



Who is God When Life Stinks?

Time to Ask for Help

Our Thanksgiving celebration in New Hampshire was precious – enjoying the grandchildren, lots of good food, and resting together with all the family. Our sister-in-law is a photographer and she offered to take family portraits. We rarely have everyone together, and since we had almost lost Bob, this photo shoot was very significant. Bob held up well for the first dozen poses, but his eyes then began to glaze and his mouth started to droop, hanging open in exhaustion. My heart jumped in surprise as Bob's weary, worn expression vividly resembled my memories of his dear grandfather during his last days.

We ended the photo session as quickly as possible. Then, within just a few minutes after the photos were completed, we were able to view the digital enlargements on our son's large television screen. Bob and I wept together as we recognized how Bob had aged, his skin had grayed, and body had weakened over the past six rigorous months.

Thanksgiving weekend passed quickly, and sadly it was almost time to say "good-bye". Bob's wound was still open and oozing, and we were aware that this was a sign of continued infection. As we hung around together with our grown children the night before our flight home, we were squeezing out every minute of being close to our precious daughters and son. They each had traveled at their own expense to visit us in Florida, when they could, during their dad's hospitalizations or surgeries. Our children were a wonderful support system to me, even long distance. We were enjoying this last evening all together, when my cell phone rang.

"How odd", I thought. Only my family has this number, and they were all here. My co-workers were enjoying Thanksgiving vacation with their own families. "Who could this be?"

Yes, it was a co-worker, telling us to go on-line to read about a tragic traffic accident earlier that day. The family involved in the accident was one of our school families – a single mother, her four-year-old son Billy, and a teen-aged daughter. Grandma and Grandpa

were in the car also. Hesitantly, I listened as one of our kids went quickly on-line to a news channel and read aloud the details to me.

Apparently, little Billy and his whole family had visited relatives in Massachusetts over the Thanksgiving holiday. They were driving back to Florida when their van veered off the road, flipping upside down. By the time that rescue crews had rushed to the scene and carried everyone to a local hospital, Billy... his sister... and his grandmother were all dead.

“NO – NO – NO! This can’t be so!” My mind refused to believe that a vibrant, smiling little guy, who walked into our school every day, could be gone! What grief must be ripping apart his sweet mother, who had lost not only her young son, but her teen-aged daughter and her mother had been stripped away from her also!

Numbness came over my heart... I could not cope with the reality of these events right now. We had to pack, head to bed, and fly back to Florida.

On the flight home, my mind raced over the thoughts of sweet little Billy – always so full of life. His momma and I had just recently talked, and we shared our hearts about how we both often prayed for Billy to grow up into a man who would love and honor God. It seemed ironic now, as Billy was already sitting in the lap of the One who loved him even more than his mother or teachers did.

“Oh, Billy’s teachers will be so devastated!” I realized. Our school staff pours so much of their hearts into each child. I knew that everyone at school would be reeling with this tragedy. As administrator of the school and leader to the staff, my heart was broken for all those who would be affected by Billy’s tragic, sudden death. I pleaded for God’s love and comfort to wrap around each one.

When we arrived back in the comfort of our own home, I got as far as our living room before the grief overwhelmed me. I dropped down on the floor in the center of the room. My knees curled up to my chest and the torrents of tears began. Bob had come into the house, walking slowly behind me. Startled by the sound of heavy sobbing, he found me in the fetal position, rocking back and forth.

“I-can’t-do-this-anymore...” I stammered between sobs. “It’s-just-too- hard!”

My precious, compassionate husband was wide-eyed, as he stood over me and let me cry it out. Gently, he reminded me of the many people who had offered to help us – we were just to let them know how to help.

“But I need help to THINK!” I sobbed. After standing strong beside Bob’s bed through life-threatening decisions, and then daily monitoring the cancer medicine and follow-up for my body, my brain was exhausted. We had daily faced death, and God held it back in both of our lives. But then, my sister’s husband was taken so quickly from her, and I had not recovered yet from that shock. Now, a family that we saw everyday at school was gone, and our whole school would be dealing with the shock and questions of this seemingly absurd loss.

Also hanging heavy in my thoughts was the upcoming, scheduled PET scan in two days. We needed to determine if the alternative cancer treatment was still effective in shrinking the cancer tumor in my breast.

There was just too much to process, and then too many responsibilities to think about! My physical health, Bob’s unhealed wound and infection, the upcoming Christmas events with staff and school, and the always-looming medical bills were clearly too heavy for my shoulders to carry.

There is a joke within my 10 siblings that the three “blonde sisters” all THINK alike. We are each organized, driven, yep, even bossy at times. If I needed someone to THINK FOR ME, my younger sister Beth might be able to step in. She had already graciously offered help and Bob said it was time to call.

“Beth, I need help.” Those words would usually feel uncomfortable for me, but this time it was flat-out, simple truth!

Beth and her husband immediately made arrangement for the daily details with their own children, purchased a last minute airline ticket from Oregon to Florida, and Beth arrived on our doorstep just two days later.

Meanwhile, Bob's home health care nurse had confirmed that Bob's infection had spread. A severe diagnosis was delivered when we visited the surgeon – infection had spread to the bones in Bob's rib cage! The only possibility for healing would be to cut out more of Bob's chest wall, plus cut off pieces of bone from several of his ribs around the heart area. They could not predict how much more extensive the surgery might be, or even if it would be successful. But the surgeon guaranteed that it would involve a long recovery, including reconstructive surgery after the infection was confirmed to be gone.

What could we do? Our desire to surrender to the plan of God for our lives was pointing toward another obvious disappointing set-back for us. Bob would need to return to the hospital for more surgery, and he would need courage to face the drastic measures of removing bone and deep tissue. The doctor was quite certain that Bob would need to remain in the hospital over Christmas.

We could complain. We could doubt. We could turn our backs on God.

But our journey this far had proven to us the truth that GOD WALKS WITH US through the darkest valleys. He never promised "comfort" or "fix-it-all". But He did promise the amazing presence of a loving God.

Two days after her arrival, Beth drove us up to the hospital. She stood with me as we watched Bob check himself in for surgery. It was uncertain how extensive this surgery would be and how long would be the recovery. This would be surgery #6 in the past seven months. We wondered quietly... would it be the last?

From: Ruth Bell

Date: Thursday, December 6, 2007 10:11 PM, CST

RE: Surgery to remove infection

Dad/Bob is finally resting - guess the last dose of pain killers worked!

He seemed quite well all afternoon. He returned to the 5th floor room around 2 pm. The doctor explained that they were prepared for crisis, but everything went smoothly.

They kept digging until they felt all the infection was out - took cartilage, parts of 3 ribs, and some chest wall. Tomorrow we hope to see plastic surgeons about whether his chest cavity will fill in by itself, or need some rearranging or support. The void is about the size of a man's hand.

They used the same incision as before - and the vacuum foam fills both the cavity and the incision.

I will sleep here at the hospital tonight (already got an hour nap:). My sister Beth has our car back in Ocala and is running errands for me tomorrow. It's been a great help that she is helping do things that we have not had time to do.

THANK YOU for praying - when Bob/Dad woke up enough to discover he could talk and checked for body parts, his first words were "we have so much to be thankful for". Just makes me admire him more and more - so glad God desires to give us a little more time together....

Time to join Bob in snoring,

Mom/Ruth

From: Eleanor D.
Organization: Philadelphia Biblical University
Date: Wed, 12 Dec 2007 09:00:46 -0500

Dear Bob and Ruth,

I'm not sure if you remember me from working with PBU Alumni in the late 80s and early 90s, but I remember you vividly. Also, my Mom who is in glory always spoke so

highly of Bob's parents, who were their church's missionaries. Some people you just "connect" to in a special way.

I have been following your health issues closely and you have gone through much too much too young. We have prayed for you each time. I want you to know what a WONDERFUL testimony you both are for the Lord Jesus Christ. Other than the abundant grace of God I just don't know how you face one serious challenge after another! You are both courageous, warriors in your battles and a shining light for the Lord. We pray God will resolve each health issue one at a time and through it all your characters and Christian witness that was already so strong will continue to be refined and strengthened for God's glory. It's so hard to understand why God takes faithful people through such trials, but sometimes I think it's because He uses His best warriors to be shining examples in this dark world.

We love you and ask God to wrap His loving arms around you and give you the peace and victory that you seek in Him.

Blessings, Eleanor D.

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