



# every day grace

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# THE STORMS OF LIFE

*"When the storms of life are raging, stand by me"*

Haven't we all experienced storms in our life – times when unpleasant or unexpected things happen? The loss of a job? The onset of a debilitating or even terminal illness? A child born ill? The loss of family structure or security? An accident and life is forever changed?

Suddenly, things don't make sense. The problems seem so big and your faith seems so small. You feel swamped and afraid. You feel God has forgotten or abandoned you.

## God, where are you?

Jesus' disciples felt that way when they were in a boat and a huge storm comes up (Luke 8:22–25). The boat was rocking back and forth and waves were filling the boat with water. Jesus was peacefully napping and the desperate disciples wake him shouting– "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing? Lord, save us!"

Jesus rebuked the wind and said to the waves, "Quiet! Be still!" The wind died down and it was completely calm. Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?"

## "Do you still have no faith?"

Faith: complete trust or confidence in someone or something.

Faith is the complete trust or confidence that God is going to do something in the midst of the storm. Faith is the confidence that Jesus Christ is going to stay with us and walk us through the storm to something bigger, better, or more satisfying than where we were. Faith is knowing God is reliable and loving and is working for our good.

So why do bad things happen to good people? Many theologians have offered their thoughts. Someone once said that though stars are always ablaze, a star shines its brightest in the darkest of night. While our mind tells us that Jesus is always with us, it is in the dark of adversity that Jesus can shine the brightest and remind us of his presence.

These storytellers give us glimpses of their darkest valleys. May you also see their faith and hope in Jesus Christ to sustain and meet the challenges of life.

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# Life Goes Forward

by Roger W. Thomas

I was not unconscious very long. I know that for a fact. I had left the Chick-Fil-A a little before 8 p.m. on the night of December 30, 2014. I was traveling from Salisbury, North Carolina, to my home in Albemarle. And shortly after 8:00, my life changed forever.

A month before, on a different road, I had hit a deer. On this day, December 30, something caught my attention to my right. I glanced in that direction fearing that another deer was about to cause damage to the mini-van I was driving. It was not mine. I had borrowed it from dear friends who were allowing me to drive it while I waited to settle with the insurance company about my vehicle.

There was no deer to my right but when I looked back at the road, I realized that I had swerved into the northbound lane. Praise God that there was no one coming north for I would have hit them head-on, and they would have suffered needlessly. Nothing was coming, but

before I could swerve back over to the southbound lane, the mini-van and I ran off the road and hit a concrete culvert. I was knocked unconscious.

When I awoke, my right leg was across my waist in a very unnatural way. The airbag had deployed and I was pretty sure that my jaw was broken. The metal of the floor of the van had been twisted by the culvert and my left foot was caught in the dented metal. I could not get out of the van. I could not get the driver's door to open nor could I reach the door to my right. None of the electric components were working – no lights, no radio, no electric windows, nothing. I learned later that when I hit the culvert, it knocked the battery out of the vehicle.

The frame of the van had been pushed upward, so there was a gap between the top of the window and the window frame. I could push my hand out of that



opening. With no other way to signal for help, I held an empty Diet Coke can out the window and banged on the roof of the van. Many cars came by but no one heard or saw me, as far as I know.

My cell phone was somewhere in the van, but in the dark and with my limited mobility, there was no way I could search for it.

Two thoughts ran through my mind. The lesser of those thoughts was that when the radio still worked, I had heard that the temperature was 28 degrees and was supposed to drop to 18 that night. Somewhere in the van was my jacket, but I could not reach it. I told

myself, "If no one stops, I could freeze to death tonight."

The greater thought that kept going through my mind was, "God, you have to save me. If you do not intervene, I will die in this van tonight." I spoke those words out loud over and over again. "You can't take me. I am not finished raising my children. There are too many things left to teach them. You cannot let me die. I do not know how you are going to fix this, but I cannot help myself. It is all up to you."

I am not proud of it, but I used my angry voice that night as I prayed. I usually reserve that for my children, but that night, God heard it loud and clear. I have no doubt of that.

Cars continued to pass me sitting in a van but no one even slowed. I grew more desperate. And then suddenly, after a half hour or so, headlights hit the van as someone pulled into the field. A man got out of a truck. He says the first thing he heard was my voice saying, "Thank you, Jesus. Thank you, Jesus," over and over again.

His first words to me were, "Do you need some help?" My reply, "Yes, I need

help. You need to call 911. I am in very bad shape and I am trapped." He made the calls and then immediately began to try and rescue me.

Mr. M. was in one of the vehicles that passed me in that field. He was going home from work. He saw the van but thought little about it. He says, "When I pulled in the driveway, I heard a voice in my head that said: 'You need to go back.'" And he did.

There is no doubt for me that I could have died if he had not come back. I prayed for help and God sent it. It does not always work out that way, but that night, five days after Christmas, God saved my life. I believe Mr. M. allowed himself to be used by God, and I am very thankful that he did.

I spent the next week having multiple surgeries and being unconscious continuously. I missed New Year's Eve and New Year's Day and most of the first week of 2015. I did have some very strange dreams during those days and nights.

My jaw was broken in five places. I lived on liquids for two months because my mouth was wired shut. I broke ten ribs,

seven on one side and three on the other. I cracked the first four vertebrae in my back and the fifth one was shattered. I broke my femur, the hardest bone to break, in three places. On my left foot, the one that was stuck in the metal of the floorboard, my two smallest toes were broken.

My other leg did not fare as well. Once I returned to consciousness, a group of doctors came to see me. My foot and ankle were seriously damaged. They explained to me that I had two choices: spend a year and half to two years having multiple surgeries that may not save the leg, or amputate it now. They told me to think about it.

The next day, the same doctors came but no one mentioned it. The second day, same doctors and no one mentioned it. The third day, I woke up very early before dawn. I knew the doctors were waiting for me to decide. I thought about my life. I thought about my children, my friends, my church, and I prayed to God. Suddenly, a phrase came into my head. It is not anything miraculous or even profound. It was just something simple. But as sure as I am that God sent Mr. M., I believe God gave me these words as well: "Life goes forward."



The accident could not be changed. It happened. The only control I had was the control I had on the future. I could not change the past. I could not wish my leg, or any other part of me, to be magically healed. But I could make the right choice for my life and the lives of those I love. "Life goes forward."

When the group of doctors assembled in my room later that morning, I said simply, "Life goes forward. I cannot go back. Schedule the surgery so I can go forward." They amputated my leg later that day.

A few months after I left the hospital, I spoke to a group of high schoolers. I told them my story and then I asked for questions. A very astute young man asked me this question: "Are

you mad at God for the accident?" I was still in a wheelchair with no right leg. I suppose that teenager and all others felt I was a tragedy. I looked him in the eyes and I said, "The wreck is on me. I did it. I looked the wrong way, I swerved too much, and I hit the culvert. I do not blame God for the wreck, but I do give Him credit for the healing. The accident is all on me. The way my body healed, that is all Him."

Overall, I was and am blessed. I am here. Mr. M. was there when he needed to be. I got incredible care from a great many people. And love abounded around me from my family, my friends, my church family and so many others. People who I had not seen since high school graduation sent me cards. Social

media spreads good and bad news, and sometimes it helps to spread the needs for prayer.

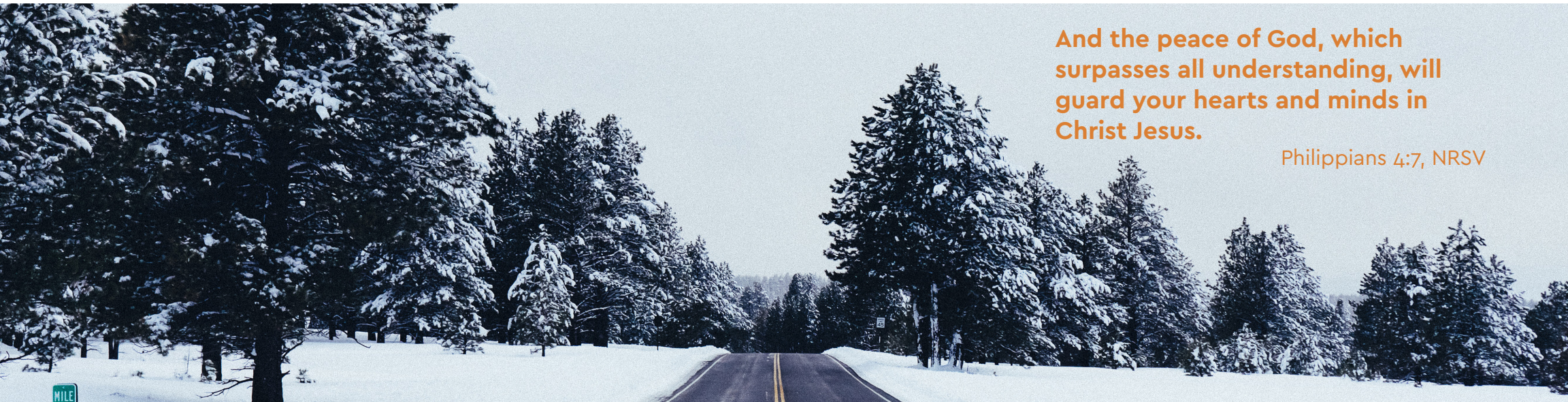
I am a very blessed man. God took care of me and takes care of me always. The first few days while I was having surgeries and sleeping all the time, it was reported to some of my friends that I would most likely be in the hospital four months because of all my injuries.

I went home on the 38th day after the accident- and some of those 38 days were in the rehab wing of the hospital.

Praise God for healing my body and saving my life. Amen.

**And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.**

Philippians 4:7, NRSV





# Fearfully & Wonderfully Made

by Parker Barnes

I have struggled with anxiety since I was 9 and depression was something that developed more in my high school years, but it was sporadic, so it was never something I sought treatment or help for. But in the fall of 2015, things hit an all-time low. I fell into a deep depression where I didn't want to get out of bed. I was constantly crying and I lost motivation to do anything. I fell into a trap where my anxiety and my depression were battling and the only thing that was losing was me, Parker. I felt lonelier than I ever had before – because that is where the enemy gets us. He gets us when we think we are alone in the dark.

One night I decided that if I stopped drinking water, something would happen to me and someone would start caring about me. So I did and that was all it took to trigger an eating disorder. Less than a month later, I had completely stopped eating and drinking anything. These restrictive acts caused me to feel nothing. My depression seemed

better. My eating disorder, the enemy, told me that it fixed everything; it told me that this was the solution.

Throughout this time, I was seeing a therapist and a psychiatrist to treat my depression and I hid the fact that I was depriving myself of the basic necessities of life. Eventually, I told my therapist and, because I was under the age of 18 at the time, we had to inform my mom. It was so hard. There were so many tears as I explained to my mom that I was competing with myself to see how long I could go without eating or drinking, to see how "strong" I was, to prove to myself that there was something about me that I was still in control of.

So my family went to war for me while I was happy just chilling on the battle field. They met with eating disorder survivors and eventually, they forced me to go see my doctor. Since I now had to eat something, because my mom punished me when I didn't, I limited my caloric intake to an extremely small amount a day.



Meanwhile, I had started to see a change in my weight, which I liked. I liked that my pants weren't fitting. I liked that my stomach was flatter. I liked that I looked like a shell of a human, and most of all, I liked that people were saying,

"you are losing weight"  
"you look good"  
"you look chiseled"  
"your legs look so good  
in those pants."



My eating disorder thrived on comments like this, but what these people were really saying was, "I like the way you look when you are dying."

I went to the doctor and she confirmed everything my mom believed. It was the first time the phrase "eating disorder" was said in regards to me. My pediatrician and my mom set up an appointment with UNC Center of Excellence for Eating Disorders and I was admitted to the Partial Hospitalization Program. I cried in therapy with my lovely therapist Emily, telling her that I didn't want to be better. I liked being sick. I explained to her that I was only there because my mom and my best friend were worried, and I did not want to burden them. So I started going into meals saying, "I'm going to eat this meal for my friend, for my relationship with my friends." And that was successful for a couple weeks, but really it only got me to eat.

I had the opportunity to go on a youth trip during the time I was at UNC and the doctors let me, and well, my eating disorder, was thrilled. As you can probably expect, things did not go well, and I came back to UNC sicker than ever. But five days after coming back, UNC discharged me even though I was

still having to supplement my meals, because technically, I was in a "healthy BMI range." I now know that an eating disorder is not dictated by weight, or a healthy BMI, but it is dictated by an unhealthy mind and view of food.

When I discharged, there was always the expectation that I was going to go to Carolina House's Intense Outpatient Program, but they were full, so I had two weeks off. My eating disorder loved this time off and during this time, I began to use other harmful eating disorder behaviors such as purging, chewing and spitting and excessive exercise. When I entered Carolina House, I had no idea the journey I would embark on. My family and I thought I would be there for less than a month just to "get things back on track," but I spent a little bit more time there than I expected.

At the beginning of my time at Carolina House, I was still using behaviors very frequently so my therapist Renee bumped me up to their Partial Hospitalization Program. I begged her to not put me in Residential Treatment because I was a senior in high school and I needed to graduate. I began to "get better" but I was still miserable. I had convinced myself that this was as good as it was

going to get. I was going to be sad, miserable and be forced to eat for the rest of my life. But Jesus had another idea.

I have gone to church my whole life and my dad, Lee Barnes, and mom, Kim Barnes, had always encouraged me find my own relationship with Jesus and develop my own faith. I had mastered the "perfect church girl" look. But when I got sick, I began to worship my eating disorder instead of the Creator of the universe. I knew that my God could fix me, but I did not want to be fixed.

On April 30, 2016, with the help of a dear friend, Lisa Markley, I surrendered my eating disorder to Jesus, and just like that, he was there waiting for me to hop into his arms and for him to carry me. He held me so tight and showed me his truth and I will praise him forever because of that. God showed up, but that doesn't mean it wasn't hard, because when I surrendered, the enemy was coming stronger than ever. John 10:10 says "The enemy comes to steal, kill and destroy but I (Jesus) come to give you life and life to the fullest."

God showed me that I had chosen my eating disorder as an idol and I was

cause the Spirit<sup>n</sup> interest  
according to the will of God.<sup>m</sup>  
28 We know that all things work togeth-  
er for good<sup>n</sup> for those who love God, who  
are called according to his purpose. 29 For  
those whom he foreknew he also predes-

worshipping it above him. God showed me Isaiah 43, where God explains that He is always there and always provides. God "makes a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland." He reminds us to forget the former things and remember that He is doing a new thing. Yet I did not call on God; I worshiped my eating disorder even though God was the one keeping me alive.

In Isaiah 44, God says, "I am the first and I am the last; apart from me there is no God" and "All who make idols are nothing, and the things they treasure are worthless... they are ignorant to their own shame." I was ignorant because I thought I knew better than God. Even after my surrender, I still wanted control. I used to cry in therapy sessions saying, "I know I am fearfully and wonderfully made - but I just want to believe it."

God gifted me with Psalm 139. I love the verse about being fearfully and wonderfully made, but the verse following means so much more to me. It says, "My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place." My God made my body for a distinct purpose, so who was I to criticize it and manipulate it? God is the potter and I am the clay. The clay knows nothing; it is what is good and right (Jeremiah 18). God gave me all of this to prove to me that He sent His only son to give me life to fullest, which Satan, in the form of my eating disorder, was stealing, killing and destroying. This relearning process was over a month's time and I learned that Jesus did come to give me life to the fullest, not a life where I was miserable. Satan was vicious in his attack, but he was not victorious.

April 30 is when my true recovery

began. That is when I truly gave my whole life to Jesus, no longer for the approval of others but for me. I, Parker Barnes, am responsible for none of my recovery because I tried to recover on my own, and clearly I failed.

But when Jesus came on the scene, he took my burdens right off of my shoulders and put them on His and held me so tight and kept me safe. Jesus proved to me that I was his beloved, and that he is enthralled in my beauty. I was made just the way God wanted me.

Still to this day, I am battling the enemy and still, I am reliant on scripture and prayer to give me ammunition against Satan. But if there is one thing that I have learned through this process, it is that God is faithful and He works all things for the good of those who love Him.



# Thy Rod and Thy Staff

by Donnie Watson

On Monday morning, July 9, 2012, I received a phone call that changed my life. My brother was found dead in his home and it appeared he had been murdered. I had spoken to him by phone about 5:30 p.m. on the preceding day and all was well with him. I think I went into a fog of disbelief upon hearing of his murder. Investigation revealed he was beaten to death. His assailant(s) is still unknown. The shock and the horror of how he must have suffered will haunt me forever. For many weeks, I did not get a good night's sleep because of not being able to stop dwelling on it. Although I spent 40 years in some form of law enforcement, I was not prepared for this to happen to a family member.

I am from a family of eleven, but this was the sibling who was my "little brother." I was the sixth child and he was the seventh following me by four years. He was a hefty guy who presented a tough, outspoken, invincible exterior to the world, but was a marshmallow on the inside. His generosity was legendary and well-known. He spent a career as

a Durham firefighter for 32 years and then as a successful businessman as the owner of a towing company. One particular incident of typical action by him stands out: A family was traveling through Durham from eastern North Carolina to visit a sick relative when the transmission went out on their car on I-85. When they called for a tow truck, his company towed the car to the lot. Upon hearing their story, he loaned them his car to continue their journey. Upon their return, the transmission had been replaced in their car at no charge to them. These were people he had never seen before. This is just one small example of his largesse. Upon his death, letters poured in about favors and sometimes large sums of money he had rendered to help others. He never failed to buy groceries for someone or slip a \$100 bill to a needy looking child.

I say all this to relay that when someone came to his door on the morning of July 9, 2012, no doubt it was because they indicated a need for his help. Most likely, it would have been an acquaintance

because he turned off the alarm and obviously welcomed them into his home. What occurred that led to his fatal beating indicates a great deal of hate and viciousness on the killer(s) part.

Who was it and why was my brother murdered? This and other questions will always haunt me. Time and much prayer for peace about the incident has dulled the shock of his death, but nothing will ever take away the pain of his loss, especially the manner in which it occurred.



# The Love Burned Brighter

by Greg Moore

## HOME

Through the trees, the bright orange glow looked like the sun was setting right over my house.

At the time, my wife and I were renting a 150-year-old farm house north of Durham while I finished my second year of seminary. It was like living in a postcard: rolling green hills, a long dirt driveway lined with trees, Belted Galloway cows grazed in the shadows of old tobacco barns and horses ran in fields surrounded by several old, well-maintained houses. We loved it there.

On this night, as my wife and I returned home from a rare dinner out, we were greeted at the entrance of the mile-long driveway by a firefighter.

"You guys live on the farm?" he asked.

"Yes sir. We rent one of the houses here."

"Well, be careful driving back, one of the buildings is fully engaged and we are working on containing it now."

As we drove down the avenue of ancient oaks toward our house, the glow from the fire danced over the fields and through the trees, whose familiar branches always spread wide to embrace us and welcome us home.

"I really hope it isn't the old horse barn," I said to my wife. "I love that thing."

Our house sat next to a huge two-story pole barn. It was at least as old as the home we rented, and it had recently been restored so that it could house about a dozen show horses. This was the kind of barn that every barn aspires to be. It was worn yet strong, big yet cozy. Picturesque in every way. The closer we got to the barn, the brighter the glow grew.

When we made the final turn toward home, the flashing red lights from the fire trucks, combined with the intense blaze radiating from the "fully engaged" heart pine building was disorienting. People ran in all directions carrying hoses, spraying water and yelling into radios.

It was so chaotic, that as I stared at the scene, it took me a full minute to realize that at the center of the pandemonium wasn't the barn. It was my house. When the smoke cleared that night, it wasn't the horses that had lost their home, but us.

## FAMILY

By the time they put the last hose on the truck, it was after 1 a.m. As my wife and I stood in the yard, facing the smoldering pile of ashes of everything we owned, the fire chief made his way over to us and asked if we had any family nearby that we could stay with that night. My family



is in the low country of South Carolina (six hours away), and my wife is from New Jersey. I looked at my watch and began to do the mental calculation – “If we leave within the hour, we could be at my parent's house around sunrise...” but before I could answer, I heard my wife say, “Yes. We have family in Chapel Hill.”

At the time, I was an intern pastor at Christ United Methodist Church in Chapel Hill. Little did I know that my wife had already called a couple from the church, with whom we led the youth ministry. They had, in turn, notified one of the parents of the youth, who immediately began putting together a plan for helping us find a place to stay, clothes to wear, and food to eat.

Around 2 a.m., we drove to that couple's house, who were waiting up for us like worried siblings. They hugged us despite our soot-covered selves, gave us food and clean clothes and an office which they had converted into a guest room for us.

The next day, clothes had been purchased for us and delivered to their house. By that evening, arrangements had been made for us to stay with a couple from the church who were

recent empty nesters, wondering what they were going to do with the spare room above their garage.

When we arrived at that couple's home, they welcomed us as though we were their own children. My wife and I each carried our bag of worldly belongings up to the spare room, and there found the bed covered with gift cards for grocery stores, the Gap and Target. There was an envelope with \$11.04 in it, a gift from one of the children at Christ Church, with a note that read, “Dear Greg and Molly, I have been saving this for something special. I want to give it to you. Love, Tori.”

As I stood there, sheltered, fed, clothed and welcomed by these people whom I had been randomly assigned to by the Office of Field Education at Duke, the overwhelming sense of belonging was moved from theory to experience.

My wife was right. By God's grace, we do have family in Chapel Hill.

## FIRE

Pentecost that year came about a month after the fire. On Pentecost Sunday, the church threw us a surprise

shower (we had been married about a year when the fire came). They invited our bridal party to come. They showered us with the china that we lost and furniture which they had collected and more gift cards to help us replace a house full of memories. They even presented us with a replacement of our wedding album, as they had contacted the photographer and asked for a copy.

John Wesley describes God's love as a fire that burns brightest and longest and consumes everything that is not pure. Love is the fire that indiscriminately marks everything it touches and reforms the very contour of creation. Love is what makes our hearts strangely warm and compels our hands to busily reshape the world around us. God's love is as senseless and destructive as a house fire, leaving nothing as it was.

As the love of God swept through Christ Church and over us in the wake of devastation, it's as if I could see divided tongues of fire on the heads of those who surrounded us. Each face burned bright with love and hope and gifts, unearned and unmerited.

Apparently, these people were not strangers to fire. Flames were their



briar patch. These were the saints of Pentecost, whose bones held a divine conflagration.

Their love for us burned brighter than the fire that consumed our house, and looking back, it is their fiery love that marked us most deeply. The things we lost are a heap of ashes compared to what we gained through their grace. They showed us what love looks like when it consumes and spreads like wildfire, and it indelibly marked us.

Over my desk hangs a picture of the only thing that survived the blaze. It's a Bible which was dug out of the bottom of a pile of ashes. Somehow, it did not burn. Somehow, all that survived and came through the ashes was this story of love, told again by Christ and the church.



# Christmas in July

by Jorge E. Perez

My name is Jorge and I reside in eastern North Carolina. I was born in Nayarit, Mexico in a little town named Amapa. I was born and raised in a place where education was not a priority, a place where there is very little future for the children. In a town that it is known for growing tobacco, it is "normal" for children and especially youth not to attend school.

I was raised in a house made of sticks (not a cabin) with black cardboard as a roof, making it extremely hot in the interior, but somehow I felt that this was a normal way of living. This had always been my life.

Growing up, it was normal to get a hug on your birthday. You didn't get a gift, much less a birthday party. All you got was a "happy birthday" and hugs and somehow that was enough. At Christmas, no one got presents. Again, all we got was a "Merry Christmas," hugs and good wishes. Real Christmas

for us as children came in the months of June and July – the "raining season."

The reason why I loved this time of the year when I was a child was because there was a river near my home, and every year during raining season, the river would overflow and bring lots of toys. There were all kinds of toys – balls, dolls, stuffed animals, and cars. All the children in my hometown were happy.

This was our Christmas; it was the only time of the year where we would get "gifts" and we all anxiously waited for that time of year. Little did we know that our happiness was someone else's sorrow. I didn't know then that the toys the river brought during the raining season were the debris from homes that the river had destroyed upstream when it overflowed. Today, it saddens my heart because the reality was that the overflow of the river brought happiness to my life and sadness and destruction to others. Tobacco for my townspeople



is the way of life. We know it from the seed, to planting and harvesting. I remember the fence at my house was made of tobacco stems, and year after year, we would replace it and paint it. I also remember that as a child, I used to play swords with my brothers and friends, using tobacco stems. Tobacco is really important where I am from; it's how the men provide for their families.

As you can imagine, working the fields is a lot of hard work and not many are willing to work. But the people from my hometown are and they are good at it. The majority of men from Amapa come to the United States with a worker's visa, precisely to work in the tobacco fields.

My father came to the U.S. as a tobacco worker when I was 7 years old. He came every year for nine to ten months for eleven years. During this time, when he came home, he would improve the house and our living conditions. One year, he would do the kitchen, the next a bathroom, and so on. Although our house and living conditions got better year after year, our relationship as father and son deteriorated year after year. Can you imagine seeing your father only two months out of twelve? Unfortunately, it became normal not seeing my father and for him to not be a part of my life.

When I was 18 years old, my father had an infection on his right foot and since he did not want to let the guy that had hired him down, and he didn't want to lose his spot for the following year, he pressed on and continued working the rest of the season. What my father didn't know was that he had diabetes and the infection turned out to be much worse than he thought. He ended up losing his leg.

That same year, my father asked me if I was ready to go work in his place in the U.S. I said yes. I still remember his words. He told me to work really hard, and to take care of the job so I would not lose it and I would be able to go back year after year as he had done for eleven years. Today, when I look back, I realize that his words were foolish because he and I lost our relationship. I lost all that time with my father growing up and then he lost his leg.

When they did surgery on his leg, the expenses were too much for my family and we could not afford it. Someone recommended getting an attorney and asking his former employer – the one who brought him back for eleven years, the one he didn't want to let down – for help. My father's former employer, who was now my employer, refused to help and then fired me because my

father reached out for help. That year, my father lost his leg and I lost my job.

The next year, I found someone else who sponsored me and I came back to the U.S. to work. I repeated the cycle of working for nine months and going back home in Mexico for three months for the next three years. At the end of my third year, I decided I wanted to stay in North Carolina. I thank God that The United Methodist Church received me with arms wide open.

I started attending church and a year later, I met my wife. Today, we have two children and my family is such a blessing to my life. Because The United Methodist Church received me and supported me and my family, I became a lay missionary last year. My wife became a licensed local pastor and we now serve together in a little local church.

When I was growing up, everything about my childhood seemed normal – growing up without my father, living in extreme poverty. Today, I do not want my children to go through what I had to go through. I do not want to be separated from my family or for my children to grow up without their father.



# Going Through the Storm Called Cancer

by Trudy Artis

In the year 2006, I was a single parent with an 18-year-old son. I was facing a hard time with several things in my life. Little did I know these were really just small things. The ball dropped when my son said to me one day, "Mom, I have a headache." I did what most mothers do. I gave him a pain medication and said, "You'll feel better soon." And he did.

Later that week, he said it hurt really badly so we visited a doctor. The doctor diagnosed it as migraine headaches.

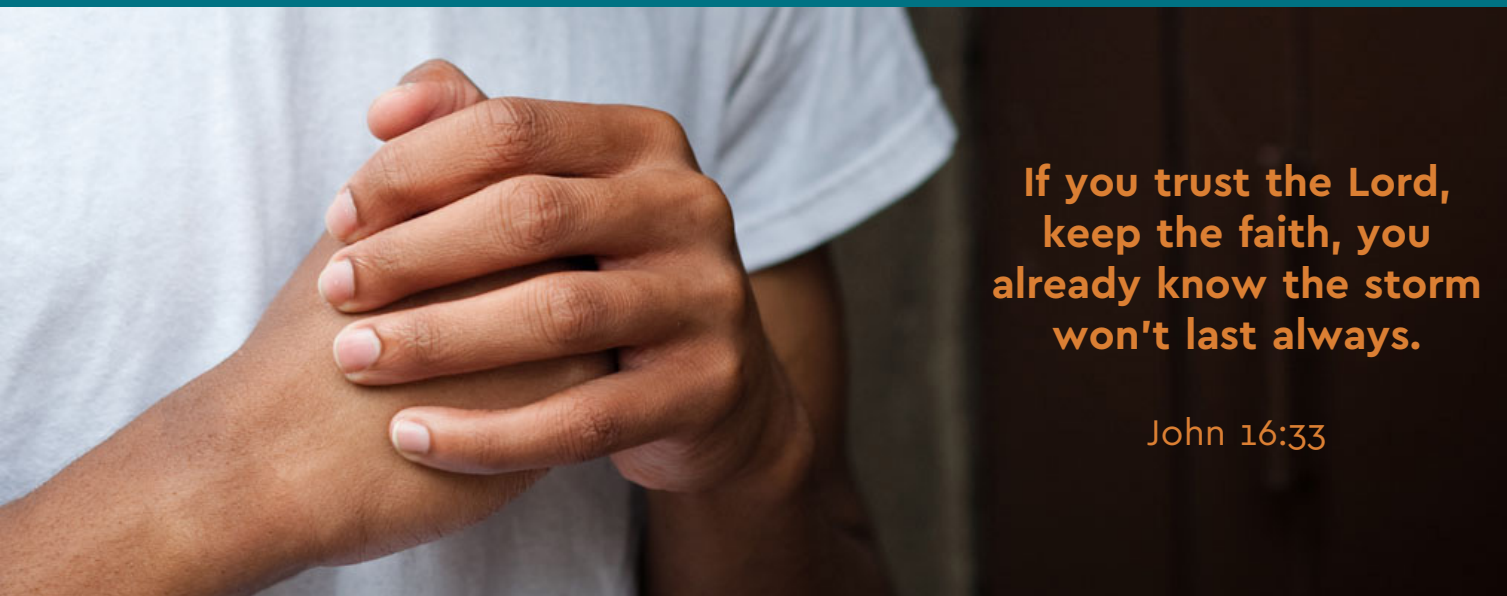
The following week, Julius drove to the Food Lion. He had not told me that he did not have any peripheral vision and that when he walked through a parking lot, he had to listen for the traffic because he could not see. Things were beginning to get serious. The next night, while on his job at Bojangles, he

had a headache and asked his manager to call me to come pick him up. I drove him straight to the hospital and once again, they said it was migraines.

People had told me to have his eyes checked – that sometimes eye problems can cause headaches, so we went to the optometrist. The optometrist is the one who noticed his eye pressure was extremely high and instructed us to see a neurologist. The neurologist found a tumor and called us back before we had even pulled back into our driveway from the appointment. She had already contacted Duke Hospital and had set up surgery with Dr. Alan Friedman.

Of course, I was afraid of what would happen next. We were told about the cancerous tumor. My son was scheduled for surgery in two weeks. When we





**If you trust the Lord,  
keep the faith, you  
already know the storm  
won't last always.**

John 16:33

went into Duke, I was doing good until a support group sent someone in to talk with me because she had experienced the same thing. She was telling me about her son and I can remember her saying he was able to go back to college but shortly after returning, he died. I thought, "Lady, I didn't come here to hear that."

I must admit that I questioned the Lord. What will I do if my son doesn't make it? But my praying friends, co-workers, and church family continued to assure me everything was going to be okay.

The morning after the surgery, I cried but then my son finally said, "Hey Mama" so I was good. We left the hospital and at that point, he could

see, but 2-3 weeks later, he lost his vision permanently. Then we started the journey with chemo and radiation.

I did trust the Lord, but I confess I wondered why it happened to my son. But I do believe that if these changes had come later in my son's life, there could have been worse storms in his life. Several of the persons he called friends are now in prison, dead, or living a life no parent would be proud of.

I am truly thankful we made it through this storm and my son is still here with me. Though he is blind, Julius lives a very independent and active life. Praise be to God!

## Helpful Resources

### **Dying to Go on Vacation**

by Marty Cauley

Marbles Press, 2015

### **The Cure for the Chronic Life: Overcoming the Hopelessness that Holds You Back**

by Deana Favre & Shane Stanford

Abingdon Press, 2015

### **Forgiveness: Finding Peace by Letting Go**

by Adam Hamilton

Abingdon Press, 2012

### **Suing for Peace: A Guide for Resolving Life's Conflicts (Without Lawyers, Guns, or Money)**

by James P. Kimmel, Jr.

Hampton Roads, 2005

### **You'll Get Through This: Hope and Help for Your Turbulent Times**

by Max Lucado

Thomas Nelson, 2013

### **The Promise of Hope**

by William M. Kinnaid

Stephen Ministries

### **Treasures in the Dark: Letting Go of Pain, Holding on to Faith**

by L. Lawrence Brandon

United Methodist Publishing House, 2013

### **The Book of Job: When Bad Things Happen to a Good Person**

by Harold Kushner

Random House, 2012

# Storms for Dunia

by Connie Orander

My heart sank as I heard the news: Dunia Vásquez, one of our long-time church members, will be deported. As we stood in the vestibule that Sunday morning, questions flooded my mind. How devastating for Dunia and her family!

Dunia had just returned from her check-in appointment with the Immigrations and Customs Enforcement (ICE) office in Charlotte.

In the days and months leading up to this visit, I knew there was concern for her situation. I was happy to hear she returned.

But the brief hurray in my mind sunk with the news that she had to return in about a month to be detained and deported.

My Sunday school classmates and I were praying for Dunia and this was not the outcome we were hoping

for. We waited for Pastor Edith to hear back from Dunia's attorney about what we could do to help.

Over the years, I have gotten to know some of the wonderful families at church through Hispanic Ministry. These families are warm and generous. They work hard. They are family-oriented and committed to their faith.

Dunia was no different. I came to know her through the tutoring program for Hispanic students that I help coordinate. She was the mother of one of our newest students starting the program in the fall semester 2014.

In the spring, I attended the Capital District IMPACT event to learn more about Hispanic Ministry. That's where I first heard Dunia's story as she stood up and shared her testimony.

I remember how my heart ached for her as I heard of her difficulty as an

immigrant. That was also the season that Dunia deepened her commitment to Christ and participated in the Conference's Lay Missioner program.

In June, Bishop Hope Morgan Ward laid hands on Dunia at Annual Conference and she was commissioned in the 2015 class of Lay Missioners.

Fast forward to mid-June 2017 – I stood in front of a large classroom on Sunday morning, introducing Dunia to a crowd





of my fellow Anglo parishioners, all ready to hear her story. Tears streamed down her face as she began to share the news of her deportation order. Appearing utterly terrified, she told us she was living a nightmare.

Dunia fled Honduras in 2003 because of the violence and the way women are treated. A victim of domestic violence, Dunia made the difficult decision to leave her husband for a better life in the United States.

When she crossed the U.S. border, Border Patrol stopped her. She signed papers, written in English, and was told she was free to go after signing. Did she know what she was signing? Dunia knew very little English. "You are free to go" probably sounded like music to Dunia's ears!

But free to go was only a temporary reprieve. The papers she signed said she could stay for six months and then would need to return to self-deport.

As I sat in the immigration attorney's office with Dunia in early July, he said that if she had presented herself to the authorities at that six-month appointment and requested asylum,

she most likely would have gotten it. But how many of us, immigrant or citizen, are savvy enough about immigration matters to have known that?

Dunia left Texas six months after crossing the border and headed to North Carolina. She did not see the deportation order issued for her. She had already moved.

Dunia worked and carried on with her life in North Carolina until around 2009, when the deportation order caught up with her during a traffic stop.

Dunia sought legal assistance. Her attorney at that time submitted an asylum application to the Immigrations Office.

It takes years for Immigrations Services to review applications, so Dunia waited and remained under a Stay of Removal status. She had a work permit and continued to work. Dunia checked in at required appointments every six months at the ICE office in Charlotte.

Dunia's husband was killed by gun violence in Honduras in 2011. As horrific as this was, it had a knock-on effect for Dunia. Eventually, in 2013, it put an end

to her asylum case. The Immigrations Office determined there was no longer a perceived threat for Dunia.

Life had not stopped in the intervening years. Dunia remarried and had U.S.-born daughters. She continued to work, pay taxes, and live her life. All was well until a fateful check-in date in June 2017.

The U.S. administration and policies had changed. Law-abiding people like Dunia are no longer allowed to stay in the U.S. She was ordered to return to Honduras, meaning she would have to leave her husband and children, and the community she has known as home for almost 13 years.

Her deportation order means returning to a country that continues to be filled with violence. Her brother was killed there last year.

If Dunia returns, the odds are high that she will be a victim of extortion. Unscrupulous members of a cartel will see her as someone with U.S. connections and therefore, having access to money.

Called into action, members of our Sunday school class prepared a petition

letter for our senators and congressman. We asked our representatives to intervene, to request that ICE reinstate her stay of removal and that the Immigrations Office speed up their review of new her U-visa application.

We organized a petition signing event at several churches and collected over 345 signatures. We placed a petition online through the church website to reach out to those who could not come and sign a letter.

In the weeks that followed, we collected 420 online signatures. Media outlets both in Spanish and English retold Dunia's story in print and on television.

At the end of worship services one Sunday in June, congregants from the Anglo worship services walked from the Christian Life Center into the sanctuary to join the Hispanic services, held simultaneously.

In a show of solidarity for Dunia and her family, she was given a prayer shawl and we laid hands on Dunia and prayed.

The storm is not over for Dunia as she tries to avoid deportation. I now see hope on Dunia's face, a hope not there

back in mid-June when she first stood up in that Sunday school classroom to tell her story.

She carries on life day by day knowing that literally hundreds of people from the church and the community spoke up for her in petitions. One of our U.S. representatives advocated for Dunia with the agencies involved.

It's too early to tell the impact of those actions. Dunia's attorney is filing new applications. The wait for the Immigrations Office to make decisions will take months, even years.

In the meantime, Dunia knows she is not alone. Hundreds of members of a faith community have come together to surround her in prayer. We are walking alongside her through the storm.

**UPDATE:** Before this magazine went to press, Dunia received word that an immigration judge in Texas has suspended the deportation order for her and will now hear what type of immigration remedies are available to her.

She is no longer facing an immediate threat of deportation. In fact, there is optimism for her case.

# Dunia's Story

## by Dunia Vásquez

Mi nombre es Dunia Vásquez, soy originaria de Honduras. Mi esposo se llama Nabor y es originario de México. Tenemos 4 hijos.

Hace 13 años emigré a este país obteniendo un permiso por 6 meses. Yo venía





huyendo de la violencia que se vivía en mi país, Honduras. Fue esta situación de violencia la que me impidió regresar. Por eso, al no presentarme en la corte de inmigración automáticamente dieron una orden de deportación.

Desde ese momento mi vida cambió y decidí mudarme de estado y llegué a Carolina del Norte, hace 11 años.

En el 2010, perdí el privilegio de conducir y en ese tiempo entró la ley 287 G, la cual llamaban "ciudades seguras." Entonces, la policía me detuvo y me llevó a inmigración.

Desde ese momento comenzó mi sufrimiento como inmigrante, ya que me comenzaron a tratar como criminal. Apelé a esa situación pidiendo asilo político. Pero en Junio de este año recibí el aviso de orden de deportación que indicaba que yo tenía que dejar este país el 31 de Julio.

Desde ese momento me inundó un miedo de volver atrás, ya que la violencia en mi país está cada vez más peligrosa y no hay respeto por la vida humana.

Es difícil regresar y dejar a mi familia, ya que como toda madre, deseo lo mejor

para mis hijos. No es un lugar de violencia y peligro el que deseo para los míos.

Mi familia en este momento vive una incertidumbre que nos aterra al no saber qué hacer, a dónde ir y lo que pasará. Esto afecta emocionalmente no sólo a mí y a mi esposo, sino directamente a mis niños que no conocen otro país, ya que éste es el que los vio nacer.

En este momento me siento como enferma, paralizada, no puedo correr o caminar, no puedo salir, no puedo planear, no puedo soñar, no puedo hacer nada. Mi mente está paralizada y mi futuro y el futuro de mis hijos también.

Realmente desearía que este fuera un mal sueño. Sin embargo, cada día me despierto y es otra mi realidad; realidad que nos paraliza a mí y a mi familia.

Mi niña mayor, de 11 años de edad, me dice: "Mami, tengo miedo de regresar de la escuela y no encontrarte. O cuando veo que otra persona va a la escuela a recogerme, me da miedo de saber que ya no estás, que ya te deportaron."

Eso, como madre, me duele y me llena de tristeza al no poder ayudarle con sus miedos. Yo también tengo

mucho miedo, y no encuentro la mejor manera de explicarle nuestra situación.

En la actualidad, no tengo planes, tengo miedo de regresar a mi país. No quiero dejar a mis hijos, pero a la vez no quiero vivir escondiéndome. Tampoco quiero enseñar a mis hijos a huir. Eso me frustra y me duele.

En la actualidad, mi vida y la de mi familia están estancadas. En este momento solo renuevo mis fuerzas a través de mi fe en Cristo. Al ver y sentir el amor y cuidado de mi congregación, puedo sentir la presencia de Dios y su cuidado hacia mí y a mi familia.

White Plains es mi familia, ellos son la fuerza que yo necesito. Me apoyan, los veo que me alientan y me dicen: "sigue adelante que aquí estamos contigo. No estás sola. Dios está contigo a través de nosotros, tu iglesia." Estoy agradecida con mi iglesia por el apoyo que me están dando, por renovar mis fuerzas, y por impulsarme cada día a seguir adelante.

**To read Dunia's story in English, visit [everydaygracemagazine.com](http://everydaygracemagazine.com).**

# The Joy in Suffering

## by Bethany Reeves

Each December, people look back and take stock of the year. They weigh it out on the scales, and make a judgement on it. Last year was labeled "terrible" by many people I know. And a lot of times, that was accompanied by the remark, "but y'all have had it so much worse, on a personal level."

I can agree that our family has had the most challenging year of our lives thus far. In March, 2016, we welcomed a baby girl named Naomi. She arrived blue and was airlifted from our county hospital to a major medical center at 12 hours old. There, we learned that only half of Naomi's heart had developed in a condition called hypoplastic left heart syndrome. It is a congenital heart defect that, if untreated, is always fatal. It was a complete surprise, both crushing and terrifying. Naomi's heart was formed in such a way that corrective surgeries were not an option—she needed a heart transplant to live.

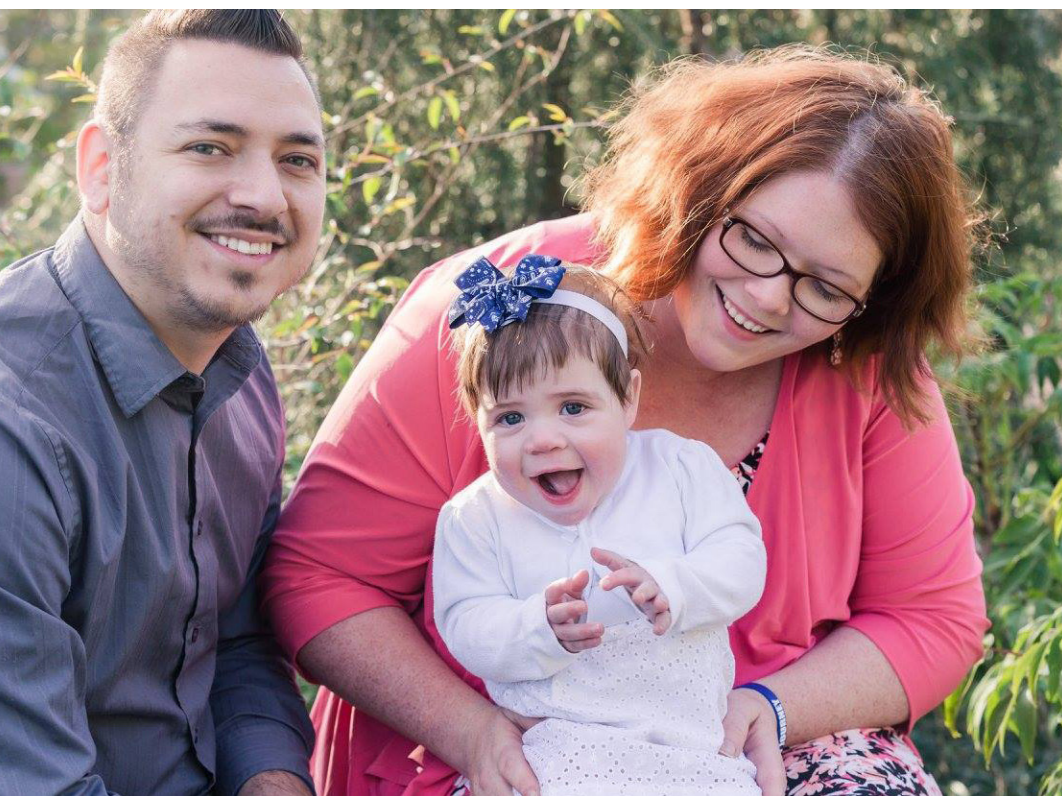
For her first six months of life, Naomi lived in ICU. I spent a large

amount of time each week either driving to, from, or being in the hospital with her. We placed Naomi in the hands of surgeons and specialists more than a couple of times, saying goodbye and praying we would see her again.

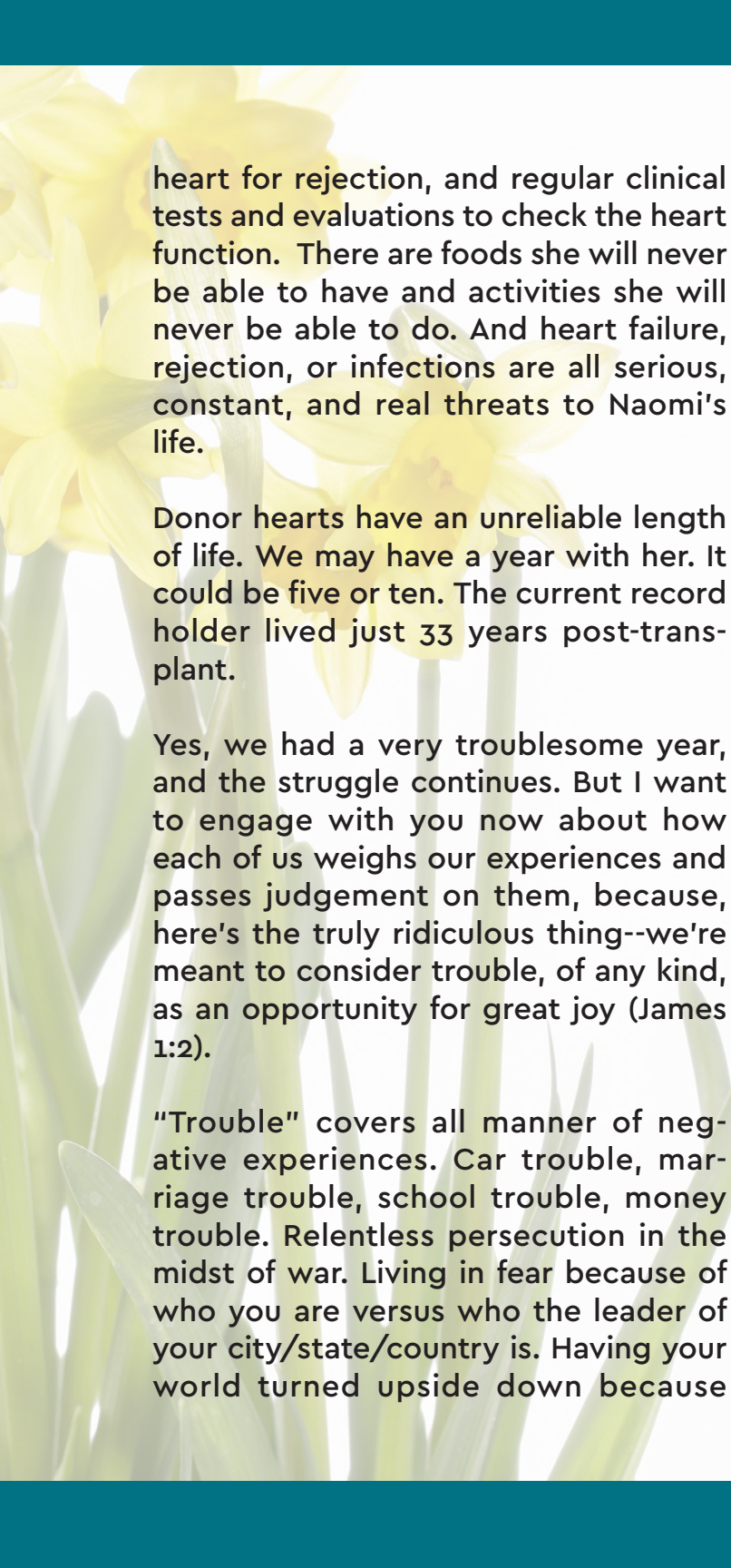
In August, she received her gift of life—a donor heart from an infant gone too soon. To know that the heart inside your child was once someone else's is a surreal and overwhelming thought, but something we are thankful for every day. We learned to feed Naomi through a stomach tube and administer 15 medications a day to keep her healthy. We studied how to recognize sudden heart failure.

Naomi came home for the first time at six months old, as I was dealing with anxiety and depression, and my husband struggling with post-traumatic stress disorder.

Transplant is not a cure. Naomi needs multiple daily medications for the rest of her life to "hide" her donor heart from her body, which would attack it as a foreign object. A side-effect of that is she gets sick easier and more seriously, requiring hospitalization again. She needs regular biopsies to check the







heart for rejection, and regular clinical tests and evaluations to check the heart function. There are foods she will never be able to have and activities she will never be able to do. And heart failure, rejection, or infections are all serious, constant, and real threats to Naomi's life.

Donor hearts have an unreliable length of life. We may have a year with her. It could be five or ten. The current record holder lived just 33 years post-transplant.

Yes, we had a very troublesome year, and the struggle continues. But I want to engage with you now about how each of us weighs our experiences and passes judgement on them, because, here's the truly ridiculous thing--we're meant to consider trouble, of any kind, as an opportunity for great joy (James 1:2).

"Trouble" covers all manner of negative experiences. Car trouble, marriage trouble, school trouble, money trouble. Relentless persecution in the midst of war. Living in fear because of who you are versus who the leader of your city/state/country is. Having your world turned upside down because

your newborn baby doesn't have the anatomy needed to keep her alive more than a few days.

Maybe you are in the midst of trouble. Maybe it's just an annoyance. Maybe it's consuming you. Either way, it can feel next to impossible to view that trouble as an opportunity for great joy. How could those two things possibly be the same? And the answer is in the verse after that, James 1:3. Here's 2 and 3 together: "When troubles of any kind come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy. For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow."

The trouble you experience... tests your faith which grows your endurance... therefore being an opportunity for great joy. What a radical school of thought.

Last fall, my 3-year-old daughter and I planted daffodil and tulip bulbs in the front yard. We dug the holes, placed the bulbs, threw in some fertilizer food, watered them, and covered them up with soil and mulch. Imagine a bulb at that point. It's in the dark. It's cold--the ground is nearly frozen. And if it could think and feel, I imagine it would be terrified. Confused. Troubled. It cannot

foresee its future, can't even imagine a future, given its present situation. And truly, that bulb must die.

As it begins to germinate, the bulb will cease to be a bulb, and will emerge a plant. This truth is confronted twice in the Bible. In 1 Corinthians 15:36, Paul said, "What you sow does not come to life unless it dies." And in John 12:24, Jesus says, "I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat is planted in the soil and dies, it remains a seed; but if it dies, it bears much fruit."

Unless the bulb sits in the cold, dark ground, synonymous with death, it will not grow. It will not push through the frozen ground in February and March, giving everyone hope that winter is nearly over and spring is on the way. It will not burst forth in a beautiful yellow or white bloom that brings cheer and hope to all who see it.

Unless we face and endure our troubles--of any kind--we will not grow either. And what is the point of life--physically or spiritually--if not to grow? Many parents say they want their children to stay little forever. But when pressed, the truth is that we want to see our kids grow up. We want the satisfaction and

pride of watching them take responsibility, live their values, and contribute to society. That only happens through growing up... which, all parents know, has its share of trouble. (Can I get an amen?)

Yes, last year was hard. Naomi's troubles are not over. We have been battered, and wearied. Like the daffodil bulb, we've reacted to our trouble in terror, confusion, even despair. But through the ever-present and ever-working hand of God, we are able to see this trouble as an opportunity.

We have grown in our faith and our endurance. We now know God in a deeper way than we did before, and trust His plan. We have been blessed by testimonies of how Naomi's life has touched others. This trouble has tested us, and we have endured. And so, we have found great joy.

It's almost a conscious choice. I could easily be bitter and refuse to see the goodness and provision and outright miracles we've experienced. But there is such a richer existence available to me!

Joseph, from the Old Testament of the Bible, had that choice too. His brothers

were so jealous of him that they threw him into an empty well, contemplated killing him and ended up selling him as a slave to foreigners. He was falsely accused and placed in prison. And yet, years later, when he confronted his brothers, he said, "You intended to harm me, but God intended it all for good. He brought me to this position so I could save the lives of many people." (Genesis 50:20)

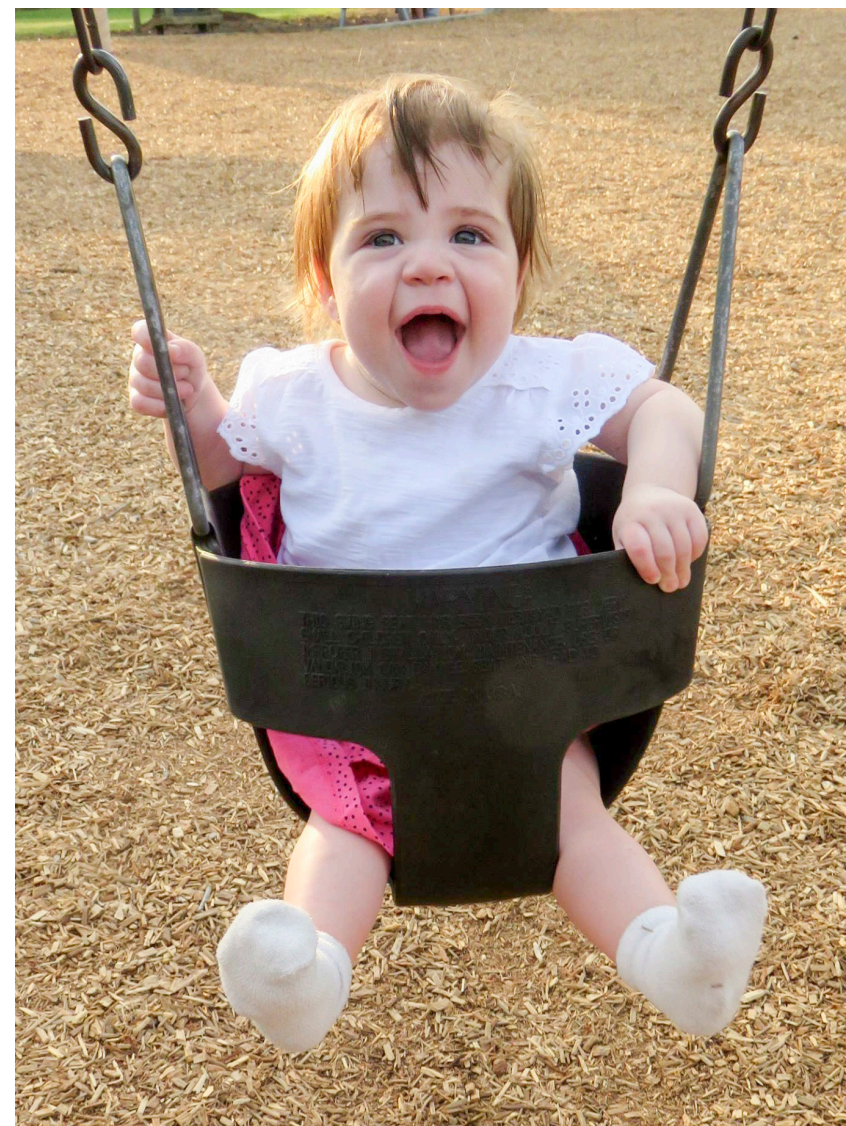
With that perspective, we can see our trials have meaning. Our problems have purpose. And that God uses trouble to accomplish great growth in our lives, and inspiration and change in others' lives.

I pray that whatever trouble you're in, that you will hold tight to the promise of God; that He knows His plan for you, and it's a good plan for hope and a future. I pray that regardless of how bad things are now, that you will look with faith and endurance to what is next, as you grow.

May we boldly live in 2017 with the declaration of Habakkuk:

"Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there

are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior."







Grace amazes,  
flows,  
surrounds us  
in every circumstance.

God comes to us  
in our wave-tossed boats.  
There is no need  
to jump out!

EMMANUEL, God-With-Us..  
is gracefully where we are.

*Hope Morgan Ward*



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