

UPSIDE DOWN

STORIES OF GOD'S HELP
WHEN LIFE IS THROWN INTO TURMOIL

INTRODUCTION

The thought of putting together a booklet of stories where people had faced difficult circumstances and not got the 'happy ending' desired, was overwhelming at times. Yet as I talked to people I found they had looked to God and not relied on their own ideas of how things should be. I've seen that it is ok to tell God "It's hard, I'd like things to be different".

Like the people in the stories, I too began to focus on God and who He is, not the circumstances. I've come to see that He is able to use all things for good. As we lean on Him, it is no longer a matter of survival, but finding new hope and life.

Even though nothing changes – everything changes.

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Revised and updated: January 2016

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FACING CHRONIC PAIN

You don't expect to be diagnosed with arthritis in your 20s; especially when you've just had your first child.

It should have been the most wonderful time, getting to know this new little person. Instead, I began to experience pain and it became difficult to move, and do simple tasks. I felt robbed of the joy of becoming a parent and I worried I wasn't giving my son what he needed.

My GP didn't seem willing to listen or believe me, so it took a year to get a diagnosis. After a few months of treatment, I started to feel better. However, about six months later, I developed a chest infection. This meant antibiotics, which I couldn't take with the arthritis medication, so I had to stop. Within weeks I was right back at square one, in a lot of pain and knowing it would take months to feel well again.

Things were frustrating and uncertain, and I worried what it meant for the future for me and my family.

It's been the hardest couple of years, but God has used the situation to show me who He is in a way I couldn't understand before.

God spoke to me about the importance of thankfulness. If I get stuck thinking

about the things I can't do then I miss out on the good things. At one point it took such a long time to get ready to go out, leaving the house by 10am was an achievement. As I slowly got myself ready, my son would be jumping on my bed in absolute hysterics, having the best time. I had a choice: I could focus on how long things were taking me and how frustrating that was, or the fact that we were together and enjoying that time. I felt God say, "This is what life's all about," and I realised there was nowhere else I'd rather be.

God also showed me it's my responsibility to share how I'm feeling. He calls us to share with and support each other; if I'm not open about how I'm feeling no one can help me. I've read a lot of blogs and websites about chronic pain and illness, and the world's view is that, "No one understands what I'm going through; no one can relate to me; my friends and family say insensitive things." But that isn't the truth. God has felt the worst pain and suffers with us. He has helped me see that He knows what I'm going through and He has a plan for me. I can trust Him and let Him take control of this. Other people might not know exactly how I'm feeling, but everyone can draw on their own experiences of pain, and they can help me walk this situation in the right way. The amount of practical, emotional and prayer support I've had is just amazing.

God helped me understand that it isn't the condition that isolates me, but how I think about it. If I see it as something that cuts me off, then I'm cutting myself off.

Another thing I've learned through this is that knowing God is more important than being well. The amount of pain or how I'm feeling is not what's important.

My life isn't defined by how I feel, but by the fact that I'm chosen, valued and saved. If this pain lasts until the end of my life, it would be pretty rubbish – but God promises eternal life. It's not just about my physical health, but my spiritual health.

"GOD HELPED ME UNDERSTAND THAT IT ISN'T THE CONDITION THAT ISOLATES ME, BUT HOW I THINK ABOUT IT. IF I SEE IT AS SOMETHING THAT CUTS ME OFF, THEN I'M CUTTING MYSELF OFF"

There was one point where I had to run out of the Sunday meeting because it was too hard to sing that God is good. But God has brought me through and shown me that He is so good in all situations. I don't need to be fearful that He isn't good; if my heart is to find the truth and know Him, then He will show me who He is.

This doesn't mean there are no bad days and I never feel fed up or wouldn't like things to change. It's like walking a path and coming across a big obstacle, or someone jumping out in front of you. It's ok to react – to scream, to stop, to get cross. It's not about how I react, it's about engaging with God rather than trying to walk it alone. Even though physically I've been at my worst, I can still be at my best because God gives me a hope that takes me above the situation.



WORKING THROUGH A BREAKDOWN

Imagine a foster mum – someone who’s supposed to open their home to you, make you feel welcome and cared for – yet who constantly tells you, “Foster children never amount to anything.” That happened to me.

At the age of six, my siblings and I were taken into foster care and moved between families several times. Having already lost my dad when I was two, I’d now lost my mum. A few years later my sister and I were separated from our brother and now all we had was each other. The foster care my sister and I received was not healthy, and as soon as I was old enough I left, leaving my sister behind. Now I was completely alone. As a consequence, family wasn’t something that I held dear until I had children of my own.

I met the person I thought was my soulmate when I was 18, and we eventually married. He too had struggled through a difficult childhood, and our connection turned out to be co-dependency, although I wasn’t aware of this until many years later.

Life wasn’t easy, supporting a husband with mental health issues, raising three children and holding down a challenging job. My foster mother’s negative words rang in my head. Yet, they also gave me a motivation and determination to prove her wrong throughout those adult years. I still felt that

I was never good enough nor would ever be successful, but I wasn't going to give up on my family. Despite a very rocky marriage, I kept it together for my children's sake.

Eventually everything took its toll, and in 2011 I went through an emotional breakdown. This left me weak and vulnerable. I attended many counselling sessions where I was asked how I perceived myself. I chose the image of a single flower, which had once been so strong and vibrant in bloom, but now the petals were wilting and falling.

Counselling did nothing for me and eventually I hit rock bottom in 2013. God, though, was working behind the scenes. He placed an angel in my life, someone who would guide and support me through the darkest and most vulnerable moments. When you hit rock bottom, there is only one way to go, and that is up. I was searching, but I didn't really know what for.

During those early days, I asked my friend, "How do you forgive people who have wronged you?" She helped me understand how forgiving myself and others for mistakes of the past would help me to move forward, without taking the past with me. She had been praying for me for some time, yet she prayed with me that day, for the first time.

Things at home went from bad to worse. I did what I knew I must do – I had to leave, and my only option was to lodge in a friend's spare room.

While the circumstances around me were sometimes desperate, traumatic, even helpless, it was at this point I began to trust in God and surrendered all

my fears and pain to Him. Having God in my life gave me an inner strength, so although there was a storm raging around me, I knew an amazing peace and joy!

God knew my life and the course that it would take. Meeting with God and being joined to part of His family was like the missing piece of my life puzzle, and it slotted in perfectly. I had discovered what a real family was, at last!

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Although I'd had a Roman Catholic upbringing and been baptised as a teenager, at that time God remained a distant and unreachable figure. Now, God was no longer distant, but with me all the time. I wanted to be cleansed from my past, bury the old me and start a new life, living His way so I chose to be baptised again. At my baptism, I was refreshed with the Holy Spirit and it felt amazing. Someone had a picture for me that evening – God had shown them a flower that was bright, vibrant and new. Needless to say, this was very significant and I know it was God telling me I'd been reborn.

Psalm 139 says, “Like an open book, you watched me grow from conception to birth; all the stages of my life were spread out before you, The days of my life all prepared before I’d even lived one day,” and I know this to be true.

I have faced many crossroads, and learning to follow God’s nudges has been challenging, fulfilling and exciting. My daily circumstances are still very challenging and there are lots of issues to sort through. But He has transformed the way I think and how I choose. There are many paths I need to tread, but I trust God will light the right path for me to see clearly. God was with me, is with me and will be with me.



UNABLE TO CONCEIVE

Like our friends who married at the same time as us, my husband and I decided to take the leap into parenthood. We gave up contraception and waited with excitement and trepidation, but nothing happened.

We went to our GP, who sent us for tests. When the results came back, we were devastated – almost no hope. When we tried to talk to the consultant about how we felt, he changed the subject and became technical.

Our closest friends couldn't help either. It was nearly impossible to talk to anyone, partly because fertility treatment is so specialised, and partly because it was hard to believe anyone could genuinely understand how we felt. We spent hours talking to each other, though.

We found the Bible doesn't say much about being infertile. We read the stories of Sarah, Rachel and Hannah, but they eventually had children. We know God's love is unconditional and He wants us to put Him above all else, including spouse or children, but we live in a world where the 'normal' thing is to get married and have kids.

We tried the 'simple' treatments, but they were unsuccessful so we entered the world of IVF treatment.

It's like being on a rollercoaster. You try not to let the daily injections and clinic appointments rule your life, but inevitably they do. For six weeks we juggled our activities around the regime.

The anxiety and the inability to put into words what we were feeling caused communication difficulties between us and we struggled to hear God when we needed Him most. The noise of our emotions drowned out the still small voice of the Creator who knew exactly what we were feeling, since He made us in the first place.

"THE FORCE OF EMOTION SENT MY HUSBAND BACK TO JESUS LIKE NEVER BEFORE"

The time came for the IVF procedure. I was sedated, my eggs collected and taken to a laboratory for my husband's sperm to be added. To our shock, the lab technicians returned to tell us the quality was desperately low. They asked if we wanted to consider donor sperm. As we began to understand the implications of the results and their suggestion, we sensed failure.

Sure enough, next morning the result was phoned through – "We're very sorry, fertilisation has not occurred."

Failure. Shattered dreams. Future plans – gone forever. All clichés, but this was all we could manage. We tried hiding from our feelings, but they didn't

go away. This wasn't supposed to happen.

The force of emotion sent my husband back to Jesus like never before. For a year after the IVF, he rose at 6.00am every day, spending an hour in God's presence. As I prayed for him, I saw him change. He developed a wisdom and maturity I hadn't seen before.

We considered a second attempt at IVF, but the thought of a repeat performance with no guarantee of success was too much to bear. We decided to end our attempts and were immediately filled with a sense of peace that could only come from God. The pressure of having a family had been lifted.

Nothing seemed to change for me. I longed to meet with God; to find the answers to the meaning of life – or at least my life. I needed to know God had something for me, rather than face a blank future with no goals or vision.

The wife of one of the church leaders knew my situation and offered to be a listening ear. I arranged to see her. She asked some questions and let me talk, offering just tea and sympathy. We prayed and she included John 15:16, "You did not choose me, but I chose you to go and bear fruit – fruit that will last." It was like an arrow hitting the target: I had been chosen. God had planned my life like this because He had things for me to be and do.

I left with those words ringing in my ears and walked home, my heart filled with a sense of God's presence and a sense of purpose being added to my life. It didn't require a 'holy' place – just me and God, walking down the road together.

Who would have thought a simple prayer could change my life? But I had reckoned without the power of God. From that moment, I could begin to live with a sense of purpose. More than a physical miracle, God had done a miracle of emotional healing.

I can't say that I'm not sad at being unable to conceive, but I can say that God has done something very powerful that helps me handle the disappointment. Our life is different to other married couples – and it is exciting! We are free to serve God in ways others cannot, we have been free to travel and we have time to spend with people who need us. With every step of obedience, God is working out the unique plan He has just for us.

LIVING IN DECEITFUL RELATIONSHIPS



As a blushing bride I stepped into the future full of confidence that we would live “happily ever after”. After all the man I had married was a Christian and we had great aspirations as to how we wanted God to use us in the days ahead.

It wasn’t long though before I began to realise that the man I had married was not who I thought was. Just months into the marriage I began to sense that something was wrong.

There was an evasiveness about where he’d been and what he’d been doing; late nights in front of the TV on his own when I wanted to curl up in bed next to him. I became aware of his addiction to Adult channels, the visits to the strip clubs and I can only guess what else. Although there were endless promises to change, and concerned people helped with counselling sessions and prayer, any temporary change did not last. Sometimes it was easier not to ask when I knew things were not right. It was easier to pretend rather than face the reality of betrayal and rejection yet again.

We muddled through for nine years and all the time my resolve to protect myself grew stronger. I wanted to know what was happening less and less, because every time the lies were exposed it was like a knife twisting inside

me. I began to withdraw emotionally and shut off my feelings. I just wanted to be happy. As a Christian surely I should be immune to such pain.

Then the inevitable happened. I met someone who showed me genuine care and interest. I began to live a double life: sneaking off to meet him, snatching brief moments together, but always conscious that I was doing exactly the same as my husband. There was no difference between my lies and his now; I knew that what I was doing was wrong. At times I felt that if only I had the courage to seek from my Christian friends the spiral of deception could be broken, but I couldn't open up to them.

After a year of living a lie I could cope no longer. I still cared about my husband but felt torn between him and my new infatuation. I left him, the deception, and my Christianity behind. I couldn't face the sense of guilt and shame, and I knew that what I was doing was a million miles from God's plan for my life.

Although I'd written myself off, God hadn't. All the time I knew that I could not deny the reality of my relationship with God and that one day I would have to sort things out. That day came about a year into my new life. I was living with friends from work who'd helped me through the upheaval of the split with my husband. Their phone rang one Saturday afternoon. It was the leader of the church. I knew that I had to see him and his wife, although I also knew that it meant the end of running away. Over the next six months they helped me by showing me love, not condemnation, even though I had been condemning myself. This

was God's love in action, reaching out to me even when I was running in the other direction.

I ended my new relationship knowing that it couldn't continue if I was to get right with God. My husband and I divorced; there was no way back for us. He was enjoying a new life and was not prepared to let God have a say in that. I hit an all time low. I felt as though life was over, and even cried to God to let my life end because of the loneliness which I now felt. The two people whom I'd loved were both gone. I faced the prospect of struggling through on my own for the rest of my days and so I began to do so, not letting people close enough to see the pain, just in case I had to face it as well.

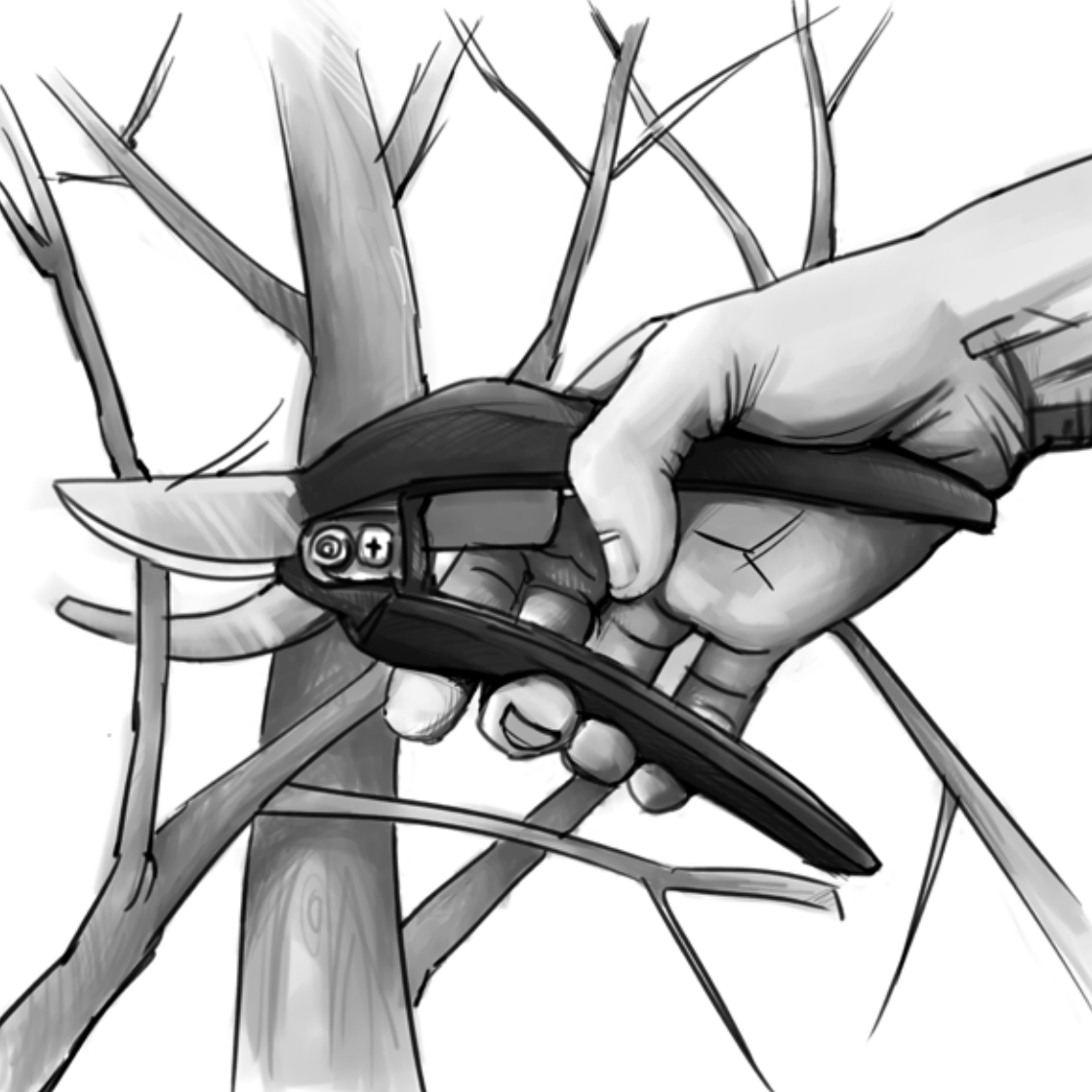
**"ALTHOUGH I'D WRITTEN MYSELF OFF, GOD HADN'T...I COULD NOT
DENY THE REALITY OF MY RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD"**

One Christmas, a few years later, I spent the entire time crying. Finally, I admitted to my Christian friends that I was very depressed. They prayed for me and something changed almost immediately in response to my cry for help. I knew once again the unchanging love and forgiveness of God, a love that far outweighs any human love.

Back on an even emotional keel now, I set about the business of immersing

myself in my career and church life. People encouraged me with words about God restoring the former things and being my provider and I began to know a time of real fulfilment and enjoyment in work and church.

I was resigned to a single life and then the impossible happened: I met a man with no history of broken relationships. He heard all about my past, but it didn't seem to concern him. Over the months of getting to know each other he formed a desire to follow God. He married me and now we have a child that is a constant reminder to me of God's love, blessing and restoration. I'm learning that even in the face of the impossible God knows what we need and has things planned for us that we cannot begin to imagine.



AN UNFULFILLED CAREER DREAM

I firmly believe everyone should have dreams: dreams about their future, their destiny, or things they would like to accomplish in life.

For as long as I can remember, I harboured a dream of being recognised as someone special – a writer (my earliest dream), a rock musician, a football legend, an actor or even a preacher. At the age of nine, I decided to be an actor. The dream followed me through boarding school, and continued for a long time.

When I was nineteen, I realised God wanted to know me personally. The realisation that His love was so overwhelming made everything else pale in comparison. I wanted to express God's love in whatever way I could. For several months I concentrated on playing guitar, song writing and learning to play worship songs without music. I developed another dream: leading God's people in praise and worship.

But the acting dream didn't die. I believe God directed me through various circumstances to study drama. For two years, much of this dream became reality, as I learned I had enough ability to play roles such as 'Henry V.' During this time, I met and fell in love with another student, and we dreamed of getting married and having a family.

The desire to act remained. I wanted to become a respected character actor who was recognised, not hounded, and I wanted to earn a decent living doing the one thing I felt I'd been created for.

After we got married, my wife and I started working for the church. The dream to act was suppressed, but surfaced in any drama we were called upon to write and perform. I regularly led worship, fulfilling one of my dreams, but the need to act remained.

"A PRAYER OF LAYING DOWN MY DREAM TO ACT... AND IT WAS LIKE A BLOCKAGE WAS COMPLETELY SHATTERED"

I can only describe it like being in love with someone unattainable: there is a longing to perform, to have the recognition, to exercise this talent. Everyday life gets in the way of that dream, to the extent that you lose patience with people and circumstances that appear to hold you back. I could not bear to contemplate that I might never get to play Hamlet. It seems silly, but that was my perspective on life.

I took a course in computer programming. My computing career gained momentum and over several years, I climbed my way into management. When I turned thirty, I began to worry that my dream would never be fulfilled and became aware that even if I did succeed as an actor, it wouldn't satisfy me.

I became morose, and while I adored my wife and children, there was a niggling depression which occasionally clouded over me, obscuring happiness and God.

I wrote and appeared in a musical which was produced by the church. It was well received, and I believe it sowed the seeds of Christianity; but in all honesty, my motivation was as much to prove myself as it was to bring glory to God. When that finished, my purpose seemed to fade again, and I contemplated the rest of my life with a sense of deep regret.

Because of this growing discontent, the leaders of our church arranged for my wife and I to pray with pastors from California. The pastor, Dave, immediately zeroed in on my unfulfilled dreams, and began to explore that avenue of counselling. I thought it was a red herring, but allowed him to pursue it, almost out of politeness.

There are times when God is not quite so polite – and this was one of them. Dave led me through a prayer of laying down my dream to act, and it was like a blockage was completely shattered, as I laid it down once and for all. The Holy Spirit did some deep work that night, and I later realised the desperate longing had gone. I still enjoyed acting, but the need to act, the desire to prove myself and the deep regrets had all gone.

It would be dishonest to say that life has been plain sailing since then, although there is no doubt that it has been easier. If God decides to lead me back in the direction of performing, that would be His choice – but I am content if that part of my life has been buried forever

Dreams inspired by God are positive things. It was a series of dreams which led Joseph to greatness; a dream which enabled Paul to plant numerous churches. Dreams have created major works in God's Kingdom – but in all examples God refines, disciplines, prunes and hones the dreamer to carry them out as He intends. Part of my giving up the dream for recognition has been just that: where it will all lead is anyone's guess. My job is to accept what God has given me to do, and do it to the best of my ability.



LOSING MY LIFE-LONG PARTNER

She was my soulmate, my helpmate, my best friend, the mother of my children, my constant companion.

She was my wife of 34 years. We were so much a part of each other's lives, we knew what the other was thinking – we always agreed on how much money to give in an offering, for example. We enjoyed our life together, although it did throw us the occasional curved ball, not least the fact that we were both diagnosed with cancer, finally ending up in the same hospital at the same time.

After that stay in hospital, I was completely healed but my wife didn't fare so well. Over the next eight years, she continued to battle against the after-effects of cancer. These years brought many difficulties, and I found myself turning to God and saying, "I can't do this – help me; resource me in this," which He did in many ways.

The support we received from both our natural family and our LifeLine church family was incredible. People would cook and clean for us, and just took care of the practicalities which eased the pressure. I'm not sure how, or even if, I would have coped without it.

There was a lot prayer for healing over these eight years; however, my wife eventually passed away. Throughout her illness, both I and others wondered

why God didn't heal her.

Before I'd met her, I'd worked for an organisation that provided a Christian presence at various armed forces barracks throughout the UK and Ireland. There, I met a couple whose youngest son had been in a motorcycle accident. He was seriously ill so his parents and others prayed for him to be healed, but he didn't survive. His mother later described it as "perfect healing." He wasn't with them, which was tragic, but he was no longer suffering and was made whole again.

"I DIDN'T HAVE TO UNDERSTAND, BUT ACKNOWLEDGING IT AND
ACCEPTING THAT GOD KNOWS BEST BROUGHT A SENSE OF SECURITY,
PEACE AND STRENGTH"

Remembering this challenged my expectation of what we were praying for. During the last four weeks of my wife's life, after the cancer returned and became more aggressive, I was reminded that God is sovereign. If her life had run its course, this was God calling her home to be with Him – she was not my possession to keep, but my privilege to have for the time He'd ordained. I didn't have to understand, but acknowledging I didn't understand and accepting that God knows best brought a sense of security, peace and strength.

That doesn't mean it didn't hurt – it was devastating, and for a long time

afterwards I found myself thinking, 'If only I'd done more... What else should I have done? Would things be different if I'd prayed harder?' It wasn't until several years after my wife died that I finally voiced this out loud, then people were able to pray for me and I was released from these feelings. There wasn't anything else to be done – it was in God's hands from the start.

Even now there are still what my family call 'cricket bat moments,' when it hits me like a cricket bat to the face. But each time I remember God is in control, and focusing my eyes back on Him restores that strength and sense of well-being.

Having been one half of a pair for 34 years – our friends often said they never thought of my wife and me as individuals – 'just' being me is something I'm still seeking to come to grips with. What I do know is that God has saved me to fulfil a purpose, initially to care for my wife as she thoroughly deserved. There are times when I struggle to understand what the outworking of this purpose is now, but I know I am not here to be a spectator.

There are people God has placed on my heart and drawn alongside me who have become like family to me, and I am keen to serve the community in any way I can, helping people to develop, grow and become more of the people He has appointed them to be. I am looking to the future with a quiet sense of expectation and wonder.

Although the circumstances don't always make sense, God never makes a mistake. He is sovereign, and when my eyes are on Him, He will bring strength and peace to me in the situation.

WANTING TO MOVE AWAY



I wanted to move away from London. I felt disconnected and unsettled, like I wanted a 'new' thing.

I'd been feeling this way on and off for a few years, and when close friends and their family moved away it reinforced these feelings and refuelled my own sense of dissatisfaction.

I got our house valued (my husband said I could do that much!), registered with an estate agent and started to do some research about different areas and churches there. In the back of my mind, though, I knew that what I really needed was to find God in all my unsettledness. Many of our friends were praying that we'd hear God together as to what we should do, but in my desperation I would often pray, "God, will You break through in my husband because he's not hearing You; help him to hear You about what we should do..."

But God was also speaking clearly to me at that time about the state of my heart, and how my heart needed to be right before Him. I was growing in my sense of desperation just to hear what God was saying. I was reading books, going to meetings, listening to talks online, trying to hear Him more; searching for an answer. Often my question was, "God, where? Where do I find it?"

Gradually that turned into a wider hunger for Him, and one night I was watching a meeting online. The guy leading the meeting said, “This sounds a bit weird, but what I want you to do is get your mobile phone out. There’s someone that God’s put on your heart, and I want you to go to your contact list, get their picture up, and we’re going to pray for them that God would touch their lives.”

I knew immediately who that friend was. I’d been getting to know my daughter’s class teacher. I didn’t know her that well, but I felt that we clicked and I felt a real burden for her, so I prayed for her, and I prayed that God would really touch her.

“GOD WAS CHANGING MY HEART. THE TOTAL FOCUS ON MOVING
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My turmoil around wanting to move away continued, but I found myself talking to God about the teacher a lot after that, and my friendship with her quickly started to grow. It wasn’t long before I remember just crying out to God and saying, “God, more than anything else, I want my friend to come to know You!”

During this time, God was changing my heart. The total focus on moving

had shifted, and my determination to find the exit door was no longer my preoccupation. I was looking to God to see His love come through for my friend. I wanted to know Him more deeply, I wanted to hear Him and I just became really eager to see God do things that only He could do. As she and I would sit and talk more and more about the things of God, He was renewing my excitement about Him and my appreciation of things I’d taken for granted for a long time, like the church community around me.

While God was working in me, refreshing me in His love, the icing on the cake was that He began to transform my friend’s life in amazing ways too.

I love feeling God’s nudges and watching what He does when we respond to them. He continues to do amazing things, and I’m thankful that He is able to bring something out of nothing! Now, more than anything, I want to be walking with Him, wherever that is. I’m not saying we’ll never move away – but I’ve learned that wholeness and fulfilment come when we’re walking with Him, hearing and doing.

I’m thankful to God that wherever we are, and wherever we’re at, He doesn’t change and He doesn’t back off, even when we’re struggling. Now I feel connected and excited and thankful – thankful that knowing my Father and walking with Him is the best thing in the world.



LIFE THREATENING ILLNESSES

It seemed unreal – lying in a hospital bed awaiting a major operation that would either save my life or kill me! Only four months earlier, I'd led a team of young people to help a church in Latvia. I was two months into a new job, but now I was in extreme pain and at the point of death.

The diagnosis was colitis, a bowel disease. It was an acute attack and the initial treatment was high doses of steroids. Four weeks later it was clear it wasn't working.

People in my church and other churches had been praying and I was sure God was going to heal me. I was confident I wouldn't need surgery – God wouldn't allow that...

I remember when my consultant told me the only option was major surgery to remove the diseased part of the colon. I refused to even see a surgeon at first – I couldn't face reality. Although my church leaders, parents and the nurses all had words of encouragement, care and comfort, I didn't want to listen. How could God allow this to happen?

When I was finally alone I had to face the whole issue. I was in extreme pain, had lost all continence in the bowel and was being fed through a machine. I began to listen to a worship album and as I listened, I began to cry and

couldn't stop. As the music continued, I started to concentrate on the words, not my feelings and found myself acknowledging God's faithfulness and love. The questions going round through my head started to change. Wasn't He the God who controlled this whole earth – wasn't He in charge of my life? Hadn't He shown Himself to be good and faithful? God started to do an incredible thing in me, He assured me of His love and I knew I didn't need to be afraid.

A few days later I had my operation. The surgeon said that my colon was in a dreadful condition, if he'd left surgery for a few more days my colon would have perforated. After three months in hospital I was discharged; very weak and three stone lighter.

Two months later things hadn't got better and the only option was further surgery, meaning I would never have a normally functioning bowel. I was overwhelmed with a heavy sense of despair.

A friend recommended I obtain a second opinion from a specialist bowel consultant. Amazingly, we got an appointment that week. Following some tests, the new consultant reckoned he could fix me without surgery. After a new course of antibiotics I was home within the week. My hope was restored; maybe I could be well again.

By next March, life was returning to normal. I moved into a new flat and started to put on weight. By the summer I was living independently and back at work part-time. I even went on holiday. But the pain returned in December. I wanted to ignore it, but it got worse. The doctors weren't sure what was causing the problem. More operations. More positive remarks from the doctors, but I kept losing weight and my substitute bowel ceased to function.

The Psalms continued to encourage me and I was finding God's strength in the disappointment. I no longer needed to ask, "Why?" but at the same time, I was struggling to understand what God was doing. Did I not have enough faith? Was I doing something wrong?

**"WE HAVE NO ABILITY TO MUSTER UP FAITH, ONLY GOD CAN DO
THIS IN US AS WE CHOOSE TO SUBMIT OUR LIVES TO HIM"**

However, it's amazing how God meets us where we are. A pastor from Sierra Leone was visiting my church and he came to see me. He told me he believed God wanted me to thank Him for the situation as it was. I wasn't sure whether I wanted to punch him or hug him! He said I didn't have to 'muster anything up;' God would give me the ability to thank Him. This pastor had lived through a war for eight years; he wasn't talking theory but was an example of one who can be thankful in whatever circumstance. I so wanted to step out of the depression and despair and knew what he was saying was the key. He prayed for me and God changed my heart.

In the coming days things were different. Physically I continued to get worse, but within myself I was once again finding God's help to cope. I was in a lot of pain and discomfort and to top it all, I got a blood clot in my leg which broke off and travelled to my lung.

This was the final test of endurance. I was transferred to intensive care because

I couldn't breathe. I remember being keen not to wake up the next day, death seemed a better option. The leaders of my church visited and I explained how I was feeling. They prayed for me and the honesty helped and I consciously opened myself for a fresh touch from God. That night God assured me of His purpose and promised victory over my illness. I read in Psalm 112 that those who love God need have no fear of bad news.

More operations followed. More consultations. I was back at home again and was slowly picking up the pieces of my life. When I had left hospital after the final operation, I knew two and a half years of severe illness had ended. God had been victorious over the battle for my life.

I have faced many things during my illness and since. I have learned there is no 'formula' for handling disappointment. We have no ability to muster up faith, only God can do this in us as we choose to submit our lives to Him. The only thing I do know is that God honours honesty and as we 'pour out our hearts to Him,' He does hear and will answer.

There are things I would like to be different in my physical condition, but I thank God for what He has done in my life through that difficult time.



STRUGGLING WITH INADEQUACY

My wife and I always felt we'd have one child of our own, then adopt more. We tried for a baby, but nothing happened. We saw the doctor, who referred us for IVF treatment. The first round of IVF failed.

Around the same time, I was on the bus home from work when I felt God say, "You're not being paid enough and I'm going to do something about it." Then I was made redundant.

I spent a lot of time wrestling with God – what was going on? What did it mean? I didn't have a child or a job – I didn't understand why this was happening.

During this time, we learned to live by faith. We made ourselves more diligent with our money, and wondered if we could get by on just my wife's salary.

The world sees a man as a father, a provider, a breadwinner – all of these had been taken away from me. My pride was crushed and I felt inadequate. It was like my identity as a man was being challenged.

A friend had a word for me – "Don't be an island." I knew I had to talk about how I was feeling, so I opened up to friends who prayed for and stood with me.

Six months later, I got a new job with a £14,000 pay rise – this was God fulfilling His word! We were coming up for our second round of IVF – maybe that would work out too.

But the IVF failed again, and I lost this job. All our plans were on hold. Everything was very frustrating.

As we went into our third round of IVF, we'd reached the point of thinking, 'Either this works or we're done with it.' My wife felt God say, "You need to trust me." The IVF failed, and although we both felt sad, we were relieved. We didn't want it to be open-ended – we could draw a line under this chapter and move forward.

"MY PRIDE WAS CRUSHED AND I FELT INADEQUATE. IT WAS LIKE MY IDENTITY AS A MAN WAS BEING CHALLENGED"

I kept talking to people, so as to avoid being an 'island.' As I listened to the testimony of others, I realised God can do anything He wants, at any time. I was learning to take my hands off the controls and let God have them. Maybe my life didn't look how the world thought it should, but I'm not defined by my job, how much money I earn, or my role. God gave me a new confidence and security in Him.

We still had hopes for a family, and I kept looking for another job.

My wife found a charity that did fostering-to-adopt and we decided to put ourselves forward. If we did get approved to foster, it looked like my wife would have to take a career break. She had a job she loved and had trained hard for, so she wasn't sure what to do. I'd found a new job, with a £4,000 pay rise, but I wasn't enjoying it. I decided to give up work to be the full time carer – not what a man usually does, but we felt it would work for us.

During our assessment, God gave me confidence and peace with myself and I was able to be completely transparent about things. The panel had no questions for us, so we felt encouraged.

We were approved to foster, and a few potential children came up over the next few months, but didn't work out. We looked into mainstream adoption, but felt it wasn't for us. By now, we were disappointed and confused about everything. We didn't blame God, and we knew He was with us through everything, but it was still painful.

We'd heard nothing from the fostering charity for five months when we got an email about another child. People prayed with us, "God where is this child?" My wife had a feeling of, 'This is the one...'

It's been a long and challenging journey, but God was always with us, providing enough light for the next step. I might have been stripped back of the things that make a man in the world's eyes, but God gave me a new identity in Him. I'm at peace with myself, knowing I'm fulfilling the role He has for me. The child did come to us, and of course we are over the moon, but it's about the journey God's taken us on.

RAISING A CHILD WITH ADDITIONAL NEEDS



Today there is more awareness of children with additional needs, but when I had my first child it was uncharted territory. It opened up a new and unexpected world for me.

After a difficult birth, I took home a baby boy who rarely slept and constantly cried. At 11 months, he was diagnosed with congenital hypertonia, or lack of muscle tone. The doctors weren't sure what this would mean long term, and I was told, "Wait and see."

As he grew, I noticed things that didn't fit with the normal childhood pattern. He lost his balance easily, he couldn't run or jump and struggled to hold pens and pencils to colour. He didn't mix or play with other children and he didn't express his emotions well, screaming, throwing things and sometimes hurting himself. When I raised my concerns with the GP, I was promptly dismissed. If I already had a child, I was told, I wouldn't be worried.

I'd been a teacher before having my son and could easily organise a class of over thirty children, but one small child was bringing me to my knees. Every day felt like climbing a mountain, only to begin again the next morning.

I had none of my own strength left, so I asked God for His. Each day was still difficult and unpredictable, but I felt able to cope because of having God's

peace. He helped me admit I was struggling and placed people around me to support me. One day I bumped into an old friend at the baby clinic, and this chance encounter gave me hope. Her son had also been a constant crier – and she’d survived! She introduced me to a group of mums who listened and supported me.

Soon the time came for my son to go to school. He still wasn’t a sociable child, and struggled physically, so I worried – would he fit in? Would he be able to get changed for PE? And would the staff cope with him?

After half a term in a local primary school, he was sent to an Observation and Assessment Unit. Students are normally there for two terms, but he stayed for two years. He was supposed to go back to mainstream school, but the school couldn’t provide what he needed and refused to take him.

It was an uncertain time. I didn’t want to settle for the first thing that came along: I wanted my son to be somewhere the staff would understand him, not just dismiss things as bad behaviour. God enabled me to keep fighting for the best for him.

He got a place at a specialist school and was the first child in the borough to have one-to-one classroom support. The school also integrated him back into mainstream school, so that he spent two days a week at a primary school, and went on to study GCSEs part time and a full time Sixth Form course.

We began to look at further education options, at a residential college near Coventry. There were two issues with this.

Firstly, finance – the cost was some £40,000 a year (for a three year course!). The local authority told us we could apply for funding – but we’d never get it. We were in no position to self-finance.

Secondly, I wasn’t sure if I could let him go. He’d never lived away from home, and he liked routine and familiarity. Would he cope in such a different environment, so far away?

Once again, I looked to God. After a long and complicated application process, the funding was approved. Since we’d been told this would never happen, it was miraculous provision.

More importantly, we visited the area, got to know the surroundings, and looked at some local churches. I knew this was God’s provision, and trusting Him was the best thing to do. I felt peace to let my son go.

At college, my son was diagnosed with Asperger’s Syndrome, which had never been recognised locally. He received speech and language therapy to help with his communication skills.

After college he was directed to an organisation helping those on the autistic spectrum find work. He had two periods of paid employment and currently does voluntary work. He’s done things I was told he would never be able to, and I’m absolutely delighted and thankful to God for how my son has become his own person with his own identity.

There are still battles to face – my son isn’t working at the moment, there are

people who would rather try to change him than adapt the world around him, and as an older parent providing a home and support for him, I do worry about what might happen when I'm no longer here. Psalm 139 says God knit him together in my womb and he is fearfully and wonderfully made, and I know God has a plan for him. I've seen this throughout his life and I trust he's in God's hands, which is the safest place for him to be.



MOVING ON FROM A DIVORCE

I was a wife in a sick marriage, but we were determined to work through the problems. After all, my husband and I were both Christians and we'd made a commitment to each other. Surely we'd be able to press through and make things work.

We'd been living abroad for three years when I returned to the UK with our children, but my husband stayed overseas for a further six months with work. It was at this point he told me he wanted us to split up. He was struggling with his faith, and this became a real division between us. However we both agreed we would make things work.

I came to LifeLine via a connection from our time abroad, and from the first Sunday my children and I visited, we felt like part of the community. Even though we were living in south London, we made the journey to Dagenham because it felt like home.

Six months later, my husband arrived back into the family home and we were supported to work towards rebuilding our marriage.

God placed people around me who supported us through this time, as my husband and I attended marriage counselling, and he spent time with people who challenged him about his loss of faith. I'm particularly thankful for friends

who faithfully prayed with me each week for my husband to be restored into his relationship with God.

However, some eighteen months later, he finally decided he was leaving. We'd been married 24 years and survived other issues, but I knew that I had done everything I could to keep the marriage together. Now I had to let him go.

This was a very difficult time, and once again God surrounded me with those who stood with me and wept with me.

"GOD PROTECTED MY HEART, KEEPING IT FREE FROM BITTERNESS, AND I WAS ABLE TO FORGIVE AND LET GO"

God supported me through this transition. I was given a picture of a heart in God's hands, and as long as the heart stayed in His hands, it wouldn't become hard and God would heal it. It would have been easy to be angry and resentful towards my husband, but I chose to take a position of not talking about him in a negative way. Some friends couldn't understand my attitude, which was that he'd done what he said he would, tried his best, but it hadn't worked. God protected my heart, keeping it free from bitterness, and I was able to forgive him and let go.

God also gave me hope – not hope that my husband would come back, but

hope for the future and for my children.

But there was another adjustment I needed to make, from seeing myself as a divorcee into being a single woman with a sense of purpose. For some time I had seen myself as a second class citizen in the church because of my failed marriage. At a weekend away with the church leaders, someone brought a picture of a barrel that had water in it. The water had become stagnant and a layer of mould had built up. If the nasty layer was poured away, God could pour in something fresh and completely transform things. This stirred something in me, and I had to confess how I felt. As I was honest with people and made the declaration, I knew this feeling was a lie. I was set free from it, and the sense of judgement I perceived from others – they had both been in my head all along.

I am thankful to God that He released me from this into a new identity as a single woman with purpose and a destiny. Many brothers and sisters in LifeLine have supported me through these years and I know that I am loved and valued.

LOSING MY MOTHER



It was my worst nightmare! I had lost my Dad to a brain tumour three years previously and now my Mum had died from breast cancer.

I'm coming to realise now that sometimes God allows us to face our worst fears so that He is bigger than the fear, and whatever happens in our lives, if we trust Him, he will help us.

Shortly after my Mum died, I remember feeling very angry with God, asking Him "How dare you take my Mum as well as my Dad!" At that point I had a real sense of God saying that Mum didn't 'belong' to me like a possession, but that she was His gift to me for that time. God gives us people for a time, and sometimes He takes them away before we are ready - according to His purpose. I realised then that I had a choice. I could stamp my feet and shout "it's not fair!" or I could thank God that he gave me a loving Mum. I could be grateful for who she was, and what she gave to me or I could stay angry that she had not lived to see all that she had wanted for me.

The period after Mum's death was traumatic and the pain of loss was almost unbearable. Somehow we expect our parents to always be there to support us, and to celebrate the turning points in our lives. For a long time coming to terms with that loss was a daily struggle.

It is only now, five years later, that I can look back and recognise God was working to bring good out of bad.

For example, having experienced long term pain myself, I was able to understand some of my Mum's frustrations in the months before her death, as she became more dependent on others for her care. Because I lived alone I had time to listen to her on the phone. This led to a deepening of our relationship which allowed me to appreciate her in a way that I hadn't really done before.

Good came out of bad in another way too. A few years earlier, unable to work because of my back pain, I was given this verse from Joel 2 v 25, "I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten". This came at a time when I had no sense of hope for the future. I had started to remind God of this promise, asking Him to begin this restoration, and then I discovered that my inheritance from my Mum was more than I ever expected. I had enough money to buy a little house, which was worth more than I could have saved even if I had been able to work full time for all the years I was ill.

Even though I sometimes still miss my Mum, I know that God has promised he will never leave me and that nothing can separate me from His love.

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