

Consider It Pure Joy

**A Mother's Fears and God's Miracle
of Peace**

by Kristen Milligan



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*Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you
face trials of many kinds, because you know that
the testing of your faith develops perseverance.
Perseverance must finish its work so that you
may be mature and complete, not lacking
anything.*

J A M E S 1 : 2 - 4

Dedication

*Dedicated to Deric, my one true love and my
best friend . . . always and forever.*

*To Ashlea, my gentle spirit. Your eyes shine
with the light of Jesus, and you have become the
most beautiful flower in the garden. Your hum-
ble leadership will present challenges, but you
will overcome as your ears are always open to
the Lord.*

*To Luke, my tenderhearted warrior. Like your
Dad, your strength and courage have always
made me feel safe and cherished. You will grow
into a man of great character and compassion,
and with God's leading your impact on the world
will be colossal.*

*To Rebecca, my laughter and delight. God has
gifted you with both passion and purpose. Your
steadfast joy found regardless of circumstance
will take you far, dear one, and you will always
be a great blessing to those around you.*

*I am overwhelmed with thankfulness for each of
you.*

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Preface

I have often heard the adage that a woman wears many hats. Since my birth I have been a daughter, a sister, a granddaughter, a cousin, a niece. Shortly thereafter I became a friend and a perpetual student, initially of academics, but more recently of God's Word. Through education and a three-year apprenticeship, I became an Orientation and Mobility Specialist and a Guide Dog Trainer and Student Instructor. At the age of twenty-two, I became a wife, to a man who is still my best friend. Particularly since becoming a mom, I have found the idea of wearing many hats to be very true. Now, as a full-time home schooling mom, I am a cook, a nurse, a teacher, a housekeeper, a manager, an accountant (all right, Deric says this one is a stretch, but I do a little), a secretary, a counselor, and just a mom (a.k.a. a woman who loves the socks off her children). However, one hat I have never worn nor felt the urge to try on is that of a writer. Through my experiences over the past several years, God has given me much to share. I suddenly feel compelled to share the miraculous lessons with which God has blessed me with whoever will listen, but first and foremost with my children. Hence, I am now a writer.

CHAPTER 1

Happy Birthday!

*I will give you the treasures of darkness,
riches stored in secret places,
so that you may know that I am the LORD,
The God of Israel, who summons you by name.*

ISAIAH 45:3

On the morning of my thirtieth birthday, March 18, 2003, my husband Deric and I woke before the sun to make the hour-long drive to Westchester, where I was to be admitted for surgery at 6:00 a.m. I loved that quiet time with Deric as we drove. We both felt such amazing peace that God would care for me through the surgery and recovery, but we knew nothing of what to expect. We had completed a living will, with help from Rusty, our brother-in-law the lawyer, and we updated our will with JAG (Judge Advocate General), the lawyers made available to military personnel at West Point.

As we walked to the doors of the hospital, we saw Deric's mom and niece Audra, standing with a rose and HAPPY BIRTHDAY sign. Fun! I was reassured, though not surprised, to see my mother-in-law, Mrs. Milligan, who had arrived late the previous night from Tennessee. Despite her full-time professorship at Middle Tennessee State University, she had not missed the birth of any of our children. In fact, she had not missed the birth of any of her nineteen grandchildren. With five children, five spouses of children, and nineteen grandchildren, she somehow manages to make us all feel incredibly special and incredibly loved.

My most-enjoyable, adorable niece Audra, who always cares for her siblings, parents, cousins, aunts, uncles, and grandparents, was with Mrs. Milligan that morning. I had been excited when Audra moved to New York City the year before, hoping that we could support her in her move or in any other needs she might have while living in the northeast. I had no idea that it would be Audra blessing me and my family during her time in New York City.

We waited for several minutes in the admission waiting room, where we had much paperwork to complete, and Deric and I were then led to a room full of hospital beds separated by curtains. I was told to remove all clothing and jewelry and I was soon decked out in a couple of glamorous hospital gowns. I felt like such a beauty! Soon they came to wheel my bed to the operating room. They allowed Deric to accompany me on the initial leg of my journey. I admit I felt a bit silly. I was perfectly capable of walking, but they insisted on wheeling me in that bed.

Deric walked next to me, in my thinking also uncomfortable with the fact that I was being wheeled around in a bed like there was something terribly wrong with me. We soon found ourselves in what appeared to be a collection area for people being wheeled around in beds. We were all waiting for our designated operating room to be ready for us, and I knew this was where Deric and I would be separated. It was the part I remember being the hardest.

After arriving in the operating room, I was immediately at ease. I was transferred onto a table, the width of which was little more than that of my body. Metal wings were spread out from the table, upon which my arms were secured. My gown was arranged in such a way as to allow the doctors to easily access my abdomen, but to also give me the feeling of being covered and not self-conscious. An IV was started in my arm, and the comforting anesthesiologist asked if I had any questions. He then asked me to count backwards from ten. I wonder if this stuff is really going to work, I remember thinking. Ten, nine, eight . . .

* * *

As my eyes slowly opened that afternoon, my husband's face came into focus, with my father just behind. "Kristen," Deric softly spoke my name.

"It hurts . . ." is all I could think to say, and all I had the energy to utter.

"The surgery went well. You're going to be all right." As always, his words gave me great comfort, allowing me to drift back into a peaceful sleep.

CHAPTER 2

Is Raising Three Children Really THIS Exhausting?

*Trust the LORD with all your heart
And lean not on your own understanding.
In all you ways, acknowledge Him,
And He will make straight your path.*

P R O V E R B S 3 : 5 - 6

Let's go back several days before that trip to the hospital. It is three-thirty in the afternoon, my three-year-old is begging me to read her favorite book for the zillionth time, my one-year-old is just waking up from his nap and he is CRANKY, my newborn is nursing hungrily, and I am SO TIRED. I know what all you moms are thinking, Yeah, yeah, we have all been there, and we are all tired! But this tired seemed different from my tiredness after the births of my first two children.

I heard one sufferer of severe fatigue compare her ailment to a well full of refreshing water. Throughout the

day as you spend your energy, you continually take from the well. And when the last drop is drained from the well, there is simply no more to be found. That's it, no more, done for the day. It doesn't matter if the children are filthy and need a bath, it doesn't matter if the little one has not yet had her Bible time and prayers, and it doesn't matter if dinner has not yet been prepared. No matter what needs to be done, there is no more water in the well. That is how tired I felt. It seemed to get worse instead of better, and all I could think about was my next opportunity to rest. I was also having nagging back pain that was sometimes quite painful, significant weight loss (though I looked at this as a blessing after child number three), and a fever that would come on intensely for a day and then disappear with no explanation for its cause.

Deric became particularly worried when the dishes sat in the sink for longer than I had previously tolerated, and he finally urged me to see a doctor. After several weeks of resisting, I made an appointment with the only available doctor at Keller Army Hospital. When, with great embarrassment, I explained that my primary complaint was fatigue, the doctor dutifully, though without great haste or concern, ordered blood work. When I returned the following week for my results, it was explained to me that though my liver levels were a bit high (I later learned that normal is about eleven, and my numbers were in the mid-four hundreds), all appeared well and my problem was most likely postpartum depression. I reasoned with the doctor that although I did recently give birth and fatigue is a symptom of postpartum depression,

I was in no way depressed. This did not lessen this doctor's confidence in her diagnosis.

I went home feeling both frustrated and embarrassed. Clearly, I was blowing my symptoms out of proportion. I was feeling the strain of motherhood, and apparently I wasn't handling it well. This disheartened me, as I loved being a mother, and I so wanted to be good at it. I knew I had much to learn and work on as a mom, but why did I seem to be so much more tired than all the other mothers? What was I doing wrong? Was I kidding myself that I was capable of homeschooling these children beginning the following year?

Upon arriving home, I found Deric waiting for me on the couch with the children asleep for their naps. I was thankful for the quiet time with Deric. I explained the doctor's diagnosis of postpartum depression, my belief that the diagnosis was "hooey," and my resolution that the doctor felt the need to create an illness because nothing was wrong with me. I simply needed to step up to the challenges of my life.

Deric didn't go for it. He quietly stood, reached for the phone, and explained to someone at Keller Hospital that his wife was sick, she did not have postpartum depression, and a CT scan was required. You see, Deric had done extensive Internet research, and he suspected that there might be a problem with my gall bladder. This was what he hoped the CT scan would confirm or rule out.

The hospital allowed for another appointment to be made with another doctor, but before the date of that appointment arrived, I became sick with a nasty flu. Fever, vomiting, headache, backache, congestion, the works. I

was miserable, but it was the flu. Everyone gets the flu, no big deal. However, my husband thought this was our chance to get the attention of the doctors, and he insisted I go to the emergency room. I argued that was silly, everyone waits out the flu; but I was touched by his concern for me, so I conceded.

Surprisingly, I was not turned away at the door. I met a nice doctor with a thick British accent, who not only listened to and considered my current symptoms, but considered the symptoms I had been experiencing the past few months as well. You can imagine my shock when he suggested a CT scan, and when he suggested that we “expect the worst.” Was “the worst” a malfunctioning gall bladder? It seemed Deric and I had won our battle, and my task was now to go and eliminate the possibility of problems with my gall bladder.

The next morning I went to Keller Hospital for my scan. I admit it was difficult, as I was still nauseous and I was required to drink a barium mixture supposedly disguised in Crystal Light lemonade (I cannot drink Crystal Light to this day). When it was done, I went straight home, feeling productive and finished. I was to return the following week for my results.

Upon walking into my home, I again found Deric waiting for me on the couch and the children asleep. I told him about the awful drink and I was just about to tell him about the scan tube and how it works (he loves the mechanics of that stuff) when the phone rang. It was the hospital.

I must pause from my story to give all readers a warning based on my experiences. If you ever have a medical

test and the hospital calls you within an hour, it is not good news. Hospital personnel do not feel the need to pick up the phone and immediately call to let us know that scans are clean and tests are negative—which was not the case in our situation.

The head of the ER (because the test was ordered from the ER) was calling to tell us to return immediately to the hospital. She would not convey over the phone what was found by the scan, but she did suggest finding childcare and packing an overnight bag, as an ambulance would be arriving to transport us to Westchester Medical Center, a facility “more capable of dealing with my condition.” Click.

That was all they gave us. I was immediately terrified and burst into tears. For several minutes I was unable to calm myself enough to convey to Deric what had been reported to me on the phone, which was not much. I had no idea what was wrong with me, and I quickly learned that I have a wild imagination. But once rational thought returned, Deric and I decided that it must be my gall bladder after all.

It took more than a couple of hours to negotiate overnight childcare, but we were blessed by dear friends who worked out a system of caring for my children and theirs until my mom was able to arrive from Florida the next morning. I remember seven-month-old Rebecca, smiling at me through watery eyes and a runny nose as I walked out the door. I hated to leave her when she was suffering from her first nasty cold.

I had decided only a few days before that it was time for her to learn to take a bottle, something she had resisted

mightily. It had required refusing to nurse her for a full day before she agreed to take the bottle of thawed breast milk. I was thankful as I left for the hospital that she would take the bottles, but I was distressed by the fact that I had not had the opportunity to pump any breast milk and she would need it more than ever now that she was fighting this cold. I said a little prayer as Deric and I left for the hospital, dreading that they would tell us I needed my gall bladder removed.

Keller Army Hospital ER is small, and the evening Deric and I walked in for the scan results it was relatively quiet. I felt the eyes of all the staff on us, though I was sure I must have been imagining this. They quickly led us back to a triple patient room, where a curtain was closed between us and a mother with her teenage daughter whose ear was infected from a recent piercing. This is all the privacy we get? I thought. Thankfully, the girl and her mother were released before the soft-spoken British doctor came in to share the findings of the scan. Quickly, in a no-nonsense fashion, he delivered the news. A very large tumor was found on my liver. Keller was not equipped to test any further, so we were being sent immediately to Westchester Medical Center, where he had already spoken with a liver specialist. Additional tests would be performed and the tumor would most likely be “chopped out.” Chopped out? His words made me giggle, though it certainly wasn’t funny. We were immediately filled with questions. “Where did it come from? What additional tests? When would they take it out? How long would I be in the hospital? Could it be cancer?”

The ER doctor, who I later realized was making educated guesses as he tried to answer our questions, assured us it would not be cancer, suggested the tumor was probably caused by the birth control pills I had taken prior to my first pregnancy, suggested I could be in the hospital for three weeks, and acknowledged that any further questions would be better addressed to the surgeon at Westchester Medical Center. We were then given directions to the hospital (apparently the ambulance would not be needed) and told we were expected immediately.

As we traveled the hour drive to Westchester, we called our family, asking for prayer. We still knew little more than that I had a large liver tumor that would most likely need to be removed quickly. Once at the hospital, we were admitted to a room, interviewed by a resident, I was hooked up to an IV, blood tests were taken, and a chest X-ray was performed, all without removing me from my bed.

We then waited for our late night meeting with the surgeon. It was suggested by the resident that a biopsy would most likely be required before surgery was scheduled, and it was our understanding that that test would be performed in the morning.

Dr. Marcelo Facciuto, a doctor not more than a few years older than us, surprised us with his shaky English and his humble manner. Yet his confidence in what he did was reassuring. He did not feel a biopsy was necessary, as the tumor was quite large (14.5 centimeters) and was pressing on my stomach, so it would have to be removed regardless. This was the cause of my recent weight loss. Furthermore, he reasoned, on the unlikely chance that

the tumor was cancerous, a biopsy could cause spreading. Because of the size, he suggested that the tumor be removed quickly, though he assured us it was no emergency. We asked when he would suggest, and he replied, "I am available next Tuesday."

So that was it. Major liver surgery scheduled. And it did not even dawn on me until later that night that next Tuesday was my thirtieth birthday.

* * *

The days preceding my surgery felt surreal, but I admit I was having a ball. My mom arrived at my home on Saturday morning and relieved my friends of childcare duty before Deric and I even returned from the initial testing that first night at the hospital. Though I did not attend church the following day, Deric went and asked for prayers from our congregation. He was overwhelmed by the church's immediate response to pray and to lay hands on him. This act of faith and action meant a great deal to both of us.

On Monday, my father and my sister, Kim, arrived, and a few close girlfriends came over that afternoon for a festive surprise birthday party one day early. We had Chinese food for dinner, one of my favorites, and I quickly feel asleep, overwhelmed with love and peace.

* * *

The next morning, while I slept peacefully, the doctors removed half of my liver, the entire left lobe. Deric and Audra completed crossword puzzles while Mrs. Milli-

gan made various phone calls to update the family; my dad and Kim tried to read; and my mom stayed home to care for our three precious babies. Undoubtedly, the time was easiest for me.

After a little more than five hours, Dr. Facciuto emerged to tell my family that the surgery had gone well. A blood transfusion had not been necessary, something that had concerned us beforehand, and adequate margins had been removed. It wasn't until all the good news had been shared that the doctor informed Deric and our families that the tumor had in fact been malignant, a rare form of liver cancer called hepatocellular carcinoma, fibrolamellar variant, which strikes young men and women for reasons unknown. Dr. Facciuto then insisted that my focus once I awoke needed to be my recovery from the surgery, not the fact that the tumor had been cancer. He asked that I not be told immediately. The doctor told Deric that later in the week, "We will tell her together." Deric hesitantly agreed, praying he was doing the right thing.

When I awoke in the recovery room, I was amazed by the pain I felt. They had asked me before the surgery to rate my pain level on a scale of one to ten. It had been zero. They asked me again after the surgery, and after careful consideration I gave it a seven. Ten seemed like a logical response, but I realistically considered that there was certainly pain greater than this. I couldn't help but think of Christ on the cross, and the pain He must have endured undeservedly. I was comforted greatly by the presence of Deric and my dad, though my visual memories of them are brief. Apparently, my eyes were closed most of the time, a

common reaction to the pain. They talked quietly to me, as there were many other patients crowded in the recovery room, separated by curtains. They assured me I was being given pain medications and the pain would diminish shortly. I remember the nurse asking if the pain was better and what I would now rate my pain. My response was six and $\frac{3}{4}$. To be honest, I did not notice a decrease of pain, but I felt the need to reward and encourage her efforts.

I must have fallen asleep again, because when I awoke it was much later and Deric and my dad were gone. My pain was definitely better, but I was desperate for Deric, and I couldn't find anyone to help me get him. I knew he wouldn't leave me if he was not made to do so, and I had been told that visitors were rarely let into the recovery room, but it seemed like a ridiculous policy to me. The nurses were obviously too busy to deal with my insecurity, and I knew Deric would make me feel dramatically better. A nurse finally came to check me, and she informed me that it was very late and Deric would not be allowed to return until morning. I felt exhausted, despite my long nap through the surgery and again afterward. I figured I would just sleep until he was able to return. It didn't take me long to realize that the morphine I was getting was not going to allow me to sleep. OK, I admit that I did not realize anything at that particular time. I was a zombie. But later, once I had regained my ability to think and function, I knew that the morphine was seriously impeding my ability to sleep. It may not sound like anything that should be such a problem, but the inability to sleep when your body and mind are consumed with exhaustion

is extremely frustrating. I have noticed over the years that the symptoms or conditions that have been most difficult to tolerate have been those that I previously would have deemed most tolerable. These are usually the times when I believe God is working to focus my mind and my spirit on the strength I can find only in the comfort of His arms.

After an excruciating night of no sleep (though I admit a painless night, and for that I am most thankful), I was rewarded by a short visit from Deric. They only allowed him five minutes, after which Mrs. Milligan and Audra were let in for a short visit. Unfortunately, during this time the nurses decided I should try to sit up. My intolerance of the morphine was made clear upon my movement. The immediate nausea was overwhelming. Mrs. Milligan informed me Kim was waiting to see me, though they would not allow her to come in immediately. Deric was told that they needed to remove the IV from my neck, which was the way I was receiving the morphine. Kim would then be allowed to come in to see me.

What seemed like hours (and probably was) passed, the IV was eventually removed, and I was able to rest a little as soon as the morphine ceased; however, Kim never came and I was as anxious as I have ever felt. I assumed she had left, but she and Deric had actually been told, over and over, that she was not allowed to come in until the nurse came and said it was OK. The nurse never came. Her name was Brittany. Brittany came to check on me only once that I recall during the long period when I did not see Deric or the rest of my family. She told me it was time to wash up, and she apparently placed a wet washcloth, soap, a toothbrush, and toothpaste on the table near my bed.

However, the morphine had not yet been removed, and I was completely disoriented. I must not have been opening my eyes, because I remember thinking desperately that I could not find the things I needed to wash my face and brush my teeth. The sudden realization that I was unable to even complete this basic personal need was intensely frightening, and I immediately started to cry. This seemed to get Brittany's attention. She came immediately and reprimanded me for making so much noise—there were, after all, people here recovering from major surgery! She then asked, with what I remember as great frustration in her voice, why I had not yet washed my face and brushed my teeth. Now, in all fairness, I admit that my memories are fuzzy and the morphine was making me more than a little loopy. I may be remembering the details as darker than they actually were, but my feelings of fear and anxiety were intense and quite real.

Soon after my ordeal with Brittany, Kim appeared. Brittany had never gone to get my sister, who had been waiting with Deric for hours, but Kim finally took it upon herself to get to me. Despite Brittany's occasional verbal attacks (bringing Kim to tears more than once), Kim sat holding my hand until they were able to remove me from the recovery room. She said nothing to me, which was a gift, because I had little energy to chat. The comfort of her presence and her hand pressed around mine gave me the peace I needed to finally rest. I was also comforted by three small pictures, one of each of my children, that Deric had thoughtfully taped to the guardrail of my hospital bed before I awoke from the initial anesthetic. Thankfully, as I was moved from one unit to another throughout my stay

in the hospital, I was never removed from this bed, and my pictures were always with me.

Within a few hours, I was removed from the recovery room and brought to a semi-private room where I would remain the next five days in the hospital. I remember Brittany's relief at my leaving (I would be one less patient to care for), and I even remember the comment of the man wheeling me from my space in the recovery room, who observed, "Wow, she isn't very nice to you, is she?" His observation validated my frustration, but I was also now well aware of the impossible job of an overworked nurse whose patients are desperately in need of attention and care.

Praise God!! Once out of recovery, Deric was allowed to stay with me until 8:00 p.m., at which time he moved to a short, hard couch in the visitors' lounge down the hall. I knew that if I needed him, I could get to him, dragging all manner of tubes behind me. For five days he did not leave the hospital and rarely left my side. There was such comfort in knowing that he was near. My hero.

The second day out of recovery I awoke feeling like a million bucks. I immediately informed the nurses that I would need no more narcotics, and I requested only Advil for the pain. This is not so bad! On day three, however, I awoke crying. Wow, the pain and the soreness were shocking! Though I did not return to narcotics, I did allow heavier painkillers to help me through the next few days. What a blessing.

Once the pain was under control, I remember my days in the hospital fondly. I spent precious time, just me and Deric, still recovering from the shock that I was

recovering from a liver tumor we did not know existed just one week before. Kim would come to visit, which is always fun; but what I remember most is the great amount of time spent alone with my dad. He had been busy during my earlier childhood, running a family juice company with my grandfather. The company was sold to Campbell Soup and reacquired by my father and grandfather just a couple of years before my surgery. He had been absorbed with re-establishing Juice Bowl the past couple of years; I was shocked when he arrived two days after the finding of the tumor, planning to stay more than a week. Despite my dad's recently realized but intense fear of heights, he drove day after day over mountains and cliff roads to visit me by himself in my hospital room. I treasured this time greatly.

When my father was there, Deric was able to take a break for a meal or to run home for a shower and three baby hugs and kisses. However, it was clear to me, though I did not understand why, that Deric did not wish to ever leave me, most especially when Dr. Facciuto might be by. It was during one of these quick trips home, leaving me in the care of my father, that the doctor made an unexpected round to my room.

For some unknown reason, the doctor decided that he would share with me during this visit, while Deric was away, that the tumor was malignant. I was shocked, to say the least. I felt as though the wind had been knocked out of me, and I immediately felt hot tears running down my face. I wish I were one of those gifted people who can speak through their tears, but my tears bind me to silence, and often make me feel foolish. This was one of

those times. I wanted to show strength and faith in this life-changing moment, and all I felt was weak and broken. I was fearful that Deric was not there, but I was immeasurably thankful for the presence of my dad. Who better to have than your father as your life seems irrevocably different and desperately frightening? He held me, he comforted me, and then he knew to call Deric without me even having to ask.

Deric was in the car headed home for a shower. He immediately turned back, and by the time he arrived in the hospital room, I was calm and no longer afraid. Dr. Facciuto had told me that if a person was to have liver cancer, this was the best type of cancer to have. It was slow growing, and he had removed all that was there. He assured me that the cancer was gone and that I was cured. Cured before I even knew I had cancer. So really, my situation was no different that it had been the hour before. The tumor was gone and I was cancer free. I am not sure Deric has ever convinced himself that his decision not to tell me immediately about the cancer was the right one, but I have always loved that while he hated to keep something from me, he was willing to do whatever it took to care for me in the best possible way.

I was also touched by something Deric shared with me that had happened while I was in the recovery room. As he and my dad were walking to the cafeteria together to get something to eat, they ran into two friends of Deric's from work who had been performing Taps for a veteran's funeral at the cemetery nearby and had spontaneously come to the hospital to check on me and Deric. Although it was not a good time to see me, one of Deric's

friends asked if they could pray for me. So powerful to me is the image of these four men, including my father, circling together and praying for me in the lobby of Westchester Hospital. I loved that.

On day five the drainage tube was removed, my final IV was removed, half of the forty-four staples were removed, and I was released. I was free! Free from tubes, free from doctors, and free from the hospital. I couldn't wait to get home to Ashlea, Luke, and Rebecca. My mom had brought them for a short time to the visitor's lounge a couple days before, but I was itching to get home where I could snuggle, read, and giggle with them again.

The ride home was a bit bumpy (though Deric drove extremely carefully), but I was rewarded by two precious children running through the back yard to greet me. My excitement to see them immediately turned to fear as I held my incredibly sore abdomen and watched them barreling towards me with no understanding of my pain. Deric, of course, stepped between me and them, scooped them both up, and brought them to me to lean over and give me gentle loving. He explained to them my pain and my limitations for the next six weeks. I could not hold the baby (my greatest struggle), I could lift nothing, I could not drive, and I needed lots of rest. Ashlea and Luke promised to be careful and to help me whenever possible, and little baby Rebecca smiled a smile I was sure was more medicinal than anything I had received in the hospital.

I was heartbroken that our precious time of nursing was cut short and that I would not be able to lift Rebecca for what felt like an eternity, but I was overcome with

CONSIDER IT PURE JOY

thankfulness that the cancer had been found and removed,
allowing me a full lifetime with my family.

CHAPTER 3

My “Picture Perfect” Life Before Thirty

*Now this is what the LORD says, . . .
“I have called my children by name,
and you are mine.”*

ISAIAH 43:1

My life had been an amazingly happy one. The memories I hold of my first thirty years are of a fairy-tale childhood and young adulthood. I was raised in the quickly-growing central Florida town of Lakeland, where I lived with my fun-loving identical twin sister, Kimberly Anna (as I called her, though her given name was Kimberly Anne), and two parents who seemed to adore me as much as I adored them.

My father worked long, hard hours at the family-owned juice company, Juice Bowl, and my mother returned to work for the school system when my sister and I were five months old. Yet, despite their strong

involvement in their careers, never once did I feel that we, as their children, were not their top priority. Never once did I question their unconditional love for me. And there was not a day that I was not warmed by the love they felt for each other. Our house was a playful one, with my dad frequently bestowing my mom with “love taps” on the rear end and always throwing us girls high in the air. Our time together was precious, leaving lasting memories of love and togetherness. I always hoped for such a relationship with my future husband, and God did not disappoint me.

Also part of our close-knit family over the years was our Springer Spaniel, Ichi, our small Poodle mix, Pumpkin, and two stray cats, Shoofy and Cinnamon. Though I was brought home from the hospital to a house in a smaller neighborhood in town, my memories do not begin until our second home, on Lake Bentley Court.

Kim and I had our own separate rooms, though we snuck into each other’s room to sleep until we were well over eight, and my parents enjoyed the privacy of the master bedroom on the other side of the rather small house. I most remember my parents putting a little telephone in both my room and Kim’s room, which were connected by a wire that ran through the short hall separating our rooms. These telephones were good only for us girls to talk to each other, but we loved it!

My favorite memories of that house, however, occurred outside the back sliding glass door. Behind the house was a small creek that led to Lake Bentley, and we were especially privileged to have a pool. Oh, how I loved that pool. My mother taught us to swim before I have any

memory of fearing the water, and as a Florida girl, all I ever wanted to do was swim.

As preschoolers, Kim and I rode our tricycles around the pool every day, until we caught the northwest corner of the pool with our third wheel and flopped over into the water. This may sound frightening to many parents, but this was simply our routine. My father returned nightly from his demanding job, changed into his bathing suit, and retrieved two tricycles from the bottom of the pool. And the next morning was a new day.

As we grew older, the bicycles were no longer allowed on the pool deck, but I still spent most of my time there. As my sister became interested in other things, I still just wanted to swim. My favorite time to swim in the pool was when a Florida hurricane was forecast. The winds gusted, the trees swayed, the sky was dark, and best of all, my parents threw all the pool furniture into the pool to keep it from blowing around the pool deck. What fun I had pretending I was a mermaid in my watery home, complete with living room furniture!

We also often played in the creek, where we searched for fish or played imaginary games with our beloved neighbors. And as we grew older, we also enjoyed the lake with an old yellow paddleboat and, eventually, a jet-ski . . . wheeee!

Music had become an important part of my life by the fifth grade, though I had already played the piano for many years. I had enjoyed the piano, but it had not interested me as much as, say, swimming or reading. But in the fifth grade, our class was given the opportunity to take string lessons. As the instructor presented the four

string instruments, most students picked the violin, which was why I did not. The cello had a beautiful sound, but I couldn't imagine lugging it on and off the bus each day. The string bass, obviously, was dismissed in my thinking for similar reasons, only bigger. In fact, I think everyone in my class dismissed that one.

Finally, the viola was presented. Everyone else in the class had already settled on the instrument they planned to play (though only five of us actually continued to play into the sixth grade). I was struck by the deeper sound of the viola, combined with the posture of the violinist, and then Mr. Yoho sealed the deal for me. He said, "Very few people play the viola. If you play it fairly well, it could take you through college on a music scholarship." That immediately became my plan, and Mr. Yoho's promise was realized when I received a partial music scholarship to my top choice school, Davidson College in North Carolina, where I spent three and a half enlightening years.

I have little to say about my high school years, though I enjoyed them very much. They were filled with family, music, and classes, and much of it has become a blur of concerts and music competitions.

As Kim and I grew older, we grew more and more different. Perhaps it was an intentional attempt to become individuals, instead of being one part of the constant reference to "the twins." Or perhaps we were just growing into the women God intended us to become. Kim was the popular and social one, while I was quietly attempting to master the viola. We were as different as night and day, but she remained my best friend throughout. What a blessing to have your best friend just across the hall as you

CONSIDER IT PURE JOY

struggle through the awkwardness of growing through adolescence to young adulthood.

CHAPTER 4

My Best Friend

*And now these three remain: faith, hope and
love.*

But the greatest of these is love.

1 CORINTHIANS 13:13

During the summer before my senior year of high school, I had a minor operation on my jaw (scar tissue had built up due to constant pressure from excessive viola playing). A friend came to check on me and brought a friend of his, a freshman at Northwestern University who had graduated from Lakeland High School the year before, where I had known him only as an acquaintance. But I certainly knew him by reputation, as an amazing trumpet player, the best to ever graduate from Lakeland, or possibly any Florida school.

His name was Deric Milligan, and he was stunningly handsome. He also played the trumpet like . . . well, I just can't do it justice on paper. Suffice it to say that when he

played his horn, my knees grew weak. I was floored when he called and asked me out on a date, and I have been smitten ever since. He is my best friend and has been my husband for more than eleven years.

Deric did much more for me than just become the greatest earthly gift God has given me. He was the one who introduced me to what a real relationship with God could look like. I had grown up singing in our church choir and attending church on occasion, and I would have told you that I was a Christian and that I believed in God, but I had no idea what it meant to truly love God, to serve Him in everything you do, and to seek His will for my life. My life had been so blessed thus far that I held a belief that though He must exist, I didn't need Him. I was obviously doing all right on my own. I failed to realize that all the blessings in my life were from Him; they had nothing to do with my own strength or accomplishments, and without God they meant absolutely nothing. I had no idea what peace and joy that relationship could bring. Deric was the one God used to bring me to Him. I love that.

* * *

Leaving for college meant leaving my sister, but at Davidson I was blessed with a special group of fun-loving roommates, with whom I giggled through every night and discussed every topic from calculus to world hunger. I also had another Spirit-filled group of friends I met through a national campus organization called Inter Varsity Christian Fellowship, many of whom touched my soul during those years. I was a "baby Christian" thirsting for answers, and our late night theology debates and discussions (often

over a game of spades) helped solidify the foundation of my spiritual walk. My beloved friends are scattered all over the country now, and though I speak with most of them rarely, I miss them dearly. The imprints they have left on my life are eternal.

I was sure that during my time at Davidson Deric would meet some cute Northwestern girl, but as it turned out he remained patient enough to wait for me to finish college even after he left Northwestern. He spent the two years between his graduation and mine working as a high school band director in Mulberry, Florida. We often visited each other, and phone calls were frequent and expensive, but we always seemed to have much to share. Though I saw him rarely during my Davidson years, he shares the majority of my memories from that time.

* * *

After completing my Bachelor's degree in Comparative Religion at Davidson a semester early, I went straight to Florida State University to begin my Master's Degree in Orientation and Mobility for the Blind. My plan was to finish the course work before the coming fall, when my soon-to-be brand new handsome husband would begin his Master's Degree in Trumpet Performance at the University of Michigan.

CHAPTER 5

Training Little People

*Train a child in the way he should go,
And when he is old he will not turn from it.*

P R O V E R B S 22 : 6

After a fun week at the beach with our friends and the perfect, fairy-tale summer wedding, Deric left his bachelorhood apartment and job as the band director of Mulberry High School. He came to Tallahassee for the summer as I completed my course work, and we then quickly moved to a sight unseen (tiny!) apartment in Farmington Hills, Michigan. We chose that apartment because it was approximately half way between the University of Michigan and Rochester Hills, the location of Leader Dogs for the Blind, my employer once my internship for my Master's degree was complete.

Though the apartment was tiny, I loved it there. I had my dream job training dog guides, and I came home to my amazing husband every night. I most remember

the frequent evenings when I pulled a burned creation of some sort out of the oven. These failures always won me a warm hug and dinner out.

Most weekends were spent attending Deric's performances in Ann Arbor or with the Adrian Symphony, where Deric had won an audition for the town's local orchestra. Deric was proving himself an impressive performer in a world of many strong performers. He was even offered a job touring Europe with a Broadway show. Though he turned down the offer to allow me to complete my apprenticeship at Leader Dogs, it was exciting for him to have the opportunity. His talents gave us so many wonderful opportunities for adventure and fun.

It was while we were still living in this tiny apartment that I fell in love with a little black lab in my "string" of dogs at work. She was one of my best workers, and though I would miss her (as I did many others), I was excited about the freedom and opportunities she could give one of the amazing people who came to Leader Dogs for a dog guide. However, we quickly noticed that Jenna was unwilling to work for her new handler unless I was there to repeat the command. When the quiet woman from Texas gave Jenna a command of, for example, "Jenna, forward," or "Jenna, come," she remained completely still, as if she did not hear, staring only at me. Only when I repeated the command did the little lab obey.

After a week of praying that time would allow the dog to attach to the new handler, we, as trainers, agreed that either I would have to return with the student to Texas to forever repeat commands, or more realistically, the dog would have to be taken from the student and rejected

from the training program. Now, we were careful not to call the dogs removed from the program “rejects.” After all, we did not want to affect the dogs’ fragile self-esteem. Instead, these dogs were referred to as “career change” dogs, and Jenna’s new career was to accompany me home and be my closest buddy for years and years to come.

At Leader Dogs, I was blessed with several mentors who taught me more than I ever realized I needed to know. I will forever be a better trainer and instructor due to the patience and wisdom of senior trainers at Leader Dogs. I was so in love with the work of training dogs and instructing students who were visually impaired that I was sure this was the work for which God had created me. Then I discovered I was pregnant. As you can imagine, my world was about to change drastically

My training schedule at Leader Dogs involved four months of training my “string” of ten dogs, followed by twenty-eight days of living in the dormitory with the students who would be instructed on how to use the dogs. I completed my last class one month before Ashlea was born. I vividly remember my joy mixed with sobs, knowing I would soon hold my first child and realizing that it would be many years before I could return to full-time training.

Ashlea was five days late, but worth the wait. She was the perfect baby, despite her inability to understand that daytime was for crying and nighttime was for sleeping. Her birth was a breeze compared to that of her brother, Luke, the largest of our children, born two years later at 9.8 pounds. Luke was the one child, of course, whom I chose to birth without any medication to dull the pain.

Luke's journey, however, allowed for Rebecca to slide out twenty months later without even one push. Easy.

Ashlea was brought home to our house in Rochester Hills, just a few blocks from Leader Dogs for the Blind. Luke and Rebecca, however, were both born at Keller Army Hospital. When Ashlea was just seven months old, Deric won an audition for the United States Military Academy Band at West Point. It was a special Army band, meaning he would be admitted into the army at a higher rank and would have a permanent assignment as a musician in the professional band at West Point. After a nine-week required time for Deric at Boot Camp (which turned into ten very long weeks), we moved into a neat little town along the Hudson River, surrounded by mountains. Cornwall-on-Hudson, New York, became the home where two of our three children would be born and where many memories would be made.

So by the age of twenty-nine, I was no longer training dogs. I was now training little people, which I found significantly more challenging, though the rewards were far greater and the principles were similar—consistency combined with unconditional love. Oh, I know it is not that easy, but these are most definitely vital aspects of both dog training and child rearing; wouldn't you moms and dads agree? A friend confirmed my belief when she informed me that Ruth Graham was reported to have said that the most important book any new parent should have is *The Art of Raising a Puppy* by the Monks of New Skete, a book I have always and will always have on my shelf.

When Ashlea turned three, I realized it was time to find a preschool. After attending several open houses, I

concluded that the preschools were doing nothing I was not capable of doing at home myself, and frankly, I just wasn't ready to be separated three hours several days a week from my oldest child. Deric and I decided that we would continue to look for another program through the year, and we would wait to enroll her until four-year-old preschool.

After another year, I was no closer to being ready to send her to school, so I instead joined forces with three other moms to establish an informal preschool co-op. We each found a curriculum to use in our work with our preschooler through the week, and on Fridays we rotated between our homes, where the mother of the house was responsible that week for the learning activities that fit in with our previously established unit studies. In the fall, we completed a unit study on apples; in winter we completed a unit study on snow, etc. We also scheduled one field trip a month, visiting places such as apple farms, a honey farm, The Crayola Factory, a local aquarium, and various children's museums. I had such great fun, both with the group of home schooled preschool children and with one-on-one learning activities with Ashlea, that I began to believe God wished us to home school Ashlea for kindergarten. I had never even remotely considered the possibility, and in the end God left me little choice. I could not help but ask God, "Why?" I finally went to Deric, partly in hopes that he might be my reason for having to forfeit the idea. The conversation went something like this.

"Deric, I think God is leading me to home school the children."

Pause. "Well, I suppose we should go for it then."

What?! Now what was I going to do? I suppose I was going to home school, which was clearly what I should do, despite continued discouragement from some family and friends. Please do not misunderstand. This is certainly not something God has forced me into unwillingly. I love it! And as great struggles were soon to enter our lives, also came God's loving response to my question of not long ago. "Kristen, THIS is why."

God was constantly present during those early stages of my life, gently molding me into the person I became by age twenty-nine. As I look back, I clearly see His hand guiding me, but at the time I thought I was moving of my own volition. Soon my lessons would become stronger and more painful, but the molding of my spirit would be dramatically deeper and quicker than the lessons of those relatively easy years.

CHAPTER 6

Welcome Home!

*My child, give Me your heart,
and let your eyes observe my ways.*

P R O V E R B S 23 : 26

For a short period after the surgery, I proudly handled our new burdens independently of God. I dutifully thanked Him for the success of the surgery and for the blessings being showered on us by dear family and friends. I was never left alone for long, and never when there was any possibility that a child might need to be lifted.

Deric's co-workers covered his responsibilities often, allowing him to be home caring for me and the children. We received meals from friends, acquaintances, and even people we had never met before for the entire six weeks I was recovering. Friends made the most beautiful Easter baskets for the children to enjoy, and it was one less project I needed to worry about. What a thoughtful blessing. Another friend came at least once a week to take my two

older children on some sort of educational field trip, and another referred to as the “laundry angel” came twice a week to take my dirty laundry, returning it the following day washed and folded, gifting me additionally with her conversation, support, and encouragement. Wow! What a glorious vacation I was having!

Despite my awareness of how blessed we were, I was struggling with pain and anxiety about my ability to return to my regular duties in six short weeks. I did not, however, invite God to be more involved in this time of struggle. I believed I could and should handle these challenges with independence and strength. It never occurred to me that God would so desperately want to carry me through this time.

After birthing three children, I felt that liver surgery should be a piece of cake, and when gifted with so much support, it was in fact “doable.” It was not until a week after the surgery that I truly began to struggle. I was just getting my appetite back, and I soon realized that all food that entered my body, whether a couple bites of apple-sauce or a few ice chips, was soon pushed back up. The violent vomiting caused great pain and concern as my stomach muscles contracted against the incisions trying to heal down from my chest and across my abdomen. Each day that I would dare to eat something, I would sit waiting until early afternoon, when I would begin to feel nauseous. The nausea would continue to worsen until sometime between late evening and the middle of the night, when I would throw up everything I had tried to eat that day. I began to look forward to the vomiting, as the relief after emptying my stomach was immediate.

The day after the vomiting began, I returned to Westchester for my surgeon to remove the twenty-two remaining staples from my abdomen. Deric and I had reported the vomiting the previous day, and although he seemed somewhat concerned, Dr. Facciuto suggested it was probably just a bug or minor food poisoning. We returned home expecting to not have to deal with the vomiting again. However, two hours later, I was ridding my body of the snack I had eaten that afternoon, the only food I had eaten that day. We waited for several days before calling the surgeon. He called in a prescription, thinking this would help the situation. It did not. The doctor sent us to Keller Army Hospital at West Point for two liters of IV saline, as I had not kept down even water for several days.

By the following week, Dr. Facciuto asked that I return to Westchester to be admitted. It had become necessary to insert a feeding tube in my nose, and the doctor was hoping that an endoscopy would show the doctors the cause of my difficulties, allowing a diagnosis and a cure.

By this time, I was weak and hungry, and one night when I got up from my chair, I passed out, presumably from the lack of nutrients. I looked forward to the procedure that should allow the doctors to solve my problem.

An endoscopy is performed by a small camera on the end of a tube that is threaded through a larger tube into one's stomach. It sounds unpleasant, yes, but I was told that I would be asleep, and Deric was told, "If the procedure takes more than five minutes, it took too long." I remembered how powerful the anesthesia from my

surgery had been, and I felt sure that I would remember nothing of this comparatively minor test. I was wrong.

For reasons I still do not understand, the anesthesia did not work for me. It made me groggy enough that the gastrointestinal doctor felt he was able to insert a tube down my throat. I remember the nurse repeatedly saying to the doctor (as I tapped her leg, unable to speak due to the tube pressing against my vocal cords and filling my airway), "I don't think she is asleep." The doctor's response was always that it should take only another minute. Unfortunately, a test that should take "no longer than five minutes" took more than an hour and a half. Apparently my stomach is J-shaped. Not a problem unless you are trying to locate with a tube and a camera the area where the stomach empties into the large intestine.

Deric sat outside the procedure room, anxious that it was taking much longer than anticipated. Little did he know that I was also conscious as the doctor repeatedly removed and reinserted the tube down my esophagus and into my stomach. It was awful, but I was encouraged once it was over that the doctors would now know how to cease the vomiting and I could finally eat again.

The doctors decided that I had a complication called gastroparesis, a paralysis of the stomach probably caused by nicking a nerve during the surgery, and they were not sure it would correct itself. There was nothing they could do. I remained in the hospital for four days, during which time they fed me liquid food through the tube in my nose, which bypassed my stomach and emptied instead directly into my large intestine. The feeding tube rubbed against the back of my throat with every breath, and fre-

quent spritzes of Chloraseptic (brought by Deric from a local drug store) did little to numb my throat or lessen the intense irritation.

On the fourth day, my dear friend who had been staying with my children during this second stay in the hospital, came for a visit and brought baby Rebecca with her. It occurred to me that time with my children might do more for my recovery than any additional time in the hospital. The doctors admitted that they were unable to heal my stomach, and although my surgeon had hoped I would stay at least another day for additional food through the feeding tube, he relented when I begged to be released. He looked into the possibility of me going home with the feeding tube in place, but my insurance was unwilling to cover it. Another blessing.

My friend drove me home and had to leave almost immediately, as she needed to return to her own family in Virginia, more than five hours from New York. She left my home sobbing, feeling that my situation had not yet been resolved. She had stayed with my children while Deric stayed with me in the hospital, and my stay there seemed fruitless.

That night after the children were asleep, Deric left to pick up his sister at the airport. She would be staying with us during her spring break from teaching elementary school music. While Deric was gone, I decided to research gastroparesis myself through the Internet. What I found was shocking and greatly disturbing. My research confirmed that the Vagus Nerve had most likely been nicked during surgery. The greatest majority of cases seemed to occur after gall bladder surgery, which had in fact been

removed with the liver. However, little to nothing was known about possible ways to reverse the damage. Some cases lasted a short time, others lasted years with no improvement, and still others appeared to disappear only to reoccur later. A feeding tube in the nose was only a temporary solution, often being replaced by what was referred to as a "J-tube," a plastic canal surgically implanted in one's side allowing liquid food to be poured directly into the base of the stomach. I was most disheartened by a site called "gastroparesis friends." This was an Internet support group, which functioned primarily through a chat room. I was not required to "join" the group or to participate; I was allowed to simply read what others with my condition had written. What struck me most about almost all the entries was the bitterness of the writers. Certainly, I could understand their frustration and anxiety over this horrific condition, but because my experience had thus far been a short one, I could not relate to the defeat echoing repeatedly through the computer screen. One writer referred to food as "the enemy," and to holidays centered around meals, such as Thanksgiving, "torture." A part of me was overcome with empathy for these people, but a greater part of me was terrified to become one of them. I was shocked to read how long many of these people had suffered with gastroparesis . . . several months, two years, five years, twelve years. I realized that night that this was not a simple post-surgical complication that would remedy itself, and my research confirmed that there was nothing the medical world could do for me.

My eyes filled with tears as my heart filled with fear. How could I care for my children? How could I support my husband? How could I ever train guide dogs again? How could I even get out of bed and take a shower???

I was exhausted, confused, and afraid that I may soon need another feeding tube or a J-tube surgically implanted in my side. It suddenly occurred to me that I just could not do it. I could not function in my life if this condition continued. I needed help. I turned to the only One I knew who could help me. I walked to my bed and I knelt on my knees. Though I pray often and in many different places and postures, I rarely kneel. Perhaps this is part of my problem? From my knees, I prayed a prayer of complete desperation. I admitted that I had tried to carry my burdens independently, and I prayed for forgiveness. I prayed from the depths of my soul . . . I could no longer do this alone. I prayed that if this was what God wanted for my life, I would live it to the best of my ability, but I could not care for my family in the midst of this condition without His help.

“Lord, I have no choice but to give my fears over to You. I can no longer do it without You.”

For me, the importance of this prayer came second only to my prayer for salvation, almost fifteen years before. I felt God lovingly hold me as I struggled against Him, and I am sure I heard a gentle smile in His voice as He responded, “Kristen, trust Me.”

The next morning began the recovery of my stomach. I could not eat much, but I kept down what I did eat. In fact, I have not vomited since the night I prayed that prayer. In a matter of months I no longer had difficulty

KRISTEN MILLIGAN

with eating, and my liver remained “clear” of the cancer. I knew that by placing my faith and trust in God, He had healed me. But our times of struggle were not over. God had many more gifts to give me.

CHAPTER 7

Goodbye, Daddy

*My health may fail, and my spirit may grow
weak,
but God remains the strength of my heart; he is
mine forever.*

P S A L M 73 : 26

As I worked each day to regain the life I enjoyed before my surgery, I was blessed by my father's unceasing care and concern. Michael Grady worked hard at whatever his chosen profession at any given time, spending long hours and offering complete dedication. Often he was away or remained in the office for long hours while I was growing up, but not once did I question his priorities. He adored my mother, and would give everything he had worked for in a heartbeat if it would benefit my sister or me in any way. This was no different as I recovered from liver surgery. Every afternoon, I would receive a call from my dad, "How did you eat today?" As my difficulties with

my stomach diminished, my heart swelled with the love shown through those daily phone calls. I loved it.

My mom reported that after returning from the week spent at my hospital bedside, my dad began attending church alone early each Sunday morning. Although my dad attended church occasionally while I was growing up and had even been involved in church leadership, he had adamantly refused to attend church with me for several years. I am not sure what caused this determined rejection of organized religion, but it was undeniable. You can understand my shock at hearing that he was now attending church regularly, without even the objective of placating a nagging daughter. During one of our daily phone conversations, I questioned my dad on his new Sunday morning commitment. Though he clearly did not wish to discuss it in detail, he thoughtfully replied, "I am getting my priorities in order."

Just five months after my surgery, on August 7, 2003, I awoke at 6:55 a.m. in Washington, D.C., to the whispers of my dear friend who I was visiting there, "Kristen, your sister is on the phone." Not good. My father's organs were failing. He died as I was en route home, flying with my little Rebecca (one week shy of her first birthday), while our friends kept Ashlea and Luke until Deric was able to get there the following day.

I had just left Lakeland after an enjoyable month with my family while Deric was touring with the band. My father had gone into the hospital for a simple outpatient procedure, a procedure that had taken less than fifteen minutes. He passed away thirty-six hours later from a

massive infection spreading like wildfire through his otherwise healthy and strong fifty-six-year-old body.

Although my faith offered a peace through the hope of my seeing my dad again, his unexpected absence left my entire family with a painful void and in a state of shock. He had reached the fulfillment of his days, and I was thankful for the spiritual growth that God had allowed my dad in just the few short months between my surgery and his death. Christ offered me hope that my dad was part of my future, not only part of my past. But I missed him, and I was saddened to watch my mom struggle to learn to live without her husband and life partner.

I was amazed by the void left by my father's sudden absence. I wish I had told him just how much those daily phone calls had meant to me. I thought I had so much time to share with him. It was clear why my mother was struggling so greatly, but I was surprised to witness friends and extended family whose lives were dramatically changed by my father's death. There were even those whom my dad had never met, such as a young girl in a far-away country whom he had sponsored for many years. And an employee who was going to lose his home until my dad bought the house and rented it back to him until the man was able to repay his debt. Both of these generous acts were unbeknownst to the rest of our family, including my mother.

I was also surprised by my own intense heartache, and the seemingly unending, catastrophic grief of my sister, who had, since college, lived near my parents and had for the past few years worked daily by my father's side. When my thoughts were rational, it seemed that losing a parent should be a natural occurrence in one's life and

should therefore be relatively easy to face. However, the loss of my father has been without a doubt the most difficult experience of my life thus far. I wonder if that is because my father was so young and his death so sudden and so tragic. Or perhaps it is this painful for the loss of any parent. I felt feelings of abandonment, though I knew my father would not have chosen this time to be separated from his family. This feeling of abandonment is one I fear my own children may someday soon experience.

Shocking the family once again, my grandfather (my dad's father) died a few months later. I believe he died of a broken heart after the loss of my dad. How amazing is the life of just one individual. Many people were deeply saddened by the loss of my father and grandfather. Many lives were drastically changed forever. I did not realize the effect these two great men had on their family, their friends, and their community until after they were gone. What a blessing to have been loved by them.

CHAPTER 8

Refiner's Fire

*So be truly glad! There is wonderful joy ahead,
even though it is necessary for you to endure
many trials for a while. These trials are only to
test your faith, to show that it is strong and pure.
It is being tested as fire tests and purifies gold –
and your faith is far more precious to God than
mere gold. So if your faith remains strong after
being tried by fiery trials, it will bring you much
praise and glory and honor on the day when
Jesus Christ is revealed to the whole world.*

1 P E T E R 1 : 6 - 7

Although the doctors had assured us of their success in my surgery, it was standard procedure for a person with a cancer diagnosis to return for scans every three months for a few years. As much as I disliked the Crystal Light concoctions, I did as I was told, but worried little about cancer in my future. It had been removed from my body,

with safe margins, and was a “non-aggressive” cancer. I was done. I was a “cancer survivor.” Sounds impressive, huh? Not so much.

Fifteen months later, in early October 2004, Dr. Faciuto called (NOTE: the call came the same day as the scan—never a good sign!) to report “spots” which had been noted at the base of my lungs. Spots? Lungs? Huh? I was terribly confused. I had liver cancer—could it then move to the lungs? Could it be that another type of cancer was growing?

The doctor assured me that it was most likely a cold, and we would re-evaluate after my next scan three months later. But I had been quite healthy, experiencing no colds at all that fall season. You must know by now that this was not a satisfactory answer for my husband. Deric’s immediate and thorough research showed that when this cancer metastasizes, it moves like most other cancers, with the flow of the blood. Next stop from the liver? The lungs. We also learned that although fibrolamellar is a slow-growing cancer, it is also a very resilient cancer, often metastasizing and almost impossible to kill. The only known effective treatment was surgery.

Our concern led Deric to make an appointment with the only oncologist covered by our health insurance, a local doctor. We accepted the first available appointment, which was on a day that Deric was unable to miss work. I assured him that I would be fine alone. Deric hand delivered my files a few days before my appointment, encouraging the nurse behind the desk to ensure that the doctor read the file before our appointment. She stated that the doctor was busy but would certainly try, to which Deric’s

reply was stern (I love this), “I would be willing to bet that I know more about this type of cancer than the doctor. Please have him prepare for this appointment.” I love that man.

Two days later, I walked into the doctor’s office, hopeful that this oncologist could answer our questions and ease our concerns. As he walked into the exam room, he began with questions that suggested he had not yet glanced at my case file. He soon excused himself to go to his office to better familiarize himself with my case. After about fifteen minutes, he returned, questioning the existence of any tumors. I explained they were on the lung. He replied that he had not checked there and returned to his office.

When he returned a few minutes later, he began to laugh. “The spots on your lung are so small! As small as the point of my pencil! Why are you concerned about spots so small?” As he continued to laugh, I felt completely foolish. I suppose he had answered my questions; there was obviously nothing about which we needed to concern ourselves. However, is it not understandable for a person who had experienced cancer before to be concerned about a recurrence? As I left the office, the doctor called out to me, “Don’t forget to schedule your follow-up appointment!” Follow-up appointment? You must be joking.

Six weeks passed, during which time the scan results lingered in the back of our minds, but I was fairly confident it was nothing. Until one Friday morning in early October when a surgeon at Keller Hospital contacted me unexpectedly and asked me to come in that morning to talk with him about my recent scan results. Upon meeting

him, I learned that an administrative nurse had taken an interest in my case and had asked this doctor to take a look at my file. He had asked radiology to look at all past scans, which showed the spots had existed as long as ten months before, but had been smaller and were consequently difficult to detect without knowing what to look for and where to look. He also explained that the few spots on the base of the lungs were seen on a scan of the abdomen, where just the tips of the lungs could be seen. No scans had been taken of the lungs themselves. WHAT? Deric and I were able to learn that the lungs were the most likely site of metastases, so how could the lungs not be included in the regular scans? The next logical step was for a scan of the lungs to be completed to see if any other spots existed in the lungs. The scan was scheduled for the following Monday.

The doctor from Keller Army Hospital called just an hour after the completion of the lung scan (uh-oh). His first words to me were, "This is not good." My lungs were riddled with small spots, and two larger tumors were also found, about three centimeters in size, one on the right lung and one on the heart. The doctor expressed his very strong opinion that this type of cancer was not treatable and very few survived past the five year marker. He told me that the oncologists may try to treat me with a strong chemotherapy that would undoubtedly "knock me on my a--," but that it was unlikely to make a difference in my survival. I was going to need to see an oncologist, and the flurry began.

Deric spoke to oncologists and/or their assistants all over the country. The fibrolamellar variant of hepato-

cellular carcinoma is extremely rare, and we found that many liver oncologists had never even seen a case. Deric spoke to doctors at John Hopkins Cancer Center, Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center (MSKCC), Mayo Clinic of Minnesota, the Houston Cancer Center, and several others. He asked each how many cases of this type of cancer they had handled and what treatment plans they might offer.

Deric was most impressed with a young doctor at Sloan Kettering named Dr. Gaston Abou-Alfa. Dr. Abou-Alfa had conducted an experimental treatment for fifty patients with FHC (Fibromalellar Hepatocellular Carcinoma). Deric was also impressed that Dr. Abou-Alfa was willing to talk with him personally about my situation and what he might be able to do for me. His credentials were impressive, his knowledge clear, and his confidence high. Deric liked him immediately.

Then came the problem of our military insurance covering our transfer to an out-of-network doctor. They stated that they would prefer me to again see the local oncologist (not going to happen), and there was “no way” that we would be allowed to even consult with a doctor from Sloan Kettering. But Deric had made up his mind. We prayed, we slept, and the next morning we received a call that our request had been approved. THANK YOU, GOD! We were given unlimited visits for six months, at which time my case would be re-evaluated. Wow. How is it that I am unable to trust more when God consistently takes care of everything?

Two days later we were sitting in Dr. Abou-Alfa’s office, waiting for his prediction for my future. The

doctor rushed in, clearly busy and having squeezed us into his full appointment schedule, but his manner was kind. He settled into a chair and his attitude showed that he was not going to rush away until every question on Deric's lengthy list was answered, and we were completely satisfied and at ease. Despite his care, knowledge, and concern, Dr. Abou-Alfa is not one to offer false hopes. He explained that while this cancer grew slowly relative to other cancers, it is resistant to all known treatments.

Surgery was not an option for two reasons. First, the tiny tumors covering my lungs were impossible to count, much less to remove individually. Second, because the cancer had metastasized from the primary cancer site and was now considered systemic, or stage IV, the cancer was in the bloodstream and would likely grow elsewhere if it was even possible to remove the existing tumors. He offered hope in an experimental treatment currently being offered at Sloan Kettering. Another patient with my diagnosis was experiencing success on this treatment. He defined success as just less than a year of treatment with no growth of the cancer. The treatment was not able to kill the cancer in this other patient, but it had successfully arrested its growth.

No definite decisions were made during that first consultation, as many tests were needed to confirm that this would be our best course of action. The following two or three weeks involved several meetings with Dr. Abou-Alfa, multiple tests, another scan, and a biopsy to confirm that the cancer on my lungs was the same as the cancer removed from my liver. Because the size and location of the liver tumor had necessitated surgery regardless of

whether it was benign or malignant, I had not before experienced a biopsy.

For the procedure I returned to Westchester Medical Center, where my liver had been resected not two years prior and where I soon after returned for the treatment of the paralyzation of my stomach. It was during that second stay at Westchester Medical Center that I had endured the endoscopy fully awake, and it was this procedure that was in my mind while I waited to have the biopsy. I waited in the same room, in the same bed, in which I had waited for my surgery fifteen months before. And although this procedure was minor compared to the liver resection, my anxiety was much greater.

Every moment of every day since the metastases had been discovered, I had feared for the future of my children and my husband. Combined with that ceaseless fear was the frightening memory of the endoscopy not proceeding as it should have, one I feared would be repeated during this procedure. The technicians did not ease my fear, as they explained to Deric and me that the tumor they wished to biopsy was touching both the lung and the heart. As I took each breath, it moved. During each beat of my heart, it moved. It was not an easy target, and they informed us of the risk that my lung might be punctured by the large needle necessary to complete the procedure.

As it turned out, this test was an easy one. A small area on my chest was numbed where they were to insert the needle. I was moved into a CT scan machine to allow the technicians to watch as they inserted the needle. They asked me to hold my breath, and within a few seconds, the procedure was done. No pain, no punctured lungs. They

asked me to remain in the hospital for several hours to watch my lungs, and I was released that night. My sister-in-law, stayed with us the entire day. Her knowledge as a nurse and her gift as an incredibly caring human being were priceless that day. How grateful I was that God had arranged this procedure during a week when she and her husband were visiting. They made the week fun instead of scary.

Once all these tests had been completed, it was finally agreed upon by the doctors that the best course of action, actually the only course of action, was the previously discussed treatment. This treatment was a combination of three intravenous chemotherapy drugs, one experimental drug combined with two FDA approved drugs.

The protocol called for a full day at the Memorial Sloan Kettering outpatient center in NYC, the only location where the treatment could be dispensed. I was to come two out of every three weeks for blood work and begin with a quick appointment with the doctor to determine that I was strong enough to handle the treatment. I would wait an hour or so for the treatment to be ordered and processed in the pharmacy. I would then be led back to the “chemo suite,” where the IV would be inserted into my arm and the first treatment begun. Cisplatin was given first, over an hour long period. Irinotecan (also known as CPT-11) was administered next over a half hour period. I was then given another liter of fluid to flush the kidneys of the poison that had just been pushed into my bloodstream. I then had a three-hour break before returning to the outpatient center for the administration of the final drug, flavoperidol, which was given over a four-hour period.

I usually arrived at the treatment center at 7:15 in the morning in order to leave by 6:00 or 7:00 that evening. Sometimes I was able to leave shortly after five, but some nights I was there until after 9:00. The doctor's description of these days sounded simply awful, but I had yet to learn how God would use them to be some of the most cherished days of my life.

Although we were thankful for a treatment option, Dr. Abou-Alfa insisted that the treatment would eventually fail and the cancer would be terminal. I admit that there were nights during that time when I awoke terrified, considering the very real possibility that my three small children could be raised without a mother and that my husband might unwillingly face the lonely task of single parenthood. And how could my mother survive another loss so soon after the death my father?

For weeks, my heart was literally seized with fear. I had difficulty breathing, I experienced minor chest pains, and I felt perpetually nauseous. During that time I did not pray for healing, I did not pray for answers, I prayed only for peace. One night in my desperate search for peace, I found comfort in the one place I knew I could find it. When I opened my Bible, I discovered Psalm 30:5, "Weeping may continue for a night, but joy comes with the morning" (NIV). I closed my Bible, closed my eyes, and contemplated what I had just read. I was overwhelmed with the comfort brought to me by this inspired verse. In an attempt to read the verse once again, I mistakenly turned to Proverb 3:5, a human mistake with providential blessings. This verse reads, "Trust the LORD with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding." My heart

immediately burst into song. I had not seen this verse for twenty years, but I instantly remembered a beautiful tune I learned in church as a child that accompanied this powerful scripture.

God, through these two verses, brought me great comfort and the beginning of “the peace of God, which transcends all understanding” (PHILIPPIANS 4:7). A peace not only for my more recent fears initiated by the cancer, but all fears I held regarding my children or my family. I have ceased my prior habit of lying awake at night worrying over how to protect my children from circumstances over which I have no control.

I had no earthly reason to feel better, but over the following days and weeks the nausea disappeared, the chest pains stopped, and my breathing improved completely. God had showed me while on my knees almost two years before that I needed to trust Him with my life. He was now asking me to trust Him with theirs. I heard Him again speak gently to me, “Kristen, do you trust me . . . with them?” With the life of my beloved husband, the fragile lives of my children, the shaken life of my mom, and the lives of all those whom I loved most dearly? He told me that it was not my job to care for and protect these people, it was His. And He never fails. He is infinitely loving and infinitely wise, and He is not limited by death. He would never leave them. On Rebecca’s wall is painted Ephesians 3:18, “How wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ!” As promised in both Deuteronomy 31:6 and Hebrews 13:5, He will never fail us, and when translated exactly from the Greek, this verse becomes a triple nega-

tive! “No, I will no not ever leave you nor forsake you.” I love that.

These intense fears for my family initiated an awareness of my time in the Refiner’s Fire. I cannot deny that time in the fire is physically, emotionally, and spiritually painful, but God is faithful! To help you understand the idea behind the Refiner’s Fire, let me share with you a passage by an unknown woman that was shared with me.

Malachi 3:3 “He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver.”

This verse puzzled some women in a Bible study and they wondered what this statement meant about the character and nature of God.

One of the women offered to find out the process of refining silver and get back to the group at their next Bible Study.

That week, the woman called a silversmith and made an appointment to watch him at work. She didn’t mention anything about the reason for her interest beyond her curiosity about the process of refining silver. As she watched the silversmith, he held a piece of silver over the fire and let it heat up. He explained that in refining silver, one needed to hold the silver in the middle of the fire where the flames were hottest as to burn away all the impurities. The woman thought about God holding us in such a hot spot; then she thought again about the verse that says: “He sits as a refiner and purifier of silver.”

She asked the silversmith if it was true that he had to sit there in front of the fire the whole time the

silver was being refined. The man answered that yes, he not only had to sit there holding the silver, but he had to keep his eyes on the silver the entire time it was in the fire. If the silver was left a moment too long in the flames, it would be destroyed.

The woman was silent for a moment.

Then she asked the silversmith, "How do you know when the silver is fully refined?"

He smiled at her and answered, "Oh, that's easy—when I see my image in it."

"THIS IS WHERE I HAVE BEEN!" I thought the moment I read this passage. My God wanted me to be "mature and complete, not lacking anything," so He took me in His loving hands and gently placed me in the Refiner's Fire. "He sits as a refiner and purifier of silver" (MALACHI 3:3 NIV). As a silversmith must place the silver in the middle of the flame where the fire is the hottest to refine the precious metal, so must God allow these trials in my life to refine me. I felt God gently removing the impurities from my life, which eventually brought blessings of great joy and a renewed closeness to my Maker. Like the silversmith, who must never remove his eyes from the fire lest the silver remain too long and be destroyed, I was continuously aware of God's awesome presence, never once taking his eyes off of our suffering family. God assured me repeatedly of His everlasting and unconditional love through gifts and great blessings. If I did not know that God was just and loved us all equally, I would have been convinced during that time in the fire that I, Kristen, was His most favorite child. What miraculous peace and joy this brings in the midst of great struggle!

CONSIDER IT PURE JOY

Remember, please, that God will never allow us to burn in the fire. Furthermore, He will never sacrifice us for the benefit of others. At times I have thought such things as, Perhaps I will be allowed to die, motivating one of my children to grow to be a great scientist who will be driven to find the cure for cancer. This would be worth my sacrifice! Well, the glory is not for me—it is for God. He has told me clearly that He loves me dearly; He would not sacrifice me for one or for multitudes. He does not work that way. Jesus' sacrifice was the only one necessary, and the only sacrifice God will allow. Whatever I am allowed to endure, it is for MY good. If others benefit, that further demonstrates the grace of God, but my suffering is first and foremost not for the benefit of others, but for the benefit of me and my relationship with Him.

There came a time when we needed a break from the fire, and God granted us an amazing time of peace. I am thankful for the pause from the pain, but I long for that closeness I felt to God while there. I am enjoying the peace and joy God has graciously granted us for this season, and I know He is with us now as always, but I know now that God offers us a special sighting of His presence when we are struggling through the fire. He walks there with us. He ensures that we do not feel alone, unloved, punished, or abandoned. What a gracious God we serve! I do believe I will someday return to the Refiner's Fire, and while I do not welcome the trials, I anxiously await His increased attention. While I would with great joy accept divine healing, I would never wish to erase my experience or forfeit the lessons God has gifted to me.

During my time in the fire, God has been disciplining me. The fire is intended to discipline, not to punish. I believe these words are often confused. Discipline is defined by Webster's Dictionary as "training to act in accordance with rules." Discipline means to train or to instruct. The word "disciples" is derived from the word "discipline." Jesus was training the disciples, and now He is training me. Apparently, I have needed much discipline, and I am overwhelmingly grateful for it. How can I choose any response except to worship Him mightily for this opportunity? "No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it" (HEBREWS 12:11 NIV).

Yes, discipline is sometimes painful. You can ask my four-year-old daughter. Have you ever heard a child express gratitude for discipline? Based on my experience with my children, I assume it is quite rare, but I have hope that they grow to someday silently appreciate our efforts as "strict" parents. Others have told me that I have always been a strong disciplinarian for my children. In this way I am like my mother, and when I am told this I do not take offense (although I am sure at times offense was meant). I believe that discipline combined with unconditional love in these younger years is incredibly important for the development of godly character and gentle hearts. God has been an active and available Father to me these past difficult years. He has graciously taken the time to discipline me, so that I may be just slightly more like Him.

And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons:

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“My son, do not make light of the LORD’s discipline,
and do not lose heart when he rebukes you,
because the LORD disciplines those he loves,
and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son.”

Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.

H E B R E W S 12 : 5 - 11

I was asked by a close friend to speak about what God has taught me through my recent trials. Another sweet friend confided in me later that she was touched by my talk as she had also recently found herself in the Refiner’s Fire. She further added with a smile, “Though I never thought to call it the Refiner’s Fire . . . I called it hell.” We shared a good laugh!

At the conclusion of my talk, I was asked to interpret in Sign Language the special music that would be sung. I was not aware of the song her friend had chosen but was greatly surprised and pleased with how God touched my

heart through her choice. She sang a song entitled “Held,” by Christian artist Natalie Grant. The song speaks about the Refiner’s Fire, about the promises God gives us to comfort us and about the abundant blessings God grants during these times of trial. Allow me to share the inspired words I heard for the first time as I prepared my signs.

*Two months is too little.
They let him go.
They had no sudden healing.
To think that providence would
take a child from his mother while she prays
is appalling.*

*Who told us we’d be rescued?
What has changed and why should we be saved from
nightmares?
We’re asking why this happens
to us who have died to live,
it’s unfair.*

*Chorus:
This is what it means to be held.
How it feels when the sacred is torn from your life
and you survive.
This is what it is to be loved
and to know that the promise was
when everything fell we’d be held.*

*This hand is bitterness.
We want to taste it, let the hatred know our sorrows.
The wise hands open slowly to lilies of the valley and
tomorrow.*

CONSIDER IT PURE JOY

(Chorus)

This is what it means to be held.

*How it feels when the sacred is torn from your life
and you survive.*

*This is what it is to be loved
and to know that the promise was
when everything fell we'd be held.*

Bridge:

If hope is born of suffering,

If this is only the beginning.

*Can we not wait for one hour watching for our Sav-
ior?*

(Chorus)

This is what it means to be held.

*How it feels when the sacred is torn from your life
and you survive.*

*This is what it is to be loved
and to know that the promise was
when everything fell we'd be held.*

CHAPTER 9

Consider It Pure Joy

Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

J A M E S 1 : 2 - 4

Pure joy??? It was the Sunday after the heartbreaking loss of my dad that God brought me back to my childhood church to hear a sermon on the above passage. I admit leaving the church with more questions than when I arrived. I considered dear family and friends who had suffered unimaginable loss. How could it be pure joy for a young mother to lose a child? How could it be pure joy for an active woman to lose her ability to walk in a tragic car accident? How could it be pure joy for a woman to lose a husband or a daughter to lose a father prematurely? I

did not at all understand; yet, God was preparing me to experience amazing lessons of trust and faith, and over time this passage would become one of my very favorites, bringing me great peace time and time again.

Though the necessary treatment for the cancer that had invaded my lungs was decided upon in late 2004, I did not start the experimental chemotherapy treatment until February 2005. Our insurance questioned whether it would cover the experimental trial, which began a battle participated in by multiple family and friends. We were told that to receive the treatment would cost approximately \$16,000 every six weeks, for an indefinite period of time. Whew! We certainly were not going to be able to fund this treatment independently. The entire Milligan clan, as well as my sister and some of her friends, began a political campaign to ensure I would receive this treatment.

A close friend from church is a lawyer in the field of health care. To be honest, I had never even realized her area of expertise until discussing our situation concerning the insurance questioning our treatment. This amazingly generous and extremely bright woman was quick to offer her services. She spoke to our doctors, the insurance company, and many others, forming an official appeal to the insurance company's questions regarding this treatment. Without a penny billed, she created a 200-page document to support our claim. Wow. This sweet friend had for many years blessed my life and that of my children with her friendship and tender heart, but how could I ever know that the intellectual gifts given to her by God would also be such a great blessing?

After five weeks, and the involvement of several politicians and a few military generals, most specifically Lt. Gen. Lennox of West Point, my treatment was approved. The commander of the Keller Army Hospital informed Deric that not one bill would go unpaid. He was reported as saying that one way or another, he would find a way to pay our bills. I was greatly touched by his determination to help me, a woman he has yet to meet. Though we struggled through the military bureaucracy, God also opened our eyes to the kind, generous souls who work within military administration.

My chemotherapy treatments began on Deric's thirty-fourth birthday, February 9, 2005. He said that though he hated for me to have to endure the treatments, after all our struggles to be approved for the treatment, it was the best birthday present he had ever received. We were blessed to have my mom now living in New York, and she was gracious enough to keep the three children while Deric and I shared three special days in New York City.

During the first day, I underwent several tests to prepare for the start of chemotherapy. Deric and I enjoyed a delicious meal at a recommended steakhouse and then treated ourselves to a New York Philharmonic concert. The next morning, I returned to Sloan Kettering for my first full day of chemotherapy. Deric never left my side, and though I became a bit nervous as they inserted the IV before beginning the treatment, I was overwhelmed by a peace assuring me of God's presence. The first drug, Irinotecan, given over thirty minutes, seemed unexpectedly easy. I was cheerful as the injection moved towards completion, my only discomfort a bit of lightheadedness.

I smiled at Deric as the nurses removed the empty bag that had held the Irinotecan and replaced it with a small bag of anti-nausea medication required before the initiation of the next chemotherapy drug. This bag was equally uneventful. However, as the nurses initiated the next drug, Cisplatin, I was overwhelmed by an intense nausea. The room began to spin and I feared I would fall out of the chair I was sitting in. I called out for something to throw up in, as I knew I would soon lose control of my stomach. A nurse quickly came with some sort of medicine, which she injected into my IV. I quickly felt better, the episode lasting no more than five minutes, but the fear it had caused led to tears I had held in for the past two days. That extreme nausea was what I had feared about chemotherapy.

The stories one hears about chemotherapy is endless vomiting, among other discomforts and humiliations. It was all coming true, I felt sure. Because this treatment was experimental and because everyone reacts differently, the doctors were unsure of how to prepare me. They told me I may experience nausea, ranging from mild to severe, I may lose my hair, and I may experience other symptoms from a list seemingly miles long. What I did not realize is that many researchers, doctors, and drug companies are working tirelessly to develop chemo drugs that are as effective against the cancer, but with drastically less severe side effects. I would soon find Mark 16:18 (NIV) to be my new mantra. "And when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them."

My grandmother, Margaret Scott Grady, the namesake of my youngest child, passed away from lung cancer

when I was less than two years old. I do not remember her, but I treasure her through the stories told by my father and my grandfather. She fought the cancer for as long as she was able with the chemotherapy drugs of thirty years ago. In one sense I feel closer to her knowing we have experienced similar paths, but I also recognize that the passing of time has softened this experience of fighting cancer. Her experience was endless vomiting with little chance of survival. The chemotherapy I have experienced is manageable, even over extended periods of time, and my chance of extended survival is so much greater.

The remainder of my morning receiving my first chemotherapy treatment was uneventful. Though minor nausea ensued, Deric and I were still able to enjoy our afternoon break before returning for the last chemotherapy drug. This drug, Flavoperidol, was administered over a four-hour period, so I settled in for a nap in my comfy chair while Deric waited for four long hours on the edge of an uncomfortable wooden, upright chair, prepared to offer anything that might make my experience more pleasant, not thinking of himself for one moment.

Now might be a good time for me to explain what I have noticed about Deric's experience as the caring husband of a woman fighting what has been labeled as terminal cancer. It was appropriate that Deric sat with me in the Keller Emergency Room as I was told that I had a liver tumor, because he has sat with me through almost every single doctor's appointment since that day. He never left my side as I recovered from liver surgery, first in the hospital for five days and then at home for six weeks. He

never missed an appointment as I waited for scan results and he researched extensively which doctor we would contact if the cancer resurfaced. When metastases were found, he was ready for the next step, and he drove me to NYC repeatedly to meet with the doctor. I never went alone. He fought mightily for the insurance to approve my only treatment option, never once accepting their rejection. And when my chemotherapy treatment began, he did not miss a treatment until I insisted I was comfortable and prepared to get the treatment without him. Even then, when the treatments became more difficult he drove to the city every Wednesday night to carry me home. He stayed awake with me the nights I was sick, and he took over all my duties of childcare and household chores as I recovered from my treatment each week. He did all this while doing his best at his job, and he never once complained about the new life we lived together. He cared for me, he prayed for me, and he always assured me that he would prefer to live this way than to live without me. Through all of this, I realized that he was under extreme pressure from the world. Our well meaning and beloved family and friends would never cease to understand when I was having a rough week or a tired day, but I noticed Deric was rarely allowed this grace. According to the customs of the world, he was to be strong for me. What people did not realize is that my life was a cake walk compared to his. His shoulders were heavy laden with extra work as he prepared mentally for the possibility of raising three children alone. But he never seemed to mind. He is my strength, my inspiration, and my best friend.

By the time our first day of chemotherapy was complete, I felt yucky, but only yucky. I could tell Deric was exhausted, though he never admitted that to me. We returned to our hotel for a sound night of rest. I was surprised to wake with terrible night sweats, and the mild but annoying nausea kept me awake most of the rest of the night. I was fascinated by the burning in my abdomen. It was explained to me that the purpose of the chemotherapy was to attack the rapidly-growing cancer cells, but the drugs are unable to distinguish between those and the rapidly-growing cells of my body, specifically the lining of the stomach and other digestive organs. The discomfort was tolerable, and a little interesting for the moment, but I could see how the disturbing sensation could quickly grow old.

We returned to the hospital the following morning for some required blood tests, and we then began our trek home. I felt like I was recovering from a nasty flu, but I couldn't help but feel strong and proud. We did it! We had survived chemotherapy, and it was not nearly as terrible as I had anticipated.

During the months after chemo began, I realized that the few days after treatment, when I felt physically bad, I would struggle mightily with my thoughts. I suppose I have always believed in spiritual warfare, but I have never before recognized it in my own life. I knew in my mind that God had not and would never desert me, but my thoughts continued to beat me down, Why are you putting yourself through these treatments? You are going to die anyway! God is not here with you! He does not care! He allowed you to suffer with this cancer! He will

take you from your children!" I could barely drag myself out of bed these days, not because of my physical pain but because my struggle against these thoughts of fear and defeat was physically exhausting. I soon realized, through the reading of scripture, that these thoughts could be spiritual warfare. The book of Job shows us that evil can only do what God allows . . . no more! God created Satan and the other fallen angels, and therefore they remain under His control. In Job, Satan was forced to ask permission of God before inflicting each act of despair on the faithful man. I read several texts on how to rebuke Satan and his forces, and sure enough, the thoughts and struggles ceased. I have given this struggle over to God, and He has taken it from me. I once read, when Satan knocks, I only need to answer, "Jesus, will you get that for me?" I love that. Psalm 30:5 reminds us, "Weeping may remain for a night, but joy comes with the morning."

Deric continued to take me to chemotherapy treatments for about six weeks. The greatest problem experienced during that time was that the chemotherapy was lowering my white cell counts enough that my body was no longer able to fight the drugs, and I was therefore not eligible for treatment. Each week as I came into the treatment facility on East 53rd Street, blood was immediately taken by my phlebotomist and soon-to-be friend, Dave, and it was tested to determine if my body was strong enough to handle the treatment. One would think I would rejoice when I was not allowed treatment, but the trip into the city seemed long for nothing, and we feared (as did the doctors) that skipping weeks to rebuild my body would also allow the cancer to rebuild.

The nurses warned me mightily during these weeks when my blood work showed extremely low white cell counts that I was to be extra careful, especially if the children were ill. I was warned that I was extremely susceptible because my body was too weak to fight common illnesses, and for a couple of months, I was extremely careful. However, I soon realized that although the children and Deric suffered occasionally from the usual colds or flu, I had not been ill since before beginning my treatment. Gradually, I stopped worrying about protecting myself during those weeks with low white cell counts, for I understood that God was protecting me. People would laugh at me when I would proclaim, "I can't get sick!" But I could not help but praise my God aloud each night that I rocked my little one to sleep as she fought a nasty flu, knowing I was protected by a most merciful God.

It was after those first six weeks of treatment that I had my first scan and we were rewarded with no growth of the cancer. By that time we were in a routine and I for the most part knew what to expect. I knew that though Deric's supervisors at work had been so generous in making arrangements for him to always accompany me for my treatments, it could not go on indefinitely. We were told that the chemotherapy would continue for as long as the cancer did not grow and my body was able to tolerate the treatment. We knew that we needed to make these treatments part of our regular routine. It was Deric's idea to include the children. I think he knew what a blessed time this would be for both me and the children. As we talked further about it, we decided I could bring one child each week to chemotherapy, while the other two stayed

with my mom. Rebecca was not yet three years old, so we decided it might be a little soon to include her in the rotation. Because the child accompanying me would be alone with me while I received chemotherapy treatments, it was important that I felt sure that the child would listen and obey while I was attached to the IV pole.

The first week I went to the city without Deric, Ashlea accompanied me. I was concerned about how it would work out, but by the end of the day, I was praising God for the blessing of this time alone with my oldest child. It occurred to me that as a home schooling mom I was rarely with just one child, and what a blessing to have this one-on-one time with each of my children. We began our adventure on the train, where Ashlea stared out the window in awe for an hour. We arrived at the clinic at about 7:15 a.m., and after Ashlea finished her special donut bought from the city bakery across the street, we were able to complete some school work while waiting to meet with the doctor, waiting to hear if my cell counts were high enough for treatment, and waiting for my chemotherapy drugs to be ready. Once we were led back to the chemo suite, Ashlea was treated with a movie she had chosen from the library. Each of the chemo suites is private and includes a TV with an attached VCR. Ashlea was in bliss! During the three-hour break we enjoyed lunch, usually with Ashlea's cousin, Audra, who worked just across the street (one more AMAZING blessing). We then set out on some city adventure . . . Central Park playground, Central Park Zoo, horse and carriage rides, the American Museum of Natural History, the Manhattan Children's Museum, the Empire State Building, the New

York Aquarium, Broadway Matinees, and much more! We had so much to choose from and so little time! Thankfully, God gave us eighteen months to complete many of these amazing adventures.

Upon returning to the clinic, I began the drug that was to be administered over a four-hour time period. I was concerned that this would be an incredibly boring time for Ashlea, but she seemed as happy as ever to watch a second movie and snuggle in with me on my lounging chair. Halfway through the movie she was fast asleep, and as I began to feel worse and worse, all I could think about was how joyous I felt to have this time holding my sleeping child after a day I knew I would never forget, and I prayed she would never forget it either.

The next week was Luke's turn. I was encouraged by the fact that Ashlea's visit had not only been a success, but an incredible blessing. However, I feared Luke might be too young, at only four and a half. Yet I believed that to see what was happening each week at chemotherapy was healthier for a child than imagining what the doctors might be doing during my mysterious trips to the city. This thought was confirmed in my mind the following year when Rebecca, who had not yet accompanied me to the city, declared when going in to see the pediatrician for a physical, "I don't want to go see the doctor! Doctors make you sick, and the city makes you sick!" A few months later, as Rebecca's Aunt Kim was recovering from an illness in the hospital in Florida, Rebecca repeatedly asked if we could visit her aunt. In our confusion, she explained, "If she is in the hospital, she must be in the city."

My children watched as I gave blood each morning in the city to test my blood counts to make sure I was strong enough for a chemotherapy treatment. They then watched while the doctor examined me (never requiring me to undress or change), and they watched while the nurses inserted an IV for the chemotherapy to be injected into my bloodstream. They then watched while the bags of drugs dripped into my veins, all the while the color draining from my face. At first they asked many questions, and they quickly made the connections between the drugs and my not feeling well. Soon my activities were uninteresting, and I am sure if you were to ask them, they would tell you that chemotherapy treatments are no big deal.

I met another mother at Sloan Kettering, with children six and twelve years of age. She came for her treatments during school hours, and her children did not even know she had cancer. I respect her opinion and admire her courage, but it is my belief that involving my children completely in my treatment helped them to face the fear that may have been overwhelming if secrets had been kept from them with the intention of easing that fear.

Luke, an active boy with a sweet heart, found the greatest happiness at Sloan Kettering Memorial Hospital. His excitement began each morning as we traveled into the city by train. He disembarked from the first few rides with a smile, but also with bruises on his forehead. He tended to bump his head against the window each time something interesting passed and he tried quickly to thrust his head out a (closed) window to catch another glimpse. Once at the hospital, the doctor encouraged his budding interest in medicine, the nurses gave him unend-

ing attention (and often special treats of homemade chocolate lollipops, yogurt, and hard candy), a movie was guaranteed in the chemotherapy suite, and a donut was guaranteed for breakfast. And in the summers, ice cream was guaranteed from a truck on the side of the road during our chemotherapy break. What could be better than that? Luke's behavior was absolutely angelic when in the city, and he became surprisingly intuitive about how I was feeling. He was aware that by the end of the day I did not feel as well as I did when the day began, and he struggled to reconcile this with the excitement he felt to come to the city. He once told our friend and favorite nurse, Tiffany, "I don't want my mom to feel bad, but I hope she has chemotherapy forever!" I couldn't help but smile. Part of me felt exactly the same way. The idea of full days of chemotherapy for an undetermined period of time initially seemed unbearable, but God turned these days into some of my most cherished memories with my children. Isaiah 61:3 promises "to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair." Thank you, Lord! You have given me beauty and gladness, and I cannot help but praise You!

It was more than a year before Rebecca was allowed to join me during one of my trips to the city. Each week she would ask, with such hope in her eyes, "Is it my turn?" I would always answer that she was not yet old enough. She never had a tantrum, always accepting this answer with respect and submission, but it broke my heart each time I saw the disappointment in her eyes. When she was three and a half (shortly after the comment that doctors

and the city make you sick), I finally decided I was ready to try having her with me in the city. Deric stressed that he did not think she was ready, but I desperately wanted the experience with her that I treasured with the others.

Her first trip went well. She was a good listener, she played hard on the Central Park playground and she slept through most of my last treatment. By this time in the duration of the treatments, this final drug was causing me to sleep as I waited for the treatment to finish, and I slept hard. It was during this regular nap that I awoke to find that Rebecca was no longer next to me. My heart leapt with panic as I jumped from my bed and ran through the chemotherapy ward, dragging my IV pole behind me. I found her at the nurses' desk. The look on my face must have revealed that Rebecca was soon to be disciplined, for the nurses quickly jumped to her defense. They explained that she did not leave my room independently (as she was told not to do), but that they had found her quietly awake next to me as I slept and they had invited her to join them at the nurses' desk. I couldn't help but smile—she was having a ball.

Rebecca's second visit was not as smooth as the first. I suppose the awe of the city had worn off, and she was willing to do what was necessary to get her way, which this particular day was to have a tantrum in the chemotherapy suite to avoid leaving me for a lunch outside of the hospital. In an effort to not reward her tantrum, which would undoubtedly ensure more to follow in the future, I was forced to place a screaming child in the arms of our endlessly patient and willing niece, Audra, who carried my youngest daughter kicking and screaming down the eleva-

tor and out of MSKCC to her favorite lunch at McDonald's.

As I turned to walk away from the elevator bank, with my IV pole being pulled behind me, I listened to my daughter's cries diminish as the elevator descended to the lobby. I said a quick but fervent prayer that her tantrum would quickly cease and Audra's good deed would not be punished. My fears were realized a few minutes later when my friend Shannon, a psychology fellow at the hospital, came in with a smile and a "cute" story of a little girl outside the hospital who was sitting on the concrete sidewalk crying. She had never met my Rebecca before, and I had little doubt of the identity of the little girl in question. Not one of my finer mommy moments! Though the incident did not last long, it was enough for me to decide that Becca was indeed too young to accompany me to the city. I certainly did not want to in any way disturb the other patients receiving treatment. My disappointment was great, but I did not realize that I was only to receive a couple more of this particular treatment.

Particularly during the first few months of chemotherapy, I was entrenched very deeply in the Refiner's Fire. We were unsure whether or not the treatment would arrest the cancer, and we had little hope that it would decrease the size of the tumors in my lungs and on my heart. It felt as if the treatment might buy me a little extra time, but Dr. Abou-Alfa gave us little hope of a cure. I spent any time during these months when I was not caring for the children and when I felt good enough preparing certain treasures I wanted them to have should

I be gone, and I spent much time in prayer for their future should they grow up without a mother.

Since their conception, I have fought to care for them in such an intentional way as to not wound or scar their sweet, impressionable spirits. I accept there will be actions I unknowingly take that will have a negative effect on my children in the future. How can there not be? In this way, I depend on prayer to give me peace in my actions and to help guide my steps to do always what is best for my beloved children. However, what could be more scarring to a young child than to lose his or her mother? I was terrified that I was going to cause this incredible detriment to my children's lives, and there was absolutely nothing I could do about it. This alone caused me great concern and bewilderment. However, my desperation during this time in the fire caused me to dive deeper and more fully into the Word of God, and this act led to enormous blessings.

I believe that while we are in the fire, during our times of greatest struggle, God blesses us greatly whether we ask for it or not. However, if our hearts are angry towards Him or our circumstances, we are unable to see all that He is bestowing on our lives, and worse, we do not recognize Who is granting us these gifts. If our hearts are open to Him, accepting our circumstances and searching for Him, we will see His hand ever so clearly. We will see EVERY DAY how He loves us and how He is SHOWERING us with His blessings. This will prove to us that we are not being punished, and that we are infinitely loved. As I was struggling the most, I would awaken each morning and ask myself excitedly, "What will He do for me today?" I couldn't wait to see. Often His gifts would

be seemingly small. Like the traffic on the George Washington Bridge clearing so that I could return home more quickly after a difficult treatment. And some seemed much greater. Such as the offering of my aunt and uncle's time-share apartment in the city on a day when I doubt I could have made it home. Or the meals that continued several days a week for more than a year, many from women whom I had never even met. For the multitudes who prepared those meals, I am ashamed to say I became overwhelmed with keeping track of who brought what blessing, thank you notes were written far too infrequently. I apologize that I was unable to properly thank you for the incredible gift of a meal shared. It meant more to me and my family than you can know. Not only the meal itself, but the lesson learned by my children that the people of God care for one another, whether or not they are close friends or whether they are strangers.

One of my favorite poems, and a favorite of many, is "Footprints." However, during a more recent re-reading of the poem, I noticed what I believe to be a significant error on the part of the unknown author. Enjoy this poem with me one more time . . .

Footprints in the Sand

One night a man had a dream. He dreamed he was walking along the beach with the Lord. Across the sky flashed scenes from his life. For each scene, he noticed two sets of footprints in the sand: one belonging to him, and the other to the Lord. When the last scene of his life flashed before him, he looked back at the footprints in the sand.

He noticed that many times along the path of his life there was only one set of footprints. He also noticed that it happened at the very lowest and saddest times in his life. This really bothered him and he questioned the Lord about it.

"Lord, You said that once I decided to follow you, You'd walk with me all the way. But I have noticed that during the most troublesome times in my life, there is only one set of footprints. I don't understand why when I needed you most you would leave me."

The Lord replied, "My son, My precious child, I love you and I would never leave you. During your times of trial and suffering, when you see only one set of footprints, it was then that I Carried You."

Can you guess what I would have difficulty with in this poem? I would like to suggest to you that if this man had been truly walking with God during His lifetime, he would never question God's presence during his times of trial. Yes, God most certainly was carrying Him during those times in the fire, and every good day to boot, but this man would have been shouting God's praise, knowing it was God's loving arms that were carrying him. There would be no question. When God does something great, such as carrying us during our times of struggle, we cannot help but to worship! Praise God!

The true author of "Footprints" is hotly debated, but many believe it to be by a woman named Mary Stevenson. Those who believe in the authenticity of her handwritten copy, dated 1939, attest that it was written by a scared and abused fourteen-year-old girl. Clearly the heart of the author is pure and Spirit-filled, and God has gifted her

with a great talent for writing poetry that touches the hearts of many. But it makes sense to me that it would be written by such a young girl, one who may have faced terrible heartache, but who thus far has lacked the spiritual maturity to recognize God's loving and steadfast presence during her time of struggle.

Other blessings also impacted our lives greatly during our time in the fire. One woman we had not met previously came and cleaned our house thoroughly, asking for nothing in return. So many friends were available on a moment's notice to babysit. Cards were sent and prayers were said from all over the world, and a prayer shawl was sent to me by a group of ladies in Atlanta.

This special gift still rests on the rocking chair at the end of our bed. Deric's niece worked just across the street from Sloan Kettering and made herself available to take the children to lunch when I was often not up for it. Could that be anything other than the hand of God?

Deric's supervisors had such compassion for our situation and ensured he was always available for me when I needed him. Deric's parents flew from Tennessee or Florida whenever they suspected we might need help for a few days. Jill, one of my closest friends, visited every day for months after my initial surgery, wanted to continue to bless our family even after she moved from New York. So she completed our family photo albums from when Deric and I were married until the present! WOW! Jill was assisted by numerous other scrap bookers, all giving their time, talents, and supplies to benefit a woman they had never met. What a blessing to know that these memories have been preserved in such a special, creative

way. Another friend has worked tirelessly to research all known treatments for Fibrolamellar Hepatocellular Carcinoma, as well as the availability, side effects, and success of each. Some may think these blessings are just thoughtful gestures or coincidence, but I know with complete certainty that they were God working through these people. And there were so many more.

My sister would call every day, and more frequently after chemotherapy treatments. If I had a bad week, she was on the first plane to New York. Really! More times than I could count, she flew up on a Tuesday night, spent Wednesday with me and one of my children in the city, and flew back to Florida on Wednesday night. She had commitments at work and at home that prevented her from staying long, but it didn't keep her from coming for the day. I loved those days.

And finally, my mother gave up her home, her job, her friends, and her life more than two thousand miles away to buy a home just down the street so she would always be available during chemotherapy or other medical appointments to care for me and my children when I was unable to do so. What would we have done without her? My head spins when I think of what my mom gave up and what we would have done had she not sacrificed her life as she knew it for ours to remain the same.

But the greatest blessing? Peace. Overwhelming peace. Peace not only for my life and how it might be affected by this cancer, but peace for my husband, my children, my mom and my sister, and my other family. John 14:27 says, "Jesus said, 'Peace I leave, my peace I give to

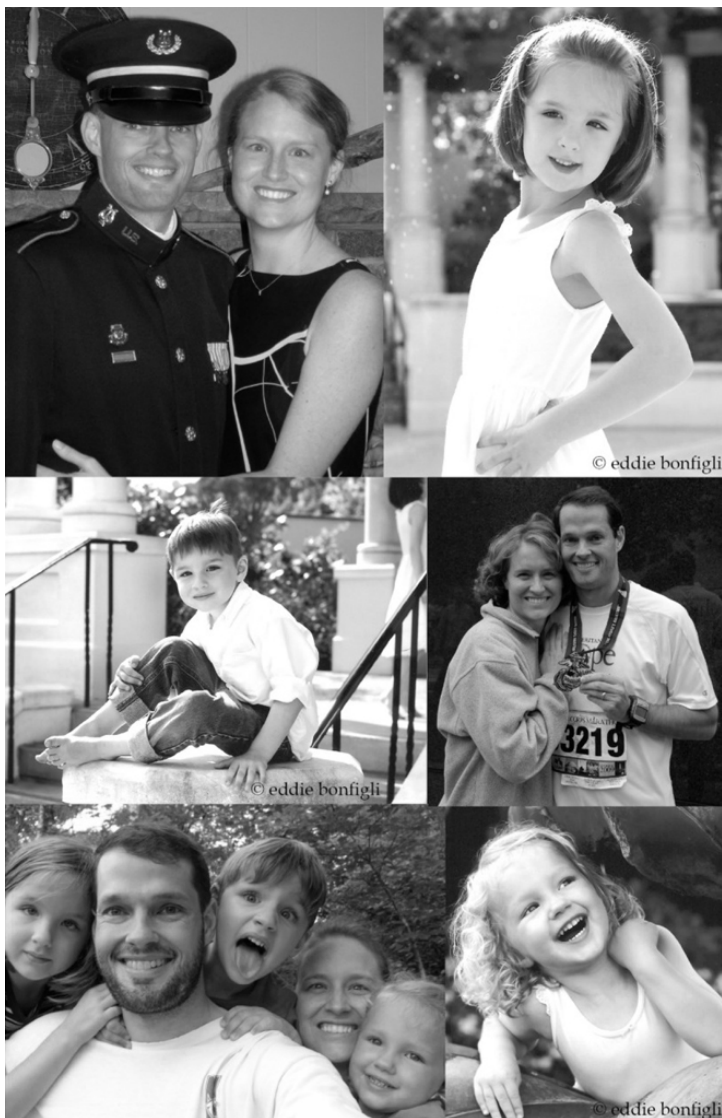
CONSIDER IT PURE JOY

you. Not like the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.”

And this peace has brought joy like I have never experienced. Yes, it has taken many months, but I am finally learning to “consider it pure joy . . . when [I] experience trials of many kinds” (JAMES 1:2 NIV). My trials have indeed been pure joy, as the lessons are eternal. God continues to lead me to be “mature and complete, lacking in nothing” (JAMES 2:4 NIV).

Family

Deric, Kristen, Ashlea (7), Luke (5), and Rebecca (3)



CONSIDER IT PURE JOY

Family

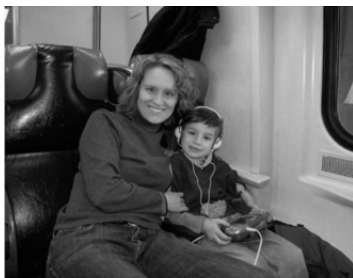
Lynn, Kim, Mike, and Kristen



Traveling to chemo in NYC



Christmas at Rockefeller Center



Riding the train to NYC



Enjoying a carriage ride through
Central Park



Canoe ride in
Central Park



Hailing a cab in NYC with Audra

CHAPTER 10

My Struggle with Faith, Healing, and Prayer

*This is what the LORD says to you: “Do not be
afraid or discouraged because of this vast army.
For the battle is not yours, but God’s.”*

2 CHRONICLES 20:15

My greatest prayer during the past couple of years has been to be faithful. When I do arrive in heaven, I want nothing more than for God to greet me with, “Well done, good and faithful servant!” (MATTHEW 25:21 NIV) I have told God that I am willing to follow His will, no matter how difficult, though I admit I need His strength to accomplish this. My requests have most often been for clarity of His will. Sometimes His desire for my life is clear, sometimes it is fuzzy. I have learned that it is definitely more visible when I seek Him through prayer and study of His Word.

Hebrews 11:1 defines faith, telling us that “faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.” My faith in Jesus, His power, His gift of salvation and His unfathomable goodness and grace is unquestioned. However, there is nothing impressive in that. James 2:19 tells me that in this way I am no different from the demons, “You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.” On the other hand, I often struggle with my faith regarding God’s will for me. I believe that having faith in an outcome that is not in His will is not being faithful, it is failing to recognize His plan for me, which may suggest my relationship with Him is not as it should be. He certainly leaves some aspects of our lives a mystery, allowing us to trust Him to bring about the most glorifying outcome. I have difficulty discerning when I should simply give it all over to God, and when I should make more specific requests through prayer. I suppose this is why the serenity prayer, believed to have been written by Dr. Reinhold Niebuhr, is so popular. “God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference.”

One individual gospel story, presented both in Matthew 17 and Mark 9, has spoken to me most clearly regarding faith, healing, and prayer. Allow me to share with you this powerful passage, Matthew 17:14-21 (NIV), which I will refer to repeatedly throughout this chapter.

When they came to the crowd, a man approached Jesus and knelt before him. “Lord, have mercy on my son,” he said. “He has seizures and is suffering greatly. He often falls into the fire or into the water. I

brought him to your disciples, but they could not heal him.”

“O unbelieving and perverse generation,” Jesus replied, “how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy here to me.” Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of the boy, and he was healed from that moment.

Then the disciples came to Jesus in private and asked, “Why couldn’t we drive it out?”

He replied, “Because you have so little faith. I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there’ and it will move. **Nothing will be impossible for you.**”

Please reread the highlighted verses of the above passage. Nothing is impossible for us! Jesus reiterates His point in Luke 17:6 (NIV), “If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it will obey you.” Jesus further explains in Mark 9:23, “Everything is possible for him who believes.” Does this mean if I do not get what I ask for, my faith is lacking? If everything is seemingly impossible for me, do I not believe enough? I would like to suggest that if our requests are not in His will, and therefore not in our best interest, our requests may appear to go unanswered. But how can we be sure of His will?

God continues to refine my understanding of complete faith, or trust in Him. I have learned not only to trust Him with my present, but also to trust Him with my future, and the future of those I love. When I faced living my life with the debilitating condition of gastroparesis, I

was forced to my knees, offering my life to God, in any way it could still be useful to Him. That was an amazing lesson. But when the cancer returned and I faced leaving my children at such a young age, I was forced to realize it was not only my life that had to be entrusted to God. I have found trusting Him with my family to be much more difficult than trusting Him with myself alone. While difficult for me to fathom, I know through His promise that He loves Deric, Ashlea, Luke, and Rebecca even more than I do! It is impossible for me to imagine that anyone could love them as deeply as I, but His love is perfect and absolutely complete for each of us. Through faith I believe this promise and I trust that God in His perfect love will care for my children more fully than I would ever be capable of doing. I am learning to realize that whether or not any of us is able to remain on this earth to help Him raise our children to adulthood, there is no doubt that they will be cared for by their heavenly Father, the Creator of the universe, Who loves them more perfectly than any earthly parent can. Knowing this, how can I not rest in complete peace for my future and the future of my family? Please do not misunderstand, this was not something that God showed me and I immediately accepted. I have struggled and I have resisted. Many nights I have awakened, crying out to my Lord, "It CANNOT be all right for them to grow up without a mother! No one will care for them like I will! No one will love them like I do! If I die, how will they ever understand the extent to which I love them?" I still struggle with this aspect of God's commandment to trust Him, but I feel I am getting closer.

I first worked through Beth Moore's Bible study entitled *Believing God* with my sister and one of my best friends, Jill. We learned that there is much more than believing IN God, we must BELIEVE HIM. We must believe His promises, and we must trust in the fulfillment of those promises. There are 1,260 promises in the Bible. God keeps every promise, and we can, no, we must, claim each promise that was made to us as believers in Christ. As a Christian, I am assured the promises of the new covenant made by the sacrifice of Jesus. These are the promises of the New Testament. To believe these promises is to be faithful.

First, we must know that God loves us. He cannot tell us more plainly than in John 3:16 (NIV), "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, so whoever believes in Him should have eternal life." God has made it abundantly clear during my time in the fire that I am not being punished, as He has assured me of His love and commitment through a wealth of blessings.

Several people have, throughout the course of my illness, asked me if I have considered the possibility that the cancer may be a punishment from God. It has been suggested that I am being punished for an unconfessed sin, for an unforgivable sin or even for the sin of my ancestors over the past three generations (a theology I had read about in the Old Testament, but I had assumed was outdated and no longer valid under the new covenant of Jesus Christ). I admit that in my desperate search for answers, I briefly considered the validity of these suggestions. These people have come to me with loving hearts, wanting only to help me; however, what I wish to say to them is this:

Our God is a loving God! Our God is a forgiving God! Have I sinned in my life? Absolutely! Are any of these sins (or any of your sins, for that matter) unforgivable? Absolutely not! I do not claim to be an expert theologian, but I can state with absolute certainty that God has blessed me abundantly throughout my illness, assuring me of His unconditional love for me and His complete lack of anger. I am confident in my belief that I am not being punished for my sins or the sins of others, despite the fact that this punishment would be deserved.

Would God bless me so abundantly if I were being punished? Some may see my blessings as fortunate circumstances, but I don't believe in fortune or luck. These have been miracles, and I have no doubt that these blessings have been the hand of God.

He showed me His face in each and every miracle. The face of a most loving God. My trials have forced me to my knees to pray, worship, study his Word, and seek His will in my life. Most of all, my trials have forced me to my knees to praise Him! I continue to seek Him through prayer and the study of His Word. He has shown me that only through this active outreach to Him will He open my eyes to His constant presence in my life. The choice is mine.

It has also been suggested that I have not yet been healed because my faith is not strong enough. This has been and continues to be a great fear of mine. I have again been encouraged by the father with less than perfect faith in Matthew 17, a story which is retold in more detail by the gospel writer Mark.

When they came to the other disciples, they saw a large crowd around them and the teachers of the law arguing with them. As soon as all the people saw Jesus, they were overwhelmed with wonder and ran to greet him. "What are you arguing with them about?" he asked. A man in the crowd answered, "Teacher, I brought you my son, who is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech. Whenever it seizes him, it throws him to the ground. He foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth and becomes rigid. I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit, but they could not."

"O unbelieving generation," Jesus replied, "how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy to me."

So they brought him. When the spirit saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into a convulsion. He fell to the ground and rolled around, foaming at the mouth.

Jesus asked the boy's father, "How long has he been like this?"

"From childhood," he answered. "It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him. But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us." "If you can?" said Jesus. "Everything is possible for him who believes." Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!" When Jesus saw that a crowd was running to the scene, he rebuked the evil spirit. "You deaf and mute spirit," he said, "I command you, come out of him and never enter him again." The spirit shrieked, convulsed him

violently and came out. The boy looked so much like a corpse that many said, "He's dead." But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet, and he stood up.

After Jesus had gone indoors, his disciples asked him privately, "Why couldn't we drive it out?"

He replied, "This kind can come out only by prayer."

MARK 9:14-29 NIV

Oh, Lord, help me overcome my unbelief! I love this passage because the father's faith is not perfect, but Jesus heals the son anyway. I thank God my faith need not be perfect, for God is full of mercy!

The promise to heal is clearly presented in the Bible, and my faith insists this is true. I believe God can heal me in one of three ways—(1) instantly, (2) over time, or (3) in His presence, presenting us with a new and perfect body in heaven. All are miracles! There is not one instance in the Gospels where Jesus was asked for healing and refused. In fact, in three gospels and in the book of Acts, Jesus is quoted as saying, "By your faith, you are healed." Although I selfishly pray for one of the first two because I desperately want to be a part of my family's lives for years and years to come, what joy there would be in facing Him as He gently touches my face and heals me of a disease no human could conquer!

Some interpret the promise of healing to say that we will all be made perfect in heaven. Perhaps this is true. My insightful friend, Jill, told me that though the cancer may be terminal, I am not. I love that! Praise be to almighty

God that by the grace given us through the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus Christ, this cancer is incapable of beating me. I will outlive it, whether here or in heaven. Undeniably, we all must die. We all must reach the fulfillment of our days. I still struggle with the fact that Jesus' miracles here on earth were always the healing of the earthly body. The promise of healing was certainly not only for those of that time, for 1 Peter 2:24 assures us that "by his stripes, you have been healed!" I know God performs miracles of healing here every day. The doctors call it "spontaneous remission" when referring to cancer, but I know that is the work of the Great Physician. However, I remain unsure of whether or not this is His will for me.

After continuing through a list of the Old Testament faithful, beginning with Abel, Enoch, Noah, and Abraham, the author of Hebrews 11 writes in verses 39 and 40, "These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect." (NIV) Perhaps I will not receive the promise of physical healing here on earth, but if that proves to be the case, I have no doubt that healing will greet me in heaven. In fact, I will no longer need this broken body at all, for God will grant me a new, perfect body in which to live by His side for eternity.

Shortly before the recurrence of this cancer was discovered, I met a special woman through my home schooling co-op group named Lisa Duscio. Lisa and I quickly became close friends, as did our daughters, Ashlea and Lianne. Lisa had bravely conquered what was diagnosed as terminal breast cancer just a couple of years before, and

her fun-loving husband, Tony, struggled with diabetes. Through their physical trials God had introduced them to a diet called the Hallelujah Acres Diet. When Lisa first explained that this diet was biblically based, I admit that I scoffed to myself. But I am now a believer in the biblical truth of this diet. It is based on Genesis 1:29, "Then God said, 'I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food.'" (NIV). It is true that about ten generations later, after the flood, God allowed the people to eat meat. Perhaps this is because much of the plant life had been drowned in the flood? Much smarter people than I do not know for sure. But the premise of the diet is that our bodies were created, in a perfect world, to consume plants and grains alone. This is the diet I have followed now for almost three years. I have prayed many prayers that this diet may be the means through which God heals me. Whether or not this is God's plan, I do not know, but I feel the diet has been a form of worship. It has been a struggle to maintain, and I believe I am following God's will for the care of my body at this point in my life. I am doing it for God. "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own" (1 CORINTHIANS 6:19 NIV).

The diet dictates that I drink six to eight glasses of freshly juiced carrots each day, as well as six to eight tablespoons of BarleyMax, a powder made from organic barley leaves and alfalfa. My food intake consists of mostly raw and organic vegetables, fruits, nuts, and grains. I am not allowed meat, any food produced by animals (such as eggs

and dairy products), sugar, salt, or white flour. Indeed, my choices are limited, and often my face is pouty as I eat what is on my plate and crave what is on someone else's. But I continue to "offer it up," an encouragement shared with me by my dear friend, Teresa. I give it all to Jesus—all my efforts, all my talents, and all my fears.

But as with anything that requires great strength to continue or maintain, I have found myself reminded by God not to lift up the diet as an idol. When my healing is complete, it will not be the diet that saved me. It will not be the doctors that saved me. It will be the one and only Great Physician!

Allow me to return to the portrait of the father without perfect faith. Draw your attention to the final verse of the passage in Mark 9:28-29. "After Jesus had gone indoors, his disciples asked him privately, 'Why couldn't we drive it out?'" He replied, "This kind can come out only by prayer." In this gospel writer's recollection, the disciples' inability to exorcise the demon was different from Matthew's recollection, but both are critically important in our walk of faith. Perhaps Jesus spoke of both reasons. Matthew reported that the disciples' belief or faith was too weak. Mark, on the other hand, reports that this type of demon can only come out by prayer! In other words, the disciples could not do it alone, they needed to ask for God's help!

Please note that this demon could be driven out only through prayer. Never underestimate the power of presenting our requests before God. We do not have the power. God has the power. So in essence, the power is not in our prayers, but in God. However, remember what God

wants most from us—a relationship with Him. Prayer is our communication with Him, the foundation on which this relationship is built. The power is in the relationship. This is why it is the “prayers of the righteous” (JAMES 5:16 NIV) that are powerful. Jesus explains in Matthew 7:7, “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.”

What I have learned about the power of prayer is beyond my ability to express with words. My greatest comfort has come through the prayer of our Savior, recorded in John 17. On the evening of Jesus’ capture and the day before His crucifixion, Jesus prays first for Himself, then for His disciples, and finally for all believers, present and future. This is the prayer He prays for us, for right now.

My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. **Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world.** Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me. I have made you known to them, and will continue to make

you known in order that the love you have for me
may be in them and that I myself may be in them”
(JOHN 17:20-26 NIV).

Notice in particular the highlighted sentence. Jesus prays that we will be unified as Christians in this life, thus showing others the power of God’s love and forgiveness, but His ultimate prayer for us is that we join Him where He is—in heaven! As He faces His death on our behalf, He does not pray for the healing of our earthly bodies or happiness here on earth, for these gifts are temporal. He wants us to be with Him! How I want to be with Him, and how I want God’s love, which was in Jesus, to also be in me! My greatest prayer has become that my children will join me in heaven, even if this means they will have to face trials here on earth.

I have been unimaginably blessed through the prayers of others. My thoughtful sister began a “CarePage” at the suggestion of my aunt. What a way for God to use the power of the Internet for good. Kim crafted a special page on a non-profit Web site to keep family and friends updated on appointments or treatments that particularly needed prayer. I had previously felt the need to keep many precious family and friends updated on any news and how I was feeling, which became increasingly difficult. This Web page preserved all past news and also emailed everyone when new information on my condition was posted. I feel blessed that more than five hundred people subscribe to my CarePage, and the prayers I have received from many Spirit-filled friends, relatives, and strangers have provided me with otherwise inexplicable strength and peace. I am thankful for the continued prayer. After

months and months of treatment, I have become bored with my situation, yet the prayers of the faithful continue. One friend wrote that she has “stormed the heavens on my behalf.” What a beautiful picture this paints in my mind, one I often conjure for strength or just for a smile.

Shortly after the metastases were found in my lungs, my sister-in-law, Dana, began a weekly prayer time on Tuesday mornings. For more than two years now, she has prayed fervently during this time, which has been intentionally set aside for God, and I have been a focus of her prayers each week. I have been blessed over and over by these unceasing prayers, and I have been uplifted each Tuesday morning by an email she has faithfully sent, describing what she has prayed for and what miracles God has revealed to her through her prayers. In one such email she wrote to me about “breath prayers.”

At a retreat several years ago, one of the ladies at our church talked about a “breath prayer.” This is a 4 or 5 word prayer that you can pray in any circumstance. It can be anything you want it to be, and several people familiar with this idea told what their prayer was.

After thinking about it for a while, I realized what my “breath prayer” would be: “Lord, Be with me.” I know that as long as He is with me I will be able to deal with whatever circumstances may come. And the knowledge of His constant presence gives me peace.

This email on breath prayers came to me just after I was told that my sister, Kim, was hospitalized after taking a cruise through the Mediterranean with a mysterious virus that was causing her liver and kidneys to fail. We

feared for her life. As I sat beside her hospital bed and entered the role of caregiver, as opposed to the role of patient, my breath prayer continued to ring in my ears. Mine is very simple, nothing profound, but the peace that enveloped me as I repeated these words was indescribable. “God is holding me. God is holding me. God is holding me.” I could feel Him, and my prayer was that Kim did as well.

I have also been blessed in numerous ways by another sister-in-law, Devonne (Deric has great sisters). She came when I needed help after my surgery, she emails me regularly with emails that make me smile and laugh, and she is available to help with any need we have. Her prayers have also given me great strength. I particularly love a series of emails about touching the hem of Jesus’ garment. She writes, “I have been picturing Kristen touching a bright and shiny and fluorescent flowing robe of Jesus and saying, ‘thank you.’”

Devonne explained in her emails, “It comforts me to consider the texture of the clothing and makes it feel real. I can feel the hem of the garment, it’s a bit gritty and has some loose threads from all the miles of walking, but I am feeling it. In my mind, I’m asking on your behalf. And tears are dotting the frayed edge.” Devonne began surveying all those around her what they thought the hem of Jesus’ garment would feel like. One friend of Devonne’s wrote this to me, “I believe that His hem is soft as the satin trim on a baby blanket. Pure, clean, softness!!!” Another friend Devonne surveyed, our niece Caroline’s first grade teacher, Bev, wrote “I would imagine that the hem of Jesus’ robe would be warm and comforting. Just a touch

would wrap you in security and your worries and stress would dissipate.” One of my favorites was written by my dear sixteen-year-old niece, Cara. She shared with me her “perhaps shallow insight of what Jesus’ garment might feel like. My immediate thought was a haggard, thread-bare garment of a maroon color. What I thought was that Jesus’ life was so sacrificial that thoughts of any style of clothing (or clean clothing for that matter) probably never entered His mind. His life was pure and therefore things of earthly existence fell into its rightful place: virtually non-existent. I unfortunately struggle to follow Jesus’ example when it comes to putting material things (especially clothes) into their rightful places.” How blessed I am to have such a beautiful young woman as a cousin and role model for my daughters. Lastly, Devonne shared with me her husband’s thought: “Just for the record, OP thinks the hem would feel like a leisure suit!”

Devonne’s original inspiration for her thoughts on the hem of Jesus’ garment and her inquiries of others on my behalf was Matthew 9:20-22, where a woman with a blood disease lasting twelve years (believed to be hemorrhaging) was desperate for healing. Mark 5:25-34 recounts the same story, giving us more detail about the woman and her encounter with Jesus. Mark tells us the woman had lost everything she had to earthly healers. When she heard that Jesus was walking through town she fought her way to be near Him. The woman “came behind him, and touched the hem of his garment: For she said within herself, ‘If I may but touch his garment, I shall be whole’” (MATTHEW 9:20-21 KJV). Both gospel writers tell us the woman was immediately healed, but Mark

further explains she became frightened when Jesus turned and asked who had touched Him. The disciples were confused that He would ask who had touched Him when so many were crowding around and pushing into Jesus. He had felt His power leave Him and He wished to know who had been in need of His healing. She fearfully threw herself before the Lord Jesus and told Him her story. He responded, "Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering" (MARK 5:34 NIV).

Nicole C. Mullen sings a beautiful song depicting the woman in this passage. I had the privilege of once seeing her perform it live. She was accompanied on stage by a graceful ribbon dancer, with a stream of red ribbon flowing behind her. Chills rippled up my spine during the verse where the woman is healed, caused not only by the beautiful lyrics and moving music brought to a climax, but by the sudden and seamless movement of the dancer who dropped the red ribbon out of sight and replaced it with a pure white ribbon. The song is called "One Touch."

*I've been ostracized for 12 years
I'm used to being alone
Spent everything I had and now it's gone*

*I'm used to being put down
my issues tell it all
my only hope is anchored in this fall
If I could just touch
the Hem of his garment
then I know I'll be made whole*

If I could just press

*my way through this madness
His love would heal my soul
if only one touch*

*So many people call him
how could he ever know
that just a brush of him
would stop the flow*

*If he knew would he rebuke me
or shame me to the crowd
well I'm desperate cause it's never
where it's now*

*If I could just touch
the Hem of his garment
then I know I'll be made whole*

*If I could just press
my way through this madness
his love would heal my soul*

*And then suddenly He turned around
He said somebody has unleashed my power
well frightened and embarrassed I bowed
you see I told Him all my troubles and how I had to*

...

*touch the Hem of his garment
and I know I've been made whole*

*and how I have pressed
my way through this madness
and his love has healed my soul*

*Then with one word he touched
the Hem of my garment
and you know I've been made whole*

*and somehow He pressed
His way through my madness
and His love has healed my soul*

*I tell you He touched me
He reached way down and touched me
when nobody else would touch me*

And I know I've been made whole . . .

I love that! Not only does Jesus heal our bodies with His touch, He heals our souls! I often feel completely enveloped in that garment.

Though I have not questioned God's presence, love, and blessings during these times of trial, I have been filled with questions that had never before concerned me. While attending a Women of Faith Conference, I was struck by a dramatic presentation by Nicole Johnson. She was trying to share through dramatic presentation the thoughts and feelings of a woman fighting breast cancer, and her set was a boxing ring. She spoke of the fears that were augmented in the darkness of night, and she spoke of the multitude of options that required decisions. Decisions that could prove to be the difference between life and death. What I found most perceptive was her statement that the greatest battle is not against the cancer, but against the despair that seems to accompany the disease. Yes, I thought, this is how I have felt but have been unable to express it. As I watched her presentation, I thought,

She must be a cancer survivor. How else could she craft such a perceptive presentation? I later discovered that she has thankfully not struggled with cancer, but she has a very close friend who has. There is no doubt that God has blessed her with a gift to present these feelings in such a way far superior to those of us who are in fact living them.

When Nicole finished her dramatic presentation, all those (in an arena of ten thousand women) who are struggling with cancer or have done so in the past were asked to stand for prayer and recognition. Though my friends gently prodded me to stand, I sat firmly in my seat. We all deal with these things differently, I realized. I witnessed many women stand proudly. And they should. They should be proud of the battle they have fought, and with God's help, have often won. But I had no desire to stand. I had no desire to be recognized. I have not yet won my battle, and often when people recognize the cancer I fight, I feel weak and small. I pray this does not translate as a weak faith. I am most definitely a work in progress.

CHAPTER 11

Legacy of Hope

*All your sons will be taught by the LORD, and
great will be your children's peace.*

I S A I A H 54:13

As I raise my children, I have often found comfort in Isaiah 40:11, “He gathers the lambs in His arms and carries them close to His heart; He leads those with young.” Yes! I have definitely felt that gentle leading as I have struggled through the marathon of parenthood. Ashlea, our first child, was not yet two years old, and I was pregnant with Luke when Deric and I joined with two other couples to form a small Bible study group intending to focus on the spiritual struggles and intentions of raising young children. We chose as our first study guide a book called *Your Heritage: How to Be Intentional About the Legacy You Leave*, by J. Otis Ledbetter and Kurt Bruner. This wonderful book discussed how we all receive a legacy from our parents or from those closest to us during our

childhood. Some legacies are harmful, hurtful, and mean. Others gracefully and fully demonstrate the unconditional love felt for us by our heavenly Father. Most, however, are a mixture of both, with parts that have proven to be a tremendous blessing and other parts that we hope will be different when passing a legacy to our own children.

It is our job as parents whose desire it is to raise our children as God would have us raise them to examine our legacy, continue the parts that have brought blessings and create new legacies that share the importance of what we most cherish. Deric and I were especially blessed to come from two families who both passed beautiful legacies filled with blessings and promise. As we worked with our friends through *Your Heritage*, we began the intentional process of combining these legacies, supplementing a few additional aspects of our own, and eventually creating a legacy uniquely ours to pass to our children, the key word being intentional. What struck me the most about this study was the reminder that our efforts to create and gift this legacy to our children must be a very intentional act. How can they enjoy and understand our traditions if we do not share and explain these traditions? How can they believe in our beliefs if we do not talk with them and explain our reason for these beliefs? How can they share our morals if we do not speak with them about and, most importantly, model these morals?

As thought provoking as this process was, it was, of course, only the first step. This process was meaningless if we failed to take the time to implement our legacy. As excited as I had become about sharing an intentional legacy with our children, I put only bits and pieces into

action. Much of what we had decided regarding the passing of our legacy I put aside, along with the text we had read and the “Milligan Family Legacy” we had written up and agreed upon. I believed that the children were yet too young to benefit from my attempting to pass on this legacy, and I thought I had so much time. How wrong I was! I am not suggesting that we should begin sharing this legacy immediately because we could pass away at any moment, though this is certainly true. I am saying that a preschooler is the perfect audience for all we have to share. To all of you who have preschool children, I must share with you what God has shared with me. We are everything to our preschooler, and consequently, this is our greatest chance to establish traditions and family values that will stick. My children are now eight, six, and four years old. Though my preschooler, Rebecca, certainly recognizes that I am far from perfect, and is quick to point this out, I believe that because she sees for this short time with such childlike vision, in her eyes my husband and I appear as close to perfect as she will ever see. Now that you are thinking I may be the most egotistical person on the planet (please don’t stop reading just yet!), let me explain.

A young child will look to her mommy and daddy for shelter, nourishment, love, security, moral and spiritual guidance, and more. A young child is completely incapable of living independently and God has therefore created that child to look confidently to the parents for these needs. (Have you ever wondered, like I have, how their little personal demands can be made with such confidence?) For this confidence, and therefore security, to remain,

God has also created these small children to have complete faith in the parent's ability to provide for these needs. Hence, to our children we are virtually perfect. Unfortunately, as they grow, they will learn how flawed and sinful we really are. I pray my children will be blessed enough to find a spouse as amazing as Deric has been for me, but even within this overwhelmingly beautiful and most loving relationship, partners are aware of the imperfect nature of their mates. The innocence of that little child allows the child for a short time to see her parents as God hopes we will see Him. As perfect, completely capable of meeting all our needs, and with an unconditional love that will always guarantee God's willingness to meet those needs. Though I continue to work tirelessly to teach our youngest the need for respect towards others, part of me wants so much to hold in my heart the confidence when I approach God that she shows when she approaches me day after day, demanding her afternoon snack.

Think back to your earliest memories. In mine, I remember my parents and a handful of other adults with whom I was very close. I remember that these adults were, in my eyes, rarely capable of doing wrong. Part of this was because my understanding of the specifics of right and wrong remained unclear. Consequently, if an unclear action was condoned by a respected adult, it was deemed right, and conversely, if an unclear action was condemned by a respected adult, it was deemed wrong.

Picture a school playground. Two young girls are kicking a bouncy red kickball back and forth. A third girl runs into the center and kicks the ball away, chasing it playfully while calling back to the two other girls to fol-

low her. The two startled girls who had been the original kickers look towards their first grade teacher, who is looking on with no reaction other than a slight smile. All three girls now accept this as acceptable behavior. A few minutes later, a third grade girl runs over to the three girls kicking around the kickball, snatches it up, and rushes back to her established game of four square (whose ball had just been lost over the school fence). The teacher walks over and explains to the third grade girl that it was unkind to steal the kickball from the younger girls. All four girls (and others watching as well) now accept this as unacceptable behavior. It does not mean that the third grade girls will not try to steal the ball again when the teacher is not looking, but these children are sinful creatures just like the rest of us, right? Nevertheless, they do now accept the behavior as inappropriate. My point? Please never underestimate your impact on the moral and spiritual legacy of not only your children, but also other children who have been entrusted into your care. It is not only our action, but our inaction that can make a lasting impression on the moral compass of a child.

While our preschoolers are at home, not only are they extremely impressionable, but they are also a captive audience! I have learned, I pray not too late, that without the distractions of school, friends, and various extracurricular activities, they are excited to spend time with me. As the mommy, I am the most popular gal in the group! They want to bake with me, play games with me, read with me, and do just about anything I want if we can do it together. What precious time to share all that I hold dear to my heart. They want nothing more than to be just like me. A

lot of pressure? Absolutely. But I pray that God will give me the strength and discernment to be a good example and the faith to trust that He knew what He was doing when He entrusted me with a child whose desire was to be with me. And I pray God will use all the little and big mistakes I make for good and for growth for both me and each of my children.

Allow me one small indulgence as a mother. I would like to share a couple of stories of my children. Yes, like most moms, I love to tell stories about my children. But I have also come to believe that we can learn much from their innocent queries and fresh wisdom. Last Christmas, when Luke was just six years old, he came down with a terrible cold. This cold brought on Luke's first real asthma attack, recognized immediately because both Ashlea and I also have asthma. As I snuggled with Luke in my bed, praying the asthma medication would quickly ease his heavy breathing, he turned to me and whimpered that it was hard to catch his breath. In an effort to comfort him, I told him that I often had difficulty catching my breath, too, and it would soon feel better. He looked at me with eyes of acceptance, no fear, and asked, "Do I have cancer, too, Mommy?" Oh, how his question broke my heart! Not because it frightened him; in fact, he seemed not at all concerned. But because he was voicing one of my greatest fears—that he or his sisters would someday have to struggle against this same cancer. I have read that small children who live with a terminally ill parent struggle most with two primary questions, (1) can I catch it, and (2) is it my fault? I thought I had worked hard to ensure these questions were not a concern for my children, but it seems

they might fester in the back of the child's mind despite one's best efforts to negate them. Once again, our trust must be in God, that His almighty peace will envelope the child, answering all the questions we do not realize need to be answered.

When Ashlea was six and Luke was four years old, we were driving somewhere during a winter evening and Luke was staring out the window at a beautiful starry sky. Suddenly, Luke exclaimed to his sister with an expression of great excitement, that He knew just where God lived. "Where?" asked Ashlea, with the slight smile of an older sibling humoring her silly brother. "Well, He must live on the moon! Look how bright it is!" Luke replied. It was, in fact, a beautiful moon.

Ashlea's answer was plain and simple, but I pray it will never leave my heart or mind. "Luke, God does not live on the moon. Jesus is the light of the world, and the moon does not give off light. The moon only *reflects* the light of the sun. So, God lives on the sun."

We can learn great truths from our children! First, I was pleased with Ashlea's answer because it appeared that she had been paying attention during our science lessons. Hooray! But secondly, and more importantly, I loved Ashlea's view of Jesus being the true "Light of the World" (JOHN 8:12). We as parents should also reflect light and truth. We are called to reflect the teachings, beliefs, and love of Jesus to our children. We can only do this if our attention is on Him. I said nothing in response to my dear children. I only smiled. I would have to deal later with the now accepted belief that God lived on the sun.

I would love to share a few of my favorite (some surprisingly successful) ways of intentionally leaving a legacy for my children, and I would love for you to share some of your favorites with me. I have come up with very few of these through my own creative juices. Most have been shared with me by either my parents or other inspired caregivers I have been blessed to meet along the way. The legacy I hope to leave centers around my belief that I must spend eternity with my children. What could be more important than that, whether we leave them while they are young or grown with children of their own? I also pray that my children will bear much fruit for God along the way, storing up great treasures for our family in heaven! Remember that the children of our children will undoubtedly also be affected by the legacy we leave, just as our children are affected by the legacy we received from our parents and caregivers from our youth.

What most people think of when they consider their legacy is probably family traditions, which is indeed a strong aspect of one's legacy. Holiday traditions, such as searching each Christmas for our favorite Christmas light display and baking Christmas cookies as a prize for that unsuspecting family; attending the same church service and reading the nativity story from Luke just before bed on Christmas Eve; preparing Resurrection cookies (they follow the crucifixion story and are found hollow on Easter morning) on Easter eve, finding Resurrection eggs to recreate the story of Christ's sacrifice, and the symbolism of the (huge) hollow chocolate egg they look forward to each Easter morning; the reading of stories about St. Valentine on Valentine's Day along with a love treat

found by their beds; or the reading of the life of St. Patrick on St. Patrick's Day, along with green waffles and three leaf clover cookies, symbolizing the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost of the Trinity.

I love holidays, and I have found that almost every holiday has a religious history about which the children enjoy learning. And if a holiday does not have religious significance, it is not hard to create one! Of course, family traditions do not always have to center around a holiday. Our children look forward to the first snow of each year, which we celebrate with vanilla frosted donuts, an ice cream cone on the last day of school, or raking leaves for a couple of church families each fall.

My favorite tradition is to hold them. Ashlea once told us when she was just two years old that God cradled her each night as she fell asleep, and I want her to remember all our cuddles, too. My mother-in-law once gave me a framed poem I have tried to live by, though I admit it is difficult for me not to see all the crayon marks on the wall that need scrubbing, dishes that need washing, laundry that needs folding, (the list is endless, right moms?).

*Cooking and scrubbing can wait 'til tomorrow
For babies grow up we've learned to our sorrow
So go away cobweb; dust go to sleep,
I am rocking my baby and that won't keep*

We also have the tradition of "mercy" and "grace" in our home. If a child has done something knowingly wrong, he or she most often faces an established consequence. However, on occasion the child will receive "mercy," not having to endure the consequence of a

wrongdoing. Furthermore, on an extremely rare occasion the children may receive “grace,” a reward given after a wrongdoing. For example, my children were warned repeatedly about leaving their bicycles in the driveway. One morning, we woke and I went out the front door to find three bicycles lying in the driveway, wet from the previous night’s rain. My inclination was to blow up and remove their privilege of riding bikes for fifteen years, but instead I returned into the house, asked the children to get their shoes on, and took them out for donuts. I explained over our sugary breakfast that this was grace. To be given a wonderful gift (what could be more wonderful to children than donuts?) when what we deserve is punishment. God does this for us every day! We talked about how “the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (ROMANS 6:23 NIV). I admit this memorable way of teaching grace to my children was not created by me. I do not recall where I learned this, but it has made an impression on my children, and for that I thank God.

Weekly traditions in our house include Saturday morning waffles made by Daddy and cookies made by Ashlea on Friday afternoon. I believe children feel safe on a schedule, and regular traditions give them something fun and exciting with which to look forward. Some family traditions are even planned for the future when the children are a bit older, such as each child being responsible for the planning, shopping, and preparing of one meal each week, or each child bearing the responsibility of handling the household finances his or her senior year in high school. One can be creative and have so much fun with

the endless possibilities of creating lifetime memories and family traditions that may continue for generations.

Legacy can also be left through tangible gifts that remain for our children after they have grown to adulthood or after their parents have passed away. Family heirlooms can of course be wonderful treasures that are cherished by generations, but I believe many children would also cherish the recorded or journaled words of a parent. Technology allows the opportunity to leave behind photographs, audio recordings, and video recordings for our children that would have been rare or impossible just a few generations ago. I have created for my children a small DVD library not only with recorded family memories, but also with recordings I have made, intentionally sharing with them all that I fear I may not be here to share with them as they grow older and need the words, love, and benefit of their mother's experiences. I have not watched the recordings myself, except to check and make sure that they are functioning properly. I do not enjoy seeing myself on tape, not even a little bit, but I feel a peace knowing my children will hear these things just as I wanted to tell them.

I have grown to believe with certainty that the greatest legacy I will leave for my children is the gift of prayer. This gift must start NOW; it absolutely cannot wait until they have grown. I decided several years ago that I wanted some sort of tangible way to remind my children of those endless and continued prayers. At that time I bought three small stones, each engraved with the name of one of my children. Most nights as I lie in bed, I hold each rock in turn, praying for that child. Don't misunderstand, I don't

mean to teach my children that there is anything magical or special about the rock itself. It is simply a reminder to them of all I have prayed for them. I pray for their daily needs, such as the recovery from a cold, a better understanding of a difficult math concept, or an added measure of patience with a little sibling. I pray for their future, including the friends, teachers, and mentors God will bring into their lives who will have such a great impact on their development and character. I pray for their future husband or wife, that that person is being loved and cared for and will do the same for my child and my grandchildren. And, most important, I pray for their salvation in Christ and their ultimate delivery to heaven, where we will again be joined in God's awesome glory. I pray this prayer most fervently.

Music often touches my heart. This song expresses well the importance of leaving a meaningful legacy, not one of things, but one of love and memories that will last even beyond the grave. I am comforted by the fact that although my children are still quite young, God has created a parent's legacy as a powerful force in a child's life even if we are with them for only a short time.

Artist: Nicole Nordeman

Song: Legacy

*I don't mind if you've got something nice to say
about me
And I enjoy an accolade like the rest
You could take my picture and hang it in a gallery
Of all the who's who and so-n-so's that used to be the
best*

CONSIDER IT PURE JOY

At such 'n such . . . it wouldn't matter much

I won't lie, it feels all right to see your name in lights

We all need an "Atta boy" or "Atta girl"

*But in the end I'd like to hang my hat on more
besides*

the temporary trappings of this world

Chorus:

I want to leave a legacy

How will they remember me?

Did I choose to love?

Did I point to you enough to make a mark on things?

I want to leave an offering

*A child of mercy and grace who blessed Your name
unapologetically*

And leave that kind of legacy

I don't have to look too far or too long awhile

To make a lengthy list of all that I enjoy

It's an accumulating trinket and a treasure pile

*Where moth and rust, thieves and such will soon
destroy*

*Not well traveled, not well read, not well-to-do or
well bred*

*Just want to hear instead, "Well done" good and
faithful one*

CHAPTER 12

“You Want Me to do WHAT, Lord?”

*For the LORD your God will bless you in all your
harvest and in all the work of your hands, and
your joy will be complete.*

DEUTERONOMY 16:15

I have been learning the great importance of Psalm 46:10 (NIV), “Be still, and know that I am God.” I have been loved by God during this quiet time and our relationship has grown considerably. I have also noticed that when I find time alone with God, just He and I in complete silence, He often offers me an assignment. Has this ever happened to you? It is sometimes simple, like cooking a meal for a friend or offering a particular service to someone we don’t know well. Sometimes it is to offer encouragement to someone, or to just give someone a big hug (I like that one). But sometimes these assignments seem greater. In fact, sometimes they seem undoable. As my

relationship with God has grown more intimate, these assignments have come more frequently, but one was particularly alarming. It caused me to question God (never a good idea, by the way). “God, are you sure? I really don’t think I am the girl for this particular assignment. Can I recommend someone else for you?” Sound familiar? Indeed, I have grown to understand the insecurity of Moses. He argues similarly with God at the burning bush as God instructs Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egypt.

Moses said to the LORD, “O LORD, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor since you have spoken to your servant. I am slow of speech and tongue.”

The LORD said to him, “Who gave man his mouth? Who makes him deaf or mute? Who gives him sight or makes him blind? Is it not I, the LORD? Now go; I will help you speak and will teach you what to say.”

But Moses said, “O LORD, please send someone else to do it.”

Then the LORD’s anger burned against Moses . . .

EXODUS 4:10-14 (NIV)

As with Moses, God did not allow me to talk my way out of my assignments. I felt His anger begin to burn against me, and I had little choice but to quickly rush to begin my assignment. He has taught me along the way that to question His request or my ability to fulfill that request is to question Him. Indeed, I am not able to do many of the tasks God assigns to me, but He is certainly capable of doing them through me! He will give me what I

need to accomplish His will. It is in His abilities, not mine, that I need to show faith.

I believe that God aids us in our heartfelt efforts to leave a powerful and godly legacy for our children. Of course God wants to use us to minister to our children, who are truly His. Just as my son Luke always reminds me, “Mommy, you are a child, too . . . a child of God!” So wise for such a young boy, and with such a tender heart. I can’t help but adore my sweet son, and I like to picture God sitting on His throne smiling down on Luke, too. I feel a connection with God in this way. The love of a parent—though God’s is so much more perfect than mine, mine still seems so powerful.

Shortly after the cancer returned and I began to prepare my children and myself for frequent doctor’s visits, chemotherapy, and all manner of other unexpected inconveniences, I began looking for children’s books to better prepare Ashlea and Luke (Rebecca was not yet two years old). I looked for books on cancer, books on chemotherapy, and books on death and dying. Most importantly, I wanted these books and the lessons they presented to be from a Christian perspective. I was surprised to find very little on this subject. With the help of a close friend, Diana Meaney, who happened to be the Children’s Librarian of our local library, I found a few books on cancer and chemotherapy, but they were all very clinical and matter-of-fact. Though I did read these books with Ashlea and Luke, they both seemed bored. They did not provoke the conversations for which I had hoped. Only one book I found was on death and dying, and because it was not from the Christian perspective, I chose to not expose my

children to that particular book at all. I knew that at times they would struggle, and I desperately wanted them to turn to God for the strength and peace that Deric and I might be unable to offer. I could not offer this lesson through a secular text.

Perhaps it is my newfound home school tendencies or habits, but I was unable to let go of the idea that a children's book would offer my children the greatest avenue for exploring their fears and general feelings while opening an opportunity for communication with their dad and me. For several months, I took every opportunity to complain to anyone who would listen about this lack in children's literature. Finally one Sunday, as I had closed my eyes to pray while communion was being served, I again began my complaints to God about my inability to find anything appropriate to read to my children. His voice was as clear to me as it has ever been, or clearer, as He stated strongly, "Kristen, write it yourself."

Wow. This was not good. I was stunned and unable to clear my head. I was anxious for the church service to conclude, and I quickly dragged Deric from the pew to a quiet room nearby. "God wants me to write a children's book!" Though I do not recall his reply, I do remember the amusement in his eyes, though I am not sure whether he was amused with me or with God. Deric never once questioned my ability to write a children's book, though I knew I was woefully under qualified. I was not a writer, I was not creative, and what would be done about the illustrations? I certainly could not even attempt to draw anything more than a sorry stick figure. I prayed for several weeks, and then with no excuses left, I told God He would

have to give me the abilities and the resources to accomplish this task if it was indeed His will.

I worked for several months on the text of the book. One would think that it would not take long to write a forty-four-page picture book, as there are not too many words per page after all; however, I was consumed with my desire to confront the issues I most wished to share with my children, and I hoped to maintain biblical truth within my story about a family of trains (Luke, you just couldn't get enough of trains at that time) and the toy maker who created them. As the first draft of my story was concluding and I knew I would soon have to share it with others, I became increasingly insecure about my efforts; however, God faithfully surrounded me with family and close friends who continued to encourage me, and God was soon to dispel my greatest concern.

As I worked on the words of my book, I repeated to myself how useless they would be without illustrations. Deric and I had discussed what we most hoped for the drawings, but we were unsure of how to ask his sister to illustrate it for us. Devonne's husband, OP, once stated the perceptive truth that Devonne has more creativity in one pinky finger than the rest of us will ever know. It is very true. She teaches music to an astonishingly blessed group of elementary school children in Georgia, which she does with passion and a most creative style. Besides her extensive musical talent for performing and teaching, she is also a gifted artist.

The illustrations she crafted to parallel my text were awe inspiring, and most certainly inspired by God. They gave me the confidence that I was following God's will,

though my insecurity remained. Ironically, my especially gifted, creative, and artistic sister-in-law was also insecure about her part in the project. This I just could not understand!

Deric explained to me, in a moment of great insecurity over my efforts on the book, that it was something God had led me to do and was therefore His project, not mine. He gently suggested that it was unfaithful to question my efforts, as God would give me what I needed to complete the task He had assigned to me. He was right, and I have since worked to muster the confidence David showed as he faced Goliath. I am as capable of writing a book as David was of conquering the giant warrior, and I must repeat to myself, "God is with me!" He will not fail me, and I will therefore not fail in whatever He has planned for me. I have since worked to remember that the book was inspired by God, and I am therefore writing to please Him and complete my calling.

After almost two years, we completed our project. We had the text, we had the illustrations, and we had titled our work *A Train's Rust, A Toy Maker's Love*. However, we had absolutely no idea what to do next. We failed to do anything at this point except to pray for guidance. In God's grace, this was all that was required.

CHAPTER 13

The Dream Team

*The LORD'S love never ends; His mercies never
stop.*

*They are new every morning; LORD your loyalty
is great.*

L A M E N T A T I O N S 3 : 2 2 - 2 4

Just as Devonne and I were completing our book project, I met Dr. Shannon Poppito, a professional and a true friend. Let me start at the beginning of my story with Shannon.

Luke slept next to me as Tiffany began my last chemotherapy treatment of the day. Luke and I had just enjoyed a beautiful afternoon in Central Park, and he was exhausted. I knew that shortly after the IV drip began, I would also become irresistibly tired. I was thankful for the peace of knowing that if Luke awoke before me, Tiffany would start a video for him and ensure that he was safe and staying with me in the chemotherapy suite. Just as Tiffany was leaving the room, a young woman I had not met before entered. She had come to inquire about my

willingness to participate in a research study being held at Sloan Kettering. These were common, but I had not been asked to participate in one before. I was hesitant, knowing that it would be very difficult for me to come to the city on days other than those when chemotherapy was scheduled. The psychology assistant assured me that any meetings would be held during my time in the chemotherapy suite. She explained that the research was called dignity therapy, and that they were researching the validity of physical, emotional, and spiritual factors in patients dealing with what has been diagnosed as terminal cancer. Did she say spiritual? I figured I had much to say in regard to how God has blessed me through my coexistence with cancer, so I quickly agreed to participate.

The following week I met with the psychologist who would be interviewing me. Her name was Dr. Shannon Poppito, and she was a psychology fellow at Sloan Kettering who was in charge of the Dignity Therapy research project. The premise was that I was to share what was most important to me, which she recorded, transcribed, edited, and bound in an attractive package to be preserved for those left behind after I pass away. Regardless of when the fulfillment of my days is realized, what a treasure to have for my children. I was thrilled with what she did for me, and I genuinely enjoyed talking with her. I liked her immensely, and God had yet to show me all the blessings this special doctor would bring. The “Faith Legacy” document, written when my children were three, five, and seven years old, which Shannon created, is more than forty pages long. Allow me to share just a few passages of her gift to me and my children.

Q: That's wonderful. What are your most important accomplishments and what do you feel most proud of?

A: I think my children are definitely what I'm most proud of. As much as I loved my job—after Deric and I just got married and I started my job—I had been so blessed as a child. I had opportunities that I know a lot of kids didn't have. I really felt God was preparing me for something. And when I started on my work, I was sure that was it—He was preparing me to train guide dogs for these people with vision problems. I was sure that was it, and I loved it, and I thought I was there. And then I had the children and I thought, you know, *I don't know, I think maybe He was preparing me for this*. Because it's hard work, and what could be more important than caring for these three precious little souls? So it's definitely my children. I think they're great kids even though they're young and they have a lot to learn. I think they're great kids.

Q: What do you think is so great about them specifically?

A: Well, they're each so different. Ashlea has a really special spirit. She was the first born, and she's a lot like me. She's a perfectionist, which we're working on. [smiles] She's very driven and she's very bright. I think that might be why home schooling is so fun for me because she catches on really fast, and it's neat to see her catch on to everything. I love to listen to her play the piano, and she loves to read. Whenever we go to the library, which is frequently because she reads through her books so quickly, she has to go immediately to her room where she asks to not be

disturbed for several hours. She won't even come out for lunch. She is completely engrossed in her stories. She likes to accomplish certain things. She's going to work very hard to accomplish something someday. Already she really feels that she wants to do whatever God wants her to do—she wants to do that. She seems to have a heart really in touch with God, communicating with Him. I like that—and she's very fun to talk to. She's getting older, so I can talk to her more as a friend sometimes, and it's just nice.

Luke is five. He's very much a boy—being silly, pretending to be a soldier or a knight, and he loves all sports that involve balls. But he's also very sensitive, and I love that about him. He has a heart of gold. He is quite tough in that if he gets hurt—if he falls and scrapes his knee—my mom has had construction at her house, and he fell and gashed his leg on this piece of barbed wire. It was a pretty nasty gash in his leg. He just sort of walked in the house and said, "I cut myself." He wasn't crying over it. When I looked at it I thought, Wow, this really hurts! And he wasn't that upset. But if his little sister Rebecca says something to him that's not very nice, he is inconsolable for a very long period of time [laughs]. He is just very sensitive. But he takes care of his sisters, and it's very sweet . . .

Then there's Rebecca—that child has a strong, yet absolutely beautiful personality. It's a very sweet personality, sort of a performer-type personality. She has so much spirit—I love that. She likes to cuddle and make us laugh. She is very precocious and very bright. She knows how to push Luke. She adores her brother

more than anybody else, yet she knows how to upset her brother, which is usually by saying that he upset her somehow—that he’s done something that’s not right. Those things upset him deeply, to the core. So she’s working on him. She’s toughening him up and he’s teaching her how to be sweet. It’s amazing to me how different they are. They are very different but all very fun. And they teach us so many things.

Q: Are there specific things that they teach you that just really stand out that you’d want to share?

A: Ashlea teaches me a lot of spiritual things. She just seems really in tune with God and what He wants for her. The past few weeks have been—if her brother and sister come to her and do something that she doesn’t feel is right—they don’t do it all the time, but, you know, bugging her or taking her book—because she likes to read—or something like that, she will say, “You just did that to God.” That’s what she likes to tell them. “You just hit God,” or “You just took God’s book. Do you think that’s a good idea?” And she explains to them in her sermon voice that she’s working on, that when you do unto others, you’re doing unto God. “So you just did that to God.” It drives her brother nuts, but I kind of let her do it because it entertains me and teaches a little lesson. So she teaches me a lot . . .

And Luke teaches me to be more sensitive. I think all of us are a little tougher than him. His feelings are so easily hurt. He teaches me how to be a little more thoughtful. With kids, you think you can just reprimand them when they do something wrong. But

he teaches me when and where. If I need to reprimand him and his friends are there, maybe you just take him from there and do it somewhere else, and that sort of thing. Those are valuable lessons for me. So he teaches me those things.

And the little one just keeps us on our toes. She's a pistol! [laughs] She is so precocious—so different from the other two that are quiet and sometimes serious, and she is so not.

Q: Legacy is so important. What about the legacy you'll share with your husband?

A: My husband and I talk pretty openly. I think he knows how I feel about everything, and he's very open with me. I just want him to know that I always knew I was very blessed to have him. He's just got such strength and he's so smart and fun. We have a good time together and I love being with him. In eleven years of marriage, I just like him more and more all the time. Oh, he's a great husband—but when I was diagnosed with cancer and went through the surgery, I was really floored by how he handled everything, and also how he cared for me. I don't think it's common or average for a man to take care of things on the level that he did. Anything that I struggled with, he took over. He never complained. He still has reason to complain. He's like that: he's doing his job and my job and helping care for my mom and everything. He does it all on his own with a happy heart. There would be some times when I watched him, and I would think, "Oh, it would be easier if this just were over and I'd be gone." So much

would be lifted from him if that was the case. But those moments are fleeting, because he's so adamant that he'd rather have it this way.

Q: Also remember that when you have a need, his ability to fulfill that need gives him value. He needs to feel that there is a reason for him to be there. So with those fleeting thoughts—it would take the value of him being as good a husband away, you know?

A: That's true. And he has been. He anticipates those needs before I even have to voice them, so I don't feel like I'm constantly nagging him. We've been on the chemo for a year and a half now. For most of our friends, it's kind of old news. I'm on the treatment, keeping everything stable, and everything is good. They kind of move on, which is good. I mean, I want that. But at the same time, maybe I have a hard week from the chemotherapy, and I don't really feel like I can talk to people because they've already moved on. But Deric always seems to know—he can always tell when I'm still not feeling quite right. He says he can see it in my eyes. He's so terrific.

I remember one Sunday in church feeling really bad. We were standing talking to a group of friends. I wasn't complaining or anything, but I was just still feeling off, and I was frustrated that it was already Sunday from treatment on Wednesday and I was still feeling bad. I remember thinking I was going to burst into tears standing there with our friends. They didn't have any idea what was going on in my head. But I looked up at Deric across the circle, and the expression

on his face that he gave me was that he knew I wasn't feeling great. You could tell he felt bad about that. It wasn't like—after living with that for a year and a half, I think a lot of people would be saying, "Okay, suck it up, because it's been so long." But it was like, "I know you don't feel good, and I want you to feel good, and I sympathize with you, but I'm not going to talk about it in front of all these people because I know you don't want that." That he knew was enough to totally calm me—totally.

So I told you I wouldn't know what I would do without my faith right now. It's also true that I really don't know what I would do if God hadn't given me Deric to get through these various situations . . . I mean, he drives to the city every week to pick me up—whatever he thinks I need, he does. He's amazing. He's really great.

Is this not a wonderful gift? I liked Shannon immensely, and God had yet to even show me all the blessings this special doctor would bring.

Once Shannon completed my "Faith Legacy," I thought my time with her was complete, but it was far from over. She came to me shortly after to explain that she had talked with a little known group within MSKCC, called the Dream Team, who fulfilled the desires of patients. For me, Shannon had requested that the children's book crafted by Devonne and me (but inspired by God) be printed and distributed by MSKCC. Wow. Devonne and I were almost finished with our book project, but we had been unsure of how to proceed. It was clear to me that God's hand was at work. I was thrilled! I

was further excited when I was told that the books would be distributed through a non-profit organization called Light One Little Candle, created by a young mother who died of breast cancer when her daughter was just four years old. This special mom believed that in the midst of medical turmoil, reading to one's child created priceless time together. The organization gives books to children with a terminally ill parent. What a perfect way to distribute to those in the greatest need of what I believe God wanted me to share with my own children! I could not have dreamed of a more perfect situation.

I was awed by God's ability to make *A Train's Rust, A Toy Maker's Love* available to many families who might benefit from it most. I found that at that point I was more than satisfied. I had the book for my children, and I had even been granted the opportunity to share it. I was ready to put the book aside and move on. But I began to take note of a burden on my heart for all those children who lived with a terminally ill parent or who had lost a parent to a terminal illness. The burden seemed to become heavier every day. How could I reach out to these children? How could I reach out to other mothers and fathers who feared abandoning their children through an early death?

Deric was the first to mention the idea of organizing a non-profit corporation. As we discussed the possibilities, I became increasingly excited. I had felt uneasy about making a financial profit from the book God had authored through me. It was, in fact, God's book, though certainly strongly affected by my imperfect human nature. God provided all the inspiration and everything good that came of the story. Despite the imperfect vessel God used,

I felt the book was good enough to touch children who were hurting and who lacked the understanding of death God has given us in order to give us comfort and peace. I continue to struggle with my lack of faith in this area. If God chose me to write this book and offered me opportunities to distribute it to His suffering children, I must remain confident that He will take my lacking skills as a writer and use it for good. Hence, the book you are reading now, which was always intended only to be read by my children and my husband. Something to leave behind to remind them that despite the suffering, God poured out blessing after blessing during our time in the fire.

Deric and I have had grand dreams about what could be done through a non-profit ministry, though we certainly could never do what needs to be done on our own. We envision the book being sold and any profits being used for academic scholarships or the meeting of other financial needs of children like ours. We envision fellowship and counseling for these children through community events where these children and their families could encourage and support one another. We envision workshops and presentations given to share our story and the lessons with which God has gifted us. We are most certainly working outside of our comfort zone, which allows us to more frequently see God's hand in our life. Each and every time we have stopped and said, "God, we can't do this," He has brought someone into our life to pull us through. I truly believe the birth of Inheritance of Hope is God's idea, and I cannot wait to see how He works through it.

CHAPTER 14

“Enough, Lord!”

*How gracious He will be when you cry for help!
As soon as He hears, he will answer you.*

ISAIAH 30:19

After fifteen months of chemotherapy, the poison was taking an increasingly stronger toll on my body. At the beginning the treatment was bearable, but it seemed that each Wednesday in the city grew more difficult. I was feeling significantly worse the day of treatment, and it was taking longer to recover. The nights of the treatment were becoming intolerable, with the burning in my abdomen building to a point where I irrationally feared that my insides would explode. I would awake at least once each night the few nights after chemotherapy with night sweats far worse than any I had experienced at the beginning of my many months of treatment. My pajamas would be soaked through, making it necessary to shower, and occasionally to lay a towel over my side of the bed, too

exhausted to change the sheets and not wanting to wake Deric. Though my face would drain of all color the day I received chemotherapy treatment, my face would be bright red the day following. My skin was hot to the touch, yet my burning insides felt chilled.

I remember several nights after chemotherapy when I would fall asleep on the throw rug in our bathroom, fearing that I would not have time to make it to the bathroom from the bed if nausea overcame me. Ironically, I vomited only once during the eighteen months I received chemotherapy. But there were many nights I prayed to be able to empty my stomach, even though I feared this would not lessen my suffering. The nights spent on the bathroom floor were thankfully short lived.

Deric would inevitably awaken, find me not in the bed, and come looking for me. He knew the chances that I would vomit were little to none, so he would gently lead me back to the bed, where he would hold me as I wrestled to fall asleep. It gave me indescribable comfort knowing he was aware of my pain and praying desperately for me to feel better. The following morning I always felt dramatically better, but I seemed to feel weaker and slightly sicker even during this day after treatment as the weeks passed.

During one appointment I finally reported neuropathy, or tingling in my fingers and toes. I had not mentioned it for a few months, thinking it was an unnecessary complaint. However, I was rewarded with immediate removal of one of the chemotherapy drugs, Cisplatin. The effects were a bit better after that, but I was growing tired of continually feeling bad. I had begun taking a narcotic for the pain and nausea the day of and the day after treat-

ment, and I hated to use drug after drug to cover the effects of the chemotherapy. We were thankful that in the past fifteen months the chemo had remained completely stable, but Deric finally approached Dr. Abou-Alfa asking if a break from the treatment was a possibility. We felt sure if I could give my body time to rebuild, I could again endure the treatments more easily.

My oncologist gave us little hope of a break from chemotherapy, explaining that I could be removed from the availability of the treatment during that time or the cancer could gain the strength needed to resist the current treatment. But during the following appointment, Dr. Abou-Alfa encouraged us with words of great hope, explaining that the doctors were pleased with my success on the drug and more opportunities for treatment were evolving quickly. Moreover, the doctor suggested that necrosis of the cancer was a slight possibility, meaning that some of the smaller tumors might be dead, explaining why none had grown in over a year. As we left the doctor's office that day, I looked up at Deric, who had tears welling in his eyes (something I had certainly never seen before). The question in my eyes prompted him to explain, "I don't think it was Dr. Abou-Alfa talking to us in there today, I think it was God giving us the hope we have asked for."

We were greatly encouraged, feeling for the first time that it might be in God's will to cure me of this cancer, but we were still wondering if God's will was for time off of the chemotherapy drugs. You see, many decisions must be made as one battles cancer. My understanding is the decisions for a woman battling breast cancer are far greater than what I have experienced—to remove just the

tumor or to have a full mastectomy? To have a double mastectomy to prevent a recurrence in the other breast? Chemotherapy after the surgery, or just wait and see? What type of reconstructive surgery, if any?

Because the cancer in my body is rare and specific, I have had few options, which thankfully diminished our need to make decisions. However, the few decisions we were forced to make seemed daunting. At this point, we wondered whether it was God's will for us to continue the chemotherapy treatment, as was recommended by Dr. Abou-Alfa, or whether we should cease the treatment to allow my body to regain the strength God's design allowed. Dr. Abou-Alfa explained that should we remove ourselves from the chemotherapy trial, the administrators of the trial might not allow us to return. More importantly, however, he explained that a hiatus from the treatment could allow the cancer to regain the strength necessary to develop a resistance to the treatment that had arrested the cancer for many months. As I prayed concerning this decision, I realized that more than anything else I desperately wanted to be faithful. Oh, how I wish to hear Him say, "Well done, good and faithful servant!" (MATTHEW 25:21 NIV). I have grown to learn that if we are in His will, we will be protected and blessed with great peace. "The circle of protection," my wise friend Grace calls it. My children know that to be disobedient to God or to those who have been charged with their care is to step outside of the circle of protection. They are in danger outside of the circle of protection. But how could I be faithful if I was not sure of His will? This I believe to be the tricky part. I learned the answer through prayer. I asked

for guidance in what to pray for, assurance that my desire was to fulfill His will, and asked for His will to be clear.

Our answer presented itself suddenly just three months later. It was determined by Dr. Abou-Alfa that my body would soon be unable to handle further treatment, so in conjunction with other doctors, Dr. Abou-Alfa had been researching other options. With the input of other MSKCC doctors, he had decided that the three largest tumors in my lungs should be removed surgically. Though the doctors did not expect a cure, the tumors that remained were quite small (sub-centimeter), and the consensus was that the removal of the larger tumors would buy me some time to live without treatment. We were thrilled, not only to be removed from the chemotherapy trial, but to be filled with the hope that God could use this opportunity for a cure.

I was required to be off chemotherapy treatment for one month before the surgery could take place. The doctor needed to confirm everything with the other doctors before moving forward with our plan, so he asked that I have the chemotherapy treatment that day. Almost a year before, because my white cell counts were often too low for chemotherapy treatment, I had begun giving myself Nuprigin shots to boost my white cell counts. These shots caused bone pain in my back and legs the day or two after taking the shots, but they were successful in their job of increasing my white counts each week. By the grace of God, that particular day, my white cell counts were too low for treatment for the first time in almost a year. I had forgotten to take my shots! I was officially done with chemotherapy, at least for a season, and we were thrilled.

Almost exactly one month later, I entered the hospital for lung surgery. Three small incisions would be made, two on my right side, and one on my back. Through these incisions a gifted thoracic surgeon would remove the larger tumors. As Deric and I pulled up in front of the hospital at almost 1:00 p.m. on July 25, 2006, we were greeted by my sister, mother-in-law, and niece. My mom joined us soon after, once the children were in the safe and loving care of my close friend. The hospital was impressive. They had a beautiful waiting area for my family, and we had a liaison assigned to us to answer all our questions before I was brought in and to communicate between the doctor and family during and after the surgery. Deric and I were soon led back to the pre-surgery suite, where I was led to a curtain enclosed bed. I found waiting for me a hospital gown, a pair of cozy socks, and a garment bag for my clothes, which would be delivered to my room where I would recover after my surgery. High class, indeed! A nurse inserted an IV, and I was soon ready to proceed to the surgery room. I was given the option to walk, which thrilled me, as I have found I feel really silly being wheeled around on a bed when conscious and perfectly capable of walking. After giving Deric one last kiss, I was led down a beautiful hallway decorated with ornate murals, which I would have enjoyed showing Deric. I then walked into the surgery suite, hopped up on the thin little table, said hello to the surgeon, was introduced to the other medical technicians in the room, and was covered by the fanciest electric heating blanket ever created. I loved that blanket. I do not even remember the start of the anesthetic, but the

next memory is waking in the recovery room with Deric sitting quietly beside me.

I spent only a few hours in the recovery room, I am told, where I was attended to with great care by a nurse who had only one other patient. Deric was never made to leave, and my periodic awakenings were soothed knowing he was beside me. At around midnight that night, I was taken to my room where my roommate was abruptly awakened by the illumination of all lights in the room while I was being settled by my caregivers. A pull out chair was next to my bed, where Deric would sleep that night and several nights to come. That night I slept fitfully, but whenever I awoke, I was overwhelmed with happiness and gratitude for all my blessings. Some would say this was the work of the drugs, but I knew God was there with me.

Laura was my second roommate after my lung surgery at Sloan Kettering Memorial Hospital. I was not planning on having a roommate. I figured dealing with a roommate was one more unknown I did not want to face, and Deric and I had therefore agreed that we would pay whatever the extra cost for a private room. However, I stood alone at the administration desk completing the pre-admission paperwork (Deric had gone to run a quick errand for me) as it was explained that I had the option for a private room. Before I had the opportunity to respond in the affirmative, I was told the extra cost would be \$558 a night. "Excuse me?" That could not possibly be right! But it was in fact correct, and I promptly told them I would be thrilled to share a room with another patient.

I was wheeled into a semi-private room at almost midnight the night of my surgery, and my sweet, elderly roommate was quiet and asleep. I did not meet her until the following morning, during which time I was calmed by her frequent singing of hymns. I had only known her for a few hours when she was released from the hospital and Laura was immediately moved in. Laura had been in another room but had been dissatisfied with her roommate, and when she noticed someone leaving from my room, she demanded to be moved. She arrived cranky, which I quickly learned was her standard behavior. It did not take her long to complain about the temperature, the noise made by my visitors, my television, and the fact that she was sure the food service staff was delivering me more appetizing food than they were offering her. She yelled, without reservation, at anyone who stepped into her room. Her language was such that I was thankful my children were not present.

Later in the afternoon on the second day of my recovery, Deric planned a trip to the local pharmacy to pick up a few necessities we had left behind. I was impressed as he bravely stuck his head into Laura's side of the room and asked if she needed anything. We had noticed that throughout the past two days, not one person had come to visit the older woman. Deric reasoned that this might have something to do with her crankiness. I heard a silence behind the curtain and I braced myself for my sweet husband to receive a tongue lashing equivalent to others I had witnessed over the course of our being roommates. But the tirade never came. She politely asked Deric if he would pick her up a toothbrush, and she seemed gen-

uinely grateful for his willingness to do this. From that moment on, we were in good graces with Laura, which was a significantly more pleasant place to be than the alternative.

Over the next couple of days, Laura became a sweet friend. She confided after watching Deric's attentive care of me that she had been married many years before, but her husband had returned to Italy without her. She never remarried and she had no children. She had lived in New York City most of her life, working as a taxi driver until just a few years before. I would have believed no woman was capable of being a City taxi driver, but Laura was as tough as they come. Despite her many years in the city, she had only one niece, and no one else she would consider family or friends. She did have a small dog at home, whom she missed very much. She asked me to make him a stuffed toy (like ones I was making for my girls, not because they were impressive, but because it felt nice to be doing something for them even though I was away). She initially asked me to make a stuffed elephant for a little boy she knew, and it pleased me to hear that she must have a young family with whom she was close. It was not until I presented the toy to her that she confessed that the toy was for her dog, Nicholas.

In those first days after the surgery I found the combination of the chest tube and a lung that was slow to heal was causing me great pain. Though I was always sore, that was pain I could handle. Occasionally, however, the pain would quickly increase and I would cry in Deric's arms while the nurses and pain team attempted to control the pain shooting through my chest, back, and side. I thought

I had felt the worst of it, but as it turned out, my greatest “pain crisis” was to occur while Deric was not present. Thankfully, I was with Mrs. Milligan, who was a great comfort, but I was desperate for Deric. I was terrified that my lungs were collapsing and I was going to die. After just a few minutes, the pain was so intense I became afraid instead that I was going to live, and I didn’t think I could handle one more minute of the intensifying pain.

I am sure others have endured greater pain, but this was the worst I had experienced and I determined it was my limit. I cried and I cried and I cried, mostly silently as I struggled for air. Mrs. Milligan called Deric, and he came quickly. Eventually, the pain team pushed a drug into my IV that decreased the pain enough for me to breathe and feel capable of bearing the pain that remained. The thirty or forty minutes that I felt that pain, my only path to comfort was prayer. I prayed desperately, in Christ’s name, for the pain to cease. I have prayed this prayer before (during the birth of Luke five years before) . . . successfully. But to this current prayer, there appeared to be no response.

As the pain continued, I became angry with God. I have heard of others speak about their anger with God in difficult times, and I had always acknowledged this as an understandable response, but I admit I was surprised and taken aback by my anger. I had never before felt true anger towards my God before, and it increased my fear and confusion. My world would be shattered if God no longer listened to my prayers, if He no longer cared. However, this fear did not keep my screaming prayers from God’s ears. “I have asked in Christ’s name for this pain to stop! Why is it not stopping? I have told You that I cannot handle it

anymore! You promised me I would not have to endure more than I could handle! I CANNOT HANDLE THIS!” Though I did not hear His voice, I quickly felt His peace and His comfort. My anger vanished, though the pain did not. I found myself praying a vastly different prayer that could only be the Holy Spirit speaking to me. “I do not always understand Your ways, but I trust You. Though I do not see how my pain at this moment can bring You any glory, I will have to trust You. I will offer this pain, and anything else I have, to You.”

My pain and fear caused me to forget that not only would God always remember me, He has given us amazing assurance in the book of Isaiah, “I have engraved you on the palms of my hands, your walls are ever before me” (49:16 NIV). I was blessed at this moment to remember that God is incapable of forgetting us and incapable of breaking His promises. It was several more minutes before the pain began to subside. I sat rigid afterward, leaning on Deric but afraid to move for fear the pain might return.

A few minutes later, the curtain separating my space from that of my roommate opened slightly. “Kristen?” Laura tentatively asked.

“Yes?” I responded quietly and carefully.

“Are you all right?”

“Yes, I am OK now.”

Her response was one that I will never forget. It was not only a response from her, but a response from God. How He blessed me by sharing a small part of His plan. “Kristen, I was so afraid while you cried. I felt helpless, and all I could think of to do was to pray. I haven’t prayed in forty years.”

Wow. I was completely awed by God's mercy and grace. I don't think I responded to Laura, but I pray she sensed my appreciation and how much her action impacted me. Laura was discharged later that day. Her niece came to drive her home, but she did not even come to the room to help Laura downstairs. It made me sad. As Laura left, she told me that she should be angry with me. She confided that after forty years of not praying, it seemed the floodgates had been opened and she could not stop. Hallelujah!

I do not know where Laura is now. Unfortunately, I did not get her address and I do not even remember her last name. I suspect she did not have a permanent address at that point because she was leaving to finish her recovery in a local YWCA. I do, however, pray for her regularly, and I have faith that God has continued to work miracles in her life.

The beds are kept full at Sloan Kettering Memorial Hospital, and it was only a few hours before my third roommate was wheeled into our room. It was late at night, and although I was awakened by the nurses turning on all the lights and working to settle her as if no one else was in the room, I remained awake because I was curious. Would my next roommate be as difficult, as interesting, or ultimately as much of a blessing as the first? I was sure this would not be the case, but God had more surprises for me.

Jill was as different from Laura as a person could be. She was only hours out of her ninth (yes, ninth) lung surgery and she was cheerfully chatting with each of the nurses as if they were old friends. I did not speak to her

until the following morning, but I was as taken with her then as I had been the night before. She was externally beautiful despite her ordeal the previous day, but I was most impressed by the beauty that glowed from within. Her spirit overflowed with joy, peace, and thankfulness. My first thought about my new friend was, "This girl knows Christ," and I was right.

Over the following four days, I figuratively sat at the feet of Jill as I imagine Mary sat at the feet of Jesus. She had much to teach me through her love and thoughtfulness towards everyone around her. She had so much love to share that it was not surprising that she had an adoring husband, two beautiful children, and a brother who flew to NYC from Atlanta to sit by her side after every surgery she had endured.

I listened as she shared her story of the past four years. She had endured chemotherapy after chemotherapy, finding none that worked to kill or arrest the rare lung cancer that had invaded her body. The only effective treatment that had been found was for the largest tumors to be removed every few months. And she credited Dr. Flores with her life. He was the only doctor in the country who had the ability to do what she needed him to do every few months. For her and for me, he was a godsend. Jill and I agreed that God worked miracles through the gifted hands of Dr. Flores.

As Jill shared her story, she never once showed any sign of feeling sorry for herself. This was not because she was tough (though she was), it was because all else was overcome by her joy. I have never seen such joy, and you can imagine my surprise at meeting such a special woman

at Sloan Kettering. While the Cancer Center is all about offering hope to those blessed to be there, it is also often filled with heartache, disappointment, and defeat. These are understandable responses to facing cancer, but they were not shared by Jill. I was enormously blessed by our few short days together. I was uplifted and inspired by her strength, determination, and contagious joy. God knew she was just what I needed to rejuvenate me for any challenges to come.

Jill and I kept in touch. Though she lived with her family in Michigan, she returned to NYC just four months later for her tenth lung surgery. Her spirit remained joyful always. Jill passed away two days after her eleventh lung surgery, just two weeks after my second lung surgery, in September of 2007. Jill's beautiful spirit now shines on all the angels of heaven, and she suffers no more. However, her husband, her children, and the multitudes who loved her would benefit from your prayers. Jill is and will always be my hero.

CHAPTER 15

What Now?

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you.”

J E R E M I A H 29:11 - 12

My recovery in the hospital was scheduled to last for four or five days. Many other people other than my roommates blessed me during that time as well. Deric stayed with me almost constantly, and friends and family visited me for support and encouragement.

Even with all of this precious time with my loved ones, I was ready to return home as day five approached. However, because a tear in my lung was slow to heal, I was still in the hospital eight days after the surgery. It was explained to us that if the chest tube was removed before the tear had healed, my lung would collapse and require a

significantly more invasive surgery than I had previously endured to reattach the chest tube.

On that eighth day, the surgeon came in to check on me as he had every day before. We went through our regular routine. I was asked to cough, and then reprimanded playfully for my apparent inability to cough heartily. As I continued to try to cough more deeply (more difficult than it sounds when you have no need or desire to cough and just underwent lung surgery), Dr. Flores would watch for air bubbles in the fluid bag attached to my chest tube. I still remain baffled as to the significance of air bubbles in the fluid bag, and it sure seems like an archaic method of ensuring that the tear in my lung had healed, but I trusted Dr. Flores and faithfully followed his directions every day. However, that day I was particularly disheartened to see the air bubbles rise in the bag. When I expressed my increasing desire to return home, sure that time with my children would be more medicinal than remaining in the hospital, the doctor gave me two options. He told me there was a drug that may quicken the healing of the lung, but it caused pain “beyond anything I had ever experienced or imagined.” Hmmm. The pain team had managed to find a morphine patch that was both strong enough to control the pain caused by the chest tube yet weak enough to avoid the severe nausea I often felt from such drugs; however, the pain I had experienced only a few days before resounded fresh in my mind, and I had absolutely no desire to experience something even more painful. My memories then rushed back six years to Luke’s birth. I had decided that for my second child’s birth I was going to show how tough I was and refuse pain medica-

tion. Big mistake (though it may have been all right had Luke not been close to ten pounds and had he not been born turned ninety degrees, something the doctor assured me just did not happen)! Not a mistake I planned to make again. I quickly refused this first option and inquired about the second. My only remaining option was to return home with the chest tube. Though I recognized that this large tube protruding from my side and emptying into a bag was not attractive, and more than a little creepy, I jumped at the chance to leave the hospital. I was given all the supplies necessary to keep the open wound that the tube pushed through clean, what seemed like an excessive number of morphine patches (several months worth), and I quickly left the hospital. My sister drove me home, and I was blessed upon my release to have no further difficulty with pain or difficulty caring for the chest tube from home.

Just one week after returning home, we were asked to return to MSKCC for the surgeon to check the progress of the healing lung. As had been practiced frequently in the hospital, I coughed, and amazingly no bubbles appeared in the bag attached to the chest tube. Praise God, my lung was healed enough for the tube to be removed! The removal was quick and painless, and I felt free after being attached to that bag for more than two weeks. Dr. Flores also informed us that I had very nice lungs (an interesting compliment from a man, but one that made me blush nonetheless), and that he felt the surgery had been extremely successful. He admitted he knew very little about this cancer, but he expressed great hope that I would remain healthy enough to enjoy the raising of our

children. We were encouraged and greatly blessed by this sincere and talented doctor.

I was most thrilled by the timing of the removal of the chest tube, because it allowed me to participate in a long awaited trip with my mother and a few other girlfriends from our church to a Women of Faith Conference a few hours away in Hartford, Connecticut. The next morning as I prepared to leave for our trip, I felt great, and I reasoned that without the chest tube I was no longer in need of the morphine patch. I rushed to remove the patch from my shoulder blade, grab my things, kiss the children, and jump in my mom's car. By the time we reached the conference I felt tired, but I was excited to get to the conference to which I had long been looking forward.

We entered the arena, found our seats, and began to sing praise songs. I remember singing perhaps only one song before sitting down to rest. I remember nothing about the first speaker, besides my rapidly increasing fatigue and the uncontrollable tears that began as I considered remaining in the arena for the rest of the day. I was overwhelmed with the effort to keep my eyes open, and I briefly considered laying down on the filthy floor to rest my eyes for just a moment. My mom, as always, was perceptive to my inner struggle, and suggested she escort me to the hotel early. I reluctantly agreed, feeling like a big baby.

My mom's long history with Hilton (she traveled quite frequently and almost always lodged with Hilton) prompted them to allow me to get into our room early. As my mom checked us in, I sat in the lobby and cried silently. I had never before felt so tired. My mom finally led me

to our room, where I climbed into my bed and immediately fell asleep. My mom returned to the conference and woke me several hours later to inquire whether I would be able to come down for dinner. I quickly decided I was not up to it. She convinced me to reapply one of the morphine patches, which remained in my bag from the trip home from the hospital. Though the pain was slight, we reasoned that perhaps that was what was draining me of all my strength.

The next morning I awoke early and felt great. I was sure that after my rest the previous day, I would be feeling better, and I was right. We had a great time, and the praise time and speakers were as encouraging and uplifting as always. It was just the spiritual boost I needed after the recent surgery.

Once home, I decided there was nothing on our calendar, it was the second week of August, and I might as well begin school. So Monday morning we began our fifth year of home school, with Ashlea in third grade, Luke in his second year of kindergarten, and Rebecca being the first Milligan child to attend preschool at an outside school. A local nature museum, the Museum of the Hudson Highlands, has been a favorite place of our family for many years. Their summer nature camps and Saturday morning nature programs are loved by the children and chock full of education information. I did not realize before that they offer a preschool, called the Young Naturalist Program. It is in fact another blessing that I did not realize they had a preschool, as Ashlea would have quickly been enrolled and the thought of home schooling the children would have surely been fleeting. But for Rebecca,

this opportunity seemed perfect. Even on the coldest of winter days she loved the hikes through the forest, she loved the other children, the teachers, and all she was learning about the environment of the Hudson Valley. And I, in the meantime, was getting a handle on teaching two students at home. She was only away a few hours on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, and she easily fit into our school time on Tuesdays and Thursdays. However, I found I missed her the mornings she was away, and I greatly looked forward to next year when we would all be at the school table every day together.

I should also explain that Luke's two years in kindergarten were not due to inability. His birthday was right at the school cut off, and we decided we would prefer him to be the oldest rather than the youngest in his class. However, he was showing signs of readiness to begin school and he desperately wished to join his sister at the school table. We decided to ease our way through kindergarten, stretching it over two years. However, Luke easily completed the math and phonics of his kindergarten curriculum, so we are now easing through the first grade curriculum, ready to take extra time when he needs it.

As is the case each year, I was excited to begin a new year of school, but it always takes a couple of weeks to get into a comfortable routine. My sister-in-law always told me her two favorite days of the year were the last day of school and the first day of school. So true! Despite the bumps and clumsiness of getting started, we enjoyed our first day (at least I did).

Our second day of school I felt sure I could remove the pain patch, I was after all in the comfort of my own

home. I was thrilled to be drug free. However, by midday I was again overcome with fatigue. Deric and I assumed it might have been a little early after the surgery for me to begin school, and he suggested I take the rest of the week off at least. But I hated to lose our momentum of the first few days, feeling I would surely feel better the next morning. I went to bed that night by 8:00 (after a long afternoon nap), and I slept well.

That following morning, a Wednesday, I awoke with a feeling of despair like nothing I have ever experienced. As soon as I opened my eyes, I began to cry uncontrollably, and I knew instantly that there was no way I was going to make it out of bed. But my extreme anxiety and dread were mysterious, for I felt little pain, only a lingering soreness from the surgery. Deric had left early for work, but my mom was home, and I immediately reached for the phone to call her. I heard the children beginning to stir downstairs and my anxiety increased significantly as I considered that I might need to go downstairs to begin their day. Thankfully, my mom wasted no time rushing the five hundred yards from her house to mine. She rushed up to my room, prayed for me (I loved that), and quickly collected the children, assuring me she would keep them throughout the day and as many days after as I needed.

My relief at knowing the children were cared for was immeasurable, but my fear steadily increased as I tried to understand this sudden and overwhelming feeling of defeat and despair. In my mind, I was able to rationalize that my pain was slight and my hope for the future was great, yet my heart emphatically exclaimed that I would

never again be capable of living the life I had lived just a few hours before. I was unable to fathom ever getting out of bed long enough to care for the children or even to care for myself. Cleaning the house, homeschooling, traveling, or planning a simple dinner party with a few friends overwhelmed me with fear and depression in such a way that I would certainly never again be able to perform these previously simple tasks. Depression—I suddenly realized that I was experiencing some sort of depression. Though I had felt intensely sad after the loss of my father, I now knew with certainty that I had never before experienced depression. But why should I be depressed? I lifted up to God all that I had to be thankful for, and the list was seemingly endless! I had no rational reason for depression.

I called Deric at work, and he came home quickly. I explained my feelings as best I could, though no words seemed to adequately describe the depth of my despair. As my tears continued to flow steadily, Deric called the doctor, asking for advice. It did not take long for the doctor and Deric to determine that I was suffering withdrawal from the morphine patch. I was shocked that I could be addicted after less than three weeks of a low dosage of the medication. The doctor's suggestion was to reapply the patch immediately, which explained my sudden recovery from what I now knew was the onset of the depression at the Women of Faith Conference. Of course, there was absolutely no way I was going to reapply that patch now that I knew the horrible drug was the reason for my current feelings. The doctors assured us that if the patch dosage was lessened gradually, the effects of the addiction would be minimal, but there was no way I was taking the

chance of feeling this way again. I was told it would take about a week to overcome these effects of the drugs, and I was determined to ride it out. It was the longest week of my life.

Every morning I would awaken and wish that I had not. Every morning Deric asked how I was feeling and I would fib that I was feeling a little more positive. Truthfully, I saw little point in continuing a life of lying in bed praying to fall asleep so the time would pass more quickly. A “Coach” marathon (a light comedy from the eighties) ran for most of the week, and I watched the continual episodes most of the day for most of the week. Somehow I found relief in becoming absorbed in their lives, and consequently avoiding mine. I repeated to myself endlessly that my life was enormously blessed and that within just a few days the effects of those drugs would leave my system, but even these assurances did not lessen my despair. Even knowing my time in this state was short, I saw little reason to continue my life. My heart continued to tell me that I would never again be useful to those I loved. I would continue only as a burden to them. I have never considered suicide, and even at this low point in my life I did not, but I could see how someone with little hope of the lifting of this dark cloud would consider suicide as a very viable option. I have a new understanding and immense empathy for those who suffer regularly from the debilitating disease of depression. I do not fully understand the lesson God wished for me to gain from this experience, but I do know that during that time I had nowhere and no one to truly depend on except God. He has certainly continued

His efforts to make me see that He is ultimately my greatest support and my most beloved friend.

I have since recovered fully from both the morphine dependence and the lung surgery. I returned to MSKCC a month later for tests that showed the surgery to be a success and the remaining tumors to be stable. Hooray! I was consequently allowed three months without having to visit any doctor or nurse for tests, treatments, or examinations. However, this did not keep me away from a special friend. About a month after the surgery, on Labor Day, the children and I trekked to the city to spend the day with our dearest nurse and friend, Tiffany. We were additionally blessed to have her sister, Katie, join us. We began at Katie's apartment, just one block from ground zero, where they served a yummy lunch and the children watched cartoons while we had a chance to chat. The children were in awe of actually being in a New York City apartment, and the macaroni and cheese to them was as good as a filet mignon in the finest New York City steakhouse. We then rode the subway to Central Park, our favorite place, where Tiffany and Katie escorted us to Long Pond to ride the canoes. We rented two canoes, one with Tiffany, Ashlea, and Luke, and the other with Katie, me, and Rebecca. What fun we had on the crowded pond! Steering our canoes through the water traffic, finding turtles, ducks, and birds galore, and staring up at the city skyscrapers as we glided through the beautiful pond surrounded by lush grass, shrubs and trees. It was a memory neither my children nor I will ever forget.

The week after Labor Day, Deric began his MBA part-time at New York University. It was a year before

that Deric and I decided the timing was as good as it was ever going to get for him to pursue his second master's degree. It was something we felt God was leading us to do, and though we were unsure how we would work it out with my chemotherapy schedule, we were determined to faithfully move forward. My mom was quick to offer her help with our schedule, the doctor allowed for my chemotherapy days to be changed to Fridays (Deric's classes were to be held on Mondays and Wednesdays), and we were sure that with admittedly great effort, we could accomplish this new task. Miraculously, however, the summer before Deric was to begin his program, my chemotherapy came to an end, and at the writing of this book I have been off of chemotherapy for almost nine long, glorious months.

What has brought me the greatest joy during this respite is my ability to now support Deric in his efforts to complete his MBA. For more than two years he has sacrificed his own desires and ambitions to care for me and the children. I love that God has granted me this opportunity to offer Deric strength during this trying time for him of balancing a full-time job, part-time school, and a family who is always clamoring for his attention. He remains my strength as I return regularly for tests and medical appointments or on days where fear for my future creeps in, but there are more days than there have been in a very long time where I am able to offer him strength and support. I think every wife and mother wants to feel needed, and this break from my treatments has offered that to me where it was greatly lacking before.

I have returned every three months since my surgery for monitoring CT scans, and though the small tumors in my lungs are now growing, they have remained small enough to allow me a continued respite from treatment. While relishing this time of feeling good and spending less time with medical personnel and more time with my family, I have also worked hard to eat well, swim several days a week, and rest as much as three young children will allow. I hope to build my strength so that if it is not yet time for God to cure me, I will be prepared to fight through any treatments or surgeries my doctors feel are necessary. I have become strong enough that my mother finally moved back to Lakeland, closing up her house here until she might be needed again. God has given me continued strength and resolve, and He has blessed me with great hope for my future as well as enjoyment of my present.

CHAPTER 16

My Greatest Gift

(You might be surprised!)

Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

1 T H E S S A L O N I A N S 5 : 2 2

My family aside, I have grown to understand God's greatest gift for me thus far in my lifetime. I have also grown enormously thankful for this gift. You might be surprised to know that cancer is my gift. Please do not misunderstand. I would rejoice with great thanksgiving if God were to miraculously heal me of this cancer this very moment; however, I would never wish to erase the lessons and experiences God has shared with me through my time in the fire. I am full of peace, despite my struggle with my health, the loss of my beloved father on earth, and my recurring fears of leaving my children so young.

While I do not believe God gave me this illness, it has been undeniably allowed by Him. He is capable only of bringing good. Since the first sin of Eve and Adam, we have lived in an imperfect world where bad things happen. God has allowed this cancer to teach me what is so much more important than my temporary struggle. I can no longer see this cancer as a bad thing . . . too much good has come of it. I recognize now all the miraculous blessings God has brought out of our struggles, and I am excited to see all the good that God will continue to bring. Now, as the doctors continue to insist that I am dying, I am happier than I have ever been, and so much more at peace than ever before. I have an amazing husband, extraordinary children, unbelievably supportive family and friends, and a home full of warmth. I am having so much fun! How can I not praise God for every moment and the endless blessings now and to come?

God has shared with me great lessons of trust, faith, and the power of prayer. God has shown me the incredible strength and perseverance of those here whom I love. Most of all, God has shown me how greatly He loves me. He has made me feel special and whole. He has shown me my multitude of sins as He has worked to purify me in the fire, and He has simultaneously demonstrated that His unconditional and unimaginably intense love for me stands, regardless of my iniquities. Just in the past few months, I have felt strongly that God has a further purpose for me. Isn't it odd that I would have such a strong conviction now, as the doctors insist that I will soon die?

For the first time in my life, I feel great peace. I am not concerned about working towards a tomorrow I am

unsure I will ever see. I choose instead to follow God's lead, and I am confident that He will lead me to incredible places. I am excited to see where we go together. I no longer fret over all the tragedies that could befall my children or others I love. I have given my fears and anxiety over to God, and He has accepted them as His own.

I used to pray that sadness would never touch the lives of my children, and when my cancer was discovered I prayed that this cancer was not hereditary and that they would never be forced to experience what I have experienced. I no longer pray those prayers. Though I am unable to bring myself to pray that my children will experience trials, I no longer wish to protect them from hardship. I certainly do not look forward to seeing them suffering from pain or sadness, but I have seen how God will greatly bless us in the fire and how this tremendously enriches our lives. I want my children's lives to be rich and full, and I want their relationship with our God to be intimate and unwavering. These blessings are accomplished in the fire. My prayer now is that when they do experience trials, as is promised us in James 1:2 ("WHEN you experience trials of many kinds"), they will be surrounded as I have been with loving and supportive family and friends. And I pray they will quickly be overwhelmed with the peace and love I have felt since my time in the fire.

I have finally learned the powerful message of Matthew 6:25 (NIV), a miraculous promise offered by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. It is a passage so many of us have read numerous times, and though we understand the truth in it, we do not accept the promise as our own.

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?

And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

What an amazing blessing God offers us in this passage. No worries! Everything will be provided for us! All we have to do is seek Him and His kingdom! Hallelujah! God truly wants to give you this gift, and I can think of no more powerful gift than the gift of eternal peace. Trust Him and it will be yours.

I believe God blesses us all when we face tragedy and heartache. I would like to suggest that perhaps the greater the trial, the more miraculous the blessings that can come from it. But I believe our response to God dictates whether or not we recognize and accept these blessings. If our hearts are willing, our greatest trials can be used by God to produce the most beautiful fruit.

I have recognized the amazing earthly blessings of which I have heard many others speak. Namely, my newfound ability to rarely take a moment with my children for granted; the deepened love, friendship, and commitment Deric and I share; and, one of my best friends (my mom) leaving her life more than two thousand miles away to move into a home just down the street from my own to help me and my family through chemotherapy treatments and various other medical appointments. Those are to name just a very few.

But more striking are the eternal lessons that come from the gift of this cancer. The anxiety and fear that filled my heart were gone almost immediately after entrusting them to God. I believe in God's promise to heal me, though I am unsure of whether it will be on this earth or in His presence. I am sure, however, that the place and the time will be perfect, because they will be God's.

I have seen many fall prey to the fear and anger that Satan inserts while we struggle. This is an understandable response, but if we allow it to continue, we will miss our blessings. If we continue to shake our fists angrily at God, we leave no opening for Him to enter our hearts and open our eyes to the glorious blessings He has in store for us.

On the other hand, if we open our fists and reach for Him, He will comfort and bless us immeasurably. I guarantee it, because He did it for me. I believe He will bless us regardless of our response to our trial, but I believe it is only with an open heart that we are able to recognize our blessings as miracles from God. This realization will bring us to our knees every time with great cries of thankfulness! 1 Thessalonians 5:18 instructs us to “Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.” What is God’s will for us exactly? To bless us through our trials! But He can only do this for us once we praise Him! I have learned to praise Him as I receive chemotherapy or as I endure the impending nausea. I have learned to praise Him as I awaken from a painful surgery. I have learned to praise Him even when I see great sadness on the faces of my children, my husband, my sister, or my mother. It is only when our hearts are open with gratefulness and praise that we will recognize His active role in our lives, constantly comforting and blessing. And we will soon find that our lives are richer, fuller, and just plain fun. Yes, as is promised in James 1:2, my trials have indeed been pure joy!

Epilogue

When I wrote this book, my intention was for only four people to read it . . . my husband and my three children. It has been a great blessing that others have taken the time to read it as well. At that time, I was 34 years old, my children were four, six, and eight years old, and I had been battling liver cancer for four years. As I write now, I am 39 years old and my battle has lasted for more than nine years. Certainly, the doctors never expected me to be here this long, and I owe the blessing of each day to God's grace and provision.

For the past nine years, this cancer and I have engaged in a sort of dance. I would have time where I was strong and healthy and was able to act as the wife and mother I have wanted to be. And then the cancer would rear its ugly head, demanding our attention. The doctors have pushed it back with chemotherapies, surgeries, and radiation, always buying me months of time where I could be myself after the treatment and recovery. But it seems now the cancer has grown tired of our dance. It has grown more aggressively in these past months than ever before, and the doctors no longer have anything to offer that might push it back once more. I have started Hospice and most of my time is now spent in bed, but I still cherish

each day as my children sit next to me and tell me about their day or Deric lays down to go to sleep and reminds me that he would still prefer me here, even if I am not able to contribute much.

Though the fight has been long and sometimes quite difficult, and even as I face the end of my fight, I still know that this cancer has been a great gift. Do you know the difference between happiness and joy? I am talking about the joy the epistle writer talks about in James 1:2-4. Pure joy.

I have learned that happiness is contentment or gladness when all our circumstances are good and right. When everything is going as we had hoped and planned, or better. Joy is when we feel that contentment or gladness even when our circumstances are difficult or chaotic. Joy is something far richer, something that can only come from God. This is what I have experienced since the cancer. I felt happiness before, but never this pure joy. I would take nine years of joy over ninety years of happiness in a heartbeat.

Since I last sat down to write this five years ago, our lives have been full and rich. Certainly, I must admit that much of that time has been spent with doctors and in hospitals, but God uses that time, too. We tried several more chemotherapies, but none that made any noticeable difference. We tried radiation twice, hitting specific tumors that were most threatening. This cancer is quite resistant to radiation, but the treatment did seem to shock the tumors into stability for a few months. The surgeries have been most successful in pushing back this cancer, but also the most difficult to recover from.

A year after the first lung surgery, I went in for another similar surgery. However, this was not a VATS procedure, where only a few small incisions were made. This would be open lung surgery, where large incisions would be made down my back. Also, where the previous surgery was for only the right lung, this surgery would resect tumors from both. I once asked Jill, my roommate during my first lung surgery, why the doctors did not resect both lungs instead of taking six months or so between each of her surgeries, switching which lung was resected each time. It seemed to me that one recovery would be easier in the long run than two. She told me her doctor said she needed one to breathe. This made sense until my doctor (also hers) suggested a double lung resection for me. When questioned, he told me I was bit younger and stronger, and with young children he thought I would prefer to get the recovery over with, even if it would be more difficult. It was indeed more difficult.

Jill was to go in for surgery the week after mine. Though I was pleased to get out of the hospital in six days, I was disappointed to miss her. I was planning to see her the next week when I went back in for my post-operative check. I was stunned when her husband let us know two days after her surgery that she had passed away. The surgeon had opened her up, found too much cancer, and closed her again without touching anything. She did wake up, but not for long.

Jill's death rocked my world. She was my friend and I missed her. But I was also frightened for my own life and that of my family. Since then I have lost many friends I have met through Inheritance of Hope. It never gets

easier. “Survivor’s guilt” is a very real thing. Why am I still here? What makes me so special? Nothing. God just isn’t finished with me yet.

After the second lung surgery, the cancer became angry and grew quickly. We decided we should take a break from surgeries. However, after several failed attempts to control the cancer with different chemotherapies and radiation, we again looked into surgery. Tumors were threatening my pulmonary arteries as well as the Superior Vena Cava, which returns blood from the head to the heart. No surgeon at Sloan Kettering would attempt the surgery, but a renegade doctor across the street at New York Presbyterian was willing to try. He had the advantage of a heart and lung machine, and he seemed to like a challenge. He performed what is called a clamshell incision, and removed all visible tumors from my heart, pericardium, both lungs, chest cavity, and diaphragm.

For the first time in seven years, I was told I was “cancer free.” Of course, the oncologist rolled his eyes, insisting that the cancer was systemic and tumors would appear somewhere soon. But I was hopeful. I thought perhaps this was the miracle I had been waiting for . . . the miracle of complete healing. I decided to be strict about diet and exercise and do what I could to build my body up, allowing it to naturally fight whatever cancer might remain.

Allow me to pause in the recounting of my medical story to share with you the true miracles that God was bestowing on our family. Our situation had shown Deric and me that our time with our family all together was not promised to us indefinitely, and we both felt strongly that we wanted to be intentional about the few years God

granted us to raise our children. We had been home-schooling from the beginning, not because we had any problems with traditional school, but because I wanted every moment I could possibly have with the children. Deric had also started pursuing his MBA from New York University. I was in the middle of receiving weekly chemotherapy treatments, he was working full time, and it certainly seemed like the worst possible time for Deric to start graduate school. However, we both felt very strongly that it was something Deric should do.

Within a year, we began to realize that God was leading us to leave the safe and secure job Deric held as a professional musician and start a non-profit for young families facing the loss of a parent. Families like ours. Inheritance of Hope was born. This was why Deric had been led to pursue an MBA. This opportunity was another of God's miracles.

Deric left his job in the summer of 2008, and he had one more semester of school before graduating. We decided to finish that semester in Sydney, Australia. Wow! What an opportunity, an incredible blessing, something we would never have considered doing if our lives had not been affected by cancer. And as we look back, we see how God made every moment possible, every moment so incredibly special.

After Deric was accepted into the program to complete his degree in Sydney we began preparing to live there with our family for four months. First, we needed to find a place to live. We knew nothing about the area, but there were several apartments and houses online that seemed acceptable. We weren't looking for luxury, just a

place to hang our hats as we set out on all our eagerly anticipated Australian adventures. Through a series of emails inquiring into one house that was not currently available, an Australian woman named Annette took us under her wing. After letting us know her house was unavailable, she wrote me again a few days later saying our family had been on her mind. She was concerned about our family, with such young children, finding a suitable place in Sydney, and she wanted to help. Our children were then six, eight, and ten years old – not much younger than her five daughters.

Annette set out to visit every home that I found on the Internet, deeming each completely unsuitable. At one point she wrote me, “I cannot believe these Aussies are trying to make these apartments look like what they are not! You absolutely cannot live in any of these disgusting places!” Annette finally found a sweet apartment, completely apart from my search, in the heart of Sydney. She negotiated hard for a reasonable price, and it became our blessed home for four glorious months. It was small, only one bedroom, but it had been outfitted with 3 small bunks in addition to the queen bed that would be for me and Deric, and it was perfect. Just across the street from a major hospital (just in case), there was also a lovely little courtyard full of grass and flowers, which is extremely rare in downtown Sydney. We had easy access to all the buses, allowing us to get to the Opera House in Sydney Harbour in just ten minutes and to Darling Harbour in just fifteen. We loved it!

* * *

And that's where Kristen stopped writing . . . a couple of months ago, her tireless energy ran out. She was no longer able to read or type on the computer.

This is Deric writing now. As I write this, I am sitting by Kristen's bedside, and she probably has just days to live. Even as her body and mind weaken, her spirit is stronger than ever. She is totally at peace. I cannot think of a single instance of her being anxious in recent months.

She has been working so hard on her legacy for the past 9 ½ years that she has nothing left on her list. Watching Kristen closely all these years has taught me that our lives really ought to be all about preparing to die. Sadly, most in our culture spend their entire lives pretending like they are never going to die. When the time comes, they will not be ready. Not ready spiritually, not having completed their lists, not having been intentional with their time, and not having been thoughtful about their legacy.

The gift of this illness for Kristen and our family is that we have been forced to live as if we are dying. Whether or not we realize it, that truth applies to each of us. In the movie *The Shawshank Redemption*, the character 'Andy' played by Tim Robbins says, "It comes down to a simple choice. Get busy living, or get busy dying." Kristen saw it just a bit differently. For her, it wasn't a choice of one or the other. She chose to get busy living while she prepared to die. Whether or not you have been faced with a life-threatening diagnosis, I encourage you to get busy living while preparing to die. What will your legacy be?

The joy Kristen experienced came not from suffering itself, but from the results of that suffering. James 1:12 says, "Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial

because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love Him.”

Kristen died on October 26, 2012, just days after I wrote by her bedside. On Thursday morning, October 25th, Kristen sat up and opened her eyes wide. This got my attention, because she hadn’t opened her eyes or sat up for weeks. Kristen began to scan back and forth with an expression of awe and wonder I had never before seen on her face. She continued for a minute, looking right through me, before she exclaimed, “WOW!” I have no doubt that in that moment she got a preview of the crown of life that was waiting for her. “WOW!” was the last thing Kristen would say. She lay back down and peacefully closed her eyes.