



JOAN YORBA-GRAY

A photograph of a forest stream with a wooden cross standing on a rock in the background. The stream flows over mossy rocks, and the surrounding forest is lush with green foliage. The lighting is soft, suggesting a dappled sunlight effect.

IN HIS SHADOW

A DEVOTIONAL FOR CHRISTIANS WITH HIV

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JOAN YORBA-GRAY

He Intends Victory
1-800-HIV-HOPE
www.heintendsvictory.com

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To HE INTENDS VICTORY for extending the love of Christ to people with HIV/AIDS.

To Paul Allen, whose words, aptly spoken were like apples of gold in settings of silver (Proverbs 25:11).

To my loving family who has supported me in sickness and in health: my children Daniel and Sevanne who gave me a reason to live when I wanted to give up, and to my husband, Galen, whose love for me is stronger than the virus.

To the late Pastor Don Baldwin and his wife Judy who loved my family and me unconditionally.



DEDICATION

This reprinting of *In His Shadow* is dedicated to the loving memory of our son Kurtis Edward Gray; March 29, 1982 to April 22, 2010. Kurtis served in the army for six years, which included 15 months in Iraq. The horrors of war and the attending post traumatic stress disorder that followed, along with injuries sustained while fighting in Ramadi, resulted in medical complications causing his accidental death. From death comes life. From his compassionate heart comes the blessing of this reprint.

Kurtis grew up as a witness to Joanie's life, and understood well the blessing of redemption—of a life snatched from the relentless ravages of AIDS. He became a supportive friend to a fellow soldier who quietly suffered with HIV in an environment where discretion required silence. I know my son would be pleased that *In His Shadow* will now create the possibility that many more people who encounter this

powerful story will reach out to God, to life, and to a loving community that awaits their discovery.

Kurtis is now safe in the shadow of the Almighty where the blazing Iraqi sun can no longer scorch his soul, and where a war ravaged body and spirit can find peace in the loving embrace of the Father.



Kurtis Edward Gray

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PREFACE

“Lord, why did you put this woman in my life when I can’t possibly marry her?” This was my cry of frustration after having known Joan for about six months, discovering that she was HIV positive, and admitting to myself that I was secretly in love. To add insult to self-torment, I had put her picture on the corkboard at my office to remind God that it wasn’t very nice to tease me this way. Was this some sort of divine irony or poetic justice—why was God apparently withholding something good for me? I didn’t exactly feel like Maria in *The Sound of Music* when, with her love wish granted she enthusiastically sings, “Somewhere in my youth or childhood I must have done something good.”

I met Joan in the fall of 1989 at a church social. She was an “AIDS widow” with two young children, and I was a single father of three. Between the two of us our five children made a perfect chronological Brady Bunch stair step—a fact which turned out to

be even scarier than the virus! This was the early nineteen nineties, and practical information about how to protect oneself from infection was not widely available. So, in spite of a semi-secret mutual attraction, we felt obligated to indefinitely postpone any romantic notions. Nevertheless, we became fast friends anyway since we shared so many common goals and areas of interest. In retrospect this was for the best since we both needed time to grieve and process our losses: Joan's heartbreaking loss of her husband to AIDS followed by her own diagnosis of HIV infection, and my devastating divorce that had fractured family, ministry, career and self-esteem. Healing, prayer and the intervention of a wise and far-sighted matchmaking pastor, Don Baldwin, would, in time, bring a new perspective of hope to our yet-to-be-realized relationship.

I had dated other women, but it always felt contrived. When I began to realize how much I really loved Joan, and what a perfect fit and soul mate she was, I finally "got a clue" and decided to get some information. I had reached the time for a decision, and needed clarity about the risks and discipline of "safe-sex" and other issues such as the blending of our families.

The choice was clear: propose marriage or resign myself to never fully exploring the breadth of Joan's bountiful soul. One morning, the lucid realization came that I loved her more than I feared the virus, and that if God gave Joan just two more years to live,

I would rather share those two years with her than twenty without her.

My instincts about Joan were right. When I first knew her she was conscientiously raising her children with Christian values when she had every right to be bitter and withdrawn due to the hardships that she had been through. She also worked as a Christian social worker and counselor right up to the eve of a serious hospitalization. In a world of takers and users, Joan is a giver—she doesn't see herself as entitled to sympathy or pity, but as a debtor privileged to share God's love from her own wounded life. Joan is the first to admit her failures and struggles in the process toward emotional and spiritual health. She is no overnight wonder or automated saint. Hard work and tears have kept her hand open and her heart unspoiled by cynicism, and she has not allowed her soul to shrivel when faced with the difficulties of forgiveness, resentful teenagers, and judgmental people. The best part is that she has invited me to love and be loved.

Since our marriage in 1994, growth has come to us in ways that we never could have imagined, moving us to plumb the depths of life's anguish and the pinnacles of love's delight. We have discovered that God not only intends victory, but that He also speaks the creative Word of Christ in our personal and shared voids. As He has forgiven the mistakes of our past, and continues to redeem our misfortunes, we find shelter in the mystery of His love. Joan does not

live for the virus nor under its gloomy cloud, but in the refuge of God's protective shadow. With "my Joanie" at my side we move confidently toward a hopeful tomorrow—the hope of Christ's calling to serve in love that is greater than life's contradictions and losses.

Galen Beckwith Yorba-Gray





INTRODUCTION

I was raised in California with roots which included Spanish immigrants who came to California with the early explorers, as well as French, Dutch, and German ancestry. Our family was Catholic and we were regular church goers until my parents divorced when I was 14. As a child I loved God and knew the stories of the Bible and the saints, which I loved. However, after my parents' divorce, I was a depressed and alienated teenager and I turned my back on my faith. Nevertheless, as I look back on my life, I realize that God was nurturing the seeds that were planted in my childhood even as I rebelled.

I met my first husband Ray in college and I was attracted to his fun loving, lighthearted spirit. He was older, having graduated from high school and worked for several years before returning to college. I appreciated his confidence in his skills and since I had never been fully on my own before, I was

impressed that he knew how to survive on his own. We had many compatible interests and goals and we married in 1976. Our marriage was good in many ways but from time to time he expressed restlessness, depression and discontent. We had some counseling but he seemed to grow increasingly morose and unhappy. Meanwhile, we had two beautiful children, a wonderful son, Daniel, born in 1980 and a beautiful daughter, Sevanne, born in 1982, and we had a good family life. I believed that all marriages suffered ups and downs and that we were going through the normal trials of married life.

Around the time of his 40th birthday, in 1986, Ray became more distant and uncommunicative. He continued to be depressed and I thought that he was suffering a midlife crisis. He still enjoyed his work, our family and a fairly satisfying home life but there was an increasing gap between us. The counseling that we attempted didn't seem to help us tear down the walls that were building up between us. Five years previously, I had returned to church and had recommitted my life to following Jesus. I noticed a gradual strengthening process in myself as I grew spiritually, yet it seemed to cause even more of a rift with Ray. He saw my faith and confidence in God as a threat. He wanted me to stop going to the church I was attending but I would not give up my relationship with the Lord. Later I was to find out that Ray had rationalized that since I had "betrayed" him by becoming committed to Christ, he had a

right to betray me by his sexual infidelity. The human mind is very capable of rationalizing what one wants to do.

Ray was not a partyer so I didn't think that he was having any extramarital relationships. In fact, he was a homebody. He traveled a little with his work but when he wasn't traveling on business he was home. He rode his bike for exercise on weekends, worked in the yard and participated in the many social events of our large, extended family. He was a puzzle to me.

In 1987 his health began to fail and he had bouts of tonsillitis, bronchitis and upper respiratory infections. One day in February 1988 he became so ill that he could hardly breathe and he could not walk five steps without stopping to rest. He was hospitalized that night. After many tests and several days in the hospital, we received the crushing blow, a diagnosis of pneumocystis carinii pneumonia, which is an infection associated with AIDS. He had AIDS!

I remember that when I heard the AIDS diagnosis I felt like a hammer had hit me. I was shocked, hurt and furious. Finally I knew that Ray had betrayed me, and the puzzle pieces began to fit into place. His distance, the barrier between us, and his midlife crisis all pointed to his sexual infidelity, to which he finally confessed. He had been living a lie. I went home from the hospital that night prepared to leave him.

At home and in bed, I was terrified. Ray had betrayed us; I would have to leave. I was devastated,

our family torn apart, our children's lives ruptured, and I also would probably develop AIDS. I had never been so terrified in my life.

As I struggled with the onslaught of waves of overpowering emotions, the phone rang. It was Ray. He was also terrified and realized that he was close to death. I said that I hoped he would make his peace with God in the event that he died from this life threatening illness. He said that he was very sorry for his betrayal of our marriage and that he wanted to make things right. He wanted to change and commit his life to God. I led him in a prayer of accepting Christ as his Savior, repenting of his sins and committing to change. We talked a lot that night about his infidelity and he was very firm that he was ready to change. For me the experience was similar to the story of Jonah and the Ninevites. Jonah wanted them to be judged immediately and blasted into kingdom come, but God had different plans. On one hand, Jonah wanted to obey God, but on the other hand, he wanted God's wrath on the sinners. I felt powerful, contradictory feelings at the same time, anger and hatred combined with joy at Ray's apparent change of heart.

Because of his repentance I had renewed hope for our marriage since my experience of meeting Christ had changed me forever. Unfortunately, that was not the case with Ray.

He became no more open with me after that night. It was if a door that had opened a crack had

slammed shut. He never really told me the truth about his extramarital affairs and never really set to work to repair the damage he had done to the children and me.

I cannot judge Ray's heart. I don't know whether he repented but was too ashamed of his behavior, or too proud to submit to God, or maybe that he went through the motions so that I would not leave him. Only God knows the heart. Nevertheless, Ray continued to be closed and distant from me and the children. He began to suffer from AIDS dementia, which also impaired his reasoning processes and destroyed any opportunity for healthy and open communication. As a result, our marriage was irreparably broken. However, I decided to stay with him and we lived as housemates, not husband and wife. One reason I remained was that he was terminally ill and it did not feel right to leave him when he was already suffering the consequences of his behavior. I knew that he needed to be cared for and believed that it was my responsibility to do so. Additionally, it seemed futile to put the family through all the upheaval of a divorce when I knew that he was dying. It seemed too much to put the children through to lose their dad twice. We had enough pain to cope with, without adding more.

In the fall of 1988, I finally summoned the courage to take an HIV test and the results showed that I was HIV positive. Again, I suffered many sleepless, terrified nights. How could I hold it together—

care for Ray, work, care for my children, and keep my health too? It seemed impossible. I feared that my children would become orphans. I felt such grief and pain for the trauma that had entered into their innocent lives. I struggled with my mortality. How long would I have? In those days there were few anti HIV medicines available and they did not significantly slow the growth of the HIV virus. Therefore a diagnosis of HIV infection was a death sentence.

That was a very lonely period in my life. Ray was focused on himself, our extended family members were in shock and therefore, distant, and because of the shame and stigma of HIV, I couldn't tell many other people. I was a Christian, married, heterosexual woman who didn't use drugs. There weren't very many people like me in those days. Many people who did know our family secret were reluctant to come to our home because of their fears of AIDS, suffering, and death.

There were many times that the Lord met me in those dark, lonely nights. He comforted me and loved me through it. He gave me strength and courage. I think of one night in particular when I was extremely anxious and upset, praying fervently for rescue. All of a sudden I had the sensation of a comforting warmth, like a blanket, slowly spreading over me from my head to my feet. The spiritual blanket from the Lord brought me an exceeding calmness that took away my fear and anxiety. I remember basking in the sensation of warmth, comfort and

peace that the Lord had physically laid on my tortured body and spirit. What a wonderful feeling it was! I had never experienced anything like it before.

Somehow, the Lord gave me strength to continue through all the stress and work of caring for Ray as he became weaker. I worked, cared for the children, and ran the household. I believe that God gives us the strength that we lack when we need it. Ray succumbed to his illness in August 1989. My hope is that he went to be with the Lord.

Although these were very difficult years, and my life is still a challenge, God has been very good to me through it all and has taught me some very valuable lessons. These lessons follow in the devotionals, which I have written in order to share my hope with others. There is plenty more to the story, including a wonderful new husband, and a wonderful miracle of the Lord sparing my life when I almost died of AIDS and other complications. The Lord has been so good to me. My Guiding Light has never let me down. As long as I live, my motto is, "I will not die, but live, so that I may proclaim the works of the Lord" (Psalm 118:17).



TIDAL WAVE

In the summer of 1989, my life and that of my family looked miserable. Our lives were like a whirlpool in the ocean, spinning, churning and drawing us downward to the depths. Ray had developed AIDS with the complications of Kaposi's sarcoma, dementia, continued lung problems, numerous infections and wasting. He required nursing care during the day when I was at work. The children were cared for by their grandmother while I worked. In the evenings, I came home from work, cooked our meals, cared for the children, for Ray, kept up the housekeeping duties and tried to keep us from being swallowed up by the chaos in our lives.

During the few months before his death in August, 1989, the whole situation became increasingly difficult for me. Ray and I were very distant emotionally and due to the dementia, communication was very poor. There was no mutual support

system between the two of us. I was working in a stressful job as a counselor for adults and children. This alone was a demanding career, even without the incredible pressures upon me at home. At home, in many ways during that time I felt that I was caring for three children instead of two because Ray had become so frail. I often took him to doctor's appointments later when he became too weak to drive.

Nights became very difficult. For some reason unknown to me, at night Ray became active. He would often awaken disoriented and get out of bed and roam throughout the house. When I asked him what he wanted he was incoherent. On one occasion I was awakened by a loud noise and found that he had fallen on the stairway. Fortunately, he was not injured. As a result, at night I frequently awoke to check on him and did not sleep well. I was exhausted.

We had no help at night and had nurses only for a few hours in the day. A couple of weekends during that summer, Ray's sister cared for him to give me a break, but other than that, few people wanted to come to our home and it was no wonder because so much pain existed inside.

As Ray became more ill and more disoriented, I became more anxious, depressed, frightened and spent. The lack of consistent sleep began to take its toll on me. At the point of most severe stress, i.e., being up at night, working, caring for the children, taking Ray to doctors, keeping the household going, I started to feel like a huge tidal wave was building

up over me, gradually gaining momentum, speed and power and preparing to crash over me. It felt as though if it crashed, I would be killed by it or have a nervous breakdown. That tidal wave was stress and exhaustion combined with being at the end of my resources. It was also the feeling of threat because the same virus that was killing Ray was percolating inside my body. I had no idea whether or not I would begin to suffer the illnesses associated with HIV, or when, since my positive test in October 1988. I had fear and concern over my children, my beloved innocents, and wondered about who their guardian should be if I were to succumb. At the same time, I deeply craved to live to see them grow into adulthood.

The psalmist cries out in words akin to what I was experiencing in those days. Psalm 69 says,

*Save me, O God,
for the waters have come up to my neck.
I sink in the miry depths,
where there is no foothold.
I have come into the deep waters;
the floods engulf me.
I am worn out calling for help;
my throat is parched (vs. 1-3).*

In my prayers I cried out to God in fear and panic. I asked the Lord to protect me from the crash of the wave and to allow me to maintain my health,

even as Ray's health was ebbing. Although I had been profoundly betrayed by his infidelity towards me and our family, there was a bond of history between us. I struggled with guilt for wanting to live and not follow him into death, similar to an ancient Eastern Indian widow who would be cast on her husband's funeral pyre. However, there became a point where it seemed that either he would go and I would follow or I would will to remain alive and as healthy as possible. At that point I fervently desired to live—to let him go if that was the course of his disease, but to take care of myself the best I could under the circumstances.

The psalmist writes,

*Rescue me from the mire,
do not let me sink;
deliver me from those who hate me,
from the deep waters,
Do not let the floodwaters engulf me
or the depths swallow me up
or the pit close its mouth over me (Psalm 69:14-15).*

I believe that the Lord graciously intervened to stop the crash of the wave at that point.

I have learned that when I am going through deep and serious tragedies in my life, and I sincerely believe that I am at the end of my rope and in fervent prayer to the Lord, He has intervened in every case. He may not intervene exactly at the moment of

my prayer but does within a short period of time. As I prayed for rescue from the tidal wave and days went by, Ray was hospitalized and I was able to meet with hospital social workers to plan for hospice care. With that care, I still would have been able to visit him but the caretaker role would be handled by the hospice staff. It was such a relief to have the respite and a shared burden with the medical staff at the hospital. I knew that the Lord had worked all things in His timing and that he had rescued me from the crash of the wave in a way that was unique to my circumstances. Ray did not make it into hospice care but died only a week after that. I could praise God and thank Him for His timely intervention when much more stress would have taken me into the abyss. I was able to continue to care for my children, to preserve my health and to begin to put the pieces of our family's life back in order.



PSALM 91

At the meetings of our “He Intends Victory” support group we receive spiritual and emotional support and prayer in a biblical context. He Intends Victory was the first evangelical Christian HIV/AIDS ministry in the US, established in 1990 in an era of great fear and trepidation about the virus and its effects. He Intends Victory provides HIV/AIDS education, support for those infected/affected by this terrifying diagnosis, and also carries out international programs for education, micro-economic development, medical care for people living with HIV/AIDS, the establishment of churches that are welcoming to people with HIV/AIDS, and other supportive services. He Intends Victory takes seriously the biblical mandate to care for widows and orphans who have been infected/affected by HIV/AIDS.

It was in the context of one of these support group meetings that we were discussing the Bible

verses that have special meaning for those of us who are HIV positive, and we realized that for several of us Psalm 91 is a beautiful psalm of protection and safety in the midst of fear and threat and the worries of living with HIV/AIDS. It provides a special comfort to people who are HIV positive or have AIDS. When we began to discuss some of our favorite Bible verses, to our surprise, many of us had come to savor those verses as we struggle with the illness.

This is an in-depth look at Psalm 91 and an exploration of its special value to the person diagnosed with HIV.

The Psalm begins: “He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty” (Quotes are from the New International Version). It begins with a message of safety and care. It communicates God’s special protection of those who seek Him. A person diagnosed with HIV feels extremely vulnerable to illness, death, and societal rejection. As a result we need to find some place of shelter with these many fears and challenges. When we know that we, along with the psalmist, can say, “I will say of the Lord, He is my refuge and my fortress, my God in whom I trust” (v.2), then we have come home to a place of reassurance and calm amidst the storm. It is easy to see that people with HIV/AIDS who don’t have a trust in the Lord would become very fearful and panicky in the face of the threat to their lives by this terrifying virus. Many keep searching for spiritual comfort through a variety of sources.

Those who are able to find Jesus Christ are fortunate to have that special comfort. There is an opportunity for ministry to those searching people who have not yet found that comfort that they are seeking.

As we read further in Psalm 91, the author writes, “Surely He will save you from the fowler’s snare and from the deadly pestilence” (v.3). Anyone with HIV or AIDS knows full well what that deadly pestilence is. When I first came across Psalm 91 after being diagnosed with HIV in 1988, I felt like God understood what this horrible disease was. He even knew about it centuries before it developed. There is a strong sense of security in the fact that nothing surprises Him.

Of course, this brings up the question of how to interpret the verse where it says that he will save you (me?) from the deadly pestilence. In the beginning of my history of HIV I somewhat naively but hopefully saw that as a promise of a cure—a miracle—that I would be healed from HIV. But as time goes by and the cure has not come, I realize that it is not as simplistic as I had once hoped. I realized also that there were many things that I needed to be healed from besides that, namely unloving attitudes and selfishness, which in some cases are worse than HIV or at best, very harmful. And I believe that God is in a healing process with all his children. Nevertheless, I could not handle these fine points in the beginning. For me it worked to believe that I would be healed someday and I still hang on to that hope. I won’t give

that up. There still could be a cure in the future and I want to be around to take advantage of it.

Even though I have not been healed yet, God has worked miracles in my life. Even though I haven't been cured yet, I have experienced the miracle of a long life. This shows me that God in His own way does save us from the deadly pestilence.

As we continue in the Psalm, verse 4 gives us a beautiful picture of protection and nurture. "He will cover you with His feathers and under His wings you will find refuge..." A mother hen holds her baby chicks in the downy soft warmth of her body, safe from all attacks and dangers. What better place to be than in the bosom of the eternal, all knowing Creator who gently holds us close to Him, even in the worst of times! The "terror of the night" (v.5) to me is the fear of not knowing God, not having a Protector, and handling the stress of having HIV by myself. Fear and terror often seem to surface at night. I remember that when I was first diagnosed with HIV I would suffer tremendous panic in the middle of night. HIV makes one face one's mortality and that can be a very difficult and scary journey.

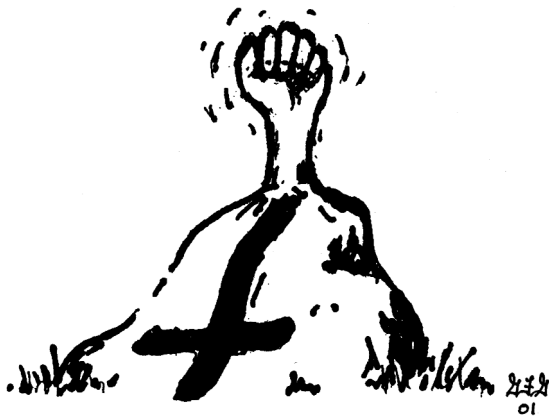
To those of us with HIV or AIDS, verse 7 is a great word picture for our viral counts—"a thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you." HIV can kill, but with God it cannot destroy us. We have eternal life that nothing can take away! Therefore we can say with confidence, "if you make the Most High your

dwelling, —even the Lord who is my refuge—then no harm will befall you...” (v.9).

Proceeding in the chapter, we move to the transcendental utterance, “For He will command His angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways; they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone” (vs. 11-12). This statement is so powerful in demonstrating God’s ministrations to His people that Satan used the very same verses to tempt Jesus when He went to the desert to fast and pray. Satan knew the power of these words to show us our position in God’s heart. What mighty words of comfort to sufferers, that He would send divine beings to us individually in order to protect us from threat!

“You will tread upon the lion and the cobra; you will trample the great lion and the serpent.” Verses 12 and 13 show us that we are real winners, and that the power of God is the greatest of all. Death will never defeat us.

The next several verses repeat God’s loyalty, faithfulness and active presence in our lives. They show our dignity and honor. Then the last verse gives us another hope. “With long life will I satisfy him and show him my salvation.” Does that mean we will live a long time, like the 22 years since my diagnosis of HIV that God has given me, or does it mean we will have eternal life? Does it matter? As I have often felt, in Christ, the worst of the bad in my life is more than made up for by the best of the good.



ANGER AT GOD

It wasn't God's fault that Ray infected me with the human immunodeficiency virus. God didn't cause the sinfulness that led to this tragic result. Nevertheless, as a Christian I prayed and prayed that God would remove this horrible plague from my life and He didn't. I had so much anger that my life was not going the way I wanted it to and it seemed that the Lord wasn't helping much.

I suffered from a naive, new believer's delusion that the Lord somehow owed it to me to rescue me since I had been so generous to dedicate my life to Him. I believed that some sort of payback was in order. I wanted Him to solve my problems and wrap my life into a neat tidy little package. Obviously, believers from the beginning of time have suffered great tragedies which God in His mystery has allowed. But as an immature believer I magically wished and expected to be immune from pain. In

my mind, I went to Scriptures that verified my desire to have quick and easy solutions. “Delight yourself in the Lord and He will give you the desires of your heart” (Psalm 37:4). I certainly desired to be free from suffering. I also read “If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer” (Matthew 21:22). I knew that I believed and therefore wanted to receive what I asked for in prayer. There was also the very familiar passage, “So I say to you, ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened to you” (Luke 11:9). I not only knocked, but I pounded at that door.

To me these seemed like promises that I could count on in a simple, one dimensional way. Yet I have come to learn that there are many dimensions to our walk on earth and that the answers to my prayers are provided but not necessarily in the ways that I expect or wish for. The Lord answers prayers in ways that provide for my growth and development rather than in ways that perpetuate my immaturity and selfishness. It is not selfish to pray to be delivered from suffering, but the Lord may allow that suffering for reasons that we do not always understand and for our good in some area of needed growth.

So at that time, as I was widowed and a single parent facing a looming health crisis, I became angry, very angry. It all seemed so unfair to me. Part of the anger was at Ray who had put me in the miserable situation in which I found myself. But there was also displaced anger at God. I was angry with

Him because He was there and Ray wasn't, and because He wasn't making life easier for me. There was so much anger spilling out from all directions that I needed an outlet for expression or I felt as if I would burst.

At first I was frightened to throw a temper tantrum with the almighty Creator of the universe. It seemed so presumptuous of me. I remembered the story of Job in the Bible and how he questioned God. At the end of the book of Job, however, the Lord puts Job in his place in no uncertain terms. "Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? Tell me, if you understand. Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know!" (Job 38:4-5a). God is certainly bigger than us and there is so much that we don't understand about His divine plans. Yet that did not divert me from wanting to share my heart because there are so many ways in which we are invited to be close to Him in fellowship and intimacy.

As I prayed and meditated about my need to be intimate with these feelings, I thought about the most intimate of relationships that Father God has created, namely marriage. In marriage we are certainly free to express anger at times so that our spouse knows when we have been offended or hurt in some way. I realized that Jesus Christ also used the metaphor of marriage in describing His relationship with the Church. In Ephesians, the author compares the Church's relationship with Christ to the marriage relationship. "Husbands love your wives, just as

Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word....” (5:25-26). I thought that if marriage was a model for Christ with His Church, then as a member of that body, I am invited into intimacy with Him in a deep way. John the Baptist also used the word picture of Christ and His Church as a marriage when he said prophetically, “The bride belongs to the bridegroom” (John 3:29). Husbands and wives have the most intimate relationship that God has designed in earthly creation.

As I pondered these Scriptures, I realized that the Lord invites us to be close to Him, emotionally as well as spiritually. Actually those two cannot really be separated. Our emotions are part of our spirituality and vice versa. I began to realize that I could share with Jesus, similarly to how I had shared with my husband in better times when he was alive. It was, of course, much different having my loving Savior to share with than a flawed human being. But the fact that the Bible compares our relationship with the Lord to that of marriage gave me confidence that the Lord was willing to hear my anger, my pain and to share more in depth with me.

I then concluded that since I had shared anger during my marriage with my spouse, then I could also share anger with my Lord. I admit that although I expressed anger, rage, frustration and very deep pain, I did not condemn or curse God. There was a need for a respectful expression notwithstanding. I cried,

yelled, prayed and stormed until either I felt release or was just spent. I felt that the Lord heard me, was present through it with me and applied an emotional and spiritual salve to my wounds. It seemed that He could take however much I could spew out when often the people around me could not.

Since then I have been deeply grateful for that opportunity to be fully spontaneous before the Lord. We have no secrets from God and therefore we can talk to Him about our frailties, our sinful attitudes and our disappointments. I have often been corrected by Him but never in a demeaning or defeating way. His way is to humble me not to humiliate me. Even when I have not felt that the Lord was present, I knew He was and I will always cherish that in my life.



THE DIFFICULTY OF FORGIVING

In February 1988, when Ray was diagnosed with pneumocystis carinii pneumonia, one of the opportunistic infections associated with AIDS, I was dealt a triple blow. First, I found out about his terminal illness. Second, I learned of his infidelity in our marriage. Thirdly, I faced the likelihood that I too had contracted the virus. I remember that during his hospitalization when I was at home, I would awaken in terror night after night, worrying about what was in store for him, for our family and for me. We had two precious children who would suffer as a result of this betrayal and who would possibly be orphaned before all was said and done; because in those days people with full-blown AIDS only lived a year or two. I thought I too would develop AIDS soon, leaving my children with no parents while they were still very young. I wondered who would take care of them if I died.

Three years later, in 1991, my sister married. I was so happy for her entering this joyous phase of her life. At the same time I was so very grieved that my life was in shatters and that I probably had no hope of achieving the loving, committed marriage that I had wanted for so long. When I was newly married I believed in “happily ever after;” yet I saw that dream crumble into desolation as I was widowed, living with HIV and caring for two young children. My life seemed so damaged and ruined that I thought it was over.

I also had a crushing burden of anger and bitterness which was piled so high that it felt like snow that accumulates on sidewalks after a cruel winter blizzard. I knew my task was to shovel through that anger but it seemed quite impossible at times.

As I studied the Scriptures, I came across the parable that Jesus tells about the unforgiving landlord in Matthew 18:21-34. The landlord owed a large debt which he couldn't pay and was forgiven the debt by his master. Yet he turned around and refused to forgive a much smaller debt that was owed to him by his servant. In the parable, Jesus tells us that the landlord was turned over to jailers to be tortured because of his treatment of the servant. Jesus replied to his listeners, “This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart” (Matthew 18:35). I still didn't want to forgive. I had been given this mountain to shovel and it wasn't fair to my children or me. I didn't want

to handle the mess I had been given. To me, forgiveness meant that Ray “got off the hook.”

Further study of the Scriptures showed me a more stringent command. Matthew 6:14-15 says, “For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.” At this point, there did not seem to be any way I could avoid this monumental task of forgiveness if I wanted to live in God’s grace, and most certainly I did.

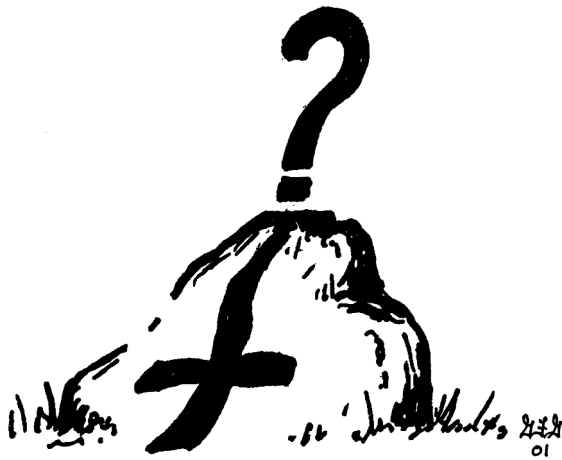
I then began a journey towards forgiveness which took many years to travel. I first had to pray for the willingness to forgive because I didn’t even have that. A seminar that was conducted by two Christian psychologists, Drs. Henry Cloud and John Townsend proved to be incredibly insightful for me and began unlocking the door to my unforgiving heart. In the seminar, they taught that when we haven’t forgiven someone, we are still tied to that person as if with a ball and chain. We are connected to them by our feeling that they owe us a debt and we don’t want to let them free. The irony of this attitude is that we are also not free, but chained to the other and carried along on a hateful path. Our expectation is that the other person makes it right in some way. It is hard enough to expect this when the person is living but impossible to expect it when they have expired. As a result, my resentment was fruitless and it was only hurting me.

Our un-forgiveness keeps us linked emotionally to the other person and again, in my case, there was no point to linking myself further with one who is out of my life. There are people who emotionally link themselves to ghosts of various types, the hoped for husband, the fantasy husband, the “if onlys,” etc. I had to give that up. The fruit of that torture is bitterness and more pain. It wasn’t easy but I gradually saw that God could deal with Ray eternally and that my job was to release him. I prayed and prayed to forgive and gradually the ball and chain was loosed and I was freed.

The important thing that I realized was that I also didn’t deserve God’s forgiveness, yet He freely gave it to me. How could I begrudge God’s forgiveness of another? God is all knowing and is the Creator and He has a much better vantage point than I do to view people’s hearts, yet he forgives murderers, thieves and evildoers. How thankful I am for His gracious gift of forgiveness!

As if the freedom from the ball and chain were not enough, God blessed me several years later with a godly, loving man who knows that I have HIV and loves me anyway. He saw through the virus into my heart and my soul. God answered my impossible prayer to be married to a loving, committed spouse. As I think back to 1991 and how deeply in pain I was, I can only be thankful that God took me on a challenging journey through forgiveness to the other side.





WHY ME?

A haunting question that occurs to many of us who suffer with afflictions is, “Why me?” I asked God the same question. Why did I get AIDS when I wasn’t doing bad things like using illegal IV drugs or having sex outside of marriage? I was a Christian when I was diagnosed with HIV. Why would God allow His child to get such a horrible disease? I have asked these questions along with many other people throughout the centuries.

These inquiries have been made since the beginnings of humanity. I can almost hear Adam saying, “Why me, Lord? The woman gave me the apple to eat.” Then Eve could have added, “Why me, Lord? The serpent deceived me.” Our human nature wants to be immune from unpleasant consequences because we want our lives to be easy, predictable and pain free. Yet life doesn’t often cooperate.

A bittersweet movie called *Mr. Holland’s Opus* depicts the true story of a musician who has aspira-

tions to write a symphony, but whose goals are frustrated by the course of his life. In an ironic turn, this man who loves music has a deaf son. As Mr. Holland struggles for a sense of victory in his life and grieves his losses, he comes to terms with the curves that life has thrown him. In one loving scene, he signs a song in dedication to his son. It is a song by John Lennon that says, "Life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans." Indeed there is much truth in that verse.

Those of us who have been thrown off our path of dreams cannot help the feelings of anger, frustration, and sometimes bitterness. We cry out to God, "Why?" Why, now that I am a Christian? Why, now that I have just gotten my life on track? Why, now that I just got married? Why, now that I just had a baby? And so on.

The Scriptures help us understand the mysteries of God's design and human nature. First, we know that we live in a fallen, imperfect world. The Bible says, "He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous" (Matthew 4:45b). The dilemma of life is that good people are not spared misfortune. The other part of the story is that even good people sin and fall short of what God wills for them.

Nevertheless, we still have not answered the question "Why?" In fact Job asks God the same question and received the following reply. "Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? Tell me if you

understand” (Job 38:4). In other words, we are not able to fathom all the mysteries of our lives. We can’t always understand God who is infinite and perfect. He is the one who created the universe, and His ways are not always our ways. I am learning to be comfortably uncomfortable with mystery. I cannot and will never get the answers to all my questions.

Nevertheless, I trust God and know that He loves me; and I can rest in that knowledge even though I suffer.

Secondly, Jesus gives us insight into the question “Why?” in the story of the man born blind. The Bible says, “As He went along, He saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind’”

(John 9:1-2)? This was a form of the why question. In other words, why did this man suffer affliction? What did he do wrong or what did his parents do wrong to deserve this? Jesus responded, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned...” (v.3a).

This was a good man who suffered anyway. He didn’t do anything to deserve it. Therefore, God isn’t punishing a new Christian who has repented of his or her past sins when they become HIV positive. Even though HIV is a consequence of sinful behavior, it is not a punishment. HIV falls on the innocent, the forgiven and the sinner. In our lifespan as Christians we are all three.

Later in the story Jesus sheds light on the why question in a beautiful way. He goes on to say, “...but this happened so that the work of God might be dis-

played in his life” (v.3b). He healed the man so that the man and others could be shown the beautiful gift of Jesus Christ—His love, His compassion, His power and His might.

Now when I want to ask the question why, I think about the many miracles that God has performed in my life. I think about His amazing love. I am so overwhelmed with what God has done and continues to do. If His own Son was not spared the cross, why should I not accept the suffering that the Lord has allowed in my life? Now when I think, “Why me?”, I am humbled by my God and ask “Why not me?”





KICKING THE WORRY HABIT

There was a well-known character in a satirical comic book whose motto was, “What Me Worry?” This motto implied that the character took life in stride no matter what the circumstances. Unfortunately, that motto did not apply to me. For much of my life I have had what I describe as a worry habit. Some people chew fingernails, some crack their knuckles, I worried.

I seemed to have an unconscious belief that by worrying and fretting I could somehow magically affect the outcome of whatever anxiety-provoking situation had come into my life. Of course what was really happening was that I worried and kept myself more anxious and fretful without resolving the situation one iota.

As a recently bereaved widow in 1989 I had developed the worry habit to top form. When my head hit the pillow at night, I would mentally run through a

stream of my worries in chant-like fashion; money, the children, my job, my health, an endless circle of worries. I would then finally fall into an exhausted sleep only to rewind and replay the tape the minute I awoke in the morning. I sunk deeper and deeper into the habit and became preoccupied with worrying whenever my mind was not distracted with work or household and family matters. Worry became an insufferable burden and a compulsion and I realized that I couldn't take it much longer, for it produced a snowball effect of increasing anxiety with no solutions. I know that the Bible cautions us against worry so I sought help from the Scriptures about what I could do to stop it.

In my search for enlightenment, I found that Psalm 127 shows us the importance of counting on God to take care of our worries. The psalmist writes, "It is vain for you to rise up early, to sit up late, to eat the bread of sorrows, for so He giveth His beloved sleep" (v.2, King James Version). This was such an insightful description of what I had been doing in my worrying: losing sleep and the refreshment of a restful night. Our Lord does not want us to worry and fret because it is not healthy for us and because He is willing to help work things out in our lives on our behalf. When we worry we are unproductive, unhealthy and untrusting of His interest in our lives. That is not to say that we shouldn't make plans or use our intelligence to work out problems productively, but worry is not productive, it is rumination,

obsession and spinning our wheels. The Bible says, “In his heart a man plans his course, but the Lord determines his steps” (Proverbs 16:9 NIV). We do need to use our efforts to make plans and go forward but worry does not carry us forward at all. We also need to set our plans before the Lord in prayer in order to discern His will.

Jesus taught his disciples about worry in his discourse about the birds of the air who are fed by their Heavenly Father and the lilies of the field that are clothed by Him. He adds that we are so much valuable than they are and that Our Father wants to care for our needs even more. Jesus then said, “Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?” (Matthew 6:27). His wise counsel is to seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness. He emphasizes this teaching by saying, “Therefore do not worry (my underline) about tomorrow for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough troubles of its own” (Matthew 6:34).

When I read those verses I realized that I had to change my habits, but my dilemma was how to change as the pattern had become so ingrained by then. Since the verse gave me a clue, “Do not worry about tomorrow,” I decided that I would only allow myself to try to digest what was going to happen today alone without thinking about a month, a year or ten years from then. If I had to make an important decision, I would only focus on what I could handle in one day. For example, I had to fill out many forms

after my husband died, and make a will and complete many legal documents. I made a pledge to myself to just focus on the documents I could handle in one day and not let myself worry about the things I had left undone. I often drifted back into worry and it took months of effort to stop myself and remind myself of my pledge and the Scriptural teaching. I would catch myself worrying frequently and force my thoughts in another direction. Gradually, with lots of prayer, the habit decreased.

The second thing I had to learn was that if the situation was something I could not change, such as my HIV diagnosis, I could not let myself indulge in worry at all. Unless I could take action in a health crisis, I had to release it in prayer. So my motto is, "if I can act, take the necessary actions, if I cannot act, pray."

It is something I still have to fight to this day as it is so insidious. When a new challenge arises, my worry habit wants to jump into hyper-drive. I permit myself to make plans, pray about the future and seek God's will but not to worry about it. Prayer is a very powerful force in this effort. I find that when I turn my mind toward prayer, I have a better outcome in stifling the worry. I sometimes have a mental picture of laying my burden in the Lord's lap and letting it sit there with His mighty power to carry the burden. Having HIV means that I have a very uncertain future and it is a frequent temptation to worry again when I have health problems or when my test results are not as good as I would like. But I have to keep

going back to the original lesson and have derived tremendous peace from laying my burdens down at my Lord's feet.



SHAME

Webster's dictionary defines shame as a disturbed or painful feeling of guilt, incompetence or disgrace. What an awful word! Yet in the Bible, there is a different view of those who trust in God. The psalmist writes, "Those who look to Him are radiant; their faces are never covered with shame" (Psalms 34:5). David also celebrates with the words, "In you, O Lord, I have taken refuge; let me never be put to shame..." (Psalms 31:1).

During my experiences and travels throughout the world, I have seen that HIV is almost synonymous with shame. It is one disease in which people ask how you got it in order to categorize you as either homosexual, a druggie, a slut or all of the above. This doesn't happen with more dignified diseases such as cancer or heart attacks.

Those of us who have HIV live with shame on a daily basis. But yet how different are our sins than

those of others around us? How different am I than my HIV negative husband? The human race lives with shame because of our fallen condition. Yet that shame is lifted when we ask Jesus to cover our sins with His righteousness.

Shame entered the human race with Adam and Eve in the garden. After they ate the forbidden fruit, they hid from God in shame. So how could David say that those who look to God are radiant, and that their faces are never covered with shame?

There is a mighty process that the Lord has given us. "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). He has created the sacrament of forgiveness so that our shame for any deed in the past, present or future can and will be wiped away if we seek his merciful pardon.

King David should have known. He was an adulterer who ordered the death of his mistress' husband—a murderer to boot. Yet he learned to humble himself before God in repentance.

Many of us repent of our sins but then continue to feel shame in spite of knowing that we are forgiven. Sometimes further steps are necessary. One very important step is to forgive ourselves. Whether we have committed "big Sins" or "little sins" they are basically all an affront to God's holiness. He doesn't have a list of bad sins that get 90% forgiveness and really bad sins that only get 10% forgiveness. He has promised to thoroughly cleanse us.

What happens in many cases is that we continue to beat ourselves up even after confessing. But in our merciful Lord's great design, we can look to Him with "radiant faces" with no sign of shame. Jesus Christ took on the shame that we deserve.

The Lord is so gracious and merciful. We may feel that we don't deserve his forgiveness. We don't. But he lovingly gives it when we confess and repent. What an amazing act of unfathomable love! If God, who is holy through and through, can forgive us, then I believe we owe it to Him to then proceed to forgive ourselves, and others, of course. Sometimes this is even harder to do.

The world may look upon those of us with HIV as the modern day leper, but we can look upon ourselves and each other and the Lord with radiant faces. Radiant is defined as, "sending out rays of light; shining brightly; showing pleasure, joy well-being, etc.; issuing (from a source).

Shame or radiance? I'll take radiance!



GUILT

Those of us who live with HIV/AIDS and who are parents have many reasons to feel guilty. Some of us were infected due to poor behavioral choices, others were infected by trusting in the wrong person, but all of us who are parents have lived with the effects of HIV/AIDS on our children.

I recently had that guilt hit me between the eyes. I have been having an extreme amount of fatigue and shortness of breath, along with heaviness in the chest area and other symptoms that have led to a sort of health “meltdown.” When I went to some important prayer partners in my life, and I told them that I had a heaviness in my chest, they told me to ask the Lord about what was causing that heaviness. I immediately sensed that the Lord was showing that the heaviness was due to my worrying about my children. Some of my worries were: What will happen to them when I’m gone? Will they have a relationship with Jesus in their

lives? How can they cope with the challenges of losing their dad to AIDS and the threat of losing their mom that they have lived with for virtually their entire lives? How have these burdens affected them today? Etcetera. Mind you, all my children are grown now, and on their own, yet these concerns never cease.

In the course of prayer, my dear prayer counselors reminded me that the children belong to Jesus now, and He will take care of them. My friend asked me to ask the Lord to be my children's inheritance when I'm gone, whether it's a year from now or twenty years from now. All the children have made professions of faith in Jesus; all have been baptized, even though some don't consistently attend church, so I was wondering if they have a real, authentic hope and faith in Jesus. But as the Bible says: "I am the Good Shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me..." (John 10:14). They are His, I don't need to worry or fret. I had not been able to really relinquish them into the Lord's hands. But trying to carry the burden of our children's walk with the Lord is something we cannot do; only Jesus can. He is their Shepherd, just as He is my Shepherd.

I prayed to release them to the Lord and surprisingly, the heaviness on my heart lifted. I wept with joy as I realized that I could let go of the burden that I had been carrying; a burden that I was not able to carry, nor was I supposed to. Jesus said: "For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:30). Yet the Lord was not through with me yet.

About a week later, I was able to pray with two women who I had invited to come over to my home to pray for me with soaking prayer, a deep meditative prayer time, for further healing. As we prayed, one woman said that she had an impression from the Lord that I was concerned about my children. I hadn't even told her anything other than the fact that I was very fatigued, so I was shocked when I realized that the Holy Spirit had given her this insight. I immediately burst into tears and told her about the prayer session I had had the week before. I thought that the burden had been lifted, but it seemed that there was more prayer work to do. As she prayed, she asked the Lord to remove any feelings of guilt from my heart. Well, that opened a flood gate of tears; for it was then that I realized that I felt guilty for the anguish and emotional suffering that I felt I had put my children through because of having AIDS. The prayer partner clarified that I hadn't done anything wrong. Nevertheless, for years I have been feeling guilty. I've felt guilty that my two biological children lost their dad to AIDS. I felt guilty because they had to live virtually their entire lives with the threat of my dying of AIDS hanging over their heads. I felt guilty because I almost died in 1998, which scared my children. I felt that somehow this was my fault, because my health status had put them through all this. Was this why many of them have had problems in their lives? Was this why some of them don't go to church? Etcetera. You can see by my

many “etceteras” that I do a lot of thinking about this.

I prayed to let go of the guilt; the impossible burden that I was carrying. I don’t have control over my children’s lives anymore. They are all adults and I need to forgive myself for this inappropriate guilt. I didn’t choose to get HIV; I didn’t do anything to “deserve it.” Even if I had contracted HIV by poor choices, I would have had to move on and forgive myself.

In 1 Timothy 1:12-16, Paul says: “I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me faithful, appointing me to his service. Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life.”

Let’s remember that Paul had executed Christians and was a witness at the death of the first martyr, Stephen. He was a Pharisee who hated the Christian faith. But the Lord got a hold of him and changed his life dramatically.

I wonder if after Paul became a believer he sat up at night, feeling guilty for all the families who had lost loved ones because of his persecution. I wonder if he stayed awake, thinking of the children who had lost their father or mother due to his persecution of them and wondering if they had a growing and thriving Christian faith even though their parents were gone. These are crushing burdens that only the yoke of Jesus can carry. That is the message that came through to me in the time of prayer with these praying friends. I could not and should not carry guilt for my lacks, weaknesses, health challenges and mistakes.

Again, I released my children to the Lord. I released the guilt that I was carrying for having AIDS. I wept and wept. It has always been my wish to give my children an easier life, but that was not the hand I was dealt. But Jesus. Jesus came into our lives. Jesus transformed our lives. Jesus has sustained us through it all. Jesus has forgiven our sins. Jesus is our Rock and our Foundation. How many times in the Bible did God say: "I will never leave you nor forsake you?" Many, many times.

After our prayers, my friend told me, "Think of it another way. Your children are concerned for your health because they love you. That is a wonderful gift. Let that be what you remember more than the negatives." I love and I am loved by my children. They are a gift that I will continue to cherish all the days of my life.



PSALM 119 AND AFFLICTION

Psalm 119 contains many verses that address affliction and suffering. Let's face it, serious health threats have a way of getting our attention. When I was knocked flat with HIV and all its complications, I had time to think about my priorities. And I found that often my priorities were upside down. I didn't always put God and family first in my life. I am not a neglectful parent or an unbeliever, but it was more a matter of letting the little aspects of day-to-day life take on bigger than necessary proportions.

Sometimes I think that maybe, in part, God allows illness in the world in order to help us reorganize our priorities and rededicate ourselves to that which is most important. We may tend to overvalue things such as money, success and other pursuits over the things of God. When we are ill, we have an opportunity for further sanctification in our lives, to focus our eyes back on the Lord. This presents a

challenge that requires courage, perseverance and lots of help.

I had to ask myself, "Would I rather have this illness and learn valuable lessons or let it bring depression and hopelessness?" I chose to seek the Kingdom of God, not that this is a one-time choice. Sometimes it is a minute-by-minute or hour-by-hour choice and it is not easy.

As I read Psalm 119 I am struck by the fact that the author says that it was good for him to be afflicted, "...so I might learn your decrees" (v.71). This psalmist found out that good could come out of his battle with an unnamed affliction.

I was a professional social worker when I committed myself to Jesus in 1981. After that there began a slow process of change, yet there were areas of my life that did not change. One area was my self-sufficient attitude. I had a strong motivation to take care of myself financially, physically and psychologically, which in itself is not a bad thing, yet I did not want to really believe that God wanted to take care of me.

When I suffered in sadness and grief over my parents' divorce at the age of 14, and the depression I felt as a result, I later read self-help books to try to figure out how to be more mentally healthy. I left for college at 17 because I wanted to live on my own and learn to take care of myself. I attended graduate school and became trained in my profession in order to be able to support myself decently as well as to contribute to society. This independent behavior was well ingrained by the time I came to the Lord.

When I did become a believer, I had difficulty trusting God at the physical, psychological and material levels of my life. I felt that He could teach me spiritual truths but that He couldn't or wouldn't take care of me like I could take care of myself. I had difficulty really putting myself in His care. I liken the dilemma I faced to a child learning to swim. When the parent stands at one end of the pool and calls to the child to swim to her, she is asking the child to put herself in the parent's hands, to trust completely. Once the child begins the swim, she needs to know deep within herself that the parent will catch her if she begins to fall so that she won't drown. I knew intellectually that God would take care of me but I fought putting myself completely in His hands, for fear that He would let me down as many others had done.

I had to reach a turning point in my thinking and begin to trust God to take care of me. I was in a position to turn to Him because of an incurable illness, and in my mind He was the only one to turn to. I looked to Scripture to learn how to survive the worry, the fear and the grief. As Psalm 119 says, "If your law (Scripture) had not been my delight, I would have perished in my affliction" (v.92).

One of my deepest fears was that due to my illness, the day would come when I could no longer work and would end up in poverty. As a self-sufficient individual, poverty was frightening to me. But the Lord resolved the problem even before I knew I had the virus or before my former husband was

diagnosed with AIDS. God went before all that and prepared the way.

What occurred was that in 1987, a neighbor who was a friend had gone into the insurance business. He wanted to tell us what he was doing in his new job. We told him that we weren't shopping for life insurance but that he could come over and tell us about his work. Previously, I had felt that we did not have sufficient life insurance for me and the children should something happen to Ray but he was somewhat superstitious. He had a belief that purchasing life insurance somehow led to one's demise. Maybe he had a premonition of his own death, I don't know, but he had steadfastly refused to talk about life insurance, wills or anything of that nature... up to that point. Miraculously, when our friend came to our home and began to chat with us, Ray decided to purchase life insurance. Four months later he was diagnosed with AIDS. Twenty two months later he was dead. The insurance company even investigated our claim because Ray died less than two years after initiation of the policy and those claims are automatically suspect. But we did not know he had AIDS when he signed up and I believe that it was the Lord's provision for my children and me. That taught me that God is working in my life in ways that I am not even aware of until much later.

When we are afflicted with a grave illness, there is so much psychological trauma. The fear of the unknown is overpowering. But God helps us turn our

burdens of fear over to Him. With support from loving individuals and the Holy Spirit, He mysteriously meets us in our fear and buoys us up. Many people look at someone who is ill and say, “I don’t know how they can cope.” I believe that the Lord has a custom-made provision of comfort just for the individual in that situation. Nobody around that person can experience that same provision of grace and comfort because it is just for the sufferer.

On a physical level, I know I can take my prescribed medicines, eat healthy foods, get good rest and exercise. Beyond that, I am in God’s hands. “Sustain me according to your promises and I will live; do not let my hopes be dashed” (v.116). Every breath we take is a gift and I am thankful for each day that I have. Following God’s word and releasing our cares to Him helps reduce stress, which helps our overall health. Our lifespan is known only by God. “Your compassion is great, O Lord; preserve my life according to your Laws” (v.156) “See how I love your precepts, preserve my life, O Lord, according to your love” (v.159).

Finally, our purpose as a believer is to give God the glory and my prayer, as well as the psalmist’s is, “Let me live that I may praise You, and may your laws sustain me” (v. 175).



THE TEMPTATION OF SUICIDE

There is an ongoing debate about the ethics of euthanasia for terminally ill people in our society. Philosophers and ethicists have argued both sides of the issue of choosing the time of our death. Those who believe in the right to die believe that we should be able to stop our suffering and pain when we so determine. Those against it believe that God makes that decision in His infinite wisdom and those who are ill, while seeking pain relief and comfort measures, should accept death as it comes.

While our mortality is a difficult subject to discuss with friends, family and others, it is a very real likelihood for those of us who live with HIV/AIDS since there is still no cure. Several of my friends with HIV have made unsuccessful suicidal attempts because the emotional duress and the fear of living with HIV were more than they felt they could cope with. While not seriously considering killing myself, I

also have had passing thoughts. Nevertheless, I find that there are two factors that keep me holding on to dear life. First, God's law tells us how precious life is and that we should not take any life (including our own). God reserves the right to determine the number of our days, as we see in Psalm 139, verse 16b, "All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be." That message was unmistakably brought home to me when a member of my church who suffered from serious heart disease said, "God decides whether I take my next breath or not, whether my heart keeps beating or stops."

The second thing that I hang onto is the power of the human will to live (which I believe was also created by God). Even as I lay in intensive care, seriously ill, weak and incoherent about twelve years ago, my body fought and fought to survive, seemingly without my conscious will. While I was hospitalized, I had a dream of evil Ninja warriors chasing me over the rocky, hilly countryside, trying to kill me. In my dream I ran, somersaulted, jumped and flipped, running for my life. For me that was a metaphor for the battle of my life. I later reflected on that dream and thought about how strong the human instinct for life is. Now I am not afraid to die although I am afraid of intense pain and physical suffering. I believe that I will enter into heavenly rest when I pass on. Yet my body is created to grab onto the life I have been given.

It appears that we often have a perception that we have control over our lives. Yes, we do have control over what we eat, whether or not we exercise, whether we smoke or drink or take drugs, etc., but beyond that our sense of control over our lives is only a veil that we use to reassure ourselves that we are ok. Anyone who has had a sudden tragedy such as the diagnosis of a terminal illness, the unanticipated death of a loved one or the birth of a disabled child realizes that we don't have any real control in our lives.

If we don't have control, then it becomes a challenge to place our trust in God, who is in control, and accept His ordering of our lifespan. As I learn to trust, I believe in God's timing. I often wonder, "What if I had committed suicide thinking my life was over right before the arrival of the anti-HIV medicines that have tremendously extended the lifespan of those living with HIV/AIDS?" I would have missed many good years, filled with the blessings of family, friends and ministry activities. What if there is a cure in the future and I could hang on until then? What if I could be alive to pray with someone instead of taking my life? I would miss out on what God had in store for me if I were to take my life.

So far, I have lived longer than I ever imagined, married a wonderful man, seen my children grow and welcomed grandchildren into the world. These are all things that appeared impossible when I was first diagnosed with HIV in 1988. I look forward to

life with the same excitement and anticipation that I feel when I unwrap a gift at Christmas.

In my experience as a counselor, I often met with clients who were very depressed and felt suicidal. But depression is a liar, like Satan. Depression tells us that life isn't worth living. It's like traveling through an extremely long dark tunnel in a train. We may feel that we'll never see the light of day, but eventually we come out on the other side.

Depression is a frequent companion to HIV/AIDS. Whether it is biological or psychological, or some of both, nevertheless it needs attention, sometimes professional care. People with HIV who feel depressed, irritable, excessively sad and hopeless, or who have trouble with either too much or too little sleep should discuss these symptoms with their doctor or a professional counselor. There is light at the other end of depression.

Because I have experienced so many surprises in my life, and seen small and big miracles, I put my trust in God to give me each moment He has for me, and not a moment less.





FORGIVENESS REVISITED

In chapter 5, I wrote about how I struggled with forgiving my former husband for his infidelity in marriage and for infecting me with the AIDS virus. I outlined the way I approached forgiveness as obedience to the Lord and as a necessary path in my journey. In this essay, I'd like to use a biblical illustration of the difficulty of the forgiveness process and the many paths to forgiveness. Psalm 55 has been tremendously helpful for me in walking through this journey.

As a Christian counselor I saw the struggles of people who were wounded emotionally like I was or in other very serious ways. Often we are told, "Forgive and forget," which often translates into the unstated message, "Hold it inside and keep it to yourself," because we often don't have permission to talk with other people about our pain and anger.

We also may feel that forgiveness should be an instantaneous occurrence—we forgive and then it is

all over. My own experience has taught me that it is an often long and arduous process to reach forgiveness, and I have derived great comfort from the biblical example of David when he tried to accomplish that very same mission in Psalm 55. In the *Life Application Bible, NIV Version*," published by Tyndale and Zondervan (1991 edition), there is a footnote that states that Psalm 55 was most likely written during the time of Absalom's rebellion and Ahithophel's betrayal. According to this source, some biblical scholars also cite this psalm as containing messianic verses (vs.12-14) that describe Judas' betrayal of Christ. (Footnote 55:1ff, page 962). We can see that the betrayals of Jesus and David placed them both in a dilemma of forgiving an enemy who had so deeply wounded them, and who was at one time a friend and loved one. The words of this Psalm, then, reflect our own experiences of betrayal and the journey toward forgiveness.

The process of forgiveness in Psalm 55 begins with prayer and David asks God to attend to him. David knows, as we do, that we have the freedom to come to our Heavenly Father with our petitions and needs. David writes, "Listen to my prayer, O God, do not ignore my plea; hear me and answer me..." (vs.1-2a). He then proceeds to express his profound pain, freely, without fear or censorship of his feelings. "My thoughts trouble me and I am distraught... my heart is in anguish within me; the terrors of death assail me. Fear and trembling have beset me; horror has overwhelmed me" (vs.2-5). David has no need to stuff his

feelings or to spiritualize them away. He is free to honestly commune and share with his Abba Father. Therefore his model shows us that the beginning of the forgiveness process is to honestly express all that is inside us, no matter how ghastly it may appear to us.

David then moves on to some escapist thinking, as we often do, wishing things were different. When we are feeling trapped and betrayed, we may begin to second-guess ourselves. I often thought to myself, “if only this hadn’t happened, if only I had made other choices, etc.” It seems to be common to the human experience to have these kinds of thoughts. We may also wish that we could magically run away from our situation, and by doing that, be freed of having to experience the hurt and pain that it causes. Of course these fantasies aren’t particularly useful as we can’t turn back time nor can we truly flee our problems, but even David is human like we are and wants to escape his situation. David wrote, “I said, oh, that I had the wings of a dove! I would fly away and be at rest—I would flee far away and stay in the desert; I would hurry to my place of shelter, far from the tempest and storm” (vs.6-8). It is after we try our avoidance tactics by using food, TV, alcohol, work and many other distractions that we may finally choose to face what is ahead of us. It is natural to wish we could get out of tough and painful situations, but if we want to be spiritually, mentally and emotionally healthy, it is best to walk through the problem with the Lord by our side.

Even while we want to forgive and hope to forgive, we may still encounter strong feelings of bitterness at the outset. We may have no love and good cheer for the person who has betrayed us. That also is a normal human experience, but is not healthy for us in the long term. We can work on gradually letting go of our bitterness and yet our God still understands our frailty and the difficulty of that task. Notice how David asks God to punish the bad guys! “Confuse the wicked, O Lord, confound their speech for I see violence and strife in the city” (v.9).

As David proceeds through all the emotional reactions to his betrayal, he is in constant communication with the Lord. He brings it all to Him with confidence.

To add insult to injury, David had the added pain of having been hurt by someone close to him. It is difficult enough to be hurt and offended, but when the offense is from a friend, it cuts closer to the bone. When my husband betrayed me, it was so much more painful than if it had been a mere acquaintance or a stranger. It seemed so illogical and unfathomable that one who professed love to me at one time could do so much harm to me. David and Jesus must have understood that too. David cried out, “If an enemy were insulting me, I could endure it; if a foe were raising himself against me, I could hide from him. But it is you, a friend” (vs.12-13). David seems to be struggling with a sense of disbelief that a friend could treat him thus. Many of us have struggled with that too!

David travels further along the road to forgiveness after this heartfelt expression of his loss. But before he arrives at peace, more hateful feelings emerge. He begins to express desires of revenge against his enemy. Again, he seems to understand how important it is to bring all the dark, socially unacceptable feelings and motives to God. He trusts that the Lord will ultimately guide him to the path of righteousness.

David's desire to get back at Absalom and Ahithophel rears up when he says, "Let death take my enemies by surprise; let them go down alive to the grave, for evil finds lodging among them" (v.15). He follows that vengeful desire with a cry to the Lord to comfort and save him from these hateful impulses. "But I call to God, and the Lord saves me" (v.16). I know that I have feelings of revenge toward people who hurt me and I want to see them hurt. I am not proud of these inclinations and I seek the Lord to change my heart when I feel this way. As a believer I know that vengeance belongs to the Lord and that He is a Just God who measures His justice with mercy for all of us sinners.

After David has gone through these many emotional expressions, a catharsis of his woundedness, he then begins to seek peace through forgiveness. I believe that we are in a much better position to forgive someone when we have been able to express our deep emotions with someone. We are then more able to focus on the task of forgiveness. David acknowledges God's forgiveness of himself as well. "He ran-

soms me unharmed from the battle waged against me, even though many oppose me” (v.18). He meditates on God’s unconditional love for him.

As David completes the letting go process it is as if he breathes a sigh of relief and release. He says, “Cast your cares on the Lord and He will sustain you; He will never let the righteous fall” (v. 22). What peace enters into that statement!

Now that David has been able to go through the wishing, the anger, the grief, the bitterness and the desire for revenge, he is calm. The Psalm ends with contentment and resolution. He tells his God, “But as for me, I trust in you” (v. 23b). I, like David, have found that by traveling a journey of pain, with honest expression of my range of emotions in communion with my compassionate Father and understanding friends, can arrive at forgiveness. The path is one that we can all travel with our Lord’s help.





MATTERS OF LOVE

IN THE PAST

I was raised with four sisters and all the romance and fairy tales common to the Disney stories—the prince and princess falling in love, overcoming obstacles in order to be together for a lifetime of happiness, with birds singing, little mice sewing the wedding gown and the beautiful couple victorious over those who sought to separate them. Unfortunately, this was a totally unreal fantasy, not only because it was a fairy tale but also because it left out the most important element of all; and that is God.

Outside the will of God, we may have all our plans and fantasies, but they never fail to fall short, compared to the peace, love and contentment that we find when we are in the will of God. I have lived it both ways, with some very different outcomes in my life.

I now believe that God is essential to the process of creating, building and maintaining a good, loving

marriage. Sadly, I did not realize this in my first marriage to Ray.

Ray and I met in college and I had not been living a spiritual life at that time. I had attended church as a child but had left as a pre-teen and hadn't accepted Christ as an integral passion of my life. I had not developed a living, daily faith and relationship with the Lord at that time. Consequently, Ray and I didn't have the Lord as a foundation for our lives. All my efforts to have a good marriage seemed to fall flat. We grew more distant and he seemed to build walls around himself, more so in the few years before he died. He may have felt some guilt for his unfaithfulness, some ambivalence towards me and probably had many other feelings that I couldn't have known.

When he died I was devastated for many reasons. The one I want to focus on here is the loss of the dream of having a loving marriage. That had been my dream for so long and I was unable to see it fulfilled with Ray. Then, when I was diagnosed with HIV, I believed that I would never be marriageable and that the dream of a loving marriage relationship would never be fulfilled. Although I believed that the Lord gives us the desires of our heart, I felt that this desire was impossible to attain. One verse from the Scripture that stood out to me was from Psalm 37:4, "Delight yourself in the Lord and He will give you the desires of your heart."

That verse led me into a sort of paradoxical prayer during the time following Ray's death. On one

hand, I wanted to experience marriage with a loving soul mate, but on the other hand, I believed that it was impossible and I wanted the Lord to change my desire to be married and to help me accept singleness for the rest of my life. I prayed to release the desire to be married and to embrace the singleness that was the apparent path for my life at that time. Only God in His infinite wisdom could untangle the mix of my needs and feelings and prayers and set me on the path that He deemed best for me. Where in my first marriage I did not seek the Lord's direction, I had learned that seeking Him first was essential, no matter what direction life took. That was a valuable lesson that the Lord revealed to me in many ways which I was to see later in a new wonderful, miraculous love relationship.

As I have written previously, I did a great deal of hard work to forgive Ray and to heal from the anger and bitterness. I believe that we cannot be truly free to love again until the business of healing is completed, or at least mostly completed, and until time has passed. I knew I had to pull out the root of bitterness and not let it choke my heart. When I met Galen, I was in the process of this healing.

IN THE PRESENT

Galen and I met at church in 1990. We were both struggling single parents. He was a graduate student in Spanish and I was a counselor. We became acquainted at a Singles' Fellowship activity and we

enjoyed meeting each other but we did not date at that time. We both had many activities going on so we primarily saw one another at church and church functions. From time to time over the next year we met for coffee or dinner. In fact, on one occasion, our pastor and his wife invited Galen and me over to their home for dinner. Later we were to discover that they were acting as quiet matchmakers on our behalf. Galen and I had common interests; our relationship with the Lord, our interest in Spanish, and our similar values and beliefs about life. Our children were friends and we had family outings together with our church family. I began to develop affectionate feelings for Galen but felt that I shouldn't become involved with him because of the HIV.

A year or so after we met he called me with a very serious matter. He said that my daughter had told her Sunday school class that her daddy had died of AIDS. He wanted to know if that was true. I said that it was and he seemed genuinely concerned about the burden that my children and I were carrying. I figured that at that point he would retreat from any relationship with me because rejection is a very common experience with people with HIV and AIDS. Nevertheless, Galen continued to be friendly and kind. I was so relieved that he hadn't rejected me as a friend that any idea of the loss of a potential romance with him was the farthest thing from my mind. I believed that there was no chance of a romantic relationship but that was OK with me

because I was glad that he still accepted me as a friend. Later I was to find out that when he learned that I had HIV he was deeply grieved because he was interested in a deeper relationship with me, and that information about my health led him to believe that it would be impossible.

As Galen and I continued our parallel healing journeys, we still saw each other at church and had visits and family gatherings. I enjoyed our friendship and felt very comfortable and open with him.

Around 1993, things began to take a turn in our relationship. Galen had been educating himself about HIV, had talked to his doctor, his parents and our pastor, and had been in prayer. He reached the decision that he did not want to lose me and that, with precautions, a relationship was possible with an HIV infected individual without excessive risk to his health. It seemed that the Lord was intervening in a miraculous way and giving Galen a love for me that in worldly terms was impossible. I too had a growing love for him, but did not want him to put himself into a situation where he felt uncomfortable, fearful or at risk. We fell in love and surprisingly, had support from our pastor, our families and our church family as well as our children. I believe that it was the Lord's will and it has been a beautiful thing for both of us. We were married in 1994 by the same match-making pastor and I have been blessed with a spiritual, loving, tender, funny and passionate husband. The Lord is integral in our marriage. We bring

our lives, our children, our vocations, our good times and our sad times to the Lord. We share our hopes and our dreams, our victories and our defeats with the Lord.

I could not have imagined the blessing of having such a loving life partner. His strong love and commitment to me was further illustrated later when I was very seriously ill. He stood by me through grave illness, the challenges of raising five teenagers, the ups and downs of our lives and the faith crises that we have faced.

To me, Galen's love is a metaphor for the love of Jesus Christ. Jesus sees me as his loving friend, not as defective in some way. He doesn't see me as "infected with AIDS" nor does he see any of his children as "alcoholics," "damaged goods," "sinners," or ... (fill in the blank). When Jesus looks at me, since I am saved by His grace through faith, He sees me as pure and clean with no spot or blemish. He doesn't look at me and see "AIDS." He doesn't see any of His followers as being unlovable in any way. His love is unconditional. When he looks at His children he sees beauty and perfection because we have that through His righteousness.

Galen sees me in a similar way. His love is like the love of Christ. Galen never makes me feel that I am tainted or defective because I have AIDS. He loves me just the way I am. I have never experienced such love before in my life. God has truly given me the desires of my heart in my beloved Galen.

ADDITION TO THE 2010 EDITION:

The Bible says, “A cord of three strands is not quickly broken” (Ecclesiastes 4:12). Galen and I rely on Jesus to be the “third cord” of our marriage. We seek the Lord’s direction and guidance in our marriage and invite Him to be present in our relationship.

At this writing, Galen and I have experienced a blessed sixteen years of marriage, much longer than either of us ever imagined. Our love has grown stronger and deeper through the years and I continue to be in awe of God’s loving provision of Galen to me as a mate. “Mi amado Galeno” is God’s gift to me as a demonstration of His deep and abiding love.



PSALM 118

In 1998, ten years after my diagnosis of HIV, I became critically ill and was hospitalized with pancreatitis, which is a serious, life-threatening inflammation of the pancreas. I did not know until much later that I had also developed sepsis and was in intensive care for several days. I was kept asleep so I wouldn't pull out the IV needles the doctors were using to give me antibiotics and other medicine. I also developed pneumonia, high fevers and infections at the site of the IV's. Additionally, my viral load swelled up to 700,000 and my T-cells bottomed out to the 100's, which then made it an AIDS defining illness. So in addition to the other conditions, I had gone from being HIV positive to having AIDS.

I later suffered a cardiac arrest and my family was called to the hospital because the doctors believed that I was dying and would not live through the night. Any one of the conditions I had, pancreatitis,

sepsis, pneumonia, and AIDS could have killed me, but then I had the cardiac arrest and my heart stopped for at least four minutes. Through God's mercy I was brought back from death. I believe this was a miracle and when I have discussed the conditions I had with a doctor, he said that it was a miracle I survived, even BEFORE I mentioned the cardiac arrest!

I was awestruck by the experience. Somehow, miraculously, the Lord had chosen to spare my life. Some doubters may say that the doctors saved me, and I believe that they did, but I was too gravely ill for it to be only the doctors and not divine intervention.

Once I became more conscious and understood what had happened, I was amazed that I had been given a second chance at life. I had so many questions—why was I spared? What was the purpose? What should I do with the remaining time I had been given? How could I cope with the tremendous gift I had been given? I was ecstatic, confused, overwhelmed and humbled. I was so grateful that I had been saved, yet I felt that I didn't deserve what the Lord had chosen to grant me.

The many questions I had led to much prayer, seeking those answers. Of course there were obvious answers. One was that I had Galen and our children, family and friends and was given more time to share with them. That, in and of itself is probably all the answer a person could need, yet there was a nagging

feeling that there was more to the story. I believe that when the Lord intervenes and performs miracles it is for a purpose. I remember how in the Old and New Testaments, God the Father, and later, Jesus, intervened to stop the course of disease, blindness, handicapping conditions and natural disasters. It also seems that the miracles were performed for a purpose.

For example, God brought the plagues to convince the pharaoh to free the Jews from Egypt. Jesus cured the sick to show His divinity and that He was the Messiah. He also healed people in order to restore or strengthen their faith. Such is the example of Jesus performing the miracle of Peter walking on water. Peter walked on water but began to sink and cried out, "Lord, save me." Then Jesus reached out and said, "You of little faith ...why did you doubt?" At this point, Peter's faith was strengthened and he said, "Truly you are the Son of God" (Matthew 14:28-32).

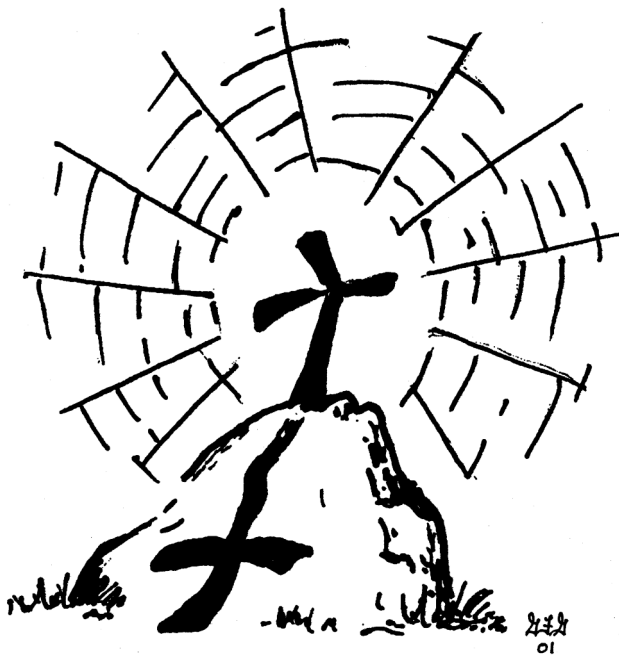
After Christ's death and resurrection, Peter healed a crippled beggar and then spoke to the gathered onlookers. Part of his purpose in healing the beggar was to teach them about Jesus. He said, "By faith in the name of Jesus, this man whom you see and know was made strong. It is Jesus' name and the faith that comes through Him that has given complete healing to him as you can all see" (Acts 3:16). These scriptural examples among many others have shown me that God heals for a purpose and that purpose is to point us to Him.

Now, I did not have a healing from HIV. I was still and am still infected with that virus. Nevertheless, I was healed from the medical conditions that were life threatening.

As I prayed and meditated on the whys I knew that there was a purpose in all this. I thought that maybe the Lord wanted me to do some kind of ministry activity. However, in my weakened state I could barely walk and get around, let alone go out and actively minister. I knew that I could at least pray and I became more dedicated to praying. I also took time to build up my strength and regain my health. I became involved with my church's HIV support group and asked the Lord to show me what He had for me to do.

As I continued seeking, I finally felt that He showed me the answer one day through my Bible study. And the answer was so unbelievably simple that I almost laughed that I hadn't learned it sooner. One exciting day I came across Psalm 118 and verse 17 jumped out at me from the page. It read, "I will not die but live, and will proclaim what the Lord has done." It was truly an "Aha!" experience. The simplicity and elegance of that verse excited me and gave me a sense that my question had been answered. We are healed so that we may proclaim to those around us how loving, merciful, gracious and compassionate is our God.





WORLD WIDE WEB

In the previous chapter I wrote about the debilitating illness I suffered in 1998 with pancreatitis, sepsis, AIDS, pneumonia and fevers and infections. It was an extremely painful time both physically and emotionally my family and for myself. I was absolutely helpless and had to rely entirely on others for my every need and I was amazed at the love and care that we received during that time.

When I became ill, my Galen quickly sent out prayer requests to all our friends and family. We received an outpouring of love and prayer that we later realized came from all parts of the country. Friends would tell their friends to pray, family members told extended family members and there was a prayer network, the likes of which we had never experienced before. It was overwhelming and awesome. Relatives flew in to take care of our children from California, Washington and North Carolina. I

had never suffered a serious illness before this and therefore had never been in such deep need in my life until this hospitalization.

Church members supplied Galen and our children with hot meals for over five weeks, usually three times per week. We received many cards and letters of encouragement as well as assurances that we were being prayed for.

When my health stabilized and I could mentally process what had happened, it became all too clear that if not for the prayers and support of many people and the Lord's intervention, I wouldn't be here today. That realization overwhelmed me with joy and wonder. God has chosen to work through a network that at times seems invisible, yet it is as strong as steel.

Our family was helpless and we were undergirded by reflected love of Jesus. That profound and indescribable love of the Lord and His people reached a depth that I had never personally experienced before. It left me a changed person. It humbled me deeply to have been a recipient of that love.

I vowed to try to be more loving toward others, even if it is a pittance compared to the love that was shown to us. God did not spare us some very painful times, but He taught us something in the process that we will always treasure.

IN HIS SHADOW

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THE LAZARUS SYNDROME

The cultural milieu of HIV/AIDS in the United States has undergone many transformations in the history of its existence. What started out as a “Gay Man’s Disease” quickly spread to the heterosexual population. Senior citizens and teenagers are as vulnerable as anyone now. Another transformation that has taken place is the shift from “dying of AIDS” to “living with AIDS.” This shift was brought about by the advent of the new classes of anti-retroviral medications that slow down the replication of the virus cells, thus permitting the person with HIV to maintain a healthy immune system much longer. Although these drugs have led to better longevity for those of us with AIDS, they still do not promise the cure that we seek.

Previous to these drugs, the life expectancy of someone with “full blown AIDS,” as it was called, was one to two years. Many people who had arrived

at this level of illness prior to the new treatments were told to get their affairs in order, i.e., prepare their wills, cash in their insurance policies, take a trip, visit relatives and prepare for their death. Surprisingly, many who had been given their death sentence remained alive long enough to take the new drug combinations and began to feel better and better instead of succumbing to the deadly virus. Interestingly, in secular HIV literature, the term used to describe this phenomenon of being prepared to die, and then facing a seeming “resurrection” is called “The Lazarus Syndrome.”

This description refers back to the biblical story of Jesus in which he raised a dead man to life. Jesus showed his mercy to this man and his family members who were suffering grief and loss. Although the HIV community has not been turning to the Lord in great numbers, they chose to use a biblical term for this new phase of living with AIDS. Could there be some subliminal awareness of God’s grace and mercy in the development of these new medications which stanching the death rate and allowed people more time to live? Only God can answer that question but it is clear that his mercy never fails us.

In my life I have experienced the Lazarus Syndrome times two. The first time was when I began to take the new anti-retroviral medications that had to be taken in combinations of three. Previous to that time, normally only one HIV medication was taken and it was not able to effectively

stop the spread of the virus. At that time, 1996, my immune system began to fail and I was able to start the new medications. Without those, I would have quickly progressed to AIDS. Because of those medications, I was able to work until 1997. I began to believe that I had a little bit more of a future ahead of me and that I might be able to hang on long enough until a cure was discovered. I experienced the Lazarus Syndrome first in the form of new hope, not just hope in modern medicine, but hope in the Lord. He knows my number of days on earth, and I can trust that I will not live a moment longer or a moment less than what He has planned for me. I am also learning that the One who created the universe also cares for me in a personal and intimate way. I may never fully comprehend that thought! For me, hope leads to a life of expectation rather than depression and pessimism. It is a wonderful lifter of my head.

My second Lazarus experience came in 1998, which I have previously documented, in which I almost succumbed to death. I believe that the Lord graciously intervened to spare me. For His reasons, my time on earth was not to be concluded yet.

I came to the conclusion that since God had granted me extra time to live in such a miraculous way, the rest of my life was icing on the cake. It was a “freebie.” I have committed the rest of my life to Him. Previously, I had thought of life as “mine,” but when I realized the love of His hand reaching out to

me, I learned that I could release my life to Him and trust Him to do with me as He deems fit. He holds us like a mother hen does her newly hatched and vulnerable chicks.

I came back to life near the time of Resurrection Sunday (Easter) on my 45th birthday.





MY GIFT

My gift has brought me to my face before the throne of God most high.

My gift has given me uncountable joy as I see the love of those around me.

My gift has taken me on a journey of spiritual and emotional housecleaning of the dank and dusty cobwebs inside myself.

My gift has offered me courage to have compassion for the broken and the broken hearted.

My gift has shown me God's tremendous power and might.

My gift has allowed me to see so many miracles.

My gift has brought me to a closer trust and dependence on God.

My gift has led me to an awakening of the power of unconditional love.

My gift has taken me through the valley of the shadow of death.

My gift has deeply humbled me.

My gift has turned my head toward meaning and away from fruitlessness.

My gift has given me the opportunity to be awestruck.

My gift has given me another chance.

My gift has brought the love of a godly, upright man.

My gift has made me grow.

My gift has showered me with love of many people, family and friends.

My gift has taught me that the outer wrapping of the body is only a small part of who I am.

My gift has shown me that the Lord alone numbers our days, be they long or short.

My gift has encouraged me to reach out to others.

My gift has taken me out of my comfort zone to speak and write.

My gift has changed my priorities.

My gift has illustrated the fact that my Lord is the husband to the widow and father to the fatherless.

My gift has filled me with praise and worship of my Heavenly Father.

My gift has made my heart soft and pliable.

My gift has overwhelmed me with thanksgiving.

My gift has taught me to appreciate each day of life that I am given.

I would relinquish my gift if I could, in spite of what it has given me, because, you see, my gift is HIV.





POSTSCRIPT

My life has changed so much since I heard those fateful words, “You are HIV positive.” I have had to give up a false sense of self-sufficiency and lean on God. And what a mighty God He is! He has brought me through storms of emotional pain, debilitating illness and spiritual crisis. He has allowed me to have a new life that I crave to live more His way and less my way. I enjoy life in spite of my health challenges because God is good and He blesses. He is a loving nurturing Father who has our interest at heart and He will never fail us.

2010 FOURTH EDITION

When *In His Shadow* was first printed in 2001, I couldn't have imagined sitting here at my computer in 2010, still alive twenty-two years after my diagnosis of HIV; healthy, still loving the Lord and still learning and re-learning the lessons written in this

book. I am a very slow learner. I still have AIDS but God continues to do healing works in my life, and I continue to pray for complete healing. God has been very good to me.

Matthew 7:7 says, "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you." I am learning that God seeks our best and hears the desires of our hearts as we live in service, obedience and love. I have become bold in asking and God has heard my petitions.

In 1988 I imagined that I would probably be dead in just a few years, never to see my children grow into adulthood. I prayed that I would live long enough to see them graduate from high school and then they would be able to care for themselves in case I couldn't. The Lord graciously granted my prayer. I was able to rejoice and thank Him for their graduations. I then became emboldened and asked that I would be able to live long enough to see them graduate from college. In 2004 I was present at the graduation of both my children from the university where they had completed their studies. Some may think that I am unappeasable but I took Matthew 7:7 seriously and I know that the Lord wants the best for His children. Matthew 7:11 goes on to say, "if you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!" As a mom I wanted to do what I could for my

children's benefit, yet Father God loves us even more and has an even stronger desire to bless us.

With that in mind, I prayed that the Lord would allow me to see my children marry. I thought that if they were married, then they would have someone to love and look after them. (Not that they needed looking after, but that's how a mom thinks). I was so happy to be able to attend my son's wedding. I was so thankful to the Lord for granting me this long life and such a wonderful opportunity to share these celebrations. I then proceeded to pray for a grandchild. The Lord in His grace and mercy also granted me that request. On August 9, 2010 we welcomed baby Reeci Belle into the world. God is so GOOD!