

PREFACE

“We were meant to remember together, in community. We need to tell our stories to others and to hear their stories told... ‘This, God has done,’ we say; ‘This He will do.’ Remembering... is an act of survival, our way of ‘watching over our hearts with all diligence.’”—Brent Curtis and John Eldredge, *The Sacred Romance*

I have been involved in a writing ministry for many years, producing my own work and also providing opportunities for believers to write about God’s unique handiwork in their lives. But I didn’t realize how long this has been going on until just this year when I began writing my memoir in earnest. Then I remembered that my first assignment as a new believer back in 1967 was to write for and edit my church College Class magazine called *The Throbbing Mind*. When my classmates wrote their testimonies and I saw the pleasure on their faces as they held the publication in their hands, I knew I’d found my niche. Over the years, my delight continued to be providing believers a reason to write and a place to publish.

With so much to be thankful for following a second surgery for breast cancer in 2007 and heart surgery in 2010, I decided to gather a praise band of the grateful to sing God’s praises with me. We who believe in Jesus are called to let our lights *“shine before men in such a way that they may see and glorify our Father who is in heaven”* (Matthew 5:14-16). Bringing our stories together in one place like this is one powerful light-shining tool!

The proposed book, our third in ten years, was titled *A New Song*, based on Psalm 40:1-3 (HCSV).

*I waited patiently for the LORD,
and He turned to me and heard my cry for help
He brought me up from a desolate pit,
out of the muddy clay,
and set my feet on a rock,
making my steps secure.*

*He put a new song in my mouth,
a hymn of praise to our God.
Many will see and fear,
and put their trust in the LORD.*

After creating a proposal, the next step was to go fishing—not for trout or salmon, but for Christians who would be willing to write their testimonies, personal journey narratives, essays, and poetry, and for photographers to share their art. The Amy Foundation has a website listing Christian writing groups in each state, so I sent out over 55 proposals to those groups. Then the title evolved into *A New Song: Glimpses of the Grace Journey*, which has a clearer purpose and a promised result based on Psalm 40. If all of us follow the psalmist’s example by remembering our histories with God, describing His rescue, our salvation, His comfort in a time of crisis, or leading when we needed a new direction, then our collective hymn of praise will cause many to *“see and fear and put their trust in the LORD.”*

When the stories began coming in, I felt like a kid on Christmas morning. With wonder and amazement, I opened each attachment and marveled at the variety of ways God reveals Himself as the Almighty I AM to human beings everywhere and, in the process, transforms their lives.

What you have in your hands today is far more than a praise band with a lead singer—it’s a full symphony and choir. Now it’s time to listen to the reflections of a few of the soloists whose work follows.

Diane Kulkarni
July 2011



“We write not to be understood, but to understand.” –Cecil Day-Lewis

Although writing has become amazingly therapeutic for me, initially I balked when the Lord called me to the craft about 25 years ago. The care of my quadriplegic husband had me overwhelmed physically and mentally. Yet, when I finally obeyed and began journaling about the ways God ministered to me daily, I found myself focusing more on His blessings than on my trials. After John passed away, the Lord called me beyond simple journaling to become a published writer. Once again, I balked, begging for a “real job,” something less risky. Now, six years later, it’s obvious that writing has served to heal my mourning, strengthen my trust in God, and give me something positive to pursue. It’s also given me an added means by which to encourage others, and spread the Good News, since I’ve now had dozens of stories published. But, best of all, I come away from each project with a deeper understanding of God’s marvelous work in my life. –Laura Bradford

Not by accident but through the providence of God, I responded to an e-mail address that proved to be a blessing to me. I found a couple of editors who took interest in my stories and edited them to perfection. *A New Song* is a book that will balance tears with laughter as readers get caught up in its true-to-life stories and testimonies of God’s goodness. –Glen Davenport

I’ve been extremely privileged to write for *A New Song*, and the idea of sharing my story has thrilled me completely. –Christine Miller-Ramey

Several days after sending my story to *A New Song* and deciding to use my real name, I had one of my “screaming” dreams. When I have these dreams, I usually wake my husband up because I am trying to make shouting noises to scare away an attacker.

This time there was the usual attacker, but I was able to yell loudly in my dream and scare him away. I realized that for the first time in decades I had found my voice. Praise God! –Shelley Kancitis

Although I had taught composition for many years and urged my students to submit their writing to contests, my writing was done for my own personal discovery or for the encouragement of others in their grace journey. That limited audience changed in 1993 when Diane Kulkarni prodded me just as she’s prodded others in this collection to make their voices known in a public way. My story came out of a speaking engagement in which I mentioned not knowing my biological father’s name. When the final draft emerged, I knew God had used the writing process to affirm His Truth in my life. I join Diane in urging believers to write their God-stories. He longs for us to be His voice, to edify others and give Him glory! –Georgia Herod

As I wrote my story and began recalling many painful and hurtful memories, God came and sat by my side. My prayer is that He will come and sit by your side as you read these stories. After all, He is the only reason my story could have been written. To God goes all the glory. Be blessed. –Pam Apodaca

During my husband’s battle with cancer and for the year after he passed, I kept a journal, really more like a “travelogue” through the valley of the shadow of death. I titled it *Treasures of Darkness* from Isaiah 45:3: “*I will give you the treasures of darkness and hidden wealth of secret places, so that you may know that it is I, The LORD, the GOD of Israel, who calls you by your name.*” When GOD called me to write my story, I had to enter that valley again—to stand in the darkness and bear witness to The Light of His Holy Spirit so others could find the way through. I asked for prayer support, and knew I was on the path when tears

blinded my eyes and a familiar deep ache entered my heart. –Connie Mace

My blessing revealed itself after being asked to rework the conclusion. I realized that next to the great gift of salvation, life's trials are also a gift. In calling me to work through hardships and grow up, God always gives me beauty for ashes. – Kathleen Barrett

The best bit of advice given to me was to “write it all down”—your thoughts, your feelings, fears, likes and dislikes. I was told to “talk to God on paper like you talk to your best friend.” This resulted in my early journal writing, which has been an enormous help to me over the years, but it wasn't the same as “writing your story.” Where do I start? How much do I write? What do I leave out? Where does it all fit? It was like my story was a 2,000 piece jigsaw puzzle tipped out onto the table. I turned over the pieces one by one, reflecting the hurts and the bitterness, then handed it all to God. “You put it together, Lord!” And He did. With God as my writer, I scribbled it all down, bringing it all into its right perspective. There were areas completely unknown to me until I stood back and saw the whole picture. This brought complete healing spiritually, mentally, and physically. There was not one piece of that puzzle that did not have the love of God in it for me. I feel incredibly humble. I have become stronger as a person and in my faith I depend entirely on God. He is my mentor, and without Him I know I could not have come to that place of peace and contentment, whatever the circumstances I find myself in. –Sue Underhill

I've always thought of myself as a writer. All my jobs since college involved writing. I worked in large corporations for 26 years doing marketing and economic research. The responsibilities included creating reports, sometimes in excess of 50 pages, on the findings. After that, I went into a second career in university teaching, which required a different type of research publishing, not to mention the 300+ page Ph.D. dissertation. I'm currently transitioning from the academic career into retirement. At this stage of my life, I'd

like to continue writing but on topics that have much more eternal significance than what I was doing before. However, breaking into this new field has been a lot harder than I expected. The story I wrote for *A New Song* is my first accepted publication in this category, so I'm pretty excited. –Dave Westfall

I was thinking about how this whole experience has impacted me, and realized that it has impacted my family as well. As I shared with them what I was doing, they were all eager to contribute some of their own stories. I think it has opened up some understanding for each other. The worst thing people can do in any relationship is to take each other for granted, but it is easy to slip into that from time to time. It was good for us to renew an appreciation of each others' experiences and of each others' differences. We are individuals in God's kingdom, but also one in His grace. – Barbara Ali

The story I wrote for *A New Song* was my first experience writing about my God-encounters. At first, I was afraid to share my past. To fully express the magnitude of the lesson required that I relate my history. Frankly, revealing my own willful defiance against the God I have learned to love so much was difficult. However, as I allowed myself to be transparent, He took the broken pieces of my heart and used writing as an instrument to encourage others, and let me know all things are used for His glory. These processes have ignited a deeper passion and hope that, through writing, I may give back to a loving God Who lavishes so much of Himself on me. –Natalie Rodriguez

It was a challenge to write about my marriage. The thing that urged me on was my wanting to share the “prize,” the joy of keeping love alive for five decades and counting. To make it through tough times, you have to look for the right guidance, and the Word of God is a powerful guide book. I'm thrilled that *A New Song* gives me the opportunity to share my story with others. It makes me want to write more about my life to encourage people because I know the same simple yet amazing truths are there to enrich the life of every single



person on earth, no matter what the circumstance.
–J. E. Lemmé

Writing the story of our experiences with my mother's illness allowed me to more richly understand God's provision for us in the midst of this storm. I already knew God personally, but living through my mom's illness and later recording these thoughts provided further confirmation that we serve the Living God who is the same yesterday, today, and forever. My prayer is that others would be encouraged as they read about God's faithfulness. –Tresa McNeal

I pray that the Lord will use any of the testimony, poems, and songs He has given me over the years for His glory according to His will. Much of this material is slowly being populated on www.SharingGospelSongs.com. Check it out when you get time. God bless. –Tom Blakely

My story began as a twenty minute writing exercise: I did not intend to make it an article, but apparently the Lord thought otherwise. Concerned with our financial situation, I sought the Lord's guidance and peace. Well-known Scriptures from both Testaments came to mind as I wrote, and birthed an article. The Holy Spirit had a lesson for me, and I pray it helps someone else in similar circumstances. The impact on me was profound as both spiritual and temporal things fell into place and I ceased my initial struggle. It was a double blessing: publication in a devotional, a personal goal, and the quieting of my soul. –Sarah Gunning Moser

I often think of this scripture as I prepare to write: *“But these things I plan won't happen right away. Slowly, steadily, surely, the time approaches when the vision will be fulfilled. If it seems slow, do not despair, for these things will surely come to pass. Just be patient! They will not be overdue a single day!”* (Habakkuk 2:3 TLB). As I am preparing to write, I apply this scripture using my creative

imagination for inspiration. Imagination is a powerful entity. It can cause the hair on the back of our neck to stand up, our spirit to soar, or our face to blush. Imagination is the power that holds our beliefs together; we believe with our imagination. Imagination is the wellspring of faith and hope. Our biggest and best dreams for ourselves and others rise from the imagination. As I apply this to writing, I visualize myself calm, peaceful, a child of the King, filled with the Prince of Peace Himself, guiding me, directing me, and directing my writing from the inside out. –Beth Willis Miller

Writing our story has opened my eyes once again to the faithfulness of our Lord. He has continually remained present in all our lives. It has given me a new perspective as well as allowed our story to be discussed and retold in our family to bring more healing. God defines our lives now, not the story. –The Prodigal Daughter

My writing came about on a day that I had the wind knocked out of my sails. I was down. That day God guided me and showed me through the Bible the life's lesson that He wanted me to know. It was an amazing time and I knew I was not alone. I could actually visualize Jesus picking me up off the ground and slinging me like a child up around His neck. All the while He kept walking strongly on the path of Life. I could feel the palm of His hand placed ever so gently against the back of my head as He drew me into Himself for comfort. Never did He miss a beat as He scooped up His beloved into His arms. He lifted me and my spirits in the early dawn of the day. Jesus gives me everything that I need. I am no longer down. The Holy Spirit is within me and dries my tears. I thank You, God, for picking me up yet again from the floor and draping me across Your shoulders. –Sandy Holly

Neither of my contributions were written specifically for inclusion in *A New Song*. But

having them accepted has been a great source of encouragement for the other members of the Writing Group at Christ Fellowship in Palm Beach Gardens, Florida, especially the group's leader, who has encouraged me and whose wonderful narrative is also included in this volume. Hopefully, my work will continue to mature so that what I'll be writing six months to a year from now will reveal more insight and grace than what I'm writing now.
—Earl Cunningham

After my husband passed away on February 27, 2009, it seemed I lost my joy of writing, although I have continued to write an inspirational article for our Texas Inspirational Writers Alive! group's newsletter, "Inspiration News," each month. When the opportunity came up and I decided at the last minute to enter my story for *A New Song*, it lifted my spirits and caused me to believe I am still a writer. I thank you for the opportunity to find again my love of writing for the Lord. —
Wanda Shadle

Telling my story is another opportunity for God to open up doors and hearts for an intimate, personal relationship with Himself. In a million years, I would never have dreamed that my story would be written in a book or told around the world. I praise the Lord for all of this and I ask all of you to look toward Jesus in your trials and tribulations. I know life is not easy sometimes, but when we put our eyes on Jesus, we can know He's there in the darkest of nights. He holds us in the palm of His hands. He will always lift you up when you're down. He's closer than a brother. Remember, Jesus is always there for you and He will always love you. I pray His blessings over you with God's everlasting love (John 3:16; Hebrews 11:1).
—Diane Rose

I have been writing since I can remember. Not just journals, but stories, newsletters, group sites, blogs, regular letters, poems, songs, any forum of writing I could use to express my thoughts and feelings. God has used that. It seemed like it has been a long time since I was able to write due to issues with moving, my computer, and my self-esteem. When I was approached to write for this book, my first reaction was "NO WAY! I am not good enough, it has been too long, etc." But God pushed me; He told me it was time to get back into writing. That's what I am called to do, so I did. In doing so, it has opened my heart once more, and as soon as I was finished, a huge weight lifted off my shoulders, my writer's block was gone, my passion stronger than ever to spread God's blessings to others . . . And in doing so, I am blessed in new and different ways from before. I pray this book blesses you like it has me. —Amy Jane Sandberg

When I was asked to write a chapter of my life story for this book, the task of reliving those events proved to be more difficult than I had anticipated. But I suppose there never is an "end" or a *final* forgetting to what I have experienced. Memories still linger no matter how much time has passed. Like a Magic Slate, the top sheet can be erased but underneath, traces of what was are still evident. Those traces are the words that you will be reading about the amazing gift of God's forgiveness. After my son Brent's death, a couple of years passed, years wherein I harbored anger and hatred towards Gabriel, my son's killer. But during that dark time when Gabriel was on trial, Someone was beckoning me to leave those destructive feelings and instead begin to embrace God's gift of forgiveness and extend it to the young man who took my son's life. How could I choose not to forgive, knowing that God had forgiven me? May the readers be blessed by reading this and more importantly, moved to forgive those who have brought pain upon them. —Deborah Parnham





A Quiet Place, by Sue Brooks

“Loneliness, loss, pain, sorrow: these are disciplines; they are God’s gifts to drive us to His very heart, to increase our capacity for Him, to sharpen our sensitivities and understanding, to temper our spiritual lives so that they may become channels of His mercy to others and so bear fruit for His Kingdom. But these disciplines must be seized upon and used, not thwarted. They must not be seen as excuses for living in the shadows of half-lives, but as messengers, however painful, to bring our souls into vital contact with the Living God that our lives may be filled to overflowing with Himself in ways that may perhaps be impossible to those who know less of life’s darkness.” –Author Unknown

Devastation to Life Everlasting:

A personal testimony of God's love of a young policeman. . .

Tom Blakely—Dumfriesshire, Scotland

In 1972, I left my Belfast, Ireland, home at the age of 16, to go to the Metropolitan Police Cadet College, Hendon, London. From there I began to pick up many of the bad habits to which young godless men are prone. After the cadet college, I returned home and went to the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) police training centre. When I graduated from there, I was given my first station. I'd never heard of it. It was a dangerous border station in County Fermanagh.

I had trouble finding it, and when I did, I couldn't believe it. The police station was a fortified police/army outpost, a far cry from the cozy establishments where I did my training. I had been there only a short time when, as a uniformed constable, I was required to deal with my first "sudden death." An army bomb disposal officer had cut the wrong wire on a booby-trapped IED, which had detonated and blown the poor man to smithereens. During my assignment there, the police station was blown up twice, mortar attacked, fired upon, along with many more terrorist attacks both when I was on patrol and off-duty.

We had a good working relationship with the regular British army, our Ulster Defense Regiment (UDR) local part-time soldiers, and the Garda, Ireland's National Police Service. The Garda station was a short distance from ours, but on the opposite side of the border in the Republic of Ireland. We all worked together to provide backup and relay essential communications, to know, for instance, who was carrying out vehicle checkpoints, especially at night. It could have been any of the above, or the Irish Republican Army (IRA). Working and sleeping there 24/7 under such stress took its toll. The only comfort I could find was in off-duty drinking, and I became more and more dependent on it. In those days, there

was no such thing as counseling after traumatic incidents.

Because my family lived a hundred miles away in Belfast and my dad was stationed there, I felt a bit out of it in Fermanagh. I had heard of the Special Patrol Group, a uniformed backup group that dealt mostly with terrorist incidents, and it really appealed to me at that time. After about two years on the border, my application for transfer to a Belfast section of the Special Patrol Group was approved.

I was leaving Fermanagh with mixed emotions. I had begun to like the place and enjoyed the comradeship of my fellow colleagues in the security forces. Living night and day with these men and being under constant threat of death has a binding effect, so I felt slightly guilty about leaving them. I countered that emotion with the thought of all the action up in Belfast, and even imagined being called to support my police sergeant father in his dangerous station. But in my daydreams there was something I hadn't allowed for.

Prior to leaving County Fermanagh, a colleague and I were having a few drinks together in a private house. If I remember correctly, we were sitting down, the television was on and the evening news had just begun. Then the door bell rang. Normally, I would have unholstered my gun and provided cover for my colleague as he checked the door. But I was focused on the news commentator who was talking about police officers being gunned down in a part of Belfast I recognized. By this time, one of two uniformed police officers who had entered the room switched off the TV. He was unknown to me, as we were in a neighbouring police division, but I knew by his uniform that he was a senior officer.



Then he called me by my first name, and my heart sank. He proceeded to tell me that my father had been shot dead by terrorists earlier that afternoon. Apparently, my father and another uniformed officer were shot in the back whilst carrying out a routine beat patrol. My dad had been shot five times in the head and back at point blank range. When I heard this, I felt physically sick. As the police transported me home that night, I was in a trance, hoping it might all be a bad dream.

On arriving home, the house was full of family friends, neighbours, and relatives, but it was my mum I saw first that night. When I looked into her face it brought home the full reality of the situation. Then I saw my brother Elmer, only 16 years old, finally my sister Jane, only 11. We wept but found no comfort. Our family was devastated.

Unknown to me that night, amongst the many phone calls of sympathy, my mum received a different type of phone call. An unknown person called and said, "We got your husband tonight; your son will be next." They were obviously referring to me, being also on the police force. Mum kept that message to herself for some time.

After a period of compassionate leave, I moved to the Special Patrol Group. Those were turbulent days in Belfast. When we came on shift, we did not know where we might end up. We were called to riots here, there, and everywhere. In many areas of Belfast, our presence alone was enough to spark a riot. Bomb calls in and around the city centre were commonplace, and we were called to deal with constant evacuations of premises. We had many other dangerous and difficult duties, but God preserved me through them all. It was during this time that I met Christine, and a couple of years later, we were married. I must say that although we were not God's children at the time, looking back now, I know He brought us together.

Meanwhile my young brother, Elmer, had grown up fast and had picked up the same bad habits as I had. He was 19 years old and a member of the police reserve. I often wondered later if I had not been so preoccupied with myself, Christine, and our wedding arrangements, perhaps I would have been more in tune with his thinking at that time. Over the previous years we had discussed what we might do, or what should be done about our father's killers. Looking back, I feel that Elmer's thoughts about revenge and justice were much deeper than mine. The way it was then, he was just my younger brother whom I met briefly from time to time. He did a really good job as best man at our wedding.

Christine and I were only married a few weeks when I got an early morning phone call from a police station. It was the station that covered the area where mum and the family resided. I was asked to come and identify the body of my brother. He had been found sitting in the driver's seat of his car, shot dead, with his police issue firearm by his side. It was suicide. He had never got over the death of our dad.

Hate breeds hate and can eventually destroy. This was a double tragedy in our family, almost too difficult to take. Once again we wept but found no comfort. The bodies of two of the family now rested under the same gravestone.

Anyway, life must go on no matter how painful it is. About a year and a half later Christine and I had our first child, a daughter. I was so proud of her. Being a dad didn't stop me smoking, drinking, etc., but it did give me a new sense of responsibility. Just over a year later we had a baby boy. However, life was not easy for us.

As a police officer in those days, we lived under a very real personal security threat, on and off-duty. Apart from trying to deal with the impossible at work and survive, at home we lived in dread of a

late-night visit from terrorists at the door, or an early morning bomb under the family car. By this time I had been living under intense stress for about ten years, aggravated by the deaths of my father and brother. Because I had become very reclusive, as a family we had no social life at all. The only social life was the occasional off-duty drinking sessions with police colleagues.

As time progressed, I became bitter and angry with life and suspicious of strangers. I realized that I was unfit to continue in my job. At that time an unarmed ex-policeman would have been an even easier target for the IRA, so with my wife and two small children, we made plans to emigrate to South Africa.

I was working in a large office in RUC headquarters, Belfast. I remember one day looking out of the office window at the same old hills where my dad had taken my brother and me for long rambles when we were kids. No doubt feeling sorry for myself, I was thinking of how life had been so cruel to us. I began to question what life was all about. I cried out in my heart, "If there is a God out there, show Yourself!" At that time, as God would have it, there were Christians at hand, so-called born again Christians.

One of them spoke to me, telling me that I needed to get right with God, through His Son Jesus Christ. I replied by asking, "Is your God a fair God?" When the reply came in the affirmative, I challenged it: "If God is such a fair God, why did He let a good man like my father die while letting his murderers roam free to kill again? And why did God allow my brother to die?" I didn't get a satisfactory answer to my question and let the man know he could keep his God. I was prone to criticizing Christians in those days. But what I hadn't allowed for was the power of God, and that at that time some Christians were praying for me.

Anyway, I had other plans. I was looking for a new start, preferably as far away from Northern Ireland as possible. With this in mind, one day at home I decided to clear out the loft. I mention this because I came across a little Gideon's Bible I

had been given when I started high school. I lifted it, read the inscription, and then threw it out with the rest of the rubbish. Within days of doing this, however, I felt that I needed God. His power was at work in me and the prayers of many were being answered.

Another Christian in my office used to read his Bible every lunchtime while he ate his lunch in a spare office. He made no secret of it, so knowing where he went, I followed him one day. I asked, "What have you got that I haven't got?"

As I look back, I thank God for this man and his faithful witness. In the short time we had together, he showed me from the Bible how I needed to know the Lord Jesus Christ as my personal Saviour. At first I struggled with this, because I couldn't understand why there was any need for Jesus. But as the days went by, I began to see from the Bible that God could not tolerate sin, and that He sent Jesus to die as a sacrifice for sinners.

One night soon after, while I was alone at home in my living room, I had a mental picture of Jesus on a cross dying for my sin. I am not ashamed to say this: I was broken, and in tears. I kneeled before God and asked Him to forgive me for Jesus' sake. He did. I had never before known such love and inner peace in my life. Five weeks later God saved my wife Christine, sometime later my widowed mother, and then my sister.

The Lord didn't stop there either, for over the years His blessing continued. Through many difficult years since and against all the odds, God has continued to bless us. Christine and I have four children. God saved them all, and today they seek to serve Him in their daily lives in church and mission work.

If anyone reading this story thinks his life is so messed up it is impossible for God deal with—read this testimony again! *"Jesus looked at them and said, 'With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible'"* (Matthew 19:20).





Upheaval, by Steve Whitehorse at Shiprock, NM

As a retired police officer, **Tom Blakely** is studying theology with the Open Bible Institute, UK. He continues to write Christian poetry and song and is still happily married to his teenage bride, Christine, who stuck by him through trials and tribulation. Tom has a vision for revival, believing that it first must come through God's children when they become totally devoted to Jesus.

"I call to You from the ends of the earth when my heart is without strength. Lead me to a rock that is high above me, for You have been a refuge for me, a strong tower in the face of the enemy." ~Psalm 61:2-4 HCSV

“No prayer is too hard for Him to answer, no need too great for Him to supply, no predicament too great for Him to solve. Lay hold on this great and gripping truth: this God is your God.”
(Selwyn Hughes, Nov. 21, *Everyday with Jesus Bible*)



Hanging On, by Lynn M. Burgher

Painful Blessings

Penne Ryan—Salem OR

Thank You, Lord, for sending painful blessings
That masquerade as wounds, betrayals, lies
And cause the evil, resident within me,
To rise up face to face—caught eye to eye.

So I can put to death through crucifixion
The thing that comes between You, LORD, and me
To feel the cleansing wash of sweet contrition
And sense my Lord much clearer now to me.

Penne Ryan, Associate Pastor over Adult Discipleship at West Salem Foursquare Church, lives with her husband Bob in Salem, Oregon. They have two grown children and three grandchildren.



Christ Alone

Kathleen M. Barrett—Port St. Lucie, FL

I am an overcomer because of Christ, alone. As I have grown to trust God more every day, I reflect on how my world was shaken nearly 42 years ago and why I first trusted in Christ Jesus.

The near tragedy unfolded, not suddenly, as is often the case, but slowly and eerily. I will never forget the morning of May 30, 1969. My bridal blush was still glowing from our February wedding, just four months earlier. I had stayed home from work that day and was happily ironing my husband's many Oxford-style dress shirts. Afterward, I would run some errands. Dennis went on his way to work as a carpenter on an ocean high-rise condominium in Pompano Beach, Florida.

My first stop was the bank, but on the way I had a growing sense of "something" being wrong. I shook it off, continued on and then headed back home again. When I returned home, I received a phone call from my mother inviting us to dinner. Little did I know that she knew the "something" that I didn't.

She encouraged me to come on over. I argued a bit, saying, "But Dennis is not home from work yet. I don't want to come without him." My mother was gentle in her demand for me to come right then. When I arrived, she was just as gentle explaining to me why we had to go to the hospital. "Dennis had a little accident," she said. The little accident, I soon found out, was the beginning of an intense fight for my 27-year-old husband's life.

His work responsibility for that day had been to take down some of the metal forms holding up the ceiling of the fifth floor in the ten-story condominium the company was contracted to build. The forms were originally put in place to hold up the ceiling until the concrete set. They

were spaced about every six feet for each sheet of plywood used on the ceiling.

The one form my husband was told to take down, alarmingly, unloosened all the others. The mass of plywood and concrete quickly collapsed and swept him across the floor over a pile of lumber and outside the five-story building, which was unsecured by the required guard rails. He plummeted 60 feet onto a pile of cement blocks, feet first. As his co-workers rushed to his aid, one of the men offered Dennis what was supposed to be his last cigarette. "Just like in western movies," he later recalled.

My parents and I, along with my husband's foreman, soon gathered at Holy Cross Hospital in Ft. Lauderdale. My beloved husband lay on a gurney with his feet swelling out of his work boots, as we waited for four hours for an orthopedic surgeon to arrive. Surprisingly, Dennis was still conscious as I stroked his head.

Was he bleeding internally? Would his feet need to be amputated? Would he walk again if his feet could be saved? It would be a long week of uncertainty, and at that week's end, a team of doctors and God's divine hand assured us that Dennis would, at least, live. In the meantime, he was hooked up to a morphine drip and life-sustaining equipment.

Here we were newlyweds in a hospital emergency room. In another area of the hospital God was preparing a sanctuary for me to cry out to Him in my distress. In the months to follow, I would frequently visit the hospital chapel, both before and after I visited Dennis, to plead desperately for his recovery. In retrospect, I see how God was urging me to make a decision to have a personal relationship with Him. Oh yes, I knew that He cared about my dire circumstances, but more



importantly He wanted me to know that I would need Him for the long journey ahead.

As a Catholic believer, I prayed the rosary, lit the candles, prayed to Jesus, and almost did somersaults, thinking that was what I had to do to get God's attention during the weeks and months of recovery. Not true. All I had to do was take Him at His word. Psalm 18:6 expressed my circumstances: *"In my distress I called to the Lord, I cried to my God for help. From His temple He heard my voice; my cry came before Him, into His ears."*

I was not a true Christ-follower at the time. However, Catholicism was the basis for a strong belief system in years to come. Before, I came to know Christ as Lord, I went to church and to confession. I took the sacraments and tried to be a "good girl," but I never really let God be the Lord over the affairs of my life. I only played the part of being a Christian by trying to do all the "right" things. I came to learn that God would use the trauma of almost losing my husband to begin my journey of spiritual and emotional growth.

Now some 40 years later, as I reflect back on my husband's fragile physical condition at the time and his amazing return to normalcy, I also recall my family's wonderful support. With my mother's background as a registered nurse, she was a special blessing during those dark hours of Dennis's hospital stay. She took two city buses every day to visit her son-in-law and to be his personal nurse, making sure he got the best care possible. She would leave her duties at home to fill in the gap for me, while I was working. Her acts of love humbled me.

My dad was always there, as well, with encouragement, finances, and repair work around the house, when needed. Even my two brothers and sister were on hand for me. How I needed them all, when four days after my husband's

admittance to the hospital, I was admitted in extreme shock, just two floors below.

When Dennis was released to go home, we began dealing with how to get around in a wheelchair, the pain medications to which he had become accustomed, daily rehabilitation therapy, and how to scratch the itch which was covered with plaster. A wire coat hanger fashioned the perfect "finger" for that itch.

"The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to . . . provide for those who grieve in Zion—to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of His splendor" (Isaiah 61:1, 3 NIV).

The legs and full body casts that imprisoned him also limited his mobility—although we were able to conceive a baby that year. Having a child was probably not the best decision, since our only income was workmen's compensation and my meager earnings as a secretary. But then, I was not listening to the Lord at that time, just my heart. Still, the joy of being able to have a baby was a miracle in itself. At least, my husband's reproductive guys were still intact! It was October 14, 1970, a year and five months after nearly becoming a widow, that we were blessed with a baby girl, Danielle.

Before Dennis could return to work in early May of 1970, he had to learn how to walk again. He had fractured his back, broken his right ankle and crushed his left, resulting in a fusion. No synthetic mobile joints were available at that time. The course of action was simply to fuse the remaining bones and somehow learn to walk, regaining

use of both feet in tandem. It took months of rehabilitation, countless prayers from friends and family all over the globe, and Dennis's strong will to learn to put one foot in front of the other.

Two weeks short of one year after the accident, he miraculously was able to return to work. Not, however, as a carpenter. A friend of the family offered him a job at the city's water department. We laughingly say that Dennis "fell" into this business, since he continued in this field and retired as Director of Utilities, followed by Public Works Director, completing a total of 34 years of service, for the town of Juno Beach, Florida. Dennis was never a couch potato throughout those years. I've never seen such courage to recover and get on with life as I did with my husband, despite severe re-injury to his left foot, 20 years later, in a tumble from a golf cart.

In May of 1973, we were blessed with a baby boy. Michael was as healthy and as strong-willed as his daddy, which was both a blessing and a challenge. Because I was flailing emotionally at the time, I battled increased depression. In two and a half short years, I had become a wife, almost a widow, a mother of two, and a very emotionally troubled young woman.

Putting one foot in front of the other took faith, mine and my brave husband's. Although I couldn't see how God was working in Dennis's life, I knew He was working in mine, patiently and lovingly. I knew because during the following months and years of emotional stress and depression and running away—literally running away—from the pain, God was faithful not to give up on me. He would always bring me back, when I would get in my car and drive off to another county, a beach or a park, or anywhere to be alone to wallow in self-pity for hours on end.

Thankfully, I would come to learn about the power and truth of God's word through a friend who kept inviting me to her church. It was a church where the Bible was read and applied to

one's life. Never had I realized that the purpose of the Bible was to completely transform a believer—mind, body, and spirit.

I later discovered that the pain I was trying to escape was rooted in the fear of abandonment. In my confused way of thinking, I felt that because of my husband's accident, I was being abandoned by my protector, my provider, my lover. How was I to know in years to come that God Himself fulfills all of those roles? Only by accepting my friend's invitation to attend her Bible-believing church would I come to a saving knowledge of a great God and how He heals.

In my husband's healing process, he did his best to fulfill all the roles I expected of him. How wrong I was, however, to be so demanding of him. I needed to realize that God is my Protector: "*You are my hiding place, you will protect me from trouble and surround me with songs of deliverance*" (Psalm 32:7). God is my Provider: "*My God will meet all your needs according to His glorious riches in Christ Jesus*" (Phillipians 4:19). And I needed to realize that God is my Lover: "*My lover is mine and I am his . . .*" (Song of Songs 2:16).

The Lord also had to deliver me from anger, jealousy, complaining, low self-esteem, and just plain ugliness of character. All these flaws did not stem from my husband's accident, but they were all underlying culprits of being self-centered—not Christ-centered.

Until my loving heavenly Father showed me the errors of my ways and the endless mercy of His, I was a mess. Now, when I am faced with personal challenges, where I know that God wants to improve my character, I moan and groan a little while, but then I press on with my eyes focused on the prize—greater Christ-likeness. You see, God is more concerned about my character than my comfort. Thus, I've learned that He allows trials and challenges in life.



The journey is not over. Although my husband rarely complains of physical pain, the emotional pain he has suffered remains dormant. Years later, Dennis relayed to me what he had seen as he lay on the scorching Florida beachfront in the immediate aftermath of his five-story plunge: “I was lying on the pile of cement rubble and I looked up and saw a figure on top of the building waving and smiling back at me.” Who or what it might have been is still a question mark in our minds.

Nevertheless this I know: it was Christ alone who brought my broken husband to recognize Jesus as Savior during one Easter drama at our church about 15 years later. As he worked as a stage hand in the production of *The Life Giver*, Dennis was responsible for the hoist that lifted the cross and the actor who played Jesus. It was an emotional encounter that brought him to tears.

Many of us have had to face the fires of adversity though, haven't we? Some return stronger and better because of their increasing faith. Some, bitter and hardened from battle scars and disbelief. As for me, I'm not the frazzled mess I was supposed to be. I'm not the broken and emotionally-driven woman I was turning out to be. And although I felt beaten down, I was not destroyed as the enemy of my soul—Satan—intended for me to be.

Borrowing words from a song by Christian artist Craig Koch, I hold fast: “In Christ alone I place my trust and find my glory in the power of the cross. In every victory, let it be said of me, my source of strength, my source of hope is Christ alone.”

Kathleen Barrett recently moved to Port St. Lucie, Florida, with her husband of 42 years, Dennis. They attend Christ Fellowship Church north campus in Stuart, FL, and enjoy an active family life with their two adult children and spouses and their 11-year-old grandson, Lance. They are looking forward to their soon-to-be adopted baby granddaughter, Abigail, from China. Kathleen is a former pre-school teacher and a frequent contributing editor to *The Home Times* family newspaper. She has also authored a children's devotional, *Jubilee Journal*. Her heart and passion, however, is to share the truth and the healing of the Word of God with hurting women everywhere.

“He who dwells in the secret place of the Most High shall remain stable and fixed under the shadow of the Almighty Whose power no foe can withstand. I will say of the Lord, He is my Refuge and my Fortress, my God; on Him I lean and rely, and in Him I confidently trust!” (Psalm 91:1-2 Amp).

The Blessing of Forgiveness

Dr. Terry Dorsett—Barre, VT

When I entered the crowded room, I saw her. My heart was strangely warmed to know she was here with me. Seeing her brought back a flood of memories from nearly twelve years before. Some of those memories were sweet, some painful, but all were laced with the fragrance of forgiveness. Her name is Mary,* and she nearly killed my family in a car accident.

Mary had struggled with alcoholism most of her adult life, and on that fateful morning she had been drinking heavily. She drove her car head-on into mine. The accident was so severe that the police who responded were amazed that anyone had survived. My wife's arm was broken and required major surgery. My leg was so shattered that at first they thought it would have to be amputated, but after surgery and many months of physical therapy, I learned to walk again.

My youngest son was the most severely hurt. His back was broken and he suffered massive internal injuries. Because the small hospital in our area was unable to treat him, he was rushed to another hospital which had a pediatric intensive care unit. The doctor told us to say good bye to him before they put him in the ambulance because the doctor did not think we would ever see him again.

For three days his life hung in the balance. But the Lord of Glory chose to use His power to spare my son's life, and though he spent months in a body cast, he made a full recovery. He is now a junior in high school and involved in both basketball and football; one would never know how seriously he had been injured as a preschooler.

Years later, the word "hate" sounds so harsh, but to be honest, that is exactly what I felt for Mary after the accident. I had moved to a small village in Vermont to serve as a missionary with the North American Mission Board. My specific ministry

was to be the pastor of a small congregation of less than 20 that was struggling to survive. I was supposed to tell people like Mary about Jesus so they could be freed from their sins and be transformed into holy living Christians.

That was such a glorious dream, until Mary nearly shattered it. I had nightmares for months about the accident. I would wake up in a cold sweat, and the hatred I felt for Mary would wash over me. One part of my mind knew that I needed to forgive Mary, but another part easily justified the fact that Mary did not deserve forgiveness.

One night, as I wrestled with those feelings, I tried once again to explain to God what Mary had done to my son. God listened patiently. He's good at that. Then He responded with a still, small voice and explained to me what I had done to His Son. God the Father showed me the depth of my own sin that had made it necessary for Jesus Christ, His Son, to die upon the cross. God reminded me that He had graciously spared my own son in the accident that Mary caused, but that Jesus, the Son of God, had to die because of my own sin. That night I asked God to help me learn to forgive; it was the first step in a long journey of healing in my own life.

It took time, but I did learn to forgive Mary. I invited her to church and she agreed to come. I sat behind her during her trial and subsequent sentencing. I went to visit her in jail as she served time for the accident. These were not easy steps for me, but they were important in the overall process of forgiveness. When Mary was released from jail, she began coming to church regularly.

One Sunday, Mary asked if I would come to her home and explain more about how she might trust Jesus. A deacon and I went, and as we sat in her kitchen, surrounded by bottles of alcohol, I





Mantua Poppies, by Scott Johnson

shared that Jesus loved her and had a plan for her life. It would not be an easy plan, for it would require significant change, but it would be a plan that would be for her good, and if she would choose to follow it, I promised her she would not regret it.

That day Mary gave her life to Christ, and the woman who nearly killed my family became my sister in the Lord. A few months later, after I had recovered physically, I was able to baptize Mary. In the years since, she has become a glowing Christian. She has served on the church council. She has been involved in a variety of ministry opportunities at the church. Though I have since moved on to a new ministry in a town not far away, Mary continues to serve the Lord in that little village church.

A few weekends ago, I attended the annual meeting of my denomination's regional organization. The meeting was filled with reports from the various national entities operated by our denomination as well as reports of the missionaries and staff members serving the churches in New England that are connected to our particular branch of the body of Christ. Each church sends representatives to hear the reports and vote on various issues to give direction to the denomination for the next year. As I walked into

the room full of those representatives, one of the first people I saw was Mary.

There she was, the woman who nearly killed my family twelve years before, now sitting in the same room, at the same table, helping me make decisions for how our denomination will reach other Marys with the life-changing Gospel of Jesus Christ.

I can honestly say that Mary is a blessing to my life. Seeing her across the room at that meeting reminded me of the blessing of forgiveness that I have received from Christ. I can do nothing less than offer that same blessing to others as I seek to live as a Christ-follower and share the forgiveness of God with anyone who will listen.

**I have changed Mary's name to protect her privacy.*

Dr. Terry Dorsett serves as a church planting missionary with the North American Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention. He is the author of *Developing Leadership Teams in the Bivocational Church*, published by CrossBooks, a division of Lifeway. Dorsett enjoys writing, blogging, and speaking to young adults. He has a burden for helping them discover a meaningful faith in Christ and developing their abilities as leaders in the church of the 21st century.

Brenda's Story

Shelley Kancitis – Ogden, UT

Few people would sign up for the class I just took. I didn't sign up either. God, however, had different plans. He picked me up and placed me in a front row seat. The textbook and teacher were my friend, Brenda.

Life has never been easy for her, but the Grand Slam of Affliction entered her life when her eight-year-old son was diagnosed with a disease that would be terminal without a successful bone marrow transplant. As I watched Brenda respond to this fearsome diagnosis, I was reminded of the wondrous sufficiency of Jesus, along with how to respond as a Christian to heart-rending news.

Brenda's battle cry goes like this: *If God says to do it—that is what I do.* Her decision-making stems from unyielding belief in the efficacy of God's Word, the foundation of her life since accepting Jesus six years ago. Don't offer other Christian books to Brenda because she'll probably tell you that the Bible is all she needs. From this Book, her friends saw wisdom come to life as we have walked beside Brenda through tremendous trials. (She would correct me and say that plenty of other people have had crises and that is just the way life is.)

Regardless, ponder these points *when*, not *if*, suffering invades your life.

God sees the big picture. Leave the snapshots alone. In other words, wait upon the Lord as the picture develops; one hour, one day, or one month at a time. Nathan had a very rare form of his disease and lab tests were often inconclusive.

"Wait" was the daily prescription. In Psalm 27:14 (NIV), God says *"Wait for the Lord; be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord."*

God's sufficiency is enough for *any* situation.

He provides comfort, strength, peace, courage, Christian medical personnel, and even LEGOs. I think Brenda would say that she never lacked what she needed, even when the needs seemed overwhelming and urgent.

Pray. Brenda prayed continually except when she was emotionally exhausted. Then she called on the Holy Spirit. *"... We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express"* (Romans 8:26 NIV).

In moments of utter panic, dial G-O-D first and then the troops. Particularly when the initial diagnosis seemed so terrifying, Brenda got on her cell phone, which rarely worked within the hospital, and was able to reach the Children's Ministry leader, who mobilized people to pray immediately. In Joshua 1: 9 (NIV), God strengthens us with these words: *"Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go."*

Trust in the Lord. He is the Great Physician even if His cure is to take our loved one to Heaven. Nathan's tests always seemed to be inconclusive so the doctors had to take risks in deciding how to treat him. The wrong decision could have been fatal. *"I will say of the Lord, 'He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust'"* (Psalm 91:2 NIV).

Love God more than anything or anybody.

Brenda's joy in the Lord shone through her Caring Bridge journal, a communication tool provided

at the hospital for families to maintain contact with friends and family. She always found reasons to praise Him even in the midst of setbacks, which were frequent. She praised God and He responded with peace and strength and love.

Read your Bible even if you can only manage a few verses.

Brenda fought the enemies of doubt, despair, and fear with the Sword of the Spirit, God's Word. Brenda's use of that Sword helped me to monitor my words so that they were in line with Scripture. (Brenda wields that Sword whenever necessary!)



Heavenly Perspective, by Nancy D'Oporto

You can advance the cause of Jesus no matter where you are and what problems you have. This thought remained paramount in Brenda's mind as she thought of ways to leave His footprints wherever she was: the hospital room, the corridors, the lunchroom, and Caring Bridge Journal. This bridge to those who walked alongside her was often as much about faith in Jesus as it was about Nathan, who was entwined with God's Son throughout his suffering.

Ask for help. Brenda will tell you that trials provide many lessons in humility, but yield great rewards as God has promised. Because she made her needs known, the Body of Christ was able to respond in wonderful ways according to each giver's time and talents. One friend offered to cut her hair in the hospital room and another gave her body lotion and a hand massage. Toys flooded in from across the country, along with books, cards, and other thoughtful gifts. The most powerful gift, however, was prayer, which blanketed Brenda and Nathan with sweet peace.

The world doesn't revolve around you, even if you are in the midst of a trial. Brenda's world revolves around Jesus—not Brenda. When you entered Nathan's hospital room, Brenda would offer the best chair and ask how life was going for you, a surprising question from someone whose eight-year-old son was gravely ill.

Keep your eye on the goal. In this case, it was Nathan's recovery. Brenda praised the helpers and protested the troublemakers. It didn't matter if it was a doctor or technician, Brenda refused to be intimidated. Nathan's emotional and physical well-being was all that mattered. If the pill didn't come at the scheduled time, the nurse was given a "grace period" and then Brenda firmly pressed the call button to request what Nathan needed.

Let the small stuff go. That means just about everything except bottom-line physical and emotional needs of yourself and other family members. Brenda stayed with Nathan for several months at Primary Children's Medical Center, so she depended on her husband, relatives, and friends to take care of the home front.



Be grateful. Brenda may never be able to write all the thank-you notes she would like to write, but she was always grateful for the countless kindnesses extended to her and her family. Gratefulness leads to praise that leads to our Lord. It changes the focus from our problem to God's provision.

Brenda will probably shrug her shoulders at these words of appreciation for her class on suffering, so I will end these observations the way I think she would want me to end them. She would say that she is a fallible human being just like the rest of us. She shed tears. She was frightened. She felt anxious. But Brenda would firmly proclaim that she has an infallible, miracle-making, strength-bearing, awesome God who is the source of anything that is good in her. And, she would say, don't forget to read your Bible regularly. It truly is *the* guidebook for life.

Postscript: Nathan's bone marrow transplant from his sister successfully engrafted. He is now at home with his family. Many health challenges remain, but the medical team is hopeful that Nathan will continue to recover from aplastic anemia.

Shelley Kancitis is blessed to live in sight of God's incredible creation, the sky-piercing mountains of Ogden, Utah. Her husband happily skis on them, she gazes at them, and Lizzie, the schnauzer, is oblivious to their beauty. Their two grandchildren live nearby providing much heart-warming merriness. She and her husband attend Precept upon Precept Bible studies and co-ordinate the Alpha program at Washington Heights Church. Shelley tutors children with dyslexia, loves to read, and likes to sew and make cards that point to Jesus.