Joni, and their now three children moved to Sky Valley near Palm Springs, California. “My parents had started a ministry there five years earlier called Sky Valley Desert Retreat,” said Bruce. “There was a little church that had sprung up from that ministry. They didn’t have a pastor, so they ‘called’ me to be their pastor. In September of 1972, we all moved from Costa Mesa to the desert. Joni and I were both 24 years old.”

In October 1972, Bruce also started “Changes,” a radio ministry. That program continued for the next 30 years reaching thousands with the hope of Jesus Christ.

“The church in Sky Valley grew and we had a wonderful time,” said Bruce. “However, in 1982, the Lord put it on my heart to move to Irvine and establish the Village Church. Joni prayed and agreed and we moved. There were six of us by now- Marine, Aaron, Carol and Matt, Joni and myself. Here were desert dwellers moving to the “big city.” It was quite an exciting time in our lives, a real step of faith.” Irvine was a fast-growing bedroom community in Orange County, which, unlike most of the other towns in the area, had very few churches.

“That was one of the things I really liked,” said Bruce. “I didn’t want to move into a town with a lot of churches. I didn’t want to compete. We contacted a young couple from Irvine whom we had known when they had lived in the desert and where members of our church. The wife had met the Lord at Sky Valley, so Joni and I asked them how they felt about our moving to Irvine and being a part of their community.

“They got really excited and began to pray with us about it. Irvine had a population of about 50,000 people at the time, and we saw it was a growing community that would probably double if not triple in size (now with 140,000). There was a village community or neighborhood in each part of the city, so the Lord gave us the name of The Village Church of Irvine.”

After starting The Village Church of Irvine, as was his custom, Bruce soon became deeply involved in outreach to the local community. “I believe pastors should reach out to their communities and not wait the community to come into their churches.

“I helped start an organization called Irvine Temporary Housing, today called Families Forward, which is now a very large community service organization and helping the homeless of Irvine,” he explained. “I was on their board for three years. Reaching out to the homeless is what Jesus would do.”

Bruce also joined the board of the Orange County Rescue Mission in 1982 and served for ten years, including two years as chairman.

“I have also been involved with other ministries and organizations over the years to the least, the last and the lost. But my favorite place is being a pastor. It is my “heart” and I love serving. I have a wonderful congregation and it’s a privilege to serve them.”

“I’m HIV Positive”

For the first four years in Irvine, the main problems Bruce had to cope with were couples separating and families dealing with their unruly offspring. These are normal challenges in any church. But in 1986, without even realizing, Bruce became involved with the AIDS epidemic. “A lovely couple in our congregation who were active within the church, stopped by my office to see me,” Bruce remembers. “They wanted me to meet their son, Kevin, of whom they were extremely proud. He was living up in Hollywood on his own and working in the movie industry and they wanted me to pray for him. I could see that he was a little embarrassed. But surprisingly, he called later and asked if he could come back and see me again. I went “fishing” for his soul as a “fishermen of men”. I could see that he was “hungry” for Jesus.

“I met Kevin on a couple of occasions at the church office. On his third visit he seemed quite upset. He said he had to share “a secret”, something he didn’t know how to say. Finally Kevin just blurted out that he had been in a homosexual relationship and the man whom he had been living with had just died of AIDS.”

With tears in his eyes, this young man confessed, “And I have just been tested and I’m HIV-positive. I don’t know how to break it to my parents.” He then broke down in sobs. Bruce told him he needed to “just tell the truth” and he would help him to do it. That day Kevin gave his life to Christ Jesus.

“The news was devastating to them,” said Bruce. “They not only found out their son was HIV-positive, but that he had also been living in a lifestyle they felt was wrong. And at the same time Kevin shared with them that he had accepted Jesus as his Savior and Lord.”

“His parents loved him very much and wonderfully stood by him and I started meeting with him weekly. He began to really grow in the Lord,” said Bruce. A year later, his dad died very suddenly. It was a very hard time in their lives. But the Lord had strengthened their hearts. It wasn’t easy but God was faithful and Kevin now stood by his mom and giving her strength. God had really changed his life.

“The Lord opened my heart to someone who was HIV-positive,” explained Bruce. “I could see he needed someone to minister to him and someone to love and not condemn him. He had confessed his sin to the Lord and

was struggling through all that, but nonetheless we, as a church, needed to stand with him.

“During the time I counseled him, he talked about a friend who was going to church in Los Angeles. This friend had become involved with the church life, and believing he could trust the pastor, shared that he was HIV-positive. The pastor told the friend he was ‘no longer welcome to come to church. It was too dangerous and he should stay away’.”

When Bruce heard this story he was infuriated. “How can any person who calls himself a pastor or even a Christian take on such an attitude?” It was at this point Bruce could see that this must never happen at The Village Church. It was that following Sunday when he preached from Luke 5 about Jesus compassionately touching the leper “before” He healed the leper that Bruce asked his congregation to stand with him. And they have ever since.

Chapter Fourteen

CAN YOU HEAR ME?

“I now pronounce you husband and wife,” said Pastor Bruce Sonnenberg on August 8, 1986, at the conclusion of a beautiful outdoor wedding ceremony. It had taken place amid blooming flowers and to the inspiring background of a singing bird.

Kurt turned and kissed his new bride and their wonderful new life together began—or so it seemed to all who witnessed this happy occasion! Tragically, the joy for the couple was to be short-lived.

Bruce first met Kurt, shortly after the congregation’s “vote of confidence” in his AIDS policy.

“Kurt was a heroin addict who had come to visit our church one Sunday with his sister,” explained Bruce. “A young man in our church who had been a drug user, shared his testimony and that day, Kurt gave his life over to the Lord.

“It was wonderful to see such a change in his life. He lived in Los Angeles, got involved in a little church and really started growing in the Lord. About a year later, Kurt called and said that he had met a Christian woman, which he wanted to get married and wondered if I would perform the wedding ceremony. He said he wanted the ceremony to take place in Orange County at his sister’s home.”

So Pastor Sonnenberg, amid the greenery of the garden, married the happy couple. “It was a delightful occasion and everything seemed perfect,” said Bruce.

One day, about a year later, Bruce got a disturbing call from Kurt’s sister. “Bruce, this is Maxine. Would you please go visit my brother in the hospital? He’s very ill. He’s been there for a week and we just found out that he has AIDS,” she shared anxiously over the phone. “It has been a terrible blow,” she sighed resignedly.

“What happened?” Bruce asked, astonished at the terrible news.

The woman explained, Kurt had received a call about the time he was to get married, from an old girlfriend, who had told him, “Kurt, I want you to know, I’ve got AIDS and you need to be tested.”

Bruce continued, “She told me Kurt went into denial. He didn’t want to be tested. He didn’t want to accept it so he just ignored the thought. It finally caught up to him. He had gotten real sick, so he finally took the test. They discovered the virus was very advanced. Kurt was so ill the hospital admitted him then and there.”

Bruce went to visit Kurt, but was not prepared for what he was about to see. His jaw tightened when he saw Kurt. “They had him in an isolation booth,” Bruce recalled. “There was glass all around it. He had an intravenous tube that had come out of his arm, and there was blood all over his arm and on his bed. It was terrible. As soon as I saw him, my heart broke for him and I began to wipe up the blood.

About then, the nurse came in and noticed Bruce wasn’t wearing a mask, gown, or gloves. She scooted him out and made him don all the protective paraphernalia before letting him back into the booth.

“When I came back into the room, Kurt was strapped down and his body was almost in convulsions. He was unable to talk,” said Bruce. He could only sit on the side of the bed and look into Kurt’s blue, distressed face, vulnerable with exhaustion.

“Kurt, this is Bruce,” he said softly as he looked desperately into the bloodshot slits that passed for Kurt’s eyes. Bruce did not know whether Kurt was cognizant or not.

“Do you remember me?” he asked. “If you do, blink your eyes twice.”

As life ebbed out of his wasted body, Kurt blinked- twice.

“Kurt, I haven’t seen you for the last year. I don’t know where you’ve been or how you’re doing, but do you know Jesus loves you?” Bruce asked. Kurt fluttered his lids again as Bruce noticed Kurt’s face had an alarming bluish cast with deep maroon colored lips. Then Bruce said, “Are you ready to go be with the Lord?” Kurt blinked his eyes two more times. For the next 20 minutes, Bruce asked Kurt questions. One blink was “no”, two blinks being a “yes” answer.

Again Bruce asked, “Kurt, are you ready to go be with the Lord?” Kurt rolled his eyes to indicate “Two blinks.”

“I prayed with him,” said Bruce as Kurt’s chest heaved violently. “It was excruciating to watch.” A couple of hours later, Kurt’s short uneven breath stopped and he passed into eternity. Kurt went home to be with Jesus. Bruce was asked to perform the funeral ceremony.

By now, his wife had been tested and found out that she was also HIV positive! “She was naturally heartbroken and confused,” stated Bruce. “She wouldn’t even come to the funeral. But in June of 1988, we did a memorial service at The Village Church that his close family members attended. It was a touching time, but through it, my heart had become aware of the terrible predicament of those who are HIV positive. I was determined to become educated to the illness and read as much information as I could. I knew there were other Kurt’s and Kevin’s out there.”

The AIDS Epidemic

Bruce read one newspaper report that said one-fifth of those living on the streets of America, those homeless individuals, had the AIDS virus. This really began to concern him.

“Being the Chairman of the Board of the Orange County Rescue Mission, I was really close to the men living there,” he said. “Our Board always insisted they go to a local church and a lot of them liked to come to the Village Church, which we always enjoyed. Out of this group, two of the men who were in the ‘New Life Program,’

graduated to become staff members at the Rescue Mission. Because of their past way of life both men were tested and found to be HIV positive. Now not only had I prayed with Kevin to accept the Lord, and prayed with Kurt on his deathbed, we had two people in our congregation who were HIV+.

One Sunday after service, John Wilson, one of these men, shared with me how important it was to have a “support group” for those with HIV/AIDS. “We need to have a place to come and talk and just open up their hearts,” John said. “I’ve tried secular groups but I don’t identify with those people. I’m a Christian and Jesus is the One who can help us. Could we meet regularly as a Christian Support Group?”

“That is a wonderful idea, John.” So Bruce arranged with the Director of the Mission to give any of the HIV-infected men the liberty to attend a weekly Tuesday night meeting. The “A Christian Response to HIV and AIDS Support Group” began in September of 1990.

There were surprising side effects to Bruce’s open attitude of HIV/AIDS at the church. “Since we started this support group, one of our elders and another leader in the church, discovered that both of their brothers, who were homosexuals, had been infected with HIV and had AIDS. Both of these men’s brothers have since died,” explained Bruce. “We prayed for them as a congregation and our elders both witnessed the Lord at work in the lives of their brothers. In fact, both of these men accepted Jesus Christ as their Savior before they died! The people in the church became even more supportive of the support group.”

This “cross-of-Christ” relationship of care brought a tremendous love into the church. Says, Bruce, “Now we had street people and yuppies, the rich and the poor, family’s and individuals, those HIV+ and those not. The church really acted and lived the love of Jesus. Even to this day, it makes no difference if someone is or is not HIV+ in The Village Church of Irvine. We all need God’s love and forgiveness. HIV is not a punishment from God. It’s what happens when we live in a sinful world. We’re all sinners saved by grace. We’re all going to die but the Good News for all of us, both HIV+ and HIV- is that Jesus made it possible for us to life forever with Him. And we’ve seen this in many wonderful churches since then. More and more we’re seeing churches open their doors to people with AIDS. And that’s the way it should be. It’s what Jesus would do.”

“How’s Your T-Cells?”

“We always start our support group meetings with a word of prayer,” said Bruce. “We also decided that each support group meeting would be open to any one who is HIV+, whether Christian or not, that everyone would be free to cry or laugh and that it was not going to be a time for just medical discussion. The spiritual was to be most important. Still, we always opened the meeting by asking people how their T-cell count was. It was a way for each of them to identify with each other.”

When someone was 400 T-cells, they would all be encouraged, but if one of the group was down to 20 T-cells, Bruce would say, “Well, praise the Lord. Let’s pray for you.”

It was sometimes discouraging, Bruce said if the person’s T-cells went down to those lower numbers. “Most healthy people have a CD4 cell count of 800 to 1,200, so we always look to a 1,000 as the average,” he explained. “That’s the number of white cells, or CD4 cells per one million red blood cells. Those are the immunity cells that fight infection. The virus attacks those cells first. When somebody gets this virus in their blood, it immediately attacks those cells and begins to destroy the immune system.”

When that process begins, a person’s T-cell count starts to go down. “When someone gets to 200 and have what’s known as an “opportunistic disease”, they are diagnosed with AIDS, also known as ‘full-blown AIDS,’” he explained. “If their T-cell count is above 200, without having an opportunistic infection, then they are described as being HIV positive.”

Bruce says his heart has really gone out to women who have found out they are HIV positive. “I remember one woman in particular who was a high school leader at her church,” said Bruce. “She had a one night fling with a guy from the church years earlier. Then she found out he had infected her with this virus and she was afraid to tell her pastor. She was afraid to tell anybody in the church because she believed she would be asked to leave.

“When we heard her story, every one in the group ministered to her. We all gathered around her, laid our hands on her and prayed. There were tears and there was comfort,” recalled Bruce. “I remember that she didn’t know when or how to tell anybody about her infection. That’s often one of those “first” questions. One of our group said, ‘Hey, the Lord will show you when and how to tell people.’

“We also looked for ways we could serve the Lord. We had people who would come for a while and then move on, and some died. But everyone who comes is welcomed in the Name of Jesus.”

A Call To Casey

Bruce says the hardest thing for him about the AIDS ministry is knowing that the people that he works with and loves are probably going to die before he does. Bruce has officiated at the funerals of Herb Hall, Mike Hylton, Terry Duffy, Ysidro Velo and many others. “That IS the most difficult thing for me because I love them all so much. But I am also so very blessed because I KNOW I will see them again!”

Bruce remembers Casey, who received the Lord into his heart and was involved with a church in Huntington Beach. “He got really sick and could no longer attend,” said Bruce. “We all sat in the church office and I turned on the speaker phone and we called him. We talked with him and prayed for him. The next night he died. It was such a blessing to be able to gather like that. It took the focus off the individual and put it on the other person. The Lord really blesses us when we pray for others.”

Andrew Johnson was another regular to the support group. “He was a fine man,” said Bruce. “He was working two full-time jobs despite being HIV positive. Andrew was initially strong and healthy, but he started to get weaker and weaker. Eventually he couldn’t attend anymore. He was a dynamic young man who’s since gone to be with the Lord.”

Bruce has strong opinions about what he perceives to be the attitude of the church today towards people who are HIV positive or have AIDS. “Ignorance! That’s sometimes the attitude,” he said. “Because of ignorance, there is also fear which causes people to keep their distance from this problem. They are afraid their children will somehow contract the disease by being in the same room as those with the AIDS virus. In view of the misunderstanding, we in He Intends Victory have developed church policies to help alleviate some of the fears for churches.” Bruce said he is pleased to report, “things are changing in the church and more is being done.”

Bruce always asks what would Jesus do if He were here? He would reach out and touch those who are hurting. “I think there is a place where caution comes in, but also we need to step over that boundary and trust the Lord, too. I think we need to respond out of real love and direction. We need to love that person.”

He added, “The other side of this disease is that AIDS is an Acquired Immune Deficiency, meaning people have acquired it. They’ve gotten it by doing something. Ninety-eight percent of the people, who have gotten this disease, have acquired it because they’ve done something wrong. Now, I can’t look down on them too long,” he went on, “because I’m sinful myself. It’s only by grace that any of us are saved.”

Still, Bruce says, in view of this, the Christian church needs to speak out and say, “There is a consequence for sin. But at the same time, if you have this disease, then we want you to know we love you because we are saved by grace, too.

“It sometimes appears the Christian church has singled out homosexuality as ‘the worst sin’ anyone could commit,” He continues. “It is called an abomination in the Scripture so it is looked upon as a ‘heavier’ type sin. I do believe there are different consequences for different sins. In the Old Testament if you said something against someone that was sinful, there was a consequence for it, if you lied, there was a different consequence, but if you murdered, there was a more severe consequence. However, forgiven sin is all the same.”

He said, “However, because the King James Version of the Bible describes homosexuality as an abomination, people are inclined to look upon homosexuals with disdain. That is wrong because it tends to make us feel we are righteous because we haven’t done such a ‘bad’ sin. The truth is we are all sinners saved by grace.”

Pastor Sonnenberg is adamant the HIV virus is not God’s punishment for the homosexual community. “If that were so, what is cancer?” he asked. “Is breast cancer, for instance, God’s way of punishing women? Is prostate cancer God’s way of punishing men? Of course not! God does not work that way. Sickness is a consequence for living in a sinful world.”

He said his plea to the church today is, “Open your heart to those with the HIV virus. Jesus has given us a new heart and it has lots of room in it for the hurting, for those in pain and for those in need. We, in the church, are those called by the Lord to reach out with a tender heart and tell them Jesus loves them and forgives them. In fact, He Intends Victory for all of us!”

Chapter Fifteen

HIGHWAY TO HEAVEN

When Jim and Ellie Johnston of Belfast, Northern Ireland, first learned their youngest son, Andrew, was homosexual, they thought he was on a highway to hell. To make it worse, the couple discovered their son had AIDS after he came down with pneumonia in October of 1988. “We were devastated,” said Ellie. But, as he passed into eternity on November 17, 1992, at 2:55 P.M., they knew for a fact he was, instead, on a beautiful highway to heaven. Shortly after losing their thirty-five-year-old son to AIDS the couple agreed to talk about their moving experience with Tim Berends, then radio co-host on the “Tim and Al Show” on KBRT-AM radio in Costa Mesa, California.

Andrew had been out of the homosexual lifestyle for five years when he passed away and Jim revealed it was the Holy Spirit and the Lord Jesus who won him back. “He loved the Lord, and the last year of his life was a beautiful, tender walk with Jesus. He truly wanted to go home to be with the Lord.

Anne Laudadio, Andrew’s sister, explained that several pastors whom Andrew loved dearly came to see him and to comfort the family prior to his passing. One of them was Chuck Smith, senior pastor of Calvary Chapel of Costa Mesa.

“He spoke some encouraging words to Andrew. Dad asked Pastor Chuck if he would sing, ‘Until Then My Heart Will Go on Singing,’” recalled Anne. “Pastor Chuck sang beautifully, and Andrew and our entire family joined in. This was remarkable, as he had AIDS-related cancer in his esophagus and for the last year Andrew had not been able to sing.

“The nurses said it sounded like angels were in Andrew’s room and we all knew they were! We sang several more songs that were dear to Andrew. Andrew was exuberant and said he couldn’t imagine a more joyous celebration than this. It brings such comfort when we think about the heavenly look on his face at that moment.”

Anne went on to say, “After several hours, Andrew began to grow tired, and he closed his eyes. Andrew was so weak we believed once he went to sleep, we would not be able to speak with him again. This was hard for us and there were tears, but the joy we experienced earlier that day had left us with a warm, wonderful feeling. We knew Andrew would not have to suffer much longer. Since our family had not slept or eaten for three days, with much coaxing, we all left Andrew’s room together to get something to eat. We knew we might have a long vigil at Andrew’s bedside until he took his last breath.

“Upon returning to Andrew’s bedside, we were absolutely astonished to find Andrew awake and sitting up!

The joy we felt at having one more chance to tell Andrew we loved him, and talk to him was indescribable. We jumped up and down and laughed and cried and hugged each other.

“Andrew told us he had just been tired, and was sleeping, but he heard us all crying as we left the room. He scolded us, and said he didn’t want us to cry over him when he really did go. Andrew told us, ‘You are going to have to go through this again, and I don’t want any broken hearts because this is a happy day. This is my coronation. I’m going to be with Jesus today.’ As we rejoiced his doctor came into the room. Andrew said, ‘I’m back.’ Then referring to the morphine which had been administered to him to deal with the pain, he added with his typical humor, ‘this doesn’t work! Where’s the guarantee? I want my money back!’”

Anne said the doctor walked out of the room scratching his head, “You people are weird!”

As they sat by his bed, their son began recalling his boyhood years. “This went on for the whole evening until he finally fell asleep,” said Jim.

He again woke and said, “I see a black limousine with black windows.”

The family listened intently as he appeared to address someone whom they surmised to be the devil. Andrew said in a firm voice, “You deceived me once, but you will never deceive me again.”

His sister Anne, who was beside his bed, leaned over and asked, “Andrew, where are you now? What do you see?”

Andrew’s face lit up as he remarked, “I’m in a beautiful green garden.”

“Can you describe it to us?” Anne asked.

He replied, “I see a bright light up ahead. It is so bright, it is almost blinding.”

“Is it too beautiful to describe?”

Andrew shook his head and replied, “No, but I am walking and I’m not feeling any pain.” After a brief moment, he continued. “Now I’m sitting on a beautiful marble bench made of un-hewn marble and it doesn’t hurt me to sit.”

Anne said, “He told us he was able to walk again! He told us he was able to see a lot of people, but he couldn’t recognize anyone.”

She asked him, “Can you see Jesus yet?”

He responded, “Not yet,” a big smile crossing his face.

Anne said her brother kept talking for another eight hours. “The entire time, his eyes were closed, but he knew right where everyone in the room was seated,” she said.

Jim Johnston said Andrew’s conversation wasn’t the typical Andrew either. “It was a very college level conversation we were having with him, almost like a message from above.”

Anne asked him, “Where are you now?”

Andrew replied, “I see the gates just up ahead. They are beautiful and made of suspended, uncut pearls.” He described each gate as being one giant pearl.

He added, “They go on as high and wide as you can see.”

As he stood before the pearly gates of heaven, Andrew declared, “Now that I’m here, I need a verse—First Corinthians 6.” Andrew’s eyes were happily peering into the next world.

Jim Johnston got out his Bible and began reading verses 19 and 20, “Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have from God.” Andrew quoted every word with his father.

“It was delightful,” recalled Jim, “just like he was reading it himself.”

Andrew then said, “I’m going in, but I need a song.”

So, tearfully, Jim Johnston began singing, “For There’s a Highway to Heaven,” as everyone joined in.

“That’s my song!” he declared joyfully. Andrew joined in with the singing. After the song was over, Andrew said, “I’m walking through the gates, and now that I’m inside, I realize you don’t need any passes or credentials here.”

Jim Johnston explained that when Andrew would go into Anne’s housing complex, he always had to have a pass at the gate.

“There are no passes here and you don’t need any papers,” said Andrew, his face flushed with heavenly joy.

Jim said that after his son had gone inside, he said, “I’m looking back in the direction of the gates, and I can see the words, ‘You made the right choice.’”

Andrew added, “Isn’t this strange. I came to the Lord when I was a little boy, but now that I’m here, God tells me ‘You have not chosen me but I have chosen you.’” With that, Andrew Johnston passed into the presence of his Lord. As Andrew closed his eyes for the last time and drew his last breath at 2:55pm, Jim turned to his daughter and said “You know, some of the years were rough years and the last one has really been a trial, but Andrew passed over to the other side like a saint.”

As the family came away from the bedside, Jim wondered aloud, “Why aren’t we crying? Why aren’t we completely destroyed?”

He later explained, “It was because he had left us with a word from the other side. He had arrived. He was happy in his eternal home.”

Anne said, “The Lord gave our family such peace and comfort. It is truly a peace that passes all understanding. We miss Andrew terribly, and grieve for ourselves, but we do not grieve for Andrew for he is with the Lord. He is no longer suffering.” Andrew Johnston had finally gone home to his wonderful reward and the Johnston family was at peace. One day, they will all be together again on the highway to heaven.

At her brother’s funeral at Florence Avenue Foursquare Church in Santa Fe Springs, California, Anne spoke to the congregation. “Andrew told me how disappointed he was that he would not be able to attend today because he didn’t want to miss out, but he had another engagement booked. He was the guest of honor at a welcome home celebration.... My father said he died like a saint and he did.”

Welcome home, Andrew!

Brothers In Arms

Greg Done's story of the last days of his brother Tony's life was as equally moving, but with a different twist. Speaking before the congregation of the Village Church of Irvine, he told of Tony's last days on earth. He also died of AIDS complications.

Greg's voice was strangely hushed and nervous as he began by sharing a couple of Scriptures. The first was from Romans 10, verses 9 and 10, in which the Apostle Paul said, "If we confess with our mouths Jesus Christ as Lord and believe in our hearts that God raised him from the dead, we will be saved." He added, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

Greg revealed that his brother, who was gay, was diagnosed with AIDS in January of 1991.

"By December of 1991, he had deteriorated significantly," said Greg. "I was able to share the gospel with him several times. However, because of the gay community's perception that all Christians hate people with AIDS and that God's punishment was on people in the gay community, he had no concept of God's love at all."

Greg said from January to September 1992, God opened the door for his family to spend some "quality time" with his brother. One day, "he was in bed and I crawled in besides him. We spent three or four hours together." Greg burst into tears, recalling the incident. When he was able to recover his composure, he went on, "God's anointing was there and I was able to minister to my brother in a big way. When I left, I was floating out of the room. He had received the gospel, and it appeared to be good news to him."

Greg asked his brother, "Would you like to have more?" He nodded his head, "Yes, come back. I want more."

Greg's heart leapt with excitement. The next week, Greg called his brother at the hospital, and said, "I'm ready to come back."

He was shocked when his brother responded with a deep bitterness in his voice. "Don't bother. You can be my brother, but that God stuff has got to go. I'm sick of it! I don't want to hear any more about it. Stay away!" Tony paused briefly then added, "If you want to come as my brother, fine, but I don't want any more of that God baloney."

Greg confessed to feeling extremely dismayed. "I was shocked because it seemed like God had done such a work there. I called a good friend of mine, Dr Eno, and asked, 'what do I do? I can't say anything right now.'" Then Greg decided to take the challenge upon himself. "I'm just going to go back. I'm just going to open that door back up again." he said.

"Dr Eno said to me, 'Don't do that. God loves him more than you. Pray for an open door and just be available and ready and see what God will do.'"

Members of the family sat with him. "My wife, Marie, spent several days scratching his back, rubbing his feet and back, and changing his diapers, but there was no spiritual response from him at all," said Greg.

Tony became so discouraged in August of 1992, he decided he would go off his \$20,000 a month drugs and "just die." Greg said, "I wanted to knock down the doors again, but I remembered the advice, 'don't knock it down. God loves him more than you.' So I didn't. Eventually, God opened the door, and again we had a special time together of prayer. I was able to share God's word with my dying brother. He was open because he knew he was approaching the door between where he was now and where he was going to spend all of eternity. He was dealing with that."

Several weeks later, after returning from a trip, Greg and Marie heard the news. Tony had passed away. They were heartbroken. Marie said to the Lord, “God, we needed just a little bit more time. Why did this happen before he accepted Jesus as his Savior?”

The next day, Greg was surprised to receive a phone call from his brother’s homosexual lover asking him to conduct the memorial service.

“I presided over the memorial service, and people shared their memories of my brother,” he recalled. “When it was just about over, a man who had been my brother’s nurse during the five weeks before he died said, ‘I’d like to share something.’ He was a great big, burly, black man, and he was aglow, just like an angel,” recalled Greg.

“He said, ‘As a nurse, I can’t push my faith, but if a patient appears to be open to the Gospel, we can share with them. One day, Tony had had an extremely bad day, and said, ‘I don’t know where I’m going. I’m not sure.’”

“Do you mind if I share some things with you from the Bible?” The nurse responded to the dying man.

“That’s what I want,” said Tony.

Greg, and the others in the church began to weep as the man pressed on with his incredible story.

The nurse opened up his Bible and told Tony of God’s wonderful plan of salvation. He asked him, “Do you believe you’ve been in sin, that you are a sinner, and the only way out is through Jesus Christ?”

Tony nodded his head and replied, “I believe that. I want to be forgiven. I want to turn my life over to Jesus. I want to spend all of eternity with Him.”

The huge man with kindly, sparkling eyes went on to reveal that Tony began to pray, “God, please forgive me for my sins. Please be my Lord.”

The nurse said Tony was open to all he was able to tell him about his new life as a Christian after that. “They shared a lot,” said Greg. “This nurse was a lay minister God had placed in Tony’s ward for that specific time.”

The nurse concluded his speech by looking straight at Greg and then the rest of the congregation. He said in a husky, bass voice, “Don’t you be worrying about Tony. Tony’s okay. Instead, you should be worrying about yourself. Have you come to the place where Tony came? Have you believed in Jesus Christ? If you haven’t, you haven’t come to the place Tony did. So don’t you be worrying about Tony,” he added. “You be worrying about yourself.”

There was a profound stillness in the congregation, and then spontaneous applause broke out.

“It was so great to hear this news,” said Greg. “My wife’s heart just burst because she had said, ‘God, you took him too soon, we needed a little bit more time.’ And God said to all of us, ‘I’m always, always on time.’”

Chapter Sixteen

THE LAZARUS SYNDROME

Joan Yorba-Gray

Lazarus, Rise Up

In 1996, AIDS patients were given a new lease on life by the introduction of a new class of AIDS drugs called protease inhibitors. People who had previously been prepared for imminent death were given a second chance. AIDS patients who had cashed in their life insurance policies, made their wills and settled their affairs were literally snatched from the jaws of death. Many who had been seriously ill and unable to care for themselves found that with the new medicines they felt better and could look forward to a future. There is still no cure for HIV/AIDS, but many people have had remarkable turnarounds due to the new medications. This phenomenon has been described in the AIDS literature as the “Lazarus Syndrome.” Just as Jesus brought Lazarus back from the dead, many AIDS patients have been restored to a new life when certain death had previously loomed on the horizon, thanks to the protease inhibitors.

I too, have experienced the Lazarus Syndrome in my life.

Before describing my Lazarus experience I’d like to share some background. My husband and I were married in 1976 and we later had two children. Outwardly we were a normal family, but our lives of “normalcy” were suddenly shattered in 1988 when my husband, who had become very ill and was hospitalized, was diagnosed with AIDS. I was devastated, not only by his diagnosis but also by his subsequent confession. After he was given his diagnosis he told me that he had been involved in extramarital relationships, and probably contracted the virus through these encounters.

Thus began one of the most painful and tumultuous periods of my life. I had to deal with his terminal illness (before protease inhibitors), his infidelity and betrayal, grief and pain, as well as the fear that I may also be infected. I was worried about our children and was terrified that they would one day be orphaned. It took me six months to summon up the courage to get tested, and the results showed that I was HIV positive. To my relief, my children were HIV negative.

An AIDS Widow

After my husband’s death 18 months later, I was a young widow with two small children, HIV positive, and my life was in pieces. Fortunately, seven years before my spouse’s illness, I had “met” Christ in a real, significant way. I became committed to developing a relationship with Him that was different than what I had experienced in my earlier years as a churchgoing Christian. I had believed in His death and resurrection for our sins but had not understood that Jesus also wants a relationship with me, a “nobody” according to this world’s value system. This realization filled me with wonder. As I pondered the significance of His love, the Creation and His

majesty, it all clicked and I rededicated myself to follow Christ. As a result, by the time I reached that very low point in my life seven years later, I had the Lord to lean on and I survived because of His help.

In the years that followed my spouse's death, my children and I found a supportive church family who loved and nurtured us. They never rejected us even though they found out that I was HIV positive. Our pastors, Don and Judy Baldwin, Vince Neypes and Bruce Kane, modeled the love of Christ by their example and the church members did the same. I was very fortunate to receive so much support when their congregations have rejected many other people with HIV.

I also met a wonderful man, Galen, who grew to love me during our friendship as members of that congregation. Together with the Baldwins' subtle matchmaking efforts, we both developed a love for each other that was deeper than friendship. Although Galen had concerns about the ramifications of my HIV diagnosis, he decided that he loved me more than he feared the virus. After discussions with his family, pastors and doctor, he expressed his love for me, and I shared those feelings. We were married in 1994.

Those of us with HIV often feel that no one would love us or want to marry us because of the virus. Yet when someone sees us with the love of Christ, love is possible in the most unlikely circumstances. Galen has been a rich blessing in my life, which reminds me that his love, in spite of my HIV infection, is like that of Christ. Christ loved the lepers of his day even though they were unlovable to many others, and he loves us all, especially those of us with HIV. The Pharisees questioned Jesus saying, "Why do ye eat and drink with publicans and sinners? And Jesus answering said unto them, 'They that are whole need not a physician; but they that are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.'" (Luke 30-32) When people see us with the love of Christ, we experience a love that the unbelieving world cannot comprehend, yet craves.

My children have grown to be strong and healthy adults and have given me the motivation to fight the virus and to move ahead in life. I hope to live long enough to see them marry and have their own children someday.

Returning to the "Lazarus Syndrome," I remained healthy for many years after I became HIV positive, even though at the time I was diagnosed as HIV positive, there was no hope of longevity. But with the Lord, there is always hope. The protease inhibitors and other related medications or the "cocktail," brought new tools, which controlled the growth of the virus. Unfortunately these medicines can be a blessing and a curse. I suffered many negative side effects and the medication schedule can be rigorous. Nevertheless, I believe that those medicines gave me an opportunity to live where in the past I would have expected death. Because I received a new chance at life with these medicines, I called that my first Lazarus Experience.

My second Lazarus episode came later. In 1997 I became very ill from some of the side effects of the medications and the unrelenting attack of the virus. I had to stop working because I became unable to continue my normal activities. I suffered fatigue, stomach distress, weakness and loss of appetite. I became progressively sicker until I had to be hospitalized in March 1998. I was diagnosed with pancreatitis, a potentially fatal illness. I then became more ill with a blood infection, sepsis, and other infections at my I.V. sites, all of which were life threatening in my much-weakened condition. If that weren't dangerous enough, I suffered a cardiac arrest and was resuscitated after a few minutes of heart failure. I call this my second Lazarus Experience because the likelihood of my surviving such attacks on my body was extremely remote, if not impossible, without the intervention of God. He gave me life where death appeared certain, due to the severity of my illness.

I am so grateful to Galen, because during that time period he called all our friends, family and church family to pray fervently for me. I believe that God miraculously spared my life and the proof of that is how sick I was. Any one of the conditions I had could have killed me, yet I lived in spite of the odds stacked against me. "With God, all things are possible". (Matthew 26b)

I am awestruck by God's love. Even when we are small and insignificant, He loves us equally to the strong and mighty. He is a God who reaches out to the sick, the little children and the sinners. What a God He is!

I puzzled for many days and weeks over why the Lord had chosen to give me more time on earth. Of course He has given me more time with my loved ones and that is a very precious gift for which I am eternally grateful. I also found a verse in Scripture that gave me another answer to my question. Psalm 118 says, "I shall not die, but live, and declare the works of the Lord" (vs. 17). Since that time I have dedicated myself to proclaim His works through the He Intends Victory ministry so that I can share His love and hope with others who have HIV, and their families.

Chapter Seventeen
ANOTHER CHANCE FOR DAN
Dan Davis

A Broken Heart

When Dan Davis became a Christian in the summer of 1963, he did so because he wanted to win a double prize - salvation and a chalk picture of Jesus. Little did he realize, many years later his faith would bring him through the greatest trial of his life.

Dan, who was born in Des Moines, Iowa on October 2, 1951, first made his decision for Christ at a summer camp organized by the First Brethren Church of Des Moines. At the camp one night he was listening, along with the other children, to the pastor speak about death. The pastor asked the question, “If you died today, would you really know you would be in heaven with Jesus?”

“I was sitting around the campfire with the other campers,” Dan recalled. “The pastor was illustrating his talk with a chalk picture of Jesus dying on the cross, which was to be given away at the end of the night.

“I gave my heart to Jesus that night, and after I said the sinner’s prayer, I knew without a doubt something had changed inside of me. By the way, I won the chalk picture. It was like a confirmation of my salvation the Lord had given me, because I had never won anything before.”

Dan had lived most of his life just outside of Des Moines. He went to a small high school and graduated from a class of approximately 175 people in 1970.

“I came from a middle class home, but I remember my folks struggling to make financial ends meet,” he recalled. “I came from a large family, five brothers and one sister. When I was very young, mom worked during the day, and went to college at night. It was very difficult, I’m sure, for her, as she had to balance work, study, and a large family. My dad worked as an auto-mechanic. I remember the times my brothers, sister, Dad I had together playing baseball. We had a wonderful time.

“My family, however, never seemed too interested in church; though Dad did work on the Sunday school bus every once in a while.”

Into The Fire

It was while he was in high school that Dan began to struggle with homosexuality. “I imagined what it would be like to be with other guys in an unnatural way,” he recalled. “I knew God had not made me that way. I toyed with my thoughts for a long time, and I even began to look at pornography that was available from my next door neighbor.”

After graduating high school, he moved out of the family home at the age of 18 and shared an apartment with a friend who worked with Dan at a local hospital.

“I was working nights at the hospital on an 11:00pm to 7:00am shift,” said Dan. “I would come home and sleep during the day. I had never met the landlord, because my friend had picked out the apartment.

“One day I was sleeping, when a strange man came into the apartment. When I woke up, he was sitting at the end of my bed. I was frightened, because I didn’t know who he was, or what he wanted. I pulled the sheets over me and moved quickly towards the headboard. The stranger introduced himself, and said he was the landlord. He proceeded to talk to me about the property, and at the same time, began to fondle me. I was frightened, but at the same time, I was enticed. That was my first homosexual encounter, and many more followed with the landlord.

“I eventually attached myself to him, and I would frequently go to his furniture store for more encounters. I continued to struggle with my sexuality, even though I knew it was wrong; yet I desired more of the same lifestyle.”

Dan had longed to marry, feeling that if he did, all of his homosexual desire would go away. It was in October 1971, while working for a hospital in Des Moines as an orderly on an orthopedic floor, that he first met Cathy, a nurse who had just moved to Des Moines from her birthplace of Vinton, Iowa.

“Cathy was really cute and seemed quite shy,” said Dan. “She had just graduated from nursing school in another town, and had come to Des Moines to start a new life. I asked her out on a date, and she agreed to go. I knew the first time I saw her she was the one for me. I asked her to marry me on our very first date. It took Cathy forever to give me an answer. Two months later, she told me she would marry me. I think she questioned herself because God’s Word states that we are not to be unequally yoked. Cathy did not know I was a Christian at the time because I was not living a Christian life.”

Cathy, who had become a Christian on April 18, 1970, said, “What attracted me to Dan was his great sense of humor. Also, he spoiled me. He bought me gifts, was romantic, and fun to be with. I loved his big family, too.”

Dan and Cathy were married on June 17, 1972. “We had a large wedding in Vinton, and everything appeared to be wonderful,” he said.

When they first married, they began to go to various local churches. “However, they didn’t seem to feed us spiritually or speak about God’s salvation,” said Cathy. “The churches we had gone to spoke more about giving money, which really turned Dan off.”

Both were by now working at different hospitals on the evening shifts. “Our routine was to sleep in late, get up in time to go to work, do our shift, then meet and go out to eat, and get to bed late,” said Cathy. “After about a year, Dan wanted us to start a family and shortly afterwards I became pregnant.”

After two years, their first child Matt was born. But his birth was not without drama. “He had some complications and was in a neonatal intensive care unit for seven and a half days,” said Cathy. “I remember acknowledging to myself and Dan, that the Lord had spared Matt’s life, but still we didn’t go to church.”

Karen came two years later, in the bicentennial year of 1976. Their final child was Johanna, who was born two and a half years after that.

A Double Life

As the years continued, Dan began to slip into a double life. He used various drugs and, although he didn’t want to, he found he could not resist fulfilling his homosexual desires more and more. Meanwhile, Cathy was unaware of much of what was happening in her husband’s life, although she discovered he was smoking marijuana.

“I remember feeling helpless about it,” she said. “I had no interest in drugs and I couldn’t understand why anyone would use money or jeopardize their family for drugs.”

But by now, Dan was well and truly hooked. “The more homosexual encounters and drugs I had, the less guilt I felt,” he said. “I joined the Navy in 1974. After boot camp, I went to a military school in Oxnard, California. Housing was very costly, and I was an ‘E-1’ enlisted man. I could not afford for Cathy and Matt to be with me in Oxnard, so they stayed with friends in Yuma, Arizona. I would travel back and forth on the weekends to see them.

“On the way back from Yuma, I would usually stop at a particular rest stop, meet a stranger, and have a homosexual encounter before going back to school.

“My first military duty assignment was in Williamsburg, Virginia. The very first day I was there, I met with another man stationed in Williamsburg, and got high off of pot while on the base. At the time, the military did not test for drugs.”

Dan says he continued to abuse drugs until one day he met John, who was known around the base as a “Jesus Freak.” John asked Dan if he knew Jesus as his Lord and Savior.

“He invited me to church on a Friday night and I accepted so he would leave me alone,” recalled Dan. “Cathy and I went to the church service the following Friday night. I couldn’t believe what my eyes saw! People were singing and lifting their hands to the Lord. I could tell these people were very focused on what they were doing. I had never experienced anything like this before. I had gone to different churches before, and thought they were a gathering place for gossip and entertainment.

“When we got home from church, Cathy told me she was not going back. Another child in the nursery had apparently bitten Matt, and she was boiling mad. Still, she got over this and we ended up going back to the church anyway. After a while, I received the baptism of the Holy Spirit. I stopped smoking cigarettes, but I continued to use drugs. I also continued to have sexual encounters with men that I did not know.

“Time and time again, I would ask the Lord for forgiveness, but everything remained the same.”

Eventually, Dan received military orders to transfer to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) base in Iceland. “Before I left for Iceland, I had to go back to school in California,” he said. “I left Cathy and the two kids in Virginia while I went to school for the next six weeks. During that six-week period, there was not a day I was not high on drugs and alcohol. I would hit the bars at night. I left my family and God back in Virginia, or so I thought.”

The family finally moved to Iceland, where they lived for two years. “I would occasionally meet other men stationed there, but it was infrequent,” he said. “After living in Iceland, I returned to Virginia with my family in 1979. Cathy wanted to settle down, because Matt was starting school, so we got out of the military.

“I eventually went to work for the government at a Naval Weapons Station, and quickly climbed the ladder of success. During this time, all three of our children were in a private Christian school. Cathy and I could not afford our children’s school tuition, so I got a second job as a waiter in a Chinese restaurant. I enjoyed the employment because it not only supported my children’s tuition; it also supported my drug habits and worldly lifestyle.

“I would party almost every night. There would be times I would spend days away from home. I would tell Cathy I was working in Norfolk; however, I would go to clubs and the beaches. I would spend weekends in Norfolk with other men.”

I'm Leaving

Dan eventually met a guy named Joe who was stationed in the Norfolk area. "I spent a lot of time with him, and thought we were soul mates," he said. "I decided to leave Cathy. I told her I was going to leave her for another man. By this time, I decided I was totally gay and wanted to live that lifestyle."

Cathy was devastated. "I couldn't imagine being left for a man," she said. "Until then, I had no idea Dan was bisexual. When I first met him, I thought he was rather effeminate, but after we started dating, I didn't think so. When he told me he was leaving me for a man, I was shocked and felt really alone. I couldn't tell any of my church family or my own family. I felt so helpless; I began to cry out to the Lord for help. It was then that the Lord taught me to depend wholly and completely on Him. God did give abundant grace."

Just as Dan was planning to move out, something extraordinary occurred. "God had a plan for my life, because this man was reassigned, and I stayed with Cathy," he said.

Through all of this, Dan and Cathy still attended a church in Williamsburg and Dan was in for a shock. The leaders in the church somehow found out about his lifestyle. "They called and asked to meet with me on the following Sunday after church," he said. "I became really frightened to meet with the leadership of the church, especially as the church had been known to be very controlling in each church member's life."

The following Sunday, with great trepidation, Dan met with the leaders of the church. They surrounded him. The pastor pointed his finger at him and told him that if he did not get out of the lifestyle he was in, he would have to leave the church.

"They also told me to get tested for AIDS," he said. "I continued to party and have my flings, and eventually I left the church on my own. I was never tested for AIDS, and I kept Cathy from everything that I was doing."

"We were still together," Cathy says, "and we would spend times walking and talking and sharing things with each other." It was during these times she began to learn a little of his past life.

I Knew In My Heart I Had AIDS

In 1987, Cathy's grandfather became terminally ill, so she flew out to Phoenix to see him. During the time that she was gone, Dan began to get very ill.

"I could not eat or keep any food in my stomach and I began to lose weight quickly," said Dan. "I thought I had AIDS, but I was afraid to be tested. I tried to reassure myself that it was just a severe case of the flu. I didn't go to the doctor. After two weeks, I began to recuperate.

"One year later, just before Christmas, I again became very ill. I did go to the doctor, and he wanted to admit me to the hospital, but I would not go because I was afraid of the outcome. I knew in my heart I had AIDS, but I did not want to hear it. I was afraid of the truth. Again, I eventually got better."

In 1990, Dan's brother-in-law (Richard) asked the family to move to Phoenix, Arizona to go to work for him.

"I was tired of Williamsburg, and thought I could get a fresh start in life by moving to Phoenix so I agreed," said Dan. "I stayed healthy for approximately five years while in Phoenix, but then, things changed.

"I thought I had the flu, and I was having a difficult time breathing, so I took myself to an emergency room.

The doctors did a chest x-ray, and told me I had a small amount of pneumonia. The doctor put me on some medication and sent me home.”

As the days passed, his condition became worse. He could not eat, and he again began to lose weight and run a low-grade fever.

“I decided I had better go back to the doctor,” said Dan. “In fact, I went to see him several times, and he ran several tests, all but the test I needed, an HIV test. I did not tell the doctor about my previous lifestyle, so he had no reason to test me for HIV.

“I continued to get sicker and sicker and the doctor was puzzled. He decided to call an internal medicine doctor, who was a friend of his. The internal medicine doctor told my doctor to test me for AIDS. The doctor gave me the HIV test; but, before the results were in, he decided his friend, the internal medicine doctor, should see me.

“Cathy and I went to the internal medicine doctor. He took one look at me and called the HIV test lab for the results of my test. The doctor came into the exam room and announced the bad news. He announced I had AIDS. Cathy and I were shocked, and we began to cry. It was like a knife going through me.

“I was so ashamed, and I was worried about Cathy. I was so sick and so ashamed at the time; I just wanted to die. I asked the Lord to take me home, but He had other things in mind. The doctor sent us directly to the hospital. I remember I could hardly walk I was so weak. I was admitted to the hospital, and the staff was very kind to us. They had worked with AIDS patients before, and they weren’t afraid.

“I was assigned a new doctor who knew about the virus. He was very kind and gentle with Cathy and me. He told Cathy she should be tested for HIV but it could wait. There was no rush now. A medical test revealed I had pneumonia, and an unknown growth was found in my head.”

Dan and Cathy decided to gather at the hospital to give the children the sad news. “We called them all to the hospital; Matt and his wife MeLinda, Karen, and Johanna,” he said. “Cathy and I told the children I was positive for AIDS. I was so sick; I don’t even remember their reactions. The children later told me they suspected I had AIDS before we told them, but cried when they heard the news.

“My pastor, Paul Singh, had been up to the hospital to see me. He even helped transport me from one bed to another, but I had sworn Cathy to secrecy. She should tell no one about my terrible fate, not even the pastor. After a week’s stay in the hospital, I persuaded the doctor to allow me to go home. I hated the hospital, and I just wanted to go home to die. I felt this was God’s judgment on my sin.

“The doctor discharged me, and two days later, I was right back in the hospital. Cathy called my mom, and my mom flew out to be a help to Cathy. After about a week, I was stabilized and was discharged; however, I was receiving IV medications the doctor had prescribed at home. The medication was so strong I would hallucinate. Cathy and mom would try to walk me, but I could only walk to the end of the driveway, about 12 feet. Then I would have to turn around and go back to bed.”

“When Dan came home, he was still very weak,” Cathy explained. “I didn’t know how our family would manage. Dan was receiving home health care with strong antibiotic IV medications. He was hallucinating a little, and thought one of the nurses was trying to kill him. The growth in his brain plus some of the antibiotics altered his thinking a bit. The first night Dan was home, he kept repeating numbers. Thankfully, it didn’t continue after the first night! I wondered who this man was! Still, I was thankful to have him home.”

In the meantime, Cathy was going to different AIDS agencies, social security, and county offices to get any assistance she could. “Dan was no longer working and I had to put my home business to a halt,” she said. “Dan had no disability coverage from his workplace. Praise God, He truly provided for our family. Both of our families

assisted in whatever they could. Friends and even people we didn't know gave us food, money, and other necessary items we needed. We never missed a payment, and we never went without food. We are truly thankful to God and to everyone who provided for us. God is truly Jehovah Jireh — My Provider. Not only did He provide material needs, but also He gave tremendous grace and strength during this time.

“Going to the different agencies for assistance wasn't always easy; some people were kind and others were impatient. I shed a few tears sometimes.”

Because of the stigma of AIDS, the couple kept quiet to their church about his illness, so were not getting any spiritual counseling

“Dan was very adamant about not telling people,” said Cathy. “He did share with his family, though, and a few friends at that time. After a few months, Dan qualified for assistance that helped us financially. I remained at home for almost a year after Dan was first diagnosed. His weight had gone to 106 pounds, but gradually he improved. He had a few up and down times, when he would be sick then feel better.

“I would wonder if he was going to be okay during the down times because his doctor had given him one to two years to live. During this time, I also helped care for his Dad while he received chemotherapy and recuperated from a stroke. Praise the Lord, he no longer has cancer, and he recuperated from the stroke.

“I went through some times of depression. I wondered what it would be like to be a widow and how I would manage. I didn't know if Dan would live to see more grandchildren or our daughters get married. I had some real cleaning sprees to keep myself busy during this time. In the meantime, I knew I would have to start working again. The Lord provided a wonderful job with great benefits. It was a job other than nursing, but I felt the Lord was leading me.

My Life Would Never Be The Same

“Dan and I praise God when he passed a second anniversary after being diagnosed with AIDS. Medical breakthroughs for AIDS were being made.”

As time passed, Dan slowly began to gain strength. “I was still very ashamed of my disease,” he said. “I felt like I had not only shamed myself, but also my family, and the Lord. I was completely helpless. It was a place where the Lord took me; I had nothing left to rely on except the Lord, Jesus Christ.

“As time went on, I began to feel better. I spent a lot of time sleeping, some reading, and spending time with Jesus. My life would never be the same.”

Cathy had her own home business at the time and Dan eventually shared his disease with Cathy's home business director, Lorraine Carpenter and her husband, Mark. They had both previously worked in the medical field, and knew about the disease. They were also Christians.

“After we told them the news, they loved us unconditionally. They were the only people we told for a long time,” said Dan.

After going back and forth to the doctor for check-ups, Dan and Cathy asked the doctor about the future. “We wanted to know how much time I had to live because we knew this disease had no cure,” said Dan. “The doctor told us I would probably live one and a half to two years maximum. Our world seemed upside down. Cathy was tested for HIV, and her results came back negative. Also, the two daughters were tested. The doctor said it was not necessary for any of the children to be tested, but they wanted to be tested for peace of mind. They were both

negative.”

It had been two years since his diagnosis and Dan had a new relationship with God. The Lord had taken him to a point similar to Paul’s situation in the Bible. “Whether he decided I should go home or I should stay, He would be my source of life,” said Dan. “I loved Him more than I ever had before.”

Dan decided it was time to tell his pastor, Paul Singh. “I made an appointment to have lunch with him,” said Dan. “We had lunch, and I spilled the beans. He was so accepting and kind. He told me about another acquaintance of his that acquired the disease from a blood transfusion, so he knew a little about HIV and AIDS.

He Intends Victory for Me

“I still had this empty spot, it seemed, in my heart. I had wished I had someone to fellowship with who related to my problems. Although I had my family and my pastor to encourage me, I still felt alone.”

The turning point came one Saturday while listening to a Christian radio station in Phoenix. He heard a public service announcement for He Intends Victory (HIV), a Christian ministry for those affected by HIV and AIDS. The announcement gave the toll-free number to call (1-800-HIV-HOPE).

“I called the 800 number and Herb Hall answered the phone,” said Dan. “He asked me if I knew someone with AIDS, and I said I did. He asked if it was me. I hesitantly said yes. His response was, ‘Praise God, brother!’ My first thought was this guy is out of his mind. How could anyone thank God for having AIDS?

“We spoke a little longer, and I seemed to notice something different in the tone of Herb’s voice. The fear of judgment I thought I would receive was not there. I decided I wanted to know more about He Intends Victory, so I asked for the book. After reading the book, Cathy and I felt the Lord tugging at our hearts. There are so many people with HIV and AIDS here in Phoenix dying without any friends, family, or God.

“I remember in my own situation when someone said, ‘You are not alone,’ it meant so much to me. Cathy and I decided we wanted to visit the He Intends Victory group. I set an appointment with Bruce Sonnenberg to go to California and check out the staff.

“When we arrived, I felt as though I had found a home. Everyone was so loving and accepting. They didn’t even ask me how I contracted AIDS. I will never forget Bruce telling me it doesn’t matter where you’ve been, what matters is where you’re going. Since our visit to California, we have begun a charter group of He Intends Victory in Phoenix. The staff from California presented a seminar in Phoenix where I was able to share my testimony with my church. It was very difficult, but I felt a release and a joy that I was accepted despite my past lifestyle.

“Cathy and I are now going forward with He Intends Victory in Phoenix. Our first support group began in October 1998. We pray lives will be changed, and God would be honored as we go forward; always changing for the best and in everything, honoring Jesus.”

At the time of writing Dan remains healthy. “My viral counts have been non-detectable for some time now,” he said. “It has been six years since my diagnosis, and I praise God for his goodness and mercy.”

His family has stood by his side. Matthew, Karen, and Johanna. Matt married Melinda in July 1993 and they have two children, Alyssa and Asbyn. Karen married Ryan (Anderson) in March 1997 and they are currently working and going to college. Johanna was married in May 2002 and is working and going to school.

Cathy has been a loyal wife and friend to Dan during his struggles, and she was by his side again when he

spoke to their church about his past life and now having AIDS. “It is so overwhelming and exciting to know that people love, accept, and support you,” she said. “What an example of God’s unconditional love. Dan is doing well. He does have some days where he gets tired, or doesn’t feel well. He’s such a go-getter though I have to remind him to slow down sometimes.

“He and I have been married 31 years. When I took my wedding vows. I never imagined our life together as it has been. I love Dan very much and it’s been my heart’s desire to grow old together. The Lord knows what He has planned for us. I know God has ingrained in my heart His faithfulness. I remember attending a ladies Bible study on God’s faithfulness years ago. The elder who spoke shared on having faithfulness as a bulldog; about holding on and not letting go. That has remained with me. I am still negative for AIDS. Psalms 91 has ministered to me greatly. The beginning is, ‘He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadows of the Almighty. I will say of the Lord, He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust.’”

A Postscript from Dan

So much has changed in my life since our story was first published. But it’s now time I believe, to share some of the things I purposely left out.

As time passed I have experienced the death of both my parents. Dad died in February 2001 while living with us here in Phoenix. Mom died in May of 2004 from breast cancer. I always felt compelled to keep a certain subject out of this book as not to cause discord or strife among family members. But now I feel it is time to speak out, as this subject is something that expands across many families of today.

As a young boy, another family member sexually molested me. It happened frequently and for many years I was ashamed to speak out on the subject.

I do believe that being molested contributed to some of the choices that I made later in life. I am not saying it was the only thing, but I do believe that it was a part. I “felt” that the act was something that I had invited as a boy of 12 years old, yet I had no control over. I “felt” nobody would help me or could help me. I was afraid of how others would think of me and I sure was not about to break the mold of “the all American family.”

As time has passed and God has changed my life, I have come to the understanding that Christ desires to change us and make all things new in Him. He has spoken to me about many things concerning my past and helped me to forgive myself as well as others. Jesus Christ has changed many issues that held me captive for such a long period of time. Psalm 30 has been a great encouragement to me, *“Lord my God, I called to you for help and you healed me. Weeping may remain for a night, but rejoicing comes in the morning. To the Lord I cried for mercy. What gain is there in my destruction, in my going down into the pit? Will the dust praise you? Will it proclaim your faithfulness? Hear, O Lord, and be merciful to me; O Lord be my help. You turned my wailing into dancing; you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy that my heart may sing to you and not be silent. O Lord my God, I will give you thanks forever.”*

Cathy, my dear wife continues to stand with me. She has been a great source of strength to me. We have been married for 32 years this year. When I look back at it all, it amazes me to know how much she has gone through standing with me. What an incredible lady she is. One day while I was speaking before a group about HIV/AIDS it occurred to me to ask her the question, “Why did you stay with me? So many women would have left.” Her reply to me was, “Dan, there are two reasons why I stayed: 1) I took a vow before God and 2) I love you!” It was one of the most incredible words ever spoken to me. Her words brought me to tears; I love her so very much and am thankful to the Lord that He was the one who kept us together.

Cathy and I continue to share the joy of our family. Now, all married, we have just shared in the joy of the birth of our third grandchild to our oldest daughter Karen and husband Ryan. Our daughter, Johanna married Charles Campos and they have just celebrated their second year together. They continue their work and studies. Matt our son and his wife MeLinda have been married for eleven years, and are the proud parents of two wonderful daughters Alyssia, and Aspyn. I am thankful for their unconditional love. I have truly been granted a second chance of life.

AIDS not only affects me but it also affects my family and my friends. Living with AIDS has its challenges. Many different people see us who are infected and affected in many different ways. But God sees us with his loving and forgiving eyes through His son Jesus Christ. He is our hope for the future.

Chapter Eighteen
He Intends Victory, United Kingdom
Irene Bibby

I was born in Liverpool, England on 8th December 1937 and raised in the centre of the city. Later, when I became a teenager, we moved to a house in a small town called Huyton, which is about 8 miles from Liverpool city centre. At that time I remember thinking our family was very upper class, because we had a back and front garden to our house!

The years went by, I married and had a family. I divorced and later remarried. In this second marriage I bore two more sons, the elder being Jason, the younger Ian.

It was at the christening of Jason on October 9th 1977, that I gave my life to the Lord. I did not know it then, but I was to need the sustaining power of God in my life frequently in the years that followed, as I was to face numerous traumatic experiences, including serious illness, surgery, and the death of our beloved son Jason at a very young age.

In 1985 I became a founding member of Prescott Elim Fellowship, later to become Prescott Community Church. This has been my home church ever since and I have always served willingly and to the best of my ability. I have many friends within the Fellowship who give freely of their love and support.

It was in 1995 that I came into contact the Pastor Bruce Sonnenberg and 'He Intends Victory' – USA. Some one to whom I was close was going through a rehabilitation program and part of that program required an HIV test; at that time, results were not available until three weeks after the test. It was during that period that I was longing for Christian support, which was hard to find, apart from within my home church - sometimes we feel the need to seek impartial encouragement outside our immediate circle of friends. It was while I was searching that I took a magazine home from church and in it was a small advertisement for 'He Intends Victory'. I wrote to Bruce in the United States, who sent me a book and an encouraging letter, which helped to support me until the HIV results came through. When the results came through however, they were negative. I was very happy about that of course.

During this time of difficulty, I was very homophobic. In fact I was the most homophobic person you could meet. However, it was when I read Herb Hall's testimony about his struggles as a homosexual that my heart was softened and God began a deep work within me. He gave me a tremendous heart of compassion for people infected and affected by HIV/AIDS. He had dealt with my homophobic nature by replacing it with a great love for those the world rejects.

In January 1997, I was asked to visit 'He Intends Victory' at the Village Church of Irvine in California. This was a daunting thing for me to do, as I had never traveled beyond the shores of the UK before. I did not hold a passport. I had never needed one. So I took a great step of faith, and I sought the Lord. I received the Scripture verse from Habakkuk chapter 1:5 *"Look among the nations observe, be astonished wonder! For I am doing something in your days, you would not believe if you were told."* As I read on I soon came across Habakkuk 2:2,3, *"Then the Lord answered me and said, record the vision and inscribe it on tablets that the one who reads it may run, for the vision is yet for the appointed time it hastens towards the goal and it will not fail, though it tarries, wait for it, for it will certainly come, it will not delay"* (American Standard Version). I took hold of these scriptures and stand on these scriptures to this day.

I was ready for whatever was to come! Off I went to meet the 'He Intends Victory' Team. That to me was a tremendous privilege and the beginning of so many friendships, which are held dear to my heart. It was so good to learn about the ministry first hand, to meet everyone involved, and to see the church where the He Intends Victory is based. It was while I was there that I was asked to represent 'He Intends Victory' in the UK. I accepted, and returned home thinking, "Oh Lord, what have I done! How do I do this?"

On arriving back home, I shared with my Pastor and with the church. The response at first was mixed, simply because people did not understand HIV/AIDS. Gradually, though, people began to support me, and we formed a Board of Directors for He Intends Victory, UK. Since its' beginning, we remain together to work in supporting and reaching out to those infected and affected by HIV/AIDS throughout the United Kingdom. Our ministry is based in Prescot, Merseyside.

Over the years we have lost count of the 'He Intends Victory' books we have given out. These books have encouraged so many people. We have received requests from people both infected and affected by HIV/AIDS. Some of them are parents who cannot share in their churches; we support by telephone and letters, and cherished friendships have developed. We have come into contact with many other organizations and ministries - they have blessed us and we trust in God that we have blessed them.

As 'He Intends Victory UK' progressed, we came in touch with an organization named Judah Trust. They are an international ministry of intercessors and are headed up by Reverend Ray Thomas and his wife, Joy. They took us under their umbrella as a ministry and we became a division of Judah

Trust, an arrangement that we continue to appreciate and value. We have been so blessed by them; their help and support to us has been tremendous. It was because of our connection with Judah Trust, that we came into contact with Wesley Forde. Wesley is a missionary for in Masaka in Uganda. He and his wife Jaquie care for AIDS orphans in Masaka and we, as a group, sponsor the care and education of two of those children. Wesley has become a very dear friend to us all.

Over several years Ruth Ross, a UK Board member and myself have attended various courses to learn and develop our understanding about every aspect of HIV/AIDS. Our local area Health Board has presented the courses and two years ago we took a course on Training the Trainers, which means we are now accredited trainers. This development enabled us to reach churches and other organizations, to share the message of HIV/AIDS and to let people know what 'He Intends Victory' is about. We feel that as the disease progresses and it will, the Church must be prepared and ready to reach out with the love of Jesus.

He Intends Victory has touched many lives here in the United Kingdom. The Board Members are all volunteers and come from different churches in the area and all experience support and encouragement from these Fellowships.

We thank our God for his faithfulness to us. He has always been there watching, guiding and bringing us through; we know God is going to expand our Ministry. Our heart is also to reach out to all our Chapters with encouragement, and support from the UK. We wait eagerly and prayerfully to see what God has further in store for us. These are exciting times; we look forward with great anticipation to His leading. Praise God. I would like to thank the Pastor of my home church, Reverend Colin Hill, and Reverend Bruce Sonnenberg, the Pastor of my away church, The Village Church of Irvine and other churches who support us locally. My thanks also to our Board members, Richard, Ruth, John, Mary, Beryl and Brian who give all their love and support and hard work into the ministry. We remember those friends of our ministry who have gone home to the Lord and we give thanks for all their love and for their lives. Praise God.

Chapter Nineteen

THE WRONG SIDE OF THE TRACKS

Ysidro Velo

Ysidro Velo was born in 1935 on the wrong side of the tracks in Oxnard, a residential city located amid some of California's richest farmland along the Southern California coast. One of sixteen children, he was born to a poor family of a Mexican father and an American mother from El Paso, Texas.

"My father was a rancher," Ysidro said, "and we were a low income family. We lived across the tracks among mainly Mexicans. These were depression days. Everything was rationed and we were given stamps for just about everything."

The barrio where the Velo family eked out a survival existence was down a dirt road with no public utilities. Like all the barrios in those days, it was stigmatized as the kind of places where poor, unskilled, "dirty" Mexicans lived.

It would be many years before Ysidro would get on the right side of the tracks - only to discover even more crushing challenges.

Going to School

Ysidro, as a small child, sold newspapers on street corners and learned how to shine shoes. He also learned other skills. "I learned how to pick pockets," he explained. "Many of my shoe shine customers were intoxicated and half their wallet would be sticking out of their pocket. The temptation was there, so I started stealing."

Ysidro said in those days, a branch of a gang called Pachuchos ruled the crime roost in Oxnard, and some of their leaders noticed this young boy was already quite a little go-getter.

"When I was growing up, you could tell them by the way they dressed, walked, and who they hung around with. These guys started to school me in how to steal.

"They encouraged me to sneak into houses of prostitution and pick the pockets of the men while they were with a girl," said Ysidro. "I was so quiet and quick it was very easy, and the more I did it, the easier it got."

When he was six years old Ysidro was first arrested and charged with receiving a stolen bicycle. He was found guilty and sent to juvenile hall. This was the beginning of a long life of incarceration for him, which later saw him in California State prisons like San Quentin and Folsom for crimes ranging from possession of drugs to armed robbery.

But, in those early days before he became a “hardened criminal,” he had other problems as well. “I started smoking when I was five and by the time I was seven I had started to drink,” Ysidro said. “Drugs were all around and I wanted to find out what it was like. I didn’t like to drink because it made me vomit. I liked Marijuana because, after smoking everything seemed so funny, but then I gradually found nothing was funny anymore, so I started to use the heavy stuff, heroin.”

It was during a stay in El Paso when he was fourteen; he had his first injection of heroin. “A guy there showed me how to fix,” said Ysidro. “He told me I would get sick the first time, but gradually I would outgrow it. He was right!

“It just got into my system, and I couldn’t shake loose. I tried everything, but nothing ever worked. If I had another chance, I would never even try it. Once you try heroin you always want to do it again and again and then it just grows to become a part of you.”

“I would steal to pay for it or sell drugs to pay for it. There was always a way. I’ve heard it said many times, if a drug addict was ever to invest the money in the bank rather than his arm, it wouldn’t be long before he would become a millionaire. Heroin is an expensive drug and you have to use all your know-how to get it. I ended up spending \$300 a day.”

He Set Me Free

Ysidro also had two failed marriages and it seemed he would never break free from his drug habit. “I tried to change my lifestyle. I searched and searched but I couldn’t find it. Then I came to the Lord. That is what set me free,” he said.

The beginning of better things started in the 1980s, when Ysidro would walk past the Orange County Rescue Mission in Santa Ana, California, on his way to work. As he passed by, some of the men would greet him and shout, “Hey, Jesus Christ loves you.”

The Mission intrigued him, so he began to attend the services. “The Lord was drawing me to His Son,” he said. “Pastor Whitehead was the director there. I learned about the Lord and I began to search the Scriptures and I started a relationship with Jesus Christ.”

Though he was getting close to the Lord, Ysidro was still using heroin. A close encounter with death changed everything for him.

“It was in 1990. I had overdosed that day and gone outside my apartment. I collapsed half into the gutter and half on the sidewalk,” he said. “I lay there from 2:00 AM to 9:00 AM, as if I was dead. People just left me there, thinking I was dead.”

Ysidro said he once read the story of Lazarus. “I believe the same thing happened to me,” he said. “During my time in the gutter, I heard the voice of the Lord say clearly to me, ‘Get up, Ysidro.’”

“I thought it was an official of some kind because there was such authority behind the voice. I woke up, looked around, and nobody was there. I realized it was the Holy Spirit. I heard the same voice again. It said, ‘Now come on home. I’m tired of playing with you. No more turning back.’”

The disheveled junkie picked himself up out of the gutter, walked back to his apartment, knowing God had spared his life for a reason. He prayed for healing from his heroin addiction and it came!

“I didn’t have withdrawals,” he said. “I couldn’t sleep for 30 days, but as far as being sick, I was not.”

Walking With the Lord

Ysidro says the Lord has called him to reach out with the gospel of Jesus Christ to the forsaken, the alcoholic, and to those in jail. From that day in 1990 until his death he was a living testimony to these forgotten people.

Shortly after his life was cleaned up from heroin, the crushing news came that he was HIV positive. “I believe I got HIV from turning my back on the Lord in those days when I attended the Mission,” he explained. “I

also used to share needles. I was a regular ‘hope to die dopey.’ I’m not a homosexual. I just loved my drugs so much.

“When I got the results, I said to myself, ‘It’s my fault I’ve got HIV because I turned my back on the Lord.’ It’s part of the ‘sin wages’ I have to pay.”

Ysidro added, “I’m HIV, but Praise God anyway.”

Ysidro began attending the Village Church of Irvine, which he calls a “wonderful blessing.”

“The Mission brought us to the church,” he said. “I was one of the first ones to attend the support group. There weren’t too many churches receiving people with HIV, but the congregation at this church has been really great about it. They have supported Pastor.”

Now he faces another life and death struggle. “I just found out I have cancer all over my chest, and I have three tumors,” said Ysidro. “I have been taking radiation and chemotherapy. As of the last chest scan, it seems the cancer has gone from the chest, and we are working with the tumors.”

He added, “My doctor tells me, ‘You’re dying Ysidro,’ but I find in the scriptures that we die daily. I do know one thing, I ain’t going one place until He says.”

When asked his message to the world, Ysidro said, “Speaking to a person like myself, I know we need Jesus, but on the other hand, everyone needs Jesus. Still, I know there are drug addicts, homosexuals, bisexuals, lesbians, or whatever, who are imbedded in their sin. Their challenge is to do what I have done and receive Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior and give the Lord a chance.”

A Postscript to the Ysidro Velo Story

On May 30, 1999 the Lord said to Ysidro, “It’s time to come home.” He was packed and ready to go. Over 250 people attended his service with tears, laughter, joy, and thanksgiving for God’s gift to all of us in Ysidro. Adios, amigo.

Chapter Twenty

MINISTERING TO A FRIEND WITH AIDS

You have just read the challenging stories of Herb Hall, Mike Hylton, Renee Austin, Jennifer Veary, Dan Davis, Joan Yorba-Gray as well others who have endured crushing rejection from some of their peers because they are or were dealing with the dreaded challenge of HIV/AIDS.

But you have also read how some, like Bruce Sonnenberg, have welcomed them into the warmth of a fellowship like the Village Church of Irvine. And they have welcomed them with open and non-judgmental arms. They have followed the example of Jesus by reaching out and touching the modern-day lepers.

Modern-Day Fallacies About AIDS

One problem is that there are so many stories floating around about how people can contract the HIV virus. There are those who believe it can be transmitted through handshakes, hugs, toilet seats, doorknobs, or mosquitoes.

These fallacies go against modern-day scientific research. Scientists have done extensive studies to

determine whether the virus can be transmitted in normal social gatherings. Definitive information shows it cannot. The only documented cases of transmission outside of the three primary modes have been health care workers exposed to infected blood or body fluids. In these healthcare workers, infected blood or body fluids were either ingested or spilled on skin with cuts or abrasions. Although this risk is very low, it should alert healthcare to the dangers of transmission in the work place, either in the hospital or other healthcare settings. It should also inform others, who do not have similar exposure, that the risk of exposure to this virus is minimal outside the three major modes of transmission.

Ministering To A Friend With HIV/AIDS

- When someone you know finds out they are HIV+ or have AIDS, you may feel inadequate to help. But at this crisis moment of their lives, they need you more than ever. Here are some suggested guidelines on how to encourage your friend:
- Stop-by for a visit! Make sure you ask if it is okay to come by. He or she may not feel up to a visit that day, but you can always visit on another occasion. Now is the time when your friendship can help keep loneliness and fear at a distance.
- Make sure you do not avoid your friend. Be there because it instills hope. Be the friend, the loved one, you have always been, especially now when it is most important.
- Express true love and compassion. A simple squeeze of the hand or a genuine hug can let him or her know you really care.
- Be a true friend. Weep with your friend when he or she weeps. Laugh when they laugh. It is healthy to share these intimate experiences.
- Don't be afraid to share the joy of knowing Jesus with your friend, but don't be overbearing. Don't demand immediate spiritual maturity, and full understanding. Remember, you didn't get where you are in a day. On some occasions, the best witness is a simple prayer or kindness. Encourage them to know Jesus loves them.
- Pray and know that God can heal, even the most difficult sickness. It's okay, when praying with your friend, to give him hope by asking God to manifest His healing power. However, don't make your friend feel guilty if healing does not take place. Jesus is the healer, and He may have other plans for your friend.
- Call and say you would like to bring a favorite meal. Ask what time and day would be best for your visit, and plan on spending the time to share the meal.
- Invite your friend or family member to go for a walk or outing, but be sensitive to any limitations.
- Offer to help answer any correspondence or help pay bills.
- Call your friend and find out if anything is needed from the store. Ask for a shopping list and make a delivery to your friend's house.
- Celebrate holidays, if possible, with your friend by decorating their home or hospital room. Bring flowers or special treasures, or include your friend in your holiday festivities at home.
- Stay in contact, when possible, with your friend's family. Family members are affected by HIV and AIDS too. They may have unique needs along the way as well.

- Go shopping and bless your friend. Buy them a special treat. It doesn't have to be expensive, just something thoughtful.
- Be creative. Bring books, periodicals, taped music, a video, some home-baked cookies or delicacies to share.
- Don't give-up! You may feel inadequate or apprehensive, and it's very natural to feel like you don't have all of the answers. Just remember you don't. Ask God for wisdom.
- It's okay to ask, "How are you feeling today?" but be sensitive to whether or not your friend wants to discuss it.
- Like everyone else, a person with AIDS can have good and bad days. On the bad days treat your friend with extra care and compassion.
- Can you drive? Take your friend to the store, or to the bank, the physician, church, shopping or a movie. How about a ride to the beach or a park?
- Read to your friend. Sometimes, reading becomes difficult. We suggest the Bible, and of course, our book, *He Intends Victory*.
- Be prepared for your friends to get angry with you for "no reason," although it seems you have been there and done everything you could. Remember, anger and frustration are often taken out on people most loved because it is safe and will be understood.
- Share outside information. Keep your friend up-to-date on mutual friends and other common interests. Your friend may be tired of talking about symptoms, doctors, and treatments.
- Discuss current events. What's new in the news? Help keep your friend from feeling the world is passing them by.
- Volunteer to do household chores - perhaps do the laundry, wash dishes, water plants, feed and walk the pets. This may be appreciated more than you realize. However, don't do what your friend can do and wants to do for himself.
- Be careful not to lecture or direct anger at your friend if he or she seems to be handling the illness in a way that you think is inappropriate. You may not understand what the feelings are and why certain choices are being made.
- Do not confuse acceptance of the illness with defeat. Sometimes acceptance may free your friend to accept God's better plan for his or her life.
- Don't allow your friend to become isolated. Let him or her know about support and prayer groups, Bible studies, and other practical services offered by your church, ministry, and *He Intends Victory*.
- Talk about the future with your friend ... tomorrow, next week, next year. It is good to look toward the future without denying the reality of today.
- Share with your pastor and Christian friends your own feelings of grief, helplessness, and inadequacy. Getting the emotional and spiritual support you need will help you to "be there" for the person who has AIDS.
- Confidentiality is of utmost importance! Don't share anything with anyone you are not at liberty to share

with.

- And remember to pray again - for your friend or family member, for their family members, and that God would use you as a messenger of love and salvation through Jesus Christ!

Will Your Church Take A Stand?

If your church is willing to show God's love and compassion to those with HIV/AIDS and their families, He Intends Victory suggests the leaders of your congregation develop a "church policy" similar to the following:

(Your Church) will welcome those with HIV+ and AIDS and their families with love and acceptance. The Christian response to a person with HIV/AIDS must be compassionate, helpful, and redemptive. Jesus, as our example, cared for those with disease with a personal demonstration of God's love (Luke 5:12-16).

Therefore, we the people of (Your Church) stand together in the following:

- We believe in the value of human life as a gift from God, thus we believe God loves all people, healthy and diseased.
- We do not believe those who have tested HIV+ or have AIDS have incurred a direct punishment from God.
- No one with HIV will be excluded from the life of (Your Church).
- We encourage everyone, including those who have AIDS or have tested HIV+, to make a personal commitment to Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior.
- We ask for a confidential disclosure to a member of our Church Leadership so we might assist in seeking Godly direction and love.
- We understand that because this virus is not spread by casual contact, there is no risk of contracting the AIDS virus from any infected adult or child in the church setting. Therefore:
- We welcome all children and adults who are HIV+ to join us in worship, Sunday School, Bible study, and special events.
- All qualified adults with AIDS are welcome to teach Sunday School.
- Infants with HIV/AIDS will not be allowed in the nursery with other babies because of their special needs, but parents are encouraged to care for them in our cry room.

We commit ourselves to educate and teach God's values! AIDS is preventable! It can be prevented by avoiding by avoiding illicit IV-drug use and sexual contact before marriage, and then maintaining a faithful, monogamous, heterosexual relationship with an uninfected person in marriage.

"A new commandment I give you: Love one another as I have loved you, so you must love one another. All men will know that you are my disciples if you love one another". John 13:34

Signed: (Your Church Leaders)

Chapter Twenty-One

A MEDICAL VIEW

Jennifer Veary, RN, BSN, HIV/AIDS Educator

In order to better understand the challenge, which stands before us in the area of HIV and AIDS, we need to understand what HIV is and how it affects the body. The following is what we call AIDS 101. It is not meant to be a comprehensive presentation of all of the issues surrounding HIV infection, but merely an overview. It does not focus on medical care available in the United States, but is intentionally simplified for global use. References are available at the end of the chapter for further, in-depth inquiries.

What is HIV?

HIV stands for Human Immunodeficiency Virus. A virus is a germ that can't live on its own, but needs to attach to something living in order to survive. HIV is a virus transmitted from one person to another through blood, sexual fluids, or breast milk.

HIV lives in special cells in the immune system, called CD4 lymphocyte cells, or T (Helper) cells. These work in our body to fight infections and diseases. Once HIV is in these cells, it sets them up as little factories to produce more viruses. These cells are now producing HIV instead of doing their normal job to fight infection.

“HIV positive” is a term which refers to the fact that the blood or saliva from a person infected with HIV tests positive for antibodies specific to this virus. This process, called seroconversion, generally occurs within 6-12 weeks following exposure, but in a few rare cases has taken up to 6 months.

What is AIDS?

AIDS stands for Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome. “Syndrome” means that it includes a wide range of different diseases and infections. It is usually the last stage of HIV infection. AIDS is actually the condition of the severely weakened immune system. As the virus continues to attack the cells of the immune system, the body becomes less and less able to resist disease. Children and adults with AIDS can suffer from many kinds of infections. These are called *Opportunistic Infections* because they take advantage of the weakened immune system. Eventually, the person will probably die from one of these infections when the body cannot fight them anymore.

The difference between HIV and AIDS has to do with the function of the immune system. HIV positive refers to the fact that the person has been exposed to the virus (HIV), and their body now tests positive for antibodies to that virus. AIDS is when the virus has damaged the immune system to the point that the person’s body is not able to fight off opportunistic infections.

Being HIV+ does not automatically mean that you have AIDS. People can be HIV+ and not have AIDS, but everyone with AIDS is HIV+. Although by the time some people learn they are HIV positive, they may have already progressed to AIDS because they have already been infected with HIV for some time, and the virus has destroyed their immune system. So the period between infection with HIV and the development of the first symptoms of AIDS can vary greatly. It can take anywhere from a few months to many, many years. This depends on factors like where someone lives, their level of health before infection, their ability to eat and sleep, levels of stress, and even “re-infection”. Each time you are exposed to HIV, more of the virus comes into your body to attack your immune system. So the more times you are exposed, the more quickly you will progress to AIDS.

What is HIV infection?

This is a term that more adequately describes the process, or continuum that occurs from the time the virus enters the body. A person initially infected with the Human Immunodeficiency Virus is considered to be HIV positive. They are infected with this specific virus. From that point on, they are living with this virus working in their system, against their system. Their body is fighting the infection, whether they are considered to be healthy, asymptomatic, or facing one or many of the opportunistic diseases of AIDS. Some may have test results that show that they are “healthy”, yet they display outward characteristics common to illness. Some may have test results indicating they have AIDS, yet outwardly they display no signs or symptoms of disease. HIV infection is an all-encompassing term, referring to the continuum from the time of infection to AIDS.

There has been some research along the way to state that at some point, the virus is “dormant”, or not active. At this point we don’t know what damage may actually be done to underlying state of health at that time, but the virus is still present, and can be reproducing new virus particles. They just may not be circulating in the blood stream or able to be detected by current modern testing mechanisms.

Stages of HIV Infection:

Acute Retroviral Infection.

This is the first stage of HIV infection, when the virus first establishes itself in the body and begins to take up residence in the cells. This occurs 1-6 weeks following exposure and infection with HIV. In 50-90% of people, they may develop “flu-like” symptoms including: fever, swollen lymph glands, skin rash, sore throat, muscle aches, nausea, or a general feeling of fatigue and malaise. Some people, however, have no symptoms when they first become infected with HIV.

During acute HIV infection, the virus makes its way to the lymph nodes, a process that is believed to take three to five days. Then HIV, targeting the CD4 cells, begins to actively reproduce and release new virus particles into the bloodstream. This burst of rapid HIV replication usually lasts about two months. People at this stage often have a very high viral load, with a high concentration of HIV in the blood. HIV is highly transmissible during this stage, even though a test for HIV antibodies may not yet provide a positive result.

Window period

This refers to the time after the person has been infected with HIV, before their body has developed antibodies for HIV. This accounts for any HIV infected blood that may enter the donated blood supply that has been screened for HIV antibodies. (This is extremely rare, as it is estimated that about 1 in 500,000 units may slip past the HIV screening process).

If a person thinks they may have been exposed to HIV and has a HIV test during this window period, the results can be a false negative, because the body has not yet responded by developing antibodies, which is what is targeted on the HIV screening test. If a first HIV test result is negative, a person should be re-tested in three months to ensure they are not in this window period.

Seroconversion

This refers to the time when the body begins to produce antibodies to the HIV. These are proteins generated by the body to neutralize disease-producing organisms, including HIV. This usually occurs within 6-12 weeks. 90-95% of the people infected with HIV will develop antibodies within three months after infection. 95 to 99.9% of people will develop antibodies within six months after infection. Once a person has seroconverted, they will test positive for an HIV antibody test.

Asymptomatic infection

During this period, the person may not feel sick or display any symptoms of a compromised immune system. Their immune system is still able to function, although over time and without treatment this will deteriorate as the virus causes destruction of immune functions. The average CD4 count is usually greater than 300, although different people respond with great variation.

Early Symptomatic Infection

Once the immune system is damaged, people may begin to experience mild symptoms, including but not limited to: skin rashes, fatigue, weight loss, night sweats, thrush (yeast infection) in the mouth, and recurrent vaginal yeast infections for women. The average CD4 count is 100-300, but can vary with individuals.

Late Symptomatic Infection

This will include opportunistic infections, and is generally referred to as AIDS. The average CD4 count for the most common AIDS-defining conditions is below 200.

How is HIV transmitted?

A person with HIV infection can pass the virus to another person through one of four body fluids:

1. Male sexual fluids (semen)
2. Female sexual fluids (vaginal secretions)
3. Blood
4. Breast milk

Although HIV has been found in saliva and tears of some persons with HIV infection, *no other fluid has ever been shown to transmit HIV from one person to another*. HIV has not been recovered from the sweat of HIV infected persons. Contact with saliva, tears, or sweat has never been shown to result in the transmission of HIV.

Also, it is not enough for a person to be “in contact” with a fluid with HIV present in the fluid. Healthy, unbroken skin does not allow HIV to get in to the body. HIV can only enter through an open cut or sore, or through contact with mucous membranes in the eyes, mouth, genitals, rectum, or vagina.

Activities where HIV can be passed from one person to another are:

- Sexual activity with someone who has HIV infection (any kind of sex, i.e. oral, anal, vaginal, between any two persons, i.e. man to man, man to woman, woman to man, and/or woman to woman)
- Sharing needles and syringes with someone who has HIV infection (when they have not been cleaned between persons and there may be some blood left on the instruments)
- Using razors or toothbrushes belonging to someone with HIV infection. HIV can be spread from fresh blood on these items
- Through transfusion of HIV-infected blood or blood products. (This risk is very low in countries where all blood and blood products are screened for HIV).
- From a mother with HIV infection to her baby while she is pregnant or during birth
- From a mother with HIV infection to her baby through breast milk while breastfeeding

HIV is NOT spread by everyday contact!

HIV is NOT spread by:

**Toilet seats **Telephones **Sharing eating or drinking utensils **Hugging **Coughing or sneezing **Shaking hands **Swimming pools **Air, food, water **Animals

HIV is also not transmitted through insects. When an insect bites a person, it does not inject its own or previously bitten persons or animals blood into the next person. Rather, it injects saliva, which acts as a lubricant or anticoagulant so the insect can feed efficiently. Diseases such as yellow fever and malaria are transmitted through the saliva of specific species of mosquitoes. However, HIV lives for only a short time inside an insect and, unlike organisms that are transmitted via insect bites, HIV does not reproduce and does not survive in insects. Thus, even if the virus enters a mosquito or another sucking or biting insect, the insect does not become infected and cannot transmit HIV to the next person it bites.

How does a person know if they have HIV infection?

Most often, it is not possible to tell if a person has HIV infection just by looking at them. A person with HIV infection may look healthy and feel healthy. An HIV test is the only way to confirm if someone has been infected with HIV.

In some countries, further blood tests can determine the level of functioning of the immune system. A doctor can determine how much of someone’s immune system has been destroyed by monitoring the CD4 count, or T cells. These are the specific cells in the immune system that are targeted by HIV. A normal, healthy person will have a CD4 count of 500-1450¹, which shows the CD4 cell concentration within a milliliter of blood. A person with AIDS has a CD4 count of 200 or below. This means that their immune system is not functioning well and they are very susceptible to infections.

Another test is called the HIV viral load. Whereas the CD4 count monitors the health of the immune system, the viral load monitors how much virus is in the system of the person with HIV infection. Sometimes, a person who is taking antiretroviral medications can have a viral load result that is “non-detectable”. This does not mean that the person is cured, or the virus is no longer in their system. It means that the virus has been brought below the level of detect ability of current lab tests, but it is still present in their body.

Opportunistic infections

As stated earlier, these are infections that take advantage of the compromised immune system. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in the United States developed a list of the most common opportunistic infections. These are now used to provide an AIDS diagnosis. The current AIDS definition is from 1993 and includes a CD4 count of 200 or less, or a higher CD4 count with one of the opportunistic infections listed (when a person is HIV positive or not otherwise immune suppressed).

- Pneumocystis Carinii Pneumonia (PCP)
- Kaposi's Sarcoma (KS)
- HIV Wasting syndrome
- Lymphoma, Burkitt's, immunoblastic, or primary in brain
- Cryptococcosis, extrapulmonary
- HIV encephalopathy (AIDS dementia)
- Mycobacterium Avium Intracellular (MAC or MAI)
- Candidiasis of the esophagus, trachea, bronchi, or lungs
- Cryptosporidiosis, chronic intestinal
- Cytomegalovirus disease (CMV)
- Tuberculosis (outside of the lungs)
- Herpes simplex virus infection: chronic ulcer(s) >1 mo. duration
- Progressive Multifocal Leukoencephalopathy (PML)
- Primary lymphoma of the brain
- Toxoplasmosis of the brain
- Histoplasmosis
- Isosporiasis, chronic intestinal
- Coccidioidomycosis
- Salmonella septicemia, recurrent
- Bacterial infections, recurrent, <13 years old
- Pulmonary tuberculosis
- Recurrent bacterial pneumonia (two or more episodes in 1 year)
- Invasive cervical cancer

Although this list has been revised several times since it was first developed, it does not include all of the illnesses experienced by people with HIV-related immune suppression. It also does not reflect infections and diseases more common to different parts of the world.

Treatment of HIV infection

There are several different types of treatment. Medications can be prescribed to prevent the development of opportunistic infections, or treat these infections once they occur. Treatment also targets the virus itself, and different stages in the life cycle when the virus replicates once inside the body. These medications are known as antiretroviral therapy.

Preventing opportunistic infections

Opportunistic infections become evident once the immune system is compromised. Research has shown that once a person reaches a CD4 count of 200 or below, their body cannot provide a normal response to fight infections, and they are susceptible to these opportunistic infections. For some of these infections, there may be medications that can prevent them before they appear. For example, pneumocystis carinii pneumonia (PCP) has been one of the most common opportunistic infections of HIV infection. Research has shown that if a person takes a particular sulfa antibiotic, this medication can actually prevent this pneumonia from occurring. So a common recommendation has been for persons with a CD4 count of 200 or below to start on this medication to prevent PCP. This antibiotic or its generic form is available in all countries and is relatively inexpensive.

There are other opportunistic infections that are common to specific regions or countries that can be prevented by different types of medications. Also some other herbs and traditional medicines have been shown to help strengthen the immune system of the person with HIV infection. But caution is recommended in taking herbal therapies to make sure the doctor is informed that the person is taking them as they may interfere with other treatments.

Treatment of opportunistic infections

There are medications available to specifically treat many of the opportunistic infections. They can also include antibiotics and antifungal agents, and in fact may be the same medications used to prevent these infections from occurring, and thus, reoccurring. These treatments include drugs that target the organism involved in the infection, whether it is a fungus, bacteria, or virus.

Antiretroviral Therapy

The use of antiretroviral medications (ARVs) targets specific processes in the life cycle of the virus to prevent more virus particles from being made. The fewer viruses in the body, the less damage to the immune system. The more viruses being produced in the body, the more rapidly the disease progresses. The goal is then to attempt to slow down the replication of HIV. ARVs have been shown to impair HIV's ability to replicate, but they are not a cure since these drugs have not been shown to totally eradicate the virus from the body.

Over time, the virus can mutate or change itself so it is no longer affected by the ARVs. This process is called viral resistance. So a goal of ARV therapy is to keep the virus level as low as possible. Therefore, the fewer viruses that is being produced, the less opportunity it has to change or mutate so the medications are not effective.

There are currently 22 FDA-approved ARV medications specific to treating HIV infection, and more research and drugs are being added on an ongoing basis. These medications are used in different combinations, where available. Some pills have two or three medications in one pill.

Current recommendations are for at least 3 drugs to be used together to fight HIV infection. This can be referred to as a “triple drug cocktail”. Another common term is Highly Active Anti-Retroviral Therapy (HAART). None of these medications is a cure for AIDS. There is no medical cure for AIDS. There is also currently not a vaccine available to prevent the transmission of HIV.

These medications can help extend the life of someone with HIV infection, but they are not available to everyone around the world, do not work for all people, and have serious, toxic side effects for others. When available, they need to be taken on a strict dosing schedule to prevent the virus from mutating against the effectiveness of the medication, thus rendering them it unable to fight replication of HIV.

If you are interested in more information on specific medications, please check the references at the end of this chapter, or contact He Intends Victory and we can provide you with further resources.

Pregnancy and HIV

Women with HIV infection who become pregnant can transmit this virus to the babies. Without treatment, the risk of transmission from mother to child is 20-35%. Certain ARV medications are now available in nearly all countries in the world to reduce the risk of mother to child transmission of HIV. These medications are often given to the mother during labor and delivery, and one dose is given to the baby after birth. By use of these medications, transmission from mother to child can be reduced to 7%ⁱⁱ. Another thing to consider is if formula and clean water are available for feeding the baby, since breastfeeding is also a mode of HIV transmission. The risk of transmitting HIV with breast-feeding is high, probably 15-25% if done for six to twelve monthsⁱⁱⁱ.

It is also important to understand that all babies are born with their mother’s antibodies. It may take up to 18 months for the baby to develop his/her own antibodies, so a baby that is born HIV+ (due to the mother’s antibodies) can seroconvert to being HIV negative once their own immune system develops.

Physical, emotional, and spiritual health for the person with HIV infection

It is important for the person living with HIV infection to take special care of their overall health. Research has made great advances in medical treatment of HIV, but as stated earlier, not everybody has access to medications, or can tolerate their side effects. There are other activities that people can do to help support their immune system.

Physical Health

It is important for the body to have adequate nutrition in order to support the immune system. As HIV infection progresses, the body begins to burn calories and proteins faster than usual. People with HIV infection usually need up to twice as much protein as others. Good sources of protein include fish, chicken, soy products, cheese, beans, seeds, and nuts. Sometimes the person with HIV infection needs to eat small meals every 2-3 hours, even when they aren’t hungry.

It is also important for the person living with HIV infection to drink plenty of fluids. This includes fluids with calories like milk, fruit juices, broth, or cocoa. Water is important too, but doesn’t have any calories, vitamins, or minerals that the body needs to stay strong. Be sure that water is purified so no bacteria can be transmitted through drinking it. If in doubt, you can boil water for 1-3 minutes at a rolling boil to get rid of dangerous bacteria that may live in the water.

Getting plenty of rest helps to support and restore the immune system, and combat stress for the person living with HIV infection. It is important to remove stress whenever possible as this has been shown to have a negative effect on immune health. If possible, exercise should be part of a daily or weekly schedule, and this can also help fight stress. Start slowly and gradually increase the endurance.

Complementary therapies have also been shown to support the health of the immune system for people living with HIV infection. These may include massage, relaxation exercises, acupuncture, herbs and traditional medicines. If you are working with a physician be sure to let him/her know about these additional therapies.

Emotional Health

The person with HIV infection may experience a whole range of emotions, including anger, guilt, fear, shame, sadness, and depression. These emotions may be very intense at first, but gradually can become more manageable. They may become worse especially when the person is isolated or ill. That is why it is important to have someone they can confide in, talk with, and receive unconditional, nonjudgmental love and support. Being able to confide in a few close friends or family members who can understand helps provide comfort as feelings are shared, and often lessens the sense of stigma and discrimination. For some, joining a support group with other people who also have HIV/AIDS can make a big difference, as information and experiences are shared. But it is important to keep the information shared in the group confidential.

One significant issue for people with HIV infection is that they may be facing their mortality for the first time in their life. Facing death may bring thoughts of regret over accomplishments not achieved and lost opportunities with loved ones. Look to assist with reconciliation in any relationship, which may free emotional pain and reduce stress.

Finally, laughter is healing- find things to laugh about!

Spiritual health

This may take on different meanings with different people, but is an equally important process in the overall healthcare of the person with HIV infection. Receiving a diagnosis of "HIV positive" or "AIDS" often causes the person to look deep into the meaning of their life. If they are mad at God, they need to work through at anger. Have they forgiven themselves and/or others, which may have been responsible for the HIV infection? Perhaps they don't know what happens after they die, which can begin a spiritual search for answers.

Death is a part of life for everyone. It is what comes after death that provides hope. We have found that everyone needs hope. And we have also found that people at this point in their lives often are open to hearing about a Savior, who provides the hope of eternal life. Sometimes sharing personal testimonies of Christians with AIDS, like those in our book, can help someone understand that Jesus provides unconditional love and acceptance.

Regardless, it is important to provide love and support in a non-judgmental manner for the person living with HIV infection, and to continue to pray for their physical, emotional, and spiritual health. Jesus Christ is the hope for eternal life for each one of us, including the person living with HIV infection.

Resources

CDC HIV/AIDS Prevention: Facts about the Human Immunodeficiency Virus and its transmission
www.cdcnpin.com

San Francisco AIDS Foundation: AIDS 101-The Stages of HIV Disease
www.sfaf.org

John G. Bartlett, M.D., and Ann K. Finkbeiner, *The Guide to Living with HIV Infection*, 5th ed. (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).

Additional Resources:

ÆGIS: AIDS Education Global Information System
www.aegis.com

AIDS Online (International AIDS Society)
www.aidsonline.com

The Body HIV/AIDS Site
www.thebody.com

HIV InSite (University of California, San Francisco)
hivinsite.ucsf.edu

Internet Resource and AIDS Treatment News
www.aids.org

Johns Hopkins University AIDS Service
www.hopkins-aids.edu

Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS)
www.unaids.org

Project Inform
www.projinf.org

¹ The Guide to Living with HIV Infection, p. 40

¹ Ibid, p. 69

¹ Ibid. p. 47

¹ Ibid. p. 39

Glossary

DEFINITIONS

HIV - Human Immunodeficiency Virus - a virus is the smallest of disease-causing organisms made of genetic material surrounded by protein envelope.

AIDS - Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome - This is the last stage of any disease caused by the HIV, which attacks and weakens the body's natural immune system.

Retrovirus - A virus that uses the reverse of the usual process to establish itself in a person's body. The genetic material of most viruses is DNA, Deoxyribonucleic Acid, which directs the reproduction of a cell. A retrovirus has RNA, Ribonucleic Acid. To take over a cell, RNA must be translated "backwards" into DNA. HIV and Leukemia are two types of retroviruses.

Opportunistic Infections - Infections that take advantage of the HIV + weakened immune system such as Kaposi Sarcoma, Pneumocystis carinii pneumonia, and numerous others.

Viral Load - The amount of virus in the blood stream.

CD4 cells - Cluster Designation 4, a docking molecule that is the preferred target for the virus. Also known as T-helper cells.

Antibody - A protein in the blood made by the body to protect it against a foreign invader, such as a virus.

Asymptomatic - Infection without symptoms.

Seroconversion - The immune system can take several days or weeks to recognize a foreign invader, like a virus, and make antibodies to fight it. With HIV, it may take six to 18 weeks or more. When antibodies to HIV appear in the blood, seroconversion has happened.

Drug Therapy - The types of drugs used for therapy. Multiple use of drugs or "combination therapy" is the most effective.

Antivirals - These drugs interfere with the life cycle of the AIDS virus.

AZT (Zidovudine), **DdC** (Hivid), **3Tc** (Epivir)

Protease Inhibitors - These newest and most powerful drugs block the necessary enzyme, preventing the virus' maturity. Saquinavir (Invirase), Ritonavir (Norvir) Indinavir - (Crixivan) Nelfinavir (Viracept), and others are coming.

He Intends Victory Board of Directors



Daniel Davis + Dan Davis was diagnosed with AIDS in 1994. He joined He Intends Victory (HIV) as a Board member, AIDS educator and speaker in 1998.



Today, Dan holds the position of Director of Ministry and has traveled the world sharing his story of how God's love, hope, and forgiveness changes pain and rejection to acceptance and joy. Dan has been married 47 years to Cathy and they have 3 grown children and 7 grandchildren. **Queen Creek, AZ**

Sharon Hylton Filsinger+ - Sharon joined the Board in 2001 and serves as Vice-President. She is the widow of founding board member, Michael Hylton (d.1998), a hemophiliac who was infected with the AIDS virus in the early 1980s. Sharon has traveled extensively in Asia and Africa with HIV as well as England, Belize, and North America. Sharon maintains our database and works with our donors. She is a former teacher, librarian, and business owner, and a loving mother and grandmother. She along with her husband, Steve Filsinger, have 10 grandchildren. **Bullhead City, AZ**



Michael Johnson- Michael has much experience in the corporate world serving as Senior Vice President and Chief Marketing Officer at Euro RSCG Dallas. In New York City, Michael served as Vice President, Management Supervisor at Grey Advertising; Vice President, Account Supervisor at Public/Bloom, and Account Executive at Saatchi and Saatchi Advertising; in Chicago as Senior Vice President, Chief Marketing Officer for Douglas Shaw and Associates. Today, Michael is the President of Slavic Gospel Association (SGA) and travels extensively throughout Russia and the Ukraine and training Pastors, church leaders, and churches. Joining the Board in 2014 and married to Erin for 37 years and they have 2 grown sons and a daughter-in-law. **Rockford, IL**

Mitch Kader- Mitch is a Registered Nurse and has over 30 years of experience in the health care field. For the last 14 years Mitch has worked as the Managing Trauma Nurse in Orange County's leading emergency trauma center. He has been on the Board since 2006 and is Secretary as well as having served He Intends Victory in numerous countries in Asia and Africa. Mitch is married to Fely for 40+ years and they have 2 grown children and 1 son-in-law. **Irvine, CA**



Rev. Ron Magno + After graduating from college with a degree in Biblical Studies, Ron began living a "double" life. Like the prodigal son though, he returned to the Lord but came back with AIDS. In 2001, Ron heard God's call to pastor Pacific Lighthouse Christian Fellowship in San Diego. Ron became a Board Member in of 2007. Ron and his wife, Vangie have been married for 17 years and have a 10-year-old son. **San Diego, CA**



Mike McIntyre- Mike has been Treasurer of the HIV Board since our second Board meeting in 1992. As a builder of numerous television studios throughout the southland, Mike was surrounded by many friends who were HIV+ in the broadcast industry. Today, Mike works as a Business Manager for a number of medical doctors in the Orange County area. Mike has been married to Bev for over 40+ years and has 3 grown children and 7 grandchildren. **Irvine, CA**



Kathy O'Connell, MD- Kathy is an OB-GYN physician and the owner of Peninsula Women's Care in Newport News, VA. She has been serving women in her community for over 25 years. Kathy joined the Board in 2009, has served as HIV's Missions Medical Team Overseer in Uganda and Kenya and enjoys reading and riding her dirt bike. Kathy with her husband, Jim are blessed to have two children: a daughter at Eastern Virginia Medical School and a son at College of William and Mary. **Yorktown, VA**



Chris Popke- Chris is Vice-President of Sales with The Recon GRP in Orange County, California. A graduate of Vanguard University of Southern California with a BA in Business Management, Chris joined our board in July of 2018. He and his wife Emily have 3 sons, serve in youth ministry in their church, and love soccer. **Irvine, CA**



Mindi Prather- Mindi joined our Board of Directors in 2017 and is CEO/owner of Mindi Walters Skin Care with her own line of facial care products. Mindi and her husband, John are blessed to have three young children. They have traveled to Ethiopia with He Intends Victory and have a heart for everyone living with and facing HIV/AIDS. **Los Angeles, CA**



Brett Rusin- Brett owns his own successful TV, lighting, and media company, Bravo Systems, Inc. and builds in-home and business systems throughout the Palm Desert community area. He joined the HIV Board in 2016 and has been to Africa and Asia with He Intends Victory including on his honeymoon with his wife Allison to Uganda and Kenya while serving those living with HIV/AIDS. They have been happily married for 8 years and have two young daughters. **Bermuda Dunes, CA**



Bruce Sonnenberg- As Founder and Executive Director of HIV, Bruce began in 1990 with a support group of three hurting HIV+ people. Bruce was the first Youth Minister of Calvary Chapel in Costa Mesa, California (1970-1972) and Senior Pastor of Sky Valley Desert Retreat (1972-1982). It was here that Bruce began his radio ministry which played on air for 30 years. In 1982, Bruce and Joni Founded the Village Church of Irvine from where he served as Senior Pastor until 2007. Bruce has participated in the International AIDS Conferences in Berlin, Vancouver, Yokohama, Bangkok, Toronto, Mexico City, and Washington DC; co-hosted "The 700 Clubs" one-hour TV special, *"Living With AIDS"*; contributed to and been interviewed by major magazines, TV, and radio; been a plenary speaker at national Christian AIDS conferences in Moscow, Washington DC, Kuala Lumpur, Hanoi, Belize City, Kampala, and London. From 2000 to 2014 Bruce also served as the 5th District Commissioner on the Housing & Community Services Commission of Orange County; Over the years Bruce has served on



numerous Christian and community organizations such as Youth for Christ of the Desert (1976-78 founder), Families Forward of Irvine (founder, 1984-88), and the Orange County Rescue Mission (1982-92). Presently, Bruce serves on the boards of Paul Ai Ministries, Hampton, Virginia; and Children’s AIDS Fund International based in Washington DC. Bruce has been married to Joni for 50 years and they have 11 grandchildren and one great-child. **Lake Forest, CA**

Rusty Veary+ - Rusty has been involved with He Intends Victory since 1997 when he married Jennifer Holmstrom+ RN who was on our Board. They both recognized the call of God on their lives and over the years have served as fulltime missionaries with He Intends Victory in Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam and travel the world sharing the hope of Jesus Christ. Presently Rusty (2007) oversees *Rusty’s Beans of Love*, the coffee bean roasting ministry of HIV. Rusty and Jennifer share 2 children and 10 grandchildren. **Huntington Beach, CA**



Kathi Winter + Kathi was and owner of Global Incentives, Inc. in Huntington Beach, California and has recently Kathi brings 32+ years of

founder

Terry's Friends retired.

international business experience to her role as an HIV educator and He Intends Victory Board Member (2006). Infected in 1996, Kathi serves everywhere she can, and now specializes in stigma, women’s issues, and micro-finance for AIDS widows. **Costa Mesa, CA**

Joan Yorba-Gray + Joanie was infected by her first husband and diagnosed with HIV in 1988. Shortly after that, her husband died and left her with 2 small children. Today, Joanie and her husband of 25+ years, Dr. Galen Yorba Gray, oversee the Hispanic ministry of He Intends Victory. Joanie has a special gift of speaking to women facing HIV/AIDS. She is the author of our ministry



resource and wonderful book, “In His Shadow”, a devotional for Christians living with HIV/AIDS and now in Spanish, Amharic (Ethiopia), and Swahili. Joanie has traveled the world with the message of hope to those living with HIV/AIDS. With Joanie and Galen’s families combined, they have four children and four grandchildren. **Lake Stevens, WA**



Those with a + after their names are infected or are directly affected by HIV/AIDS.

**PO Box 53534
Irvine, CA 92619
1-714-247-4327
www.heintendsvictory.org**

