

*Hooked
on*
HOPE

Ralph E. Johnson, M.D.

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Dedicated to my wife Sylvia
and the late Jamie Buckingham,
gracious provisions of God
in times of need.

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Preface

So that we might accept His will for our lives, God permits trials and tribulation to occur. In fact, God says He refines us in the “*furnace of affliction*” (Isaiah 48:10). At times affliction results from poor choices such as the alcohol and drug addiction which held me captive for many years. At other times, adversity is not self-inflicted such as my cancer diagnosed nine years ago. Yet even cancer has proven a servant to draw me closer to a loving God and His will for my life.

It has been said that ‘hopelessness breeds recklessness.’ I found this to be true in my own life...until I learned that “*those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength*” and “*will soar on wings like eagles*” (Isaiah:40:31). Perhaps my own testimony will encourage those who face obstacles and find themselves in despair. If my story brings you hope, then to God be all the glory.

Ralph Emil Johnson
November, 2000
St. Petersburg, Florida

1. The “Call”

Each of us has experienced waiting for a certain report or phone call with a degree of anxiety. And this particular call was fully expected. Two days earlier, a urologist had performed biopsies on my prostate gland to rule out cancer. The report was to be ready within 48 hours, and the countdown was now over.

A rather remarkable event some days earlier led to this biopsy. On a Sunday evening in December of 1991, I found myself meditating on Psalm 107:20: *“He sent forth his word and healed them; he rescued them from the grave.”* While meditating on the verse, a word of knowledge came from God.

There was no possible way of mistaking this message. My prostate gland contained cancer!

What made this so remarkable was that I had no symptoms of cancer. Furthermore, I’d undergone a routine examination only months before, and was told the prostate tests were normal.

Yet on that particular Sunday evening, I knew beyond a shadow of doubt that I’d heard from God. So my first telephone call the following morning was to Dr. John Scheuren, a respected urologist.

“What? You want me to do a prostate biopsy? Are you crazy?”

Silence followed, and I took a deep breath before continuing. “I know you checked me recently, so let

me explain my request.” I proceeded to tell just how God had spoken to my heart the prior evening. Yet my words met with obvious disbelief.

“Are you certain you want me to do this? I’ll bet my \$1000 against your \$1 that a biopsy won’t show anything!”

“Sorry, John. I can’t take your money. You know my past and how my life has changed. Now I listen for God’s voice and know when He speaks. In fact, Jesus tells us that His sheep know His voice.”

Dr. Scheuren was reluctant. “If you insist. Be at my office at 10:00 a.m. next Monday and we will have the ultrasound unit ready for biopsy.

It was now two days later and the report was due. I’d asked the office manager, Pearl Williams, to hold all other calls so to not interrupt my time with another couple. Jamie and Jackie Buckingham had become very special in our lives. Jamie was known internationally as an author and conference speaker and was senior pastor of an independent pentecostal church across the State of Florida in Melbourne.

Jamie was under my care for cancer treatment. I had just explained that a CT scan that very morning had revealed recurrence of his kidney cancer with extensive metastatic spread to the liver. They would need to cancel a trip to London the next week where the release of Jamie’s book, *Summer of Miracles*, was scheduled to take place.

I had also shared what had taken place regarding my prostate...and that the pathology report was due momentarily.

Then the phone rang. And Dr. Scheuren’s voice was unusually somber.

“Ralph, I can hardly believe it!” The biopsies did find cancer hidden in your prostate gland. But don’t be concerned. It’s a slow-growing cancer. Let’s get together in a few days and talk about treatment.

Somehow I knew John was hedging. Indeed, the cancer proved to be Grade 7 of a possible 10, tending toward a faster growing type.

Replacing the phone, I turned to Jamie and Jackie. “Now it’s my turn. I have cancer too...”

It was an emotional moment. The biopsy showed exactly what God had told me. Like no time in the past, I appreciated what Jesus meant by referring to Himself as the Good Shepherd. Now He’d warned one of the sheep about a wolf that no one else saw coming. And I’d been forced to insist that a biopsy be done *against medical advice*.

Shortly after the Buckingham’s left, I reflected on words I spoke to my wife Sylvia a full year earlier.

“Jamie is placed in my life for more than one reason. There’s more than my being an experienced oncologist. I believe I will follow the same road as Jamie. First cancer, then a miraculous touch from God for a season. Meanwhile, I’m supposed to learn some lessons from this special man.”

Little did I suspect just how prophetic these words would prove to be!

2. Early Years

My childhood and early teens hold few conscious memories for me. For years, I didn't understand this lack of recall until I was in marital counseling in my early forties. A psychiatrist suggested "blocking" of painful memories in my younger years. I'm now able to appreciate what he meant, because I went into adulthood with feelings of both unworthiness and rejection along with certain fears.

My childhood was strongly influenced by a work ethic that stemmed from parents having been raised by immigrants. Play was only permitted after school when chores were completed as well as a half hour of piano practice. In the meantime, yells of children playing outside were always so distracting.

At times, I admit being grateful for this heritage, especially when it comes to having some ability to play the piano today. Being raised this way has also made acceptance of an important scripture a great deal easier:

"No discipline seems pleasant at the time but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it" (Hebrews 12:11).

There also was a downside to such upbringing. While both our parents had limited education, they

achieved success – father in the business world and mother as a church organist and choir director. But it always seemed ingrained that gaining acceptance depended on excellent performance.

There was reward only for perfect grades, never for simply doing my best. And I only felt approved for piano recitals without mistakes. Never did I feel accepted simply for who I was...a child who never asked to enter the world in the first place. So it was that I did not feel exposed in my early life to what one might call unconditional love.

But I was familiar with criticism. It was not until later in life that I learned our mother suffered from what she considered rejection in her own childhood. Not surprisingly, my own children received similar treatment from me, bearing witness to the fact that “wounded people wound others.”

So early in life, seeds were planted for what was a compulsive need to prove myself by achievement. This also promoted the false idea that acceptability to God depends upon a person’s “good works.” Indeed, I wouldn’t learn about the grace of personal relationship with Jesus until many years later.

Times of marital uncertainty occurred during my childhood as in many a home. I experienced great fear when divorce was discussed, although it never took place. Severe nightmares of the type recently given the name “night terrors” began in early life, and continued into my teens.

On a more positive side, material needs were met at all times. My brother David and I never had lack of wonderful cooking and baking by a very diligent mother. Our father had been forced to leave high

school after one year to help support a large family when his own father died. Dad was successful in business and expected me to join him after completing college. Thus he was disappointed when I made a decision to seek a career in medicine.

This desire was birthed during hospital rounds at the invitation of a physician neighbor in my second college year. Seeing patients cheerful as Dr. Haver entered their room had a profound impact on me, no doubt reflecting my own need to find approval by others.

A desire to gain early admission into med school led to curtailing nearly all extracurricular activities at Lawrence University in Appleton Wisconsin. But near the end of my third year, a telegram from the Medical School at Northwestern University stated, “granted early acceptance into next fall’s class.” To celebrate, I immediately went to a nearby beer hall and “tied one on” as was the expression in 1950’s.

Medical school started off with flying colors and I ended my first year near the top of the class. But with the start of the second year, worldly pleasures caught my eye and periodic alcohol abuse took root. I misused the checking account provided by my father and found myself without his support when I stubbornly refused to accept correction.

It became necessary to work almost nightly and on weekends to meet expenses. Pride prevented me from learning a lesson and my academic work was the victim. My class standing plummeted to the degree that I graduated in the middle third of the Class of 1958 from Northwestern Medical School.

During my final year at Northwestern, marriage took place to Jo Ann Washburn, a school teacher from Oregon who had joined United Airlines as a stewardess. Our first child, Kathryn Ann, was born in June of 1959 just as my internship year at the University of California in San Francisco ended.

A second daughter, Carol Marie, arrived midway through a three-year residency in radiation therapy at Penrose Cancer Hospital in Colorado Springs. I intended eventually to enter private practice after training when events took a totally unexpected change of direction at the end of my residency.

I was about to be drafted with assignment to the army in Korea in the late spring of 1962. Then a Dr. Ralph Meader with the United States Public Health Service visited our training program as a guest of my mentor Dr. Juan del Regato. Suddenly there was a prospect of fulfilling my military obligation at the largest cancer research center in the world.

Only weeks later, I found myself settled with my family at the site of the National Cancer Institute in Bethesda, Maryland. It was a dream come true and included an opportunity to do research of my own choosing. It was during these two years of military service that a third daughter, Mary Ethel, arrived to join her two sisters.

In retrospect, this two-year period of my life was tranquil and satisfying. However I could never have anticipated what the future held in store.

My research involved mice with leukemia and reports of the work received international attention. The work led to investigation of radiation therapy to prevent the recurrence of childhood leukemia in the

brain and spinal cord. As a result, the survival of children with acute leukemia was improved quite significantly.

However, Proverbs 27:21 tells “*a man is tested by the praise he receives.*”

And I totally failed the test!

I wanted attention and fame. But its arrival failed to bring the satisfaction and contentment that I had expected. Instead, a desire for recognition increased as did pride and a sense of self-importance. Then at the end of my military obligation, the director of the Radiation Oncology Department suddenly resigned. Though younger at only 32 years of age than other department heads, I was offered his position on an acting basis.

Forget private practice! I would never let such a golden opportunity slip away. Not when true fame was just around the corner. It was the chance of a lifetime to prove just how worthy a person I was. Feelings of rejection I had fought since childhood were going to be demolished once and for all.

The idea that God is the only Comforter who can give peace that passes understanding simply did not exist in my thinking. All I knew was worth based on personal accomplishments, not on a relationship with a God I *knew about*...but didn't really *know*.

3. Empty Fame

With “work ethic” mentality, I moved full steam ahead to achieve success. Little did I realize the emptiness of this goal. I never heard Paul’s warning about “*trying to please men*” instead of seeking the approval of God. Nor would I really have believed what Paul said had I been told.

Fame eventually came with invitations to lecture in cancer centers around the world with all expenses paid plus lecture fees. My research was published in respected journals and scientists came from other countries to gain experience in our laboratories. In time, there were offers of professorships at major medical schools with a carrot of immediate tenure.

At the time, I admit to feeling proud. But it was a lie of the flesh and the devil. Never for one moment did I experience lasting peace or deep contentment. Instead, the more recognition I received, the more attention I craved.

Little did I know “*pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall* (Proverbs 16:18). Not only is pride addictive, but a snare that entraps. And I was willing prey for this snare. A gnawing lack of inner peace reflected itself in a gradually increasing dependence on alcohol as an escape. The bottle was needed at the end of each day to relax from pressure

I imposed on myself to succeed with ever more and better research as each year passed.

No bottom was in sight to the downward spiral in which I found myself. An old Chinese proverb says, “The man takes a drink, the drink takes a drink, and then the drink takes the man.” Over the fifteen years spent at the NCI, I became a living example of that proverb. Drinking changed from social to private, from weekly to daily and from light to heavy. It was a transition that took place without awareness, and eventually a drink was needed to feel “normal.” Yet denial kept me from accepting what was happening.

Extramarital affairs began. I left the wife of my youth to marry a hard-drinking nurse with whom I had an adulterous affair. In doing so, I abandoned a wonderful family which, by that time, included a son Philip Ralph. This decision to divorce was one over which I would later grieve and shed tears until no tears remained. And then I’d weep some more.

Those fifteen years at the prestigious National Cancer Institute are no longer seen through glasses with rose coloring. Yes, I did gain reputation among men. But it would be years later before I’d learn that contentment is not getting what you want, but being satisfied with what you have.

As addicts often do, I decided that my mounting problems would find relief if I changed circumstances. I never thought the demons would go with me. So resigning my position at the NCI, I moved to Florida with a new wife, her four children, and two daughters from my previous marriage.

However, serenity was not found in Gainesville where I joined the faculty of the Medical School at

the University of Florida. My new colleagues were not aware of my addictive problems. They were surprised that I was a heavy cigarette smoker, as I piloted a new successful treatment for small cell cancer of the lung at the NCI. My response was to only joke how education doesn't prevent stupidity!

Nine months later, I moved to St. Petersburg to organize the first cancer center in the county as my downward spiral picked up speed. Greener pastures beckoned as I believed the lie that money can buy one's way into happiness. The family remained in Gainesville temporarily while a new house was built on fashionable Brightwaters Boulevard in the northeast part of the city. After all, how could any prominent doctor be happy if he didn't live at the "right" address? And in a waterfront home!

But by this time, my alcoholism had progressed to a stage of prolonged blackouts. As for organizing the new cancer unit at Bayfront Medical Center, I must have functioned like a robot, relying on past experience. To this day, however, I can't recall the location of the rental house in which I lived during that first six months in St. Petersburg.

In fact, there is a nearly total absence of memory for the next several years. During that time, I was not only drinking very heavily. I also began abusing prescription drugs and using marijuana on a regular basis.

The remainder of the family moved down from Gainesville in late 1978 or early 1979. I cannot recall the date with any exactness. But by the end of 1980, my second marriage had also terminated in a bitter divorce battle.

4. A “Witness Talk”

Communication with family became strained and infrequent. Friends were primarily those who used the same watering holes...the cocktail lounge at the St. Petersburg Yacht Club and the Ten Beach Drive piano bar directly across the street. Looking back, I can see that meaningful relationships were absent in this period of my life as a feeling of hopelessness began to develop.

Soon thereafter the hospital administration forced me to resign as director of the Cancer Center. What remained of my medical practice was a shadow of earlier years. But the days of “wine and roses” had arrived. Anything that gave good feelings was done to excess...especially alcohol, drugs, and sex.

One day blurred into the next as I lived in a fog. I still continue today to meet people with whom I had interaction during those years. At times, I fail to even recognize their faces, let alone their names. But what I do recall is pathetic! Like trying to find a parked car at a shopping mall or trying to remember my home telephone number.

I rarely could remember where or with whom a previous day had been spent. No doubt a number of promises were made and not kept, and a great many were offended by my conduct. But without any recollection, apologies and amends are simply not possible today.

Surprisingly, the life-long habit of singing in a church choir continued off-and-on during a gradual deterioration in every other aspect of life. No one ever commented on obvious alcohol on my breath. But why should they? Alcohol abuse is so common, especially in more liberal churches where the clergy are frequently plagued as well.

And why be concerned about a liberal lifestyle? Homosexuality was being tolerated among those in full-time ministry, and I knew of pastors and priests having extramarital affairs. Anyway, the particular church I attended was broad-minded enough to not preach that “born again” brand of religion.

Then in early 1983, I was invited by Eddy Burns, a fellow physician, to attend a weekend retreat.

“Ralph, why don’t you attend a Cursillo?”

I was instantly suspicious. “What is that?”

“Just a get-together of men with a lot of singing and good eating. Nothing unusual about it.”

“Fine!” I had plenty of free time on my hands. And how could it not be fun with my best friend...a bottle...going along with me. Everything would be fine. So I left in the company of a quart of vodka. As long as I used mouthwash and chewed gum to freshen my breath, no one would ever notice my “nips” throughout the day.

The first evening on Thursday was fellowship but these weren’t exactly my kind of people. Nothing like the good times at my favorite bars.

By the next evening I was ready to leave. I felt increasing anxiety, and things were not at all like Eddy had told me. Some friend he turned out to be!

But a glass of vodka before I retired for the night improved my attitude, and I slept soundly.

It was on Saturday morning that a man dressed in a short-sleeved shirt and blue jeans stood before us. He proceeded to give a testimony about his life. It was the first time I heard what's called a "witness talk."

"Life was OK until the heavy drinking began."

(Tears came into my eyes. In embarrassment, I lowered my head.)

He continued, "In time, drink got the best of me."

(Maybe I can wipe the tears away without anyone noticing.)

"Before long I lost my family as well as my job."

(I wish he'd stop. It sounds like my life's story.)

"I felt hopeless and began to think of suicide."

(I can't believe he's talking about the way I feel.)

"Then someone told me there was another 'Way' to live."

(Tears were running down my face, but now I didn't care.)

"He told me the 'Way' was Jesus!"

(Under conviction of the Holy Spirit, I began to weep openly.)

The ache in my heart I had never experienced before. It was an terrible heaviness. Suddenly I saw my life revealed through eyes from which blinders had been removed. I had squandered my inheritance in *wild living* just like the prodigal son. I lived in a *pig pen*. And I too felt *unworthy*. It was more than I could bear.

"Father, please hear my confession. This guilt is more than I can stand."

"Can't you wait until the noon hour break?"

“Please! I can’t stand the way I feel!”

“OK. Let’s go to the chapel.”

And I wept tears of godly sorrow as I repented for a life filled with self-centered, sinful living. In all sincerity, I asked Jesus to forgive me and to be the Lord of my life. But I had no idea how much easier it is to just confess sins than it is to repent and change one’s direction in life. Unfortunately, learning to seek the heart of God and depend on the Holy Spirit to bring change was not on the teaching agenda in my particular church.

Nonetheless, for the moment I was filled with joy that can’t be described. It continued for weeks after that Cursillo weekend. For the very first time I can ever remember, there was real peace in my heart. A load of guilt was gone and the sense of God’s love was so strong that it seemed as if my feet did not even touch the ground as I walked.

My countenance apparently changed as well, for the hospital staff seemed somewhat startled when I returned to work the next week. In answer to their questions as to why I was so happy, I only grinned and answered, “Jesus!”

5. Making Covenants

Within weeks of asking Jesus to be Lord of my life, I learned that a quarter of all the children in Uganda, East Africa, died in a measles epidemic the prior year. An entire generation was threatened if the measles epidemic could not be halted.

Four months later, I joined a medical team doing emergency vaccinations in Uganda. We were taken to remote areas in the lovely countryside and given large supplies of vaccines for measles, tuberculosis, polio, diphtheria, and whooping cough. Over the next three weeks, our small team of two physicians and four nurses immunized between 500 and 1000 children daily.

During this time, a silver-plated cross given each Cursillo attendee hung around my neck. I was not aware that wearing a cross in Uganda was tradition only among Catholic clergy. But this proved to our great advantage on one rather humorous occasion.

The national Ugandan advance team had failed to secure permission from Catholic sisters operating a large parochial school in a remote area. As a result, we arrived at the school to vaccinate the students without the nuns being told about the immunization program. They were not willing to give us access to the children for which they were responsible...a most understandable position for them to take.

We were dismayed and preparing to leave when the Mother Superior noticed the cross on a chain around my neck. Immediately she bowed from the waist in an obvious case of mistaken identity.

“Father! I’m sorry! It will be fine for you to give shots to the children.” And having traveled for three hours over terrible roads to reach the school, we felt it advisable to not confuse the matter any further.

During several hours of blistering afternoon heat, this sister stood behind me holding an umbrella to provide shade from the sun...a wonderful example of servanthood to which we all are called by Jesus.

Midway through our mission, a nurse assigned to our group suddenly curled up in a fetal position. We did not realize Linda was recently discharged from a psychiatric hospital for schizophrenia. Certainly she would have been excluded from this rigorous trip had the program organizers been aware of this.

At this time we were living at a camp site having neither running water nor electricity. An absence of shower and toilet facilities had not been advertised in advance, and meals were rice-based, prepared by local Ugandans. We all lost considerable weight but Linda refused *all* food as well as liquids and rapidly became extremely weak.

We became gravely concerned because our van had a broken axle and we had no way of contacting outside help. As the second day passed, the need for intravenous feedings increased when Linda became dehydrated, but we had no such supplies available.

Late that second evening found me standing at the campsite along the shore of Lake Victoria, a beautiful body of water forming the headwaters of

the Nile River which flows northward to Egypt. On this particular night, the sky was bright with a wash of stars as I lifted a prayer to the Father in heaven.

“Lord, please help in this time of desperate need. I promise to serve You the rest of my life if you will spare the life of our nurse. The only other thing I’ll ask is for someone with a love of missions to share my life.” And in saying this prayer, a covenant was made with God.

The following morning, Linda was seriously ill. But as we finished breakfast, God’s miracle arrived. A filming crew for National Geographic magazine made an unscheduled stop at our camp which was far removed from any paved roads. We explained the situation, and they immediately took Linda on a four hour drive to Kampala where she was flown by air ambulance to Nairobi, Kenya.

I honestly didn’t reflect further at the time about having made a covenant with God who had shown such faithfulness. But He had fulfilled the first part of what I’d asked, and very soon would complete the rest of my request made by that lakeshore.

Returning from Uganda, I began to attend church daily. With all will power I could muster, I tried to change my lifestyle and read the Bible faithfully. But monkeys remained on my back. The addiction to drinking, smoking and using marijuana was so powerful that I was unable to gain any victory.

Gradually a sense of defeat developed. There was no one to teach me that Jesus came to set captives free and doesn’t expect us to free ourselves of these strongholds to drug and alcohol abuse. I had no idea

that God provides an arsenal of weapons having “*divine power*” to accomplish this goal.

Weekly I met with six men who’d also gone to Cursillo, a meeting called ‘grouping.’ We reviewed the events of the prior week in a shallow way that lacked serious emphasis on holiness and self-denial. It was a deficiency of teaching in so many churches.

A second lack was absence of true accountability. We never challenged each other about responsible use of our time, treasures, or talents. Harmful habits such as drinking and smoking were never discussed, perhaps because these habits were shared by others in the group.

Nor was I ever corrected about my relationships with women. Indeed a priest in the group was later removed from ministry because of moral failure.

Then while the Gulf Coast of Florida was bracing for Hurricane Elena in late August, 1985, God sent another hurricane into my life named Sylvia.

By now my medical practice had virtually ended and I worked as volunteer gardener at church to fill the empty hours. I was in the garden at high noon, pulling weeds and drenched in perspiration when Sylvia arrived. Little did I realize that a sovereign God would use her to pull weeds from my life when I first saw her enter the garden.

“Could it be an angel?” I thought. No, angels do not dress that way!

“Hello,” I offered as a very original greeting.

She answered. “Hi.”

“Would you like to help me?” was the best that I could think to say.

She chuckled softly. “I don’t think so!” And then she disappeared into the church office as quickly as she had appeared.

Distracted, I didn’t feel like pulling weeds any longer. So I went home.

Two weeks later, Elena was in the history books after drenching the Gulf Coast with rain. But the other hurricane hadn’t left town.

There she stood in the elevator to my apartment at Bayfront Towers where I’d lived for four years. I had just finished another scrimmage with weeds at the church and my usual dapper self. Perspiring, unshaven, and even likely having forgotten to use deodorant that morning.

Thinking of a cold beer, I was greeted warmly as I entered the elevator.

“The service elevator is across the hall.”

It was Sylvia again. Dressed as ever for a fashion show. And with a sense of humor as well!

“No, I live here,” I replied. “What are you doing here?”

“I live here too.”

A week later, Sylvia and I talked until early hours in the morning about our pasts, hopes, and dreams. At least that’s what Sylvia told me later. For by this time, blackouts from years of alcohol abuse were all but continuous.

But God seemingly had determined that one part of our conversation wouldn’t be forgotten. It had to do with both her father’s and first husband’s abuse of alcohol. Somehow that penetrated the fog of my befuddled mind and wouldn’t go away.

“She is so special!” I thought repeatedly. “The last thing I want is to see her hurt again. Maybe my Christian friends can help me stop drinking. I’ll be with them again in two weeks.

Months before meeting Sylvia, I had enlisted for kitchen duty at the October 1985 Cursillo. Kitchen teams consist of five men who gather predawn each morning for prayer before preparing breakfast for about eighty men. In addition to asking the blessing of God on the day, there was time given to personal intercessions and requests.

“I’ve met someone special named Sylvia, and do not want to hurt her. Please pray for me about my drinking. It’s not that I have an alcohol problem but I’d like to stop for her sake. And while I’m at it, I probably should throw in smoking the weed and my cigarette habit as well. So please pray for me.”

And now a marriage covenant was in the making.

Sylvia and I were seated at the St. Petersburg Yacht club for dinner two evenings after my return from Cursillo. She ordered a glass of wine, and then asked, “Aren’t you going to have wine too?”

“No, I’ve quit drinking. Cigarettes and marijuana as well. I asked the kitchen team to pray for me each morning. It’s amazing. I have absolutely no desire for smoking or alcohol, and I tried to quit so often in the past. It seemed so hopeless that I had given up trying.”

Sylvia became quiet before replying, “I’m glad. I was ready to say that I wouldn’t keep seeing you because of your drinking.” Then she smiled. It was the same picture-perfect smile that I’d seen that day in the church garden.

Over the weeks and months that followed, my mental function gradually improved. I was just as thrilled as a child opening birthday presents when I could remember simple things...like what I'd done two or three days earlier. Then what had happened an entire week earlier! Then I was reading medical books, and able to recall what I'd read. Restoration of memory was a miracle for which I'd forever remain grateful to God.

By Thanksgiving, we'd decided to marry and this union took place February 8, 1986. My four children and Sylvia's three by previous marriage attended. But none were thrilled to see their parents make an obvious mistake! Our honeymoon at Vail ski resort all but proved them correct. Stress levels reached a fever pitch. Despite four months of sobriety, I still bore effects from years of alcohol abuse. They were something I later learned were called "dry drunks."

Returning from Colorado, I resumed my medical practice on an increasing basis. Sylvia continued as a consultant in helping others open women's retail shops. Her past had included owning her own store and serving as a fashion coordinator for Allied and Federated retail chains, and she was very successful in her consulting endeavors.

Sylvia's fashion expertise and love for attractive clothes contrasted with my lack of interest. I didn't know if pant cuffs were in style or not, or how wide ties should be. But her interest in appearance and the shopping bills became a matter of controversy. I asked God to let me share life with someone having a love for missions, and now I had married a person in love with the fashion world.

6. Storm Clouds and Rain

Jesus loves us enough to accept us as we are, yet too much to leave us as we were. Early in my walk with Him, I realized a need to cooperate and allow Jesus to be Lord of everything in my life. Obviously He could not refine me unless I were willing, and I kept reading in the Bible about being refined.

Isaiah 48:10 had especially caught my attention: *“See, I have refined you, though not as silver; I have tested you in the furnace of affliction.”* But the problem was that I had little enthusiasm for spending time in a furnace. I didn’t care for the fact that God uses relationships as furnaces for this refining process as explained for us in Proverbs 27:17: *“As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another.”*

I had expected marriage to Sylvia to be bliss and only bliss. Never in my wildest dreams could I have seen our marriage as an instrument for refining. Yet nearly every matter that came up seemed to contain the seed for some kind of confrontation. What in the world was going on?

I determined more than ever to become a ‘good’ Christian. That would solve at least some problems. But I had no real concept as to what being a good Christian really meant. Years of church attendance never involved biblical discipling about God’s will for my life. So out of ignorance, I committed myself to attending church daily, involving myself in

activities such as Cursillo, choir, ‘grouping,’ and being faithful in terms of financial giving.

Initially, Sylvia was supportive, but she became resentful in time. Her focus increasingly became the fashion work and time spent with her fourteen year old daughter who lived with us. As a result, someone felt rejected...and it wasn’t two cats I’d been forced to adopt as part of our marriage contract.

To insure even more stress, we purchased an old house for a major restoration! This created still one more battlefield where we could disagree. Indeed, marriage was becoming a tornado if not a hurricane. And I began listening to the enemy whisper in my ear that a mistake was made in marrying again.

Becoming insecure, I began to drink in the third month of marriage. This ‘slip’ lasted for one week. And during this week in April of 1986, I did what I sincerely wanted to avoid...hurting Sylvia. It was the last time the demon alcohol entered my lips by the grace of God.

Books began to appear on alcoholism, thanks to Sylvia. Suddenly I found myself faced with obvious truth. I’d been an alcoholic and addict for years! It was not only humbling, but a relief to finally reach this awareness at age 53 after a lifetime of denial.

I joined medical colleagues at weekly meetings of *Doctors in A.A.* for several months. It helped to publicly share the reality of my dependency and the *Twelve Step* program forced me to confront many of my character defects. And I learned from personal observation that those who achieve an enduring and quality sobriety are the very same who accept the need for a committed spiritual life. It isn’t possible

to serve two masters...anything or anyone other than Christ.

I wanted to serve Jesus more than anything, but it was critical to me that our marriage succeed. Fear of another failure held me in bondage. My error was trying to gain Sylvia's approval instead of seeking the face of God and obeying His will for my life.

Would I agree to what I considered the indulgent use of credit cards? What was to have top priority in my life? Would I rejoin a social life where alcohol was the prime refreshment? Would I share watching TV trash like soap operas? Would doing only for our own children or "*doing for the least of men*" have the top priority in my life?

A dilemma was here! Would my first devotion be to Sylvia or to Jesus?

Had I communicated this clearly to Sylvia at the time, I question whether our marriage would have survived. Neither of us realized at that time how all things are possible...but only *through* Christ. And we each were trying to have things our own way.

Restoration of the house was completed in time to move before Christmas, 1986. It should have been a time for rejoicing, but our marriage was totally out of focus and the holidays proved disastrous. A stalemate had developed with neither of us being concerned about the cost of winning.

It was early in 1987. Our evening had been most unpleasant because of dissension. I found myself pacing the floor in a semi-darkened house well past the midnight hour. Reading of the Psalms had given little relief to my distress. I felt totally overwhelmed

about circumstances in general, and was filled with despair about the state of our marriage.

Standing alone in an upstairs room (later dubbed the “upper room”), I called out to God with a sense of desperation as tears streamed down my face.

“Lord, help! Please, I beg of you!

“I try so hard, but things only get worse!

“Forgive my faults and sins. Please don’t let this marriage fail?”

“Do what you want with my life...but save our marriage! I give up! Do it Your way!”

Suddenly an indescribable peace came over me. I found myself lying on the floor, immersed in a warm glow. Incredibly the previous feeling of utter hopelessness and despair was totally gone. Miracle of miracles! I must awaken Sylvia and let her know something wonderful has happened!

“Sylvia, I was praying when something hit me like a wave of peace. I was knocked to the floor and have no idea what happened! But it’s marvelous!”

She replied, “That’s nice. May I please go back to sleep?”

The following afternoon, I settled into a favorite chair to read the Bible. But it no longer was a book of words. God was speaking *directly to me*. The words jumped off the pages right into the events of my everyday life.

I read nonstop for eight hours with hunger for the word of God that was supernatural. Then I fell into a sound sleep, the first such sleep in many a month. The hunger to fill myself with words of Scripture continued. Being “in God’s Word” was just as necessary for sustaining me as breathing and eating

food. A life changing experience had begun which was convicting and comforting at the same time. And other remarkable events started to take place.

Only weeks later, I received a call from a woman at All Children's Hospital. Her infant daughter was in intensive care with a terminal illness. Somehow she'd heard I had started to pray with patients, and she asked me to pray for her daughter.

On arrival at the ICU, I first reviewed the chart as any self-respecting doctor might do. Later, I would realize this was nothing except pride. But on that occasion, all hope melted once I began to read the chart. The situation was totally hopeless. There was no possibility of recovery.

However, the mother insisted that I lay hands on her child and pray, and I did so only because of her insistence. Some months later, I "accidentally" came in contact with this woman of great faith. It was astonishing to hear her tell me that her daughter had miraculously recovered, to the great bewilderment of doctors supervising her care.

Bill Barbour was dying at home from metastatic cancer which had widely spread to bone, and was causing severe pain. We'd known Bill from church where he served for many years as the head usher. All treatment had failed to arrest his cancer, and the pain had him confined to bed when we arranged for daily transportation to my office for some palliative radiation. And for ten days after each treatment, the two of us spent time in prayer.

Bill continued to come on a courtesy basis each week for what we fondly called "prayer treatment" once radiation was completed. Within a few weeks,

this bed-ridden man was walking without pain. We were thrilled when followup bone scans and x-rays showed healing not only where radiation had been given, but in all other bones not treated. And repeat x-rays showed clearing of a large lung mass causing malignant fluid to collect, yet the chest itself was never given a single treatment.

This man remained well for about two years and returned to active life, attending church weekly on Saturday evening as was his custom. Then he died after a brief illness. At committal, the priests who'd taken Bill home communion two years earlier failed to make mention of his miraculous extension of life. I was left puzzled and saddened. Were they blinded to what God had done by His grace?

Ernie was a street person with a long history of alcohol abuse. He was brought to the Free Clinic from "detox" where he'd been confined after police found him unconscious in an alley. Ernie needed a refill of his blood pressure medicine. While writing the prescription, I felt God press me to tell this man what Jesus had done in my own life.

"Ernie, do you have a few minutes to spare so I can tell you a story?"

He replied, "Sure Doc! I got no place to go."

Within minutes, tears began to stream down his face as the Holy Spirit began to convict and reveal Jesus as the One who came to save us and to set us free.

"Doc, I need Jesus!" said Ernie when I finished. He then asked Jesus to forgive his past sins, and to become the Lord of his life. I could sense the angels rejoicing over a lost son who'd come home.

Six months later, a letter came from Ernie. He'd written from out-of-state to say that he'd not taken a drink and was attending a Bible-based church. He'd entered a job training program and had new teeth, thanks to a local Rotary Club. He didn't understand how all this was happening, but my eyes filled with tears as I gave praise to the Jesus who can truly set captives free.

Weeks later found me telling Father Lawson, the retired senior pastor, of many unusual things taking place in my life. I felt he might be able to give me some insight as to what was happening. I explained how it all began...crying out to God, then falling down as if overwhelmed by a wave of peace.

I described the supernatural hunger for the Word of God and seeing God work in extraordinary ways, using my feeble words to convict, and my hands of clay to bring miraculous healing under the most desperate of circumstances.

“You've experienced what some call Baptism in the Holy Spirit.”

“What's that? I've gone to church fifty years, and never heard about Baptism in the Holy Spirit.

Smiling gently, this beloved priest reached over to his bookcase for a worn book with a title, *The Baptism*. “This may help you understand,” he said. And the time, I did not realize that Father Lawson had received the baptism early in his ministry, but reportedly was told to refrain from teaching on the empowering that comes by this gift of God.

The same restriction exists today in many of the mainline denominations. The devil does not want to see believers empowered by the Spirit so they will

destroy his works. So Satan creates confusion by blurring the distinction between the separate works of regeneration and empowering by the Holy Spirit.

The *breath* of the Holy Spirit regenerates, giving new life to those who believe in Jesus (John 20:22). In contrast, the *baptism* in the Holy Spirit is the gift promised by the heavenly Father to bring us “*power from on high*” (Acts 1:4,5,8;2:2).

7. A Flashback

As God began to manifest in supernatural ways, I recalled an incident in the past when spiritual scales still covered my eyes. Because of blindness, I was unable to recognize what was taking place. It began with a phone call from Gainesville in 1974, the city in northern Florida where I later lived briefly.

“My name is Dr. Garcia and I’m calling from the medical school in Gainesville. Can you spare a few minutes to talk to me?”

“Of course. Please go ahead.”

“Our 19 year old daughter has just been given a diagnosis of malignant lymphoma.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, Dr. Garcia. Is there any question about the diagnosis?”

“There doesn’t seem to be. Slides were reviewed by Rappaport and Lukes, and they agree it is diffuse histiocytic lymphoma with extensive nodal and skin involvement. They both suggested chemotherapy.”

At once I recognized the names given as those of world-class pathologists in the field of lymphomas. My heart was touched as I listened to the grief in his voice, and I tried to be supportive.

“Chemotherapy sounds appropriate, Dr. Garcia. But my specialty is radiation therapy of cancer.”

“I know,” he replied. “But the chairman of our pathology department suggested that I consult you before a final decision is made as to treatment.”

I hesitated, and then answered, "I'd be delighted to help. Would you like to bring her to Bethesda?"

His reply caught me by surprise. "I've already made flight reservations. We can arrive at the NCI by 8:30 p.m. tonight!"

Puzzled by his confidence in my offer to see his daughter, I replied, "Fine. I'll meet you at 8:30 p.m. Have a safe trip."

Worry etched the faces of Dr. and Mrs. Garcia as we met in the conference room. Margarita, their daughter, was quite subdued, speaking only when a direct question was asked her. Several masses of the cancer were readily visible on both arms and nearly the entire left eye was covered by another tumor.

Though familiar with seeing advanced cancer, I still couldn't help but think, "It doesn't seem fair." The following morning, review of the biopsy slides by our staff confirmed the diagnosis of a malignant lymphoma of a rapidly growing and deadly type.

Having wanted to show personal concern, I had admitted Margarita on my own service as attending physician. Although I thereby had the ultimate responsibility for her care, we worked closely with the Medicine Branch. And they planned to start her chemotherapy the very next afternoon.

I sat on the edge of Margarita's bed, holding her hand. She had been told about the side effects of the chemotherapy and was frightened. Then my eyes noted a red ring encircling one of the tumor masses on her left arm. The other skin nodules had no such ring around them.

A voice inside me was saying, “Don’t be in too much of a hurry!” And what I proceeded to do had neither a rational nor scientific basis.

Excusing myself with a promise to return, I wrote a progress note on the young woman’s chart. “The treatment will not begin until I understand the red ring around the tumor mass near the left elbow.” I then instructed the charge nurse to not permit any treatment until I personally gave the order.

An hour later, a group of physicians stood at the door to my office. They included senior staff from several departments, not to mention my own staff.

“Do you know what you are doing? Don’t you realize that girl has a rapidly growing cancer? She’ll die!” Caught off-guard, I stammered, “But there’s a reddish ring around one of the skin nodules, and I don’t understand it.”

“Of course there is! It’s infected. Cancer is growing through the skin! What do you expect?”

I felt intimidated. My own staff kept looking at the floor, avoiding direct eye contact with me. No support to be found there!

“Let’s wait until tomorrow,” I pleaded. “We will start chemotherapy in the morning if nothing is any different. Please!” Slowly the lynch mob drifted out of my office with their heads shaking.

The following morning, two more nodules were surrounded by identical red rings. And I continued to hold out against treatment. My own staff was so distressed with my reluctance that they avoided any contact with me to the degree possible. Yet by day five, every visible tumor was encircled by redness. And on the sixth day, all of the tumor masses began

to shrink. Still no treatment had been given. During this time, Dr. Garcia and his wife were in the chapel daily praying fervently for their daughter.

Within four weeks, absolutely nothing remained of the cancer. Not even scars where skin had been ulcerated by tumors measuring inches in diameter. All of the massively enlarged lymph nodes also had disappeared. Twenty five years later, there has been no further problem for Margarita Garcia.

As I reflect on this experience, several thoughts come to mind. It occurs to me how not one single doctor talked later about the incident, not even my closest associates. Yet clearly a supernatural event had taken place right in front of our very eyes.

We were so wrapped up in scientific research that we failed to appreciate how a power greater than us had dramatically healed a patient. On a personal level, I feel God had attempted to reveal Himself to me with a “*burning bush*” experience as He’d done with Moses. But I’d placed the approval of men and fame on a pedestal, and failed to see that only God is worthy of glory, honor, and praise for His works.

At that point in my life, there was no way I could have been open to recognizing the hand of God, or in trusting Him...for I was trusting only in myself. And what a mistake that turned out to be!

8. Mercy Ships and Dreams

In 1987, Sylvia and I became acquainted with Mercy Ships which operated under the umbrella of 'Youth With A Mission' or YWAM. One of the two ships at that time, the *Good Samaritan*, resupplied on a regular basis in St. Petersburg. Our tour of the ship included watching a video on third world ministry and we left with a yearning to volunteer on a short term basis. But never could we have realized the future impact that mission trips would have on the priorities in our lives.

The first trip was to Port Antonio located in the northeastern part of Jamaica, far from luxury hotels, beautiful beaches, golf courses, and casinos. This city was famous for little except substandard living conditions and scanty health and dental services for much of the population.

However, it proved a rich experience for Sylvia and me. We not only had the privilege of serving a needy people. We were exposed for the first time to depending on God in everyday matters such as the praying for generators that supplied power to dental equipment. Missions often invade those areas which are strongholds of the devil, and it was the first time we were knowingly exposed to spiritual warfare.

We also participated for the first time in worship that is typical of many evangelical and pentecostal churches today. It was extremely different that the

liturgical worship with which we were so familiar. And on frequent occasions, Sylvia and I found our eyes filled with tears.

Flying home from Kingston following our trip in 1988, I found myself moved to increase my personal commitment to helping the needy.

“Sylvia, this trip makes me want to do so much more!”

“I’m feeling exactly the same way!” she replied.

“Working one evening a month at the Free Clinic isn’t enough,” I continued. “Maybe they’d like the medical clinic open during daytime hours as well as in the evening. I should be able to volunteer one afternoon or two a week without too much strain.”

Daily after our return, Sylvia would ask whether I’d called the Free Clinic. And each day, I’d reply, “Not yet. I’m letting God tell me when to call.”

As I think back, this was really unusual for me to wait upon the Lord for His timing instead of doing things on my own schedule.

Then one morning I said, “Today I’m going to call the Free Clinic.”

Sylvia looked at me questioningly. “Why today?”

“Because today is the day!” was all I said. I was starting to learn God speaks in a rather distinctive way. It’s difficult to explain to others just how one hears. And often, if not usually, there’ll be some kind of confirmation.

Martha Smith R.N. was head nurse at the Free Clinic, and she answered my call later that morning.

“Hi Martha! Ralph Johnson here. By chance, is there any thought of having a medical clinic during daytime hours a couple times each week?”

“Why are you asking?” she replied.

“Because I’d really like to do more volunteering. I might be able to come two mornings or afternoons a week if you’re interested.”

“Dr. Ralph, you won’t believe this. We’ve been discussing a daytime clinic. And prayed for the first time this morning that God would send a doctor to volunteer. We just said ‘Amen’ to finish our prayers when you called.”

Somehow I was not surprised at what Martha had said. But I really felt blessed. “That’s confirmation I need to be sure this was God’s idea and not mine.” And later events would demonstrate just how the hand of the Lord was guiding my steps.

Our next mission with Mercy Ships was to the Dominican Republic. Sylvia had now asked Jesus to be her Lord and Savior. And while all differences in our marriage didn’t suddenly evaporate, it was the most important step toward greater harmony. More than ever, we experienced our hearts becoming soft during the praise and worship that began each day on the mission field. As a result, we desired to find a way to worship more expressively on returning.

Four days after our returning from the Dominican Republic, I awoke at 2 a.m. after a vivid dream that Sylvia’s car was being broken into...and it caused me to bolt upright in bed!

“What’s wrong?” asked Sylvia, awakened by my sudden movement.

“I’m dreaming that someone’s breaking into your car! Maybe I heard a noise outside!”

I hurried onto the porch extending off our second floor bedroom, but all was quiet on the driveway

where the cars were parked. However, my spirit was still anxious, and I said to Sylvia, “I’m going downstairs for a glass of milk. This crazy dream is not going away for some reason!”

Forty minutes slipped by as I paced, now with a second glass of milk. Again I glanced out the front window. To my amazement, a man was coming up the driveway towards Sylvia’s car holding a crow bar. Exactly what I’d seen in my dream earlier.

The police responded quickly to our call, nearly capturing the man and his accomplice after a rather wild chase. And only a few days passed before still another dream...again in the middle of the night.

The following day, I called several charismatic Christians in our rather liturgical minded church.

“Hi! Ralph Johnson here. I’ve had a dream that is really like a vision about a Spirit-filled church. It is just what we’ve been wanting!” I then proceeded to explain about the car dream before going on.

“I saw a small church in the north side of the city. In time a Christian day school started as well. A bit later, a large multipurpose building was built...and still later a semicircular sanctuary able to hold 2500 worshippers.”

Adrenaline was flowing, but only mine. I did not realize the church authorities were the key players in this ballgame. They could not have been less interested in more contemporary Spirit-led worship. Tradition was sacred and not to be altered. “No new wine in our old wineskins” was the basic substance of their response.

So we felt directed to look for another church in which to worship. I now realize the Holy Spirit was

using our desire to worship with greater freedom for another purpose. We were being led from religiosity and “*tradition of the elders*” into greater emphasis on having a personal relationship with Christ. Hour upon hour spent reading the Bible was showing me that God’s Word is the only authority for believers. And I found the scriptures in conflict with much I’d been taught over the years in churches of various denominations.

Infant baptism was supposed to have left me “born again” and a member of the kingdom of God. But the scriptures make it clear that salvation comes only by grace through faith in Jesus when a person repents and makes Jesus the Lord of his life. In a similar fashion, other tradition-bound practices had no real scriptural basis as best I could determine.

At that point in my life however, I just desired to worship in a more personally involved manner, and to hear strong biblical teaching. With regard to the other matters, I simply had the sense that liturgical religion wasn’t what my heavenly Father was really asking from me: “*Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after the needy in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world*” (James 1:27).

9. New Church Home

After deciding to look for a new church, a local dentist Don Crawford and his wife Winnie invited us to attend their pentecostal church. Previously we had enjoyed a mission trip to Puerto Rico with the Crawfords, and we happily accepted their invitation to join them on the following Sunday.

Our initial visit began with Sunday school prior to the main worship service. Quite by coincidence, the teacher had a close relative under treatment at our center for advanced cancer. And before the dismissal of class, we found ourselves exposed for the first time to “name it and claim it,” although it certainly was done with the best of intentions.

During prayers at the end of class, healing of this patient was ‘claimed.’ However, I was aware of her terminal state. (*Rather soon thereafter she died.*) This experience nearly caused us to leave before the service started, but we were assured that ‘naming and claiming’ was not the doctrinal position of this church despite its practice by some, including some of the clergy.

The strong biblical teaching at this church plus inspiring times of worship greatly compensated for certain deficiencies. One of the latter was the lack of reverence in the sanctuary. This proves distracting for those who come from any kind of liturgical background. But of greatest importance was that for

the first time in my life, I was being discipled in the Word of God. The senior pastor was a very gifted teacher and the congregation had grown under his ministry from 800 to 1800 on an average Sunday.

After attending this church for several months, I felt a strong desire to follow the Lord Jesus in water baptism. I hadn't known before that the Greek word *baptizo* literally means "to immerse." As an infant, I had been sprinkled with water, but now I wanted to be baptised by immersion to signify having the 'old man' buried with Christ in His death. I also fully expected that in coming up out of the water, I'd somehow live a more consecrated life. And not long thereafter, Sylvia also was baptized by immersion.

One Sunday, a dramatic realization took place as we drove into a parking lot at church. Construction on a new sanctuary had started, and I became aware in a startling instant that the sanctuary was identical in every detail to what I'd previously dreamed. The sanctuary extended from the multipurpose building and directly across the street was a Christian day school. The small former church was being used as a gymnasium. It was the exact picture I'd seen in a dream two years earlier, and now it was so obvious!

Shortly after this, in the late fall of 1988, another dream came during the middle of the night. Fire and destruction were falling from the sky, and there was no escape except in one direction. The path leading from this devastation was extremely narrow, and I wanted someone to come with me. But that person, still anonymous to this day and perhaps symbolic of many people, refused to come along despite urgent pleading.

I was left to go forward alone in my dream, and entered a place of brilliant sunshine and clear skies as I followed the narrow path. Behind me, however, the sky was filled with dark clouds and fire. Then a command was given! “Call the Pastor, and read him the fourth chapter of Daniel! It’s my message in this hour for him!”

Each previous dream had been so powerful and energizing that I’d been unable to go back to sleep again. This dream was no exception. I got out of bed and went downstairs with my Bible to read the fourth chapter of Daniel. And immediately I started to weep. It was a warning for the pastor I’d come to love and who’d baptized me only weeks earlier.

In this passage, the king of Babylon dreams of a tree being cut down. The prophet Daniel interprets the dream, telling the king that the tree represented the king himself. My dream meant that Pastor was in grave danger of losing his ministry.

How could such a thing happen? And I was filled with deep sorrow.

The remainder of the night was spent grieving. As the hours rolled by I began to wonder how to make such a call. Then a ringing telephone startled me at 8 a.m. The caller was E.C. O’Brien, a dear friend and retired Canadian pastor from the church. He was phoning to say God gave him a message for me during the night.

“What’s the message, E.C.?”

“You’ve been given a word for our Pastor. I’m to tell you to give it to him without delay!”

Dumbfounded, I explained how that very night I had experienced another dream. Previously I had

shared the matter of my dreams with both E.C. and with the Pastor, along with others.

“I haven’t been able to sleep for hours since my dream, E.C.”

“What time did you wake up, Ralph?”

“I’ve been downstairs since 3 a.m.!”

“That’s remarkable!” he replied. “I glanced at the clock when I awoke from my dream. It was exactly 3 a.m.”

I continued, “I’ve been told to read the fourth chapter of Daniel to Pastor.”

E.C. asked, “What’s that? I don’t recall.”

“It’s the story of Nebuchadnezzar being warned that he’s going to lose his kingdom. And our Pastor is about to lose his ministry!” There was nothing but silence at the other end of the phone.

Roughly one hour later, Pastor arrived. He came at once when told I had a dream concerning him. As he walked in the front door, I was still weeping, and I asked that we might pray before anything else.

Then I began to read: “*I, Nebuchadnezzar, was at home in my palace, contented and prosperous. I had a dream that made me afraid...*”

“Pastor, I believe this concerns you. Tell me that it isn’t so?!” Tears were streaming down my face as I spoke to him.

Then I listened to my pastor tell of a relationship with a woman in the church other than his wife. It was only a brief time until Pastor surrendered his credentials and left. In time he would divorce his wife to marry the ‘other woman.’ And I find myself weeping again even now as I write about this event that caused so many hearts to break.

10. Another Mission Trip

The next mission trip to the Dominican Republic was very special. I was unaware how God prepared me for what would occur. Our former pastor had a strong burden for ‘winning souls’ along with seeing that discipling would follow so that believers would become mature in their faith. And through working of the Holy Spirit and Pastor’s teaching, a strong desire to evangelize was birthed in me.

Before leaving for the DR, I taped an insert to the inside of my Bible cover: *Steps in Leading Someone to Christ*. I hadn’t used it as yet, but that was about to change in a most remarkable way.

We arrived at the *S.S. Anastasis*, berthed as she was previously in Barahona. I then learned that I’d been assigned to work in a remote village one full hour drive from the ship in town.

Why did this have to happen? The wind suddenly went out of my “trusting in God” sails. I wanted to be in the city with all the action: puppet shows, the music, evangelism, and showing of the *Jesus* film. And now I was forced to work out in the country!

Besides, the extra daily travel meant less time for medical work. But I’d promised God before leaving the U.S. to do my best at being obedient and to do whatever was asked without grumbling.

So I prayed, “Lord, help me keep my promise. It is so hard for me at times!”

The village of La Guazara was something else! No running water, electricity unpredictable, little resemblance to civilization except for the open-air saloons. These were the center of the social activity where men spent the daytime hours drinking either wine or beer and listening to rock music while the women worked the fields.

Unfortunately, one saloon was located right next to our clinic. Blaring music made it difficult to even think, let alone talk to the patients. How could we promote health and evangelize in *such* a place?

There I was, leaning on my own understanding as usual instead of trusting God. How quickly I forget His ways are not my ways. I became so discouraged after the first week. But it wasn't fruitless from the perspective of God as we'd soon learn. He wanted to make sure we understood who deserved the glory when all was said and done.

Dr. Perry Ball, medical director on the Anastasis, and I worked together in La Guazara with nurses, a pharmacist, and a bilingual public health worker. The village had one permanent nurse to assist plus a government health worker named Maria who had four children out of wedlock. She was responsible for registering births and recording birth weights for each child born in the town.

My hopes had been high. I was ready to be used of God on arrival. Now a week later, it seemed so hopeless with only two weeks remaining. So when Sylvia expressed a wish to go sightseeing on that first weekend, I encouraged her to do so. My spirits were so depressed that I needed to be alone with God and seek His comfort.

Before our medical team left for La Guazara the following Monday morning, we gathered for prayer. We agreed to pray that God, if nothing else, would divinely stop the deafening music from the nearby saloon. And an hour later, we entered a totally quiet town! No music!

Electricity must be shut off. Praise God! But as we entered the clinic, all lights were working. Yet there was silence next door which continued during the remaining two weeks. There never was any kind of explanation other than answered prayer.

While riding to the village that day, I opened my Bible repeatedly to the insert titled *Steps in Leading Someone to Christ*. There seemed no reason for this prompting at the time. But while unloading the van on arrival, I turned to Perry. “Would you mind if I take our translator and look for Maria? I’d really like to talk to her about the Lord.”

“That’s fine. Go right ahead!” he answered.

Off we went...for about twenty feet. There came Maria toward us, a person who’d avoided us nearly all of the first week. And just as surprising was her warm greeting: “I’m coming to see if I can help you today.”

Less than 30 minutes later, Maria was weeping. Her eyes began to fill with tears within minutes as I witnessed to her about Jesus changing my life. The joy of salvation filled her from head to toe when she asked God to forgive her and invited Jesus into her heart. That same afternoon, her cousin (an engineering student) also made a decision for Christ. And it was only the beginning!

Returning to the ship that afternoon, I sat silently, rejoicing over God's faithfulness when Dr. Perry interrupted my thoughts.

"Wasn't that interesting about the mayor?"

My ears perked up! "What was that?"

"Did I forget to tell you? We had a visit from the town mayor as you prayed with Maria. He retired as principal of the only school and raises fruit trees in a nearby government nursery."

Perry continued. "A dream frightened the mayor last night. He was so upset that he went to his priest at the Catholic church, but the priest said he didn't know anything about dreams. Then the mayor was told of our clinic and came to ask about the dream."

Now my mind was at full alert! "What did you tell him?"

"We didn't understand the dream either, and he left."

I felt a stirring inside and said to those in our van, "Please don't tell me what his dream was! Just pray that God will provide the interpretation before we return to La Guazara tomorrow."

Early the following morning, I picked up *My Utmost for His Highest* by Oswald Chambers for my personal devotions. I'd already prayed the Lord would provide help with the mayor's dream.

On opening the book, the January 15th message was before my eyes: "*Do You Walk in White?*" It spoke of going through a "*white funeral*." It also held the interpretation of the mayor's dream, though I didn't know it at the time.

Reaching La Guazara, we found the town mayor at the nursery and invited him to join us for lunch as

I'd brought an extra sandwich. I asked the translator to tell the mayor we could talk about his dream, and couldn't help noticing a look of anxiety in his eyes when the dream was mentioned.

"Please tell me about your dream," I asked later.

The mayor hesitated, then began: "The first thing I saw was myself dressed in black!"

Prompted by the Holy Spirit, I interrupted. "That was my life for years. I was dressed in black and it means I was living in sin. Living in the darkness of the world without Jesus. I was going to church, but Jesus was not Lord of my life."

The mayor looked surprised. "It's the same with me," he said.

"What did you see next in your dream?" I asked.

"I was dressed in white clothes!"

Excitement began to boil in me. "That's exactly what took place in my life. After living in sin and being an alcoholic, I asked God to forgive me and invited Jesus to be Lord of my life. The Bible says when we do this, our sins are washed away and we become whiter than snow. We can also stay dressed in white robes if we try to obey God's commands and repent when we fail."

Tears filled his eyes. "I need to change my life, but I'm afraid!"

"Tell me what happened next," I encouraged as I rested my hand on his shoulder.

"I saw myself in a casket! I was dead!"

Now tears were streaming down my face as well. I understood how perfectly God had orchestrated even my morning devotions for the very purpose of this moment.

“Tell me,” I asked, “What color was the casket?” But I already knew the answer.

“It was white!” the mayor exclaimed.

God had moved on the most respected man in town in a dream, and provided the interpretation of the dream to a doctor from Florida. I explained that the white funeral was the picture of a person dying to sin and his old person. Not death to be frightened of, but new life! Even *eternal* life!

The Holy Spirit already had the mayor under conviction and he was eager to confess past sins. When the mayor asked Jesus to be Lord of his life, the tears disappeared, and he was incredibly filled with joy. He ran from the clinic through the streets of the town with his arms upraised, shouting, “Jesus is Lord of my life!”

He was indeed a new creation...one whom God would use to open doors for further spreading of the gospel. The next day, the mayor introduced me to the new principal as well as to the other teachers. All were men and they also embraced Jesus as Lord and Savior that day after I shared the “good news of Jesus Christ” with them.

Their immediate desire was for all the students to hear about Jesus. So that evening, I arranged for our ship evangelist to speak to the student body the next week. On that day, I could not help but recall that Jesus says, “*Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these*” (Matthew 19:14).

11. God's Guiding Hand

It was a sweltering July day in 1990 when a phone call came late in the evening from Jackie Wickes, a nurse we'd met while serving with Mercy Ships in the Dominican Republic. But let's hear about this call as told by Jamie Buckingham in his wonderful book, *Summer of Miracles*:

At 9:30, the phone rang. It was Gordon Strongitharm, one of our staff pastors. One of his pastoral duties was carry the beeper and answer emergency calls that came into the church after hours.

Jackie took his call, jotted something down and then hung up.

"Gordie just got a call from a Dr. Ralph Johnson, a medical doctor in St. Petersburg who is trying to get hold of you. Gordie seems to think you should return the call."

"Now?" I said from the bed where I was propped up on pillows.

"The doctor left his home phone number. You can wait until tomorrow, however."

But something was sputtering inside me. It felt like the old Model-A Ford we once had around the house when I was a boy. To start it, someone had to twist the crank. Then the engine would sputter, backfire, cough, and finally catch. I now had that same feeling

in my spirit. Something was trying to get started.

“No, I think I’m supposed to return this call now. This hasn’t been a good day for me. I’m ready for a messenger from God. Maybe he’s it.”

“God has already sent you a number of messages today,” Jackie reminded me.

“I know. I’ve given the devil a key to my mind, haven’t I?” She smiled and handed me the phone.

Dr. Johnson answered on the first ring. “I was praying you would call back,” he said jovially. There was a ring in his voice that gave me confidence.

“Who are you?” I asked.

He gave me a rundown on his practice - actually a testimony of his life. He was a radiation oncologist who had been director of the department of radiation therapy at the National Institutes of Health, the prestigious hospital that wanted to treat me as an experimental case.

However, he had begun to drink and finally resigned. In the process he lost everything. Wife. Position. Money. He moved to Florida and opened a small cancer clinic associated with Bayfront Medical Center in St. Petersburg. His drinking got worse. He was losing his ability to function. Then, in a remarkable series of incidents, he had an encounter with Jesus Christ. He had stopped

drinking instantly. Shortly afterward he had remarried. Now he was baptized in the Holy Spirit. He continued to work at the Bayfront Cancer Clinic but spent a large amount of time giving free treatment to the homeless and several times a year made missions trips overseas.

I laughed. "I think I can trust you."

"What do you mean?"

"I have problems trusting people who don't walk with a limp," I said. "It sounds like you have one. Now tell me how you found out about me."

"This morning when I got up, I was standing in the shower and said, 'God, just zing me with something special today.' I've never prayed like that before and didn't think much about it until a few minutes ago when I got a phone call from a missionary nurse named Jackie Wickes. I met her last year when we were both in the Caribbean on the hospital ship *S.S. Anastasis*. Jackie asked for my card. I seldom carry cards, but I had just one and gave it to her.

"Our church supports Jackie, I interjected. "She's a single mom who gave up her nursing job after her kids were grown and has been with YWAM ever since."

Someone from your church told her about your condition," Dr. Johnson continued. "She said God had directed her to call me. She scrounged around and found the card I had given her a year ago. She felt I would

have a word for you that you would receive only from a medical doctor.”

“Well, do you?”

He laughed. “You’d better tell me about your situation first.”

I explained everything, closing out with the fact that my brother John had left this morning with my medical records.

“You’ve done exactly the right thing by letting him take them to Birmingham,” he said. “Do you have his phone number? I want to call him.”

“Now?”

“It’s only 9:00 P.M. in Birmingham,” he answered. “I want to make a couple of other phone calls, and then I’ll call you back tomorrow.”

I gave him John’s home number and hung up. Jackie was standing at the foot of the bed, looking at me. “How do you feel?”

“Better,” I said. “Much better. “For some strange reason I think I’ve just heard from a messenger from God...and I don’t even know the man.”

Within minutes of this conversation, a sequence of amazing events were complete. Earlier that day, I’d gone to the hospital library at Bayfront to search for information on a rare cancer affecting a patient referred to me. While waiting for a librarian to help me, I casually picked up a journal from a wall rack.

Just as casually I scanned the journal for anything of interest. Only one article came to my attention.

By seeming coincidence, the article was authored by a person I knew, our parents having been friends for many years. The article was authored by Dr. David Swanson at the famous M.D. Anderson Cancer Center in Houston and concerned research on patients with advanced kidney cancer. This was the identical cancer diagnosed in Jamie Buckingham, but I didn't know about Jamie until later in the day.

By 10:00 p.m. that same evening, I'd contacted both John Buckingham in Birmingham and David Swanson in Houston. Arrangements were made for Jamie to be seen in a few days by Dr. Swanson. The roadblocks often encountered in arranging consultations simply didn't seem to exist.

It was mid-morning on a Saturday, ten days later, that the phone rang. Jamie and Jackie had returned from Houston but his voice was unsettled. "They didn't reach a decision. Dr. Swanson said he was unable to decide what to recommend."

"So what are you supposed to do now?" I asked.

Jamie replied, "I was told to go home and think about it. But I don't know what to think about!"

"Well, neither do I! I guess that means to pray and let God provide the answer."

Look back, my words about trusting God to give directions seem out of place. Of course we are to trust God, but it wasn't the usual way I did things. A more typical strategy for me was to act first, and then pray that God would abundantly bless what I'd decided to do...or already done.

The next morning, I turned to Sylvia as we were leaving church. "The Holy Spirit just said to go to

Melbourne and pray with the Buckingham's about treatment."

There was no immediate reply.

Her absence of reply was quite understandable. The four and a half years since our wedding in 1986 had not been blissful. And to say something about God speaking to me wasn't generally received with great enthusiasm. At least it seemed that way to me.

I continued, "Tomorrow is an extremely full day at the office. But I can reschedule Tuesday if it'll be convenient with the Buckingham's. Let's call them right after brunch."

Sylvia drove to Melbourne on Tuesday morning, most of the trip made in silence except for worship music playing on a cassette. No thought was given to possible advice that might be offered. Instead the matter was being given to God. As we rode, I sang along with the music and read from a book that had been written by Jamie.

The Buckingham's gracious home was located in the midst of twenty wooded acres where four of their five children live with families. We arrived just before noon and enjoyed the lunch of delicious fresh fruit along with the warm hospitality typical of Jamie and Jackie. Again, let's hear a description of what took place from *Summer of Miracles*.

Following lunch, we went into our living room. Jackie and I sat on one love seat, the Johnsons on the other. I liked them. Both were easy to talk to, easy to listen to.

We sat quietly for a few minutes, then Dr. Johnson opened a book. "Why don't you sit

back and let me read you something.” Jackie and I relaxed on the sofa, holding hands. He began:

“To view the wilderness as an end...a place of abiding, rather than a place through which one passes on his way to a land of promise...is the greatest of tragedies. Since God never intended that His children enter a wilderness and remain, each wilderness experience should be accompanied by a sense of nagging dissatisfaction, a deep longing for the Promised Land to come. Pilgrims should be careful not to try to escape the suffering God places on His children, until the object of that suffering is complete. At the same time, they should arise every morning and look upward...expecting, yea *knowing*, that one day the cloud will move.

“Depression, discouragement, unhappiness, feelings of unworthiness...all these are moods of the wilderness. But the promise of God is far greater and can be experienced long before one actually emerges from the wilderness. Therefore, it is not unusual to hear, even from the wilderness beds, songs in the night.

“Even though the reed is bruised He will not break it off. Even though the wick is only smoldering, He will not snuff it out. While each desert is a place of burning, the promise of God remains: “When you walk through the

fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze.”

He closed the book and looked up. I was trying to hold back the tears, but they were pushing through my tightly closed eyelids.

“Do you know where that comes from?” he asked gently. I could only nod my head.

“Those are closing paragraphs from your book, *A Way Through the Wilderness*. I was reading it in the car as Sylvia drove over from St. Pete. Even though you wrote it seven years ago, it is God’s word for you this afternoon. It is bread on the waters, now returning.”

We prayed.

Finishing, Dr. Johnson looked me straight in the eye.

“You are to go for surgery!”

Jackie sat straight upright. “What?”

“Surgery! I feel it strongly. The sooner the better.”

Words sent by the Holy Spirit had come through my lips before. At times I was aware of listening to words that weren’t mine...as if someone else were speaking. And these words about surgery certainly weren’t mine. Never in thirty years of medicine had I suggested surgery be done on someone considered inoperable in the opinion of surgeons.

It was then that Jamie asked a question.

“Would the word ‘unrooted’ fit with having an operation done?”

Puzzled, I replied, “Why are you asking that?”

“Because minutes before you and Sylvia arrived, my old friend Oral Roberts called from Tulsa. He’d been praying for me when he felt he was given a word from God.”

“What was that word?”

“It was ‘unrooted.’ But Oral didn’t know what it meant.”

Again I heard myself speak. “Unrooted! I guess that would fit with surgery.”

Jamie and Jackie immediately came into unity, and a call was placed to Dr. Swanson in Houston.

“Dave, this is Ralph Johnson calling from the home of Pastor Jamie Buckingham here in Florida. He’d like you to operate as soon as possible.”

“Fine,” said Swanson. “We’ll schedule surgery for next week unless he’d prefer to see a surgeon on the east coast in Fort Lauderdale.”

I relayed the option to Jamie but he was emphatic that surgery should be in Houston. And while this conversation was taking place, it never occurred to me Swanson’s willingness to operate was opposite his conclusion that the cancer was inoperable.

The intensity of spiritual warfare intensified with the decision for surgery. Faithful believers stormed the heavens with prayer. At *The Tabernacle*, the Buckingham’s home church, both congregation and staff entered into prayer and fasting. Pat Robertson beseeched thousands of listeners to his *700 Club* to intercede in prayer for Jamie.

The next weekend, Jamie and Jackie headed for the M.D. Anderson hospital in Houston on wings of prayer, confident that Almighty God was in control of the entire situation.

Supper was scarcely over when our home phone rang the following Tuesday evening. Instinctively, my throat tightened.

“Sylvia, it’s the call from Houston we’ve been waiting for!”

A tired voice spoke. “This is Dave Swanson. We just finished.”

“How did it go?” I asked almost reluctantly.

“We operated for more than four hours, but just couldn’t get anywhere. The cancer was so fixed in place like concrete. Then all agreed we should stop operating and just close him up.”

The lump in my throat grew, and I couldn’t reply. It seemed like an eternity before Dr. Swanson went on explaining.

“We were closing up when heavy bleeding began where we had tried to free up the cancer. We had to reopen the abdomen in order to get bleeding under control. Then the tumor started to loosen up. Before long, the entire tumor mass was free enough to be removed.”

Then he added, “I’m glad that I kept going until we got it all out.”

My eyes filled with tears and I began to weep. It somehow didn’t seem like an appropriate time to explain what really took place. Dr. Swanson was simply an instrument in the hand of a sovereign and omnipotent God who had foretold uprooting of the cancer even before the surgery began.

12. Going Different Ways

Time would reveal the Buckingham's to be God's provision for our marriage. Our relationship had become badly strained and the activity surrounding Jamie's illness distracted us from the increasing tension during the summer and fall of 1990.

In early November of that year, Jamie asked me to share my testimony at their church. I was asked as well to describe what took place with Jamie's cancer from a medical viewpoint. And it was during the altar ministry at the end of this service that a prophetic message came to the associate pastor.

"Jamie," said Gordon Strongitharm, God wants you to anoint Ralph as an '*apostle of hope.*' Let me get the oil." Once this was completed, the ministry at the altar resumed and the anointing incident was forgotten...until I was preparing for a mission trip to Honduras in the early spring of 1991.

Marital stress again escalated following the visit to Melbourne. Sylvia and I had little tolerance for each other's opinion. Suggestions made by the one brought an instant, contrary reaction from the other. Looking back, I realize that nearly all interactions bordered on conflict. I don't believe either one of us recognized how negatively we were acting toward each other.

Certainly I wasn't making an effort to understand Sylvia's feelings. I made no allowance for the fact

that living with alcoholics creates problems. Later I'd become much more aware that codependency can be as crippling as alcoholism or drug addiction.

Having little compassion for Sylvia's struggles, I was unwilling to compromise. I had decided to live in a world of black and white where it was totally unreasonable to compromise. And who in the world needed a mediator anyway?

In truth, both Sylvia and I did! But stubbornness blocked communication. Resolution of issues was rarely possible. This led to a pattern of our making separate living arrangements whenever the tension became intolerable.

By early 1991, each of us was convinced that God needed help in changing the other person. In truth, God couldn't change much of anything because we were in *His* way. About this time, Sylvia was eager for a considerable change of scenery (*meaning far away from Ralph*).

I'd arranged to join a church mission to Honduras as the team doctor. This opened the door for Sylvia to volunteer for a mission with Mercy Ships.

And guess where?

In Africa of all places!

Off went Sylvia with the *S.S. Anastasis* for two months in Ghana, West Africa. That didn't help me one bit. It seemed crazy that God had answered a prayer of eight years earlier, to send someone with a love for missions to share my life. I marry a fashion expert who then develops a love for missions...and especially for Africa where I prayed for her in the first place. And what happens? She goes to Africa without me!

Meanwhile the church team prepared for building a Bible school dormitory in Honduras. My role was to be available for medical emergencies, and to hold a family clinic for nationals living in the area of the school.

For some reason, I frequently found myself praying the trip would provide confirmation of being an *'apostle of hope'* as Jamie had prayed some months earlier. But once we departed Tampa, the thought completely left my mind.

The day following arrival in San Pedro Sula was a Sunday and team members were invited to attend different churches. Some were asked to give their testimonies, and I was invited to speak at a church in the central city with missionary Raymond Jacobs acting as translator.

I felt a burdened to share the mercy of Christ who had rescued me from a life full of addictions. I also spoke of needing to prepare for the return of Christ and avoid the deceptiveness of worldly pleasures in these last days. While speaking, three men sitting near the front of the church came to my attention.

Finishing the message, I gave an invitation. The altar filled quickly with people who came forward for prayer and to commit themselves to Christ.

Missionary Jacobs motioned me toward one side and he moved to the opposite end.

Then a most remarkable thing happened!

Stepping forward to pray for the first man in line, my hand had barely touched his shoulder when he began to fall backward. No one moved to help, and I quickly attempted to catch him and prevent injury.

But there was no need. He was weightless.

This grown man floated to the floor! I was being taught those truly *slain under the power of the Holy Spirit* don't need 'catching.' Only those 'slain in the flesh' can possibly be injured.

I approached the next man, and he began to fall before I touched him. Again I instinctively reached out. But again, the Holy Spirit was gently lowering another virtually weightless man.

And then it was lesson time!

Looking at the two motionless men on the floor, I had a thought. It seemed innocent enough until it was entertained. And at once I realized the mistake!

Instead of praising God for moving in our midst, I thought silently, "I wonder if the same thing will happen when *I* pray for the next person." At once, I felt the anointing leave. How easy it had been to slide into self-centered thinking.

God was offended, and I knew it! As if *my* hands made anyone fall under *my* power. I'd crossed a line that God clearly draws, for He is unwilling to share His glory with any man.

Under conviction, I fell to my knees on the very spot, and begged God to forgive my pride. But the anointing had left. It was a lesson to not forget.

Later I shared the morning events with the senior pastor who'd come along with the mission team.

"Why do you think those men were felled by the Holy Spirit, Pastor?"

"Ralph, you don't realize that there've been few signs of the Holy Spirit moving here. What you saw take place this morning brought hope to the national superintendent who attended the service along with two other church leaders."

I remembered three men sitting off to one side. But as the word *hope* was used, I did not recall praying for the confirmation of that word in my life before leaving for Honduras.

Then it was my turn to hear a fascinating story.

Pastor continued talking. "We had an interesting time as well." He explained that he and his wife had flown with a missionary pilot to deliver the Sunday message at a church some distance away.

The Holy Spirit caused him to stop preaching shortly after he began. Instead, he was prompted to tell of God's mercy to an alcoholic doctor who was part of his mission team. Unknown to him, God had brought two persons into the church that morning, neither in the habit of attending any church.

One was a town doctor with an alcohol problem, the other a drug lord being sought by authorities. After hearing how a miserable sinner found new life in Jesus by grace, both the doctor and the drug lord went to the altar under conviction...but hearts filled with *hope*. And the drug lord reportedly surrendered himself to the authorities.

I wiped tears from my eyes as Pastor shared this story. And once again, the memory of praying God might confirm my being an '*apostle of hope*' never entered my mind.

It was the third day of our mission that the voice of the Holy Spirit spoke quietly to my spiritual ears as I was reading the scriptures late in the evening.

"Forget sightseeing with the others at the end of the week. I have a task for you in the country!" The next day, the same message was heard, only now it included taking medicine along. That didn't make

sense. Not only was I unfamiliar with the countryside, but our medical supplies were being used up at a rapid pace.

On the last working day, final instructions came from God: “*Ask the driver of the school bus where he can drop you off tomorrow!*”

By now, the voice was a loud command. And to my surprise, limited amounts of antibiotics were left together with antifungal and antiparasite medicine. Enough perhaps for a couple hours of work. I stored these supplies in the bus, and the driver suggested leaving me at a church in the town of Rio Linde. It was near the sightseeing destination so that I could travel back and forth with the rest of the team.

At dinner that evening, I asked a Puerto Rican-born pastor Alex Rios to join me as translator on the following day. The next morning, we stood together waiting for the bus to arrive at the hotel.

“Good morning, Ralph. Good morning, Alex.” It was missionary Raymond Jacobs.

“Raymond! Just the person we wanted to see.” I told him about going to Rio Linde. “The pastor does not expect us. Can you tell us about him so we can let him know we’ve spoken to you?”

Raymond’s reply caused quickening in my spirit.

“We knew that you were a cancer specialist, and wanted to bring the pastor from this church to see you, at least for prayer if nothing else. He’s only 40 years old and dying from cancer. His entire stomach was removed several weeks ago, and the cancer had already spread to the liver. No other treatment is being offered him, and now he’s become too weak to travel.

Tingling with excitement, I exclaimed, “God has arranged this! It’s no accident we’re going there!”

Standing nearby were two women in our group who’d come along to prepare meals for the team.

“We couldn’t help hearing what you were talking about. May we join you as intercessors? We really would like to go along!”

Then the bus pulled up, and we scrambled inside.

A small house was attached to the rear of the typical tin-roof church. As the bus slowed to a stop, the pastor’s wife exited from the house. She invited us to first meet her husband as the bus drove off.

“He’s very sick,” she said, great sadness deeply etched across her face. Alex explained that we had been told of his serious illness and thanked her for welcoming us.

Lying on a floor mat was an emaciated man. In spite of years doing cancer work, I’d not seen such wasting of flesh. Instantly his appearance brought to mind pictures of Jewish holocaust victims in Nazi Germany. But these thoughts were short-lived.

The moment we entered his room, this dying man pointed at me and began speaking very rapidly. His eyes were bright with excitement!

“Alex, why is he so emotional?”

“Ralph, he’s saying he had a dream last night. He saw someone come to pray for him and it was your face he saw in his dream. He says that he knew you the moment you walked in!”

Hearing those words, I fell to my knees weeping. I praised God for His compassion in bringing such encouragement to this dying man. I also thanked the Lord for speaking to my heart about being there.

The small pentecostal church became filled with many of those who'd come for medical treatment. All remaining medicine had been used up in a little more than an hour after arriving. People were asked to remain for prayer on behalf of their pastor after we finished the clinic, and nearly all did so.

I felt moved to begin with a testimony of how the Lord lifted me from a pit of addiction and moral degradation, and placed me on rock-firm ground... on the Rock of Jesus Christ. As I finished, a tattered man came to the front, crawling on his knees from the back of the church with folded hands and tears streaming down his unshaven face.

It was a town drunk who'd stood in the doorway listening to how Jesus had forgiven and redeemed another drunk. He was leaning against the doorpost for support initially, but now he was totally sober as he repented and asked God to forgive him. It was an exact repeat of my own experience at Cursillo.

Returning into the house, I picked up the dying pastor who weighed about as much as a nine or ten year old child. Not more than eighty pounds at the most. And once back in the church, we entered into fervent prayer to the God who says, "*I am the God who heals. Believe and you shall receive.*"

Shortly thereafter the bus returned, and the pastor had a parting word before we left. Speaking to Alex in Spanish, he said, "Tell the doctor he brought me hope." For the third time on this trip, my conscious self did not bear witness to use of the word *hope*.

As we headed back to San Pedro Sula, I felt quite subdued over what had happened. While the others talked excitedly about sightseeing, I felt more like

meditating. I chose a seat alone toward the rear of the bus, but my plan was short-lived.

One of the two women who joined us to pray as intercessors was standing next to my seat. “May I talk to you for a few minutes?”

I slid over toward the window to make room, and listened to this mother tell about a son destroy his health with alcohol. He had gone through recovery programs to no avail. There had been hospital stays, the most recent but months earlier when he nearly died. “One more drinking bout will kill you!” was a warning given at the time of discharge.

“Dr. Ralph, I never heard your testimony before. How I wish my son would talk to you, but he does not want to hear about God.”

And a thought crossed mind, *‘Maybe not yet!’*

13. Home Again

Shortly after return from Honduras, Sylvia came back from Africa and the tension resumed. Most of our confrontations centered around issues common to many marriages. One was what I considered to be imprudent spending and the second was behavior I thought was overly protective of her children.

I felt so sanctimonious when Jackie Buckingham called us from Melbourne one evening to say she'd received a word from God. It was for Sylvia to take her hands off the children. She received this with as much enthusiasm as one might touch a rattlesnake. Her response was an irritated, "I don't accept that!"

On the other hand, I seemed to have inherited a 'short fuse' when it came to feeling offended. In the case of my father, its outward expression had been anger. My mother expressed her reaction to offense by rejection. These were different reactions but both parents had short fuses. And my 'fuse' could be lit either way and result in anger or rejection of others.

My anger was less and less controllable. At times it almost seemed another person were using my lips to speak. Then I'd be filled with remorse over what I'd said while my emotions were out of control.

Hostility finally intensified to where need for a separation arose. I rented a small condo, determined to seek the face of God without the distractions at home. And for the first time in a long while, I was

able to find peace on a consistent basis. It would be important for me to realize having peace through a close relationship with Christ was possible. In the near future, the temperature in the furnace would rise even higher.

During this period of ‘escape,’ I sat alone in the back of church one Sunday evening. I had been on a 72-hour fast, and was sensitive to the voice of God. As the associate pastor began to pray, he said “We ask prayers for Philip who is hospitalized and not expected to live through the night!”

Instantly my heart was stirred. It was the young man whose mother had spoken to me on the bus in Honduras. Than as though a hand were pulling me out of my seat...*I must go to Philip!* Hurrying to the front, I stopped the pastor in the midst of praying.

“Which hospital is Philip in? I must go there!”

Startled, he answered, “Humana Northside.”

Minutes later, I walked into the Intensive Care Unit of that hospital.

“Nurse, where is the chart on Philip?”

“With the patient,” she answered. “Room 3.”

There he lay, unconscious. Eyes rolled upward with only the jaundiced whites visible. At first, he wasn’t breathing. Then a few short gasps with the familiar rattle. Then no further breathing...a pattern of terminal breathing known as Cheyne-Stokes.

The nurse was the first to speak. “Blood pressure is falling. He is a ‘no code,’ so it’s not going to be long. A few minutes at most.”

Sadness filled her eyes. She’d cared for Philip on his last admission when fifteen units of blood were

given after a massive hemorrhage in the stomach caused by cirrhosis. “Such a shame,” she added.

Only later did I realize how a supernatural filling with faith had occurred.

“Do you know the story of Lazarus?”

The nurse looked puzzled and remained silent at first. Her patient was dying, and now a doctor she’d never seen was giving a Bible quiz. Hesitating, she finally answered, “Yes.”

“In the past I was alcoholic as well, and dead in sin. But God who delivered me from addictions and gave me new life, the One who brought Lazarus back from the dead, can do the same for Philip!”

With that, I took his limp hand in mine.

“Father, we come to You in the name of Jesus, and we ask...”

The nurse screamed!

Looking up, I saw her standing across the bed from me, trembling. Staring down at Philip, she was unable to control her emotions.

“It’s OK! God loves alcoholics! It’s what we do to ourselves that He hates!”

“You don’t understand! When you said ‘Jesus,’ he woke up. Now he’s looking at you!”

She was right. His eyes were focused on me and followed me as I walked around the bed. After six days in deep coma and near death, he was awake!

Amazed, doctors found their patient sitting in a chair eating breakfast the next morning. Four days later, Philip was discharged from the hospital with his liver and kidneys in working condition. He had recovered from hepatorenal syndrome...a uniformly fatal condition.

A few weeks later I resumed living at home when Jamie and Jackie Buckingham again occupied our guest bedroom. Spread of Jamie's cancer required radiation therapy and also created a situation where they could minister to our struggling marriage...and they did so like angels sent from heaven.

The following weekend, one of the missionaries from Honduras visited our church. He expressed thanks for construction work at their school. Then seeing me sitting with Sylvia, he turned toward us.

"Dr. Johnson, the dying pastor you prayed for has said to tell you he has recovered. He's working full-time, and revival is taking place in his church!" On hearing that report, the tears could not be stopped.

Over the previous year, I'd seen priorities change in Jamie's life and seeds were planted. Seeds about examining the priorities in my own life. I'd come to admire so many things about Jamie because of his transparency...a willingness to share true feelings at the "gut" level.

It was at this time that I told Sylvia I would walk the same road as Jamie in the future, and needed to learn lessons that would apply to my own life. I was aware of Jamie's curtailing his speaking schedule. He also transferred the role of chief shepherd to an associate pastor at *The Tabernacle*. And his great skill at writing was being practiced less and less.

On the other hand, I saw Jamie steadily increase his prayer time and 'bathing' in God's Word. I was strongly impacted by watching what happens when one's eyes are turned upon Jesus...how the "things of earth will grow strangely dim" like the words of a familiar song.

Jamie provided inspiration for me to consider a great deal sooner than I realized at the moment. My own cancer diagnosis was just around the corner. I too would then be facing personal decisions on the priorities in my life.

As I reflect back on those days, a unique incident comes to mind. Sylvia and I had gone to church for Wednesday evening worship. Jamie and Jackie had chosen to remain at our home, quite likely relieved to be left alone for a change without the feuding.

They had retired for the night by the time we returned. So I went to the family room to watch the evening news. And the moment I sat on the sofa, I felt it!

“Sylvia! Come here! There’s an incredible peace, right in this spot where I’m sitting!”

I don’t recall Sylvia’s reaction at this time. But in relating the incident to Jamie and Jackie at breakfast the next morning, their response was remarkable.

“We sat in that very spot while you two were at church last night and prayed for God’s peace over this home...and your marriage.” They both knew so well that Jesus wants to give us peace in our times of trial and tribulation. *“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest”* (Matthew 11:28).

14. A Need to Regroup

The fall of 1991 became a frenzy for which I was not prepared emotionally or spiritually. While some changes had taken place at home, other issues still were not resolved. This time they centered around the upcoming wedding of my wife's older son.

I'd abandoned membership at the St. Petersburg Yacht Club some time earlier. God had made it clear through His Word that I needed to separate from unbelievers and worldly Christians, "*lest their gods become your gods and their ways your ways.*"

My discomfort had increased at social functions where intoxicating beverages were served. Looking back, it's obvious why the upcoming wedding was such a problem for me personally. Its focus was on what the world finds important, yet my life was no longer the same. I was to help pay for what was so contrary to my conscience.

Tension mounted as the wedding approached, my home no longer seeming like a castle. Paying bills seemed my only significant role. But the condo I'd rented the prior summer was vacant, so I went there just prior to the wedding to seek refuge.

This time it was more painful in one way, yet at the same time somewhat easier. The idea of spending the upcoming holidays away from home was difficult to accept, but inner compelling to get away was strong. I'd reached the point where I no longer

viewed my life as having citizenship on earth, but in heaven. And I had no intention of living with Sylvia again, outside the seemingly remote possibility that her attitude might change.

Looking back, it's amazing to me how the Holy Spirit directs our steps. I needed close communion with God so that His voice could be heard revealing a hidden cancer in me.

I was sitting alone in my apartment as God spoke to me that Sunday evening in early December using Psalm 107:20. ***“He sent forth his word and healed them; he rescued them from the grave.”***

There was no mistaking the message.

God said I had a cancer growing in my prostate gland. I was so certain of the diagnosis that the next day I called Sylvia. And I also called my pastor.

“If that's true, Ralph, we'll have the elders anoint you with oil and pray for you next Sunday,” he said.

“I appreciate that. But even though it's scriptural, I don't believe that's what I supposed to do. God is telling me to learn to trust Him. I don't think it will honor God to hurry for healing prayers the moment the diagnosis of cancer is confirmed.”

The cancer quickly put a new wrinkle on matters, however. As Jamie went through his trials, I sensed that I was observing a role model for my own life. I watched him surrender good things - good things important to him as well as important to others - but not necessarily the best. And the very best is always a more intimate relationship with Jesus.

We can choose to hold on to pursuits and those things which give us an identity. Or we can decide to turn to Him in whom our identity is hidden. At

once I sensed a challenge to reorder the priorities in my life. It was the challenge of greater dying to self. I could embrace it or resist. It was my call.

God had given me a remarkable opportunity to witness His grace. Not only being set free from the bondage of addiction, but being warned of a hidden cancer. At the same time, I was being reminded of mortality. My days were numbered as were those of Jamie, and I must choose how to use them.

Decision time had come. I'd been warned earlier how marital strife could damage being a witness for Christ. If separation from Sylvia hurt my usefulness to God, then personal feelings had to be set aside. If new lessons had to be learned about dying to self, it was the time to begin!

Returning home to live again, I received radiation treatments on the same machine as Jamie in January of 1992. This time, however, my friend's cancer didn't respond. Yet somehow it didn't seem critical that Jamie didn't improve. He had fully surrendered his will to God and placed his very life on the altar. Once that has been done, a person no longer exists independent of God.

My treatment lasted for seven and a half weeks, during which time Jamie continued to deteriorate. And on a day brilliant with sunlight in February, Jackie stood courageously before a group of family and friends to read a letter written by her husband shortly before his death.

“...You remember all the things I did to try bring my body into full submission: losing all that weight, violent exercises,

afternoon and evening basketball games, long periods of fasting . . . yet the battle between my body and the real me was never over. I knew there was still one more step necessary before my spirit could soar free – a step which I have now taken. The world calls it death. God calls it freedom...” *

Minutes later, the physical remains of Jamie were lowered into the ground. I found myself unable to contain tears, missing the man I’d come to consider my closest friend. Others had a very similar sense of loss, reflecting an endearing quality about Jamie. He had a unique ability to bond with people in an incredibly personal way.

His final words about having struggled endlessly with flesh were typical of the man a loving God had placed in my life...a God who knew all about my trials with flesh long before they became evident to me.

* Used by gracious permission of Jackie Buckingham

15. Another Dream

Shortly after the end of my radiation treatments, I received a call at my office from Susie White. Her dentist husband Arnold had been a patient of mine, and died from cancer a few months earlier.

“I hear you have cancer. Please know I’m sorry.” We chatted for a few minutes, and the conversation ended.

Until a few days later!

“I’m upset over what you said to me!” Susie said with some agitation.

Immediately I felt defensive. Also embarrassed, as I really couldn’t remember what we had talked about. So I mumbled, “Did I really upset you?”

“Yes, you did...when you asked if I were filled with the Holy Spirit.”

Surprised, I replied, “Did I ask that?”

“Yes you did,” she repeated. “I want you to know that I attend church every Sunday and have been in Bible Study Fellowship for years.”

“But Susie, those things have nothing to do with baptism in the Holy Spirit.” I tried to be supportive, but it wasn’t coming out that way.

At supper that evening, I related the conversation to Sylvia and said, “I think I’ll give Susie the book *Nine O’Clock in the Morning* to read. It may tell about baptism in the Holy Spirit much better than I can explain.”

Less than one week passed before Susie called back. “I want to be baptized in the Holy Spirit. How do you get it?”

The following day, she received the baptism as I prayed for her to be given the gift promised by the Father in heaven. Her demeanor so changed that her friends at church asked, “What happened to you?”

Just as Dennis Bennett wrote in *Nine O’Clock in the Morning*, now Susie’s friends wanted what she had. It was in this way that Friday evening meetings began at our home. It was really more than a Bible study. With frequent teaching on the Holy Spirit, many received the baptism as well as physical and emotional healing.

It was also time for me to learn another lesson.

The weekly meetings were not very popular with Sylvia at first, and at times she withdrew. Looking back, this lack of unity between us created an open door for attack by the enemy.

Contrary to the rejection I felt at home, those coming into my life for ministry affirmed. And how our flesh seeks approval! To say that my focus on our marriage was distracted for several months is a great understatement.

Eventually the Holy Spirit reminded me of the experience with the pastor who had water baptized me. Deception can threaten every believer, and I’d seen it become a tragic reality when a gifted teacher lost his ministry. How easily any usefulness of mine to God might also be defaulted.

Then in the spring of 1992 while the meetings at home continued, I had another dream. Immediately I called our pastor.

“I had another dream last night. I’m to return to Honduras. God is going to pour out *living waters*, whatever that means!”

“That’s interesting,” Pastor replied. “I just had a phone call from one of our Honduras’ missionaries. He wants to come for a visit, but doesn’t know why he’s to come. Perhaps he’s to stay with you.”

“That would be just fine,” I answered.

Two months later, missionary Frank Hendricks leaned back in his chair after dinner. He’d been our guest for several days, and witnessed Jesus baptize believers with the Holy Spirit at our usual Friday evening Bible study and prayer meeting.

“Why do you think you’re supposed to come to Honduras, Ralph?”

On the surface, his question seemed casual. But I knew it had been on his mind since arriving.

“It doesn’t make sense to me,” I replied. “What I hear God telling me is so ridiculous that I hesitate to tell anyone!”

Frank straightened up and leaned forward in his chair. “What is it?”

“I’ve had the thought of teaching pastors about the Holy Spirit and then laying on hands so Jesus will baptize with His Spirit. It doesn’t make sense. The pastors are pentecostal, and your denomination would laugh if I asked for permission to do this. They might even cry since I’m married for the third time now!”

We laughed at what wasn’t really intended as a joke. Then Frank’s face became serious.

“You’re to do exactly what you said!”

My own face must have registered shock because that's how I felt...shocked!

"Frank, do you realize that I haven't even been to a Bible college?"

He smiled, and leaned back in his chair.

"Ralph, you'd have no way of knowing what has been happening in Honduras. God is raising up new pastors, but many haven't received infilling with the Holy Spirit. They're earnestly praying to receive the baptism, so what you've heard from God fits where things are. When I return, we'll make the necessary arrangements for you to come."

An old saying had certainly just come true: "You could have knocked me over with a feather."

But there was one thing to get out of the way.

Sylvia was energized. God was now using her at a local Christian TV station in ministry. She'd taken a lesbian woman with alcohol and drug problems to Lakeland for deliverance. Those who went felt that a real breakthrough took place. And as I listened to Sylvia tell about it, I felt God directing me.

"I'm supposed to go for deliverance, Sylvia! As soon as you get to the office tomorrow, would you please call for an appointment?"

Richard Murphy had an outgoing personality. At once I felt comfortable, and we quickly went to the issues. The first was my anger, a problem for many years. As he began to pray and bind demonic spirits there was no reaction until he came to the spirit of bitterness.

Instantly, I felt a sharp stabbing pain in the right side of my throat. I glanced at Pastor Murphy who

was turned away, not looking at me. Then he said something quite amazing!

“The pain you feel in the right side of your throat is a demon! Open your mouth and let it out!”

As I did so, violent retching began that lasted a full minute. Then it ended as suddenly as it started. Later when we came to a spirit of anger, no reaction occurred whatsoever. It was explained to me how anger stems from a root of bitterness or resentment, usually as a result of unforgiveness. And any spirit of anger leaves once the spirit of bitterness is gone.

My other long struggle was with lust. Here again, I experienced physical reactions as this spirit was bound. Had I not personally had this experience... and the freedom that followed...I likely would be quite skeptical in listening to such a story.

Recently an old-timer shared with me some of his memories from the ‘early days’ of pentecostalism. Without having told him about my experience, he volunteered, “It’s unfortunate that we no longer see ‘garbage pail deliverance’ as in the past.”

“What do you mean by that?” I asked.

He answered, “People retched as demonic spirits tormenting them were bound and cast out.”

I nodded in agreement. While Christians can’t be possessed by demonic spirits, they certainly can be harassed, oppressed, and tormented. While some might deny Satan’s ability to attack believers, they are ignoring Paul’s warning that “*our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against...spiritual forces of evil*” (Ephesians 6:12). This is why we’re told by Paul to be faithful in putting on the armor of God. To neglect doing so exposes us to great risk.

16. Preparing for Honduras

Six months passed while Frank Hendricks made arrangements to visit Honduras. This not only gave me time for the deliverance experience, but time to prepare teachings on the Holy Spirit.

And this preparation took a most unusual turn.

At first, I felt intimidated by the idea of teaching pastors. Of course I knew the Holy Spirit really had to do the teaching, but I was feeling so responsible. It was the old ‘doctor thinking’ showing up!

During years of lecturing on medical subjects, it always was my practice to research what others had written and then add my own experience. I’d done much the same with Bible teaching, and now I was reading everything I could find on baptism in the Holy Spirit.

Gradually an outline took shape and I sat down at our new computer to write. Dozens of hours later, a rough text was finally completed. A month before departure, praise God!

Sylvia had just announced dinner was ready as I exclaimed, “At last, I’m finished! I’ll print a copy while we’re eating.” And I pressed the key.

But the wrong key!

The one called *delete!*

Instantly the screen went blank! And being a total newcomer with the computer, I had failed to keep a backup disk. Weeks of effort...gone in a flash!

My feelings at that moment could never be put to words. They were a strange mixture of horror, disbelief, and dismay. Yet there was almost a hint that what happened might not be accidental.

“Sylvia, maybe this is for a reason.” Never could I have known my words would be prophetic.

“Instead of rewriting while everything is fresh in my mind, I’m going to spend a few days in prayer and in reading the Bible first.”

Looking back, it’s awesome to realize how God moves in our life without constant awareness on our part. I recall now after my momentary shock, there was no anxiety over the computer glitch. Instead an unnatural peace existed. But I could never have guessed just how firmly God was in charge.

Later that evening, I began to read Paul’s epistles and a few days later came to Philippians. And to the tenth verse of the third chapter: *“I want to know Christ, the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings...”* And in a flash, a wonderful illumination of Scripture took place.

This single verse contained the key as to why every Christian needs baptism in the Holy Spirit. And to be certain I didn’t miss what God was showing me, there would be confirmation.

The next day was Wednesday, and as the senior pastor was out of town, the youth pastor brought the message. And this young man started out by saying, “Please turn to Philippians.”

“Watch this!” I whispered to my wife. “It’s going to be the third chapter and tenth verse to confirm using that verse as the framework for teaching on the Holy Spirit in Honduras!”

The youth pastor continued: “Please turn to verse ten in the third chapter.”

I gave thanks that the Holy Spirit was giving me guidance. And during the days that followed, the Spirit provided scriptures to illustrate exactly what I was to teach. Shortly, a fresh teaching was ready, not prepared from the writings of others but by the Holy Spirit Himself.

My Alex Rios was willing to join me as translator in Honduras. I’d become fond of Alex and felt that his exuberant demeanor would offer most effective translation during the teaching and ministry.

Four days prior to departure, however, I became stricken with an infection and was acutely ill. The trip was suddenly in jeopardy. By the next morning, I was profoundly weak with high fever and chills, a severe sore throat, headache, and a cough producing heavy yellow-green sputum.

It was an illness affecting dozens of patients at the Free Clinic...an illness that required 10-14 days to run its course. We were to leave in three days, and I couldn’t even stay out of bed.

Sylvia obtained some antibiotics from the doctor along with Tylenol for fever, and I fell asleep for an hour. I awoke needing to use the bathroom, and the short walk left me so breathless that I fell panting into a chair on return to the bedroom.

“Are you all right?” asked Sylvia with concern in her voice, never having seen me so ill.

“I need to sit for a minute and catch my breath. I think I’ll watch TV.”

The set was only an arm’s length removed, and I pressed the “On” button. And soon I would catch

more than my breath. I'd catch the healing wind of the Holy Spirit as the screen came into focus on a Benny Hinn crusade.

A mother was bringing her four-year-old son to the front with a physician. The boy was born with a malformed hip and was admitted to the hospital for total replacement of the hip joint. One year earlier, he'd been prayed for at such a crusade.

The physician showed old x-rays as well as the new ones taken just prior to scheduled surgery. No operation was necessary! A miracle-working God already had a new hip in place. New films showed a perfectly normal hip. Seeing the films, I began to weep in praise of God.

Benny Hinn shouted, "People, have faith in God! Reach out to Him if you need a touch." Then I did something so uncharacteristic. Bending forward, I touched the TV set...and felt God's touch!

Before my finger left the screen, I felt perfectly well! Except for hoarseness! The headache, cough, sore throat, and fever were instantly gone! Even my weakness had completely disappeared!

I had coughed so severely that laryngitis left my voice at the level of a whisper. But I was bathed in peace, and had every confidence that by the time we arrived in Honduras, my voice would be restored.

17. Pentecost Revisited

We reached the first district just past noon on the following Monday after a scenic drive. Missionary Frank Hendricks had served in Honduras for several years and was an experienced driver. Thirty pastors awaited us, and we began the service with a time of praise and worship.

Alex Rios translated as we reviewed the person of the Holy Spirit and His role in the body of Christ. After examining the scriptural conditions to receive baptism in the Holy Spirit, a period of time was set aside for personal prayer and preparation.

As I moved from one pastor to another, laying on hands, all but eight immediately “fell out” under the power of the Spirit. It was exactly as happened with me in the ‘upper room’ at home when the baptism took place some years earlier. Later we were told that falling under power of the Spirit was virtually never observed in that country.

When the pastors regained their feet, they began to exalt the Lord. As described in the book of Acts, praise was heard in other “*tongues.*” But there was a burning question. “Why had eight not received the baptism?” I silently asked this question in prayer to the Father.

“You brought us here so that these men might be empowered by the Spirit. Why not the eight?”

The answer was clear! “Ask about hidden sin!”

Calling Alex Rios aside, I said, “We need to ask these eight if they have unconfessed sin that might be hindering God from pouring His Spirit on them.” Seven immediately answered, “Yes!” In each case, it involved unforgiveness being held toward another person...and toward another pastor in several cases!

After repenting, infilling took place at once with the seven. Later that night while in personal Bible study, Proverbs 28:13 came before my eyes: “*He who conceals his sin does not prosper.*”

At each district, Pentecost was faithfully repeated by Jesus. Frank commented later that he observed immediate changes, not only in their speech but in the entire demeanor of some. It was an incredible blessing to witness power from on high being sent upon these precious men!

Evening services brought tears to my eyes. My message to the unsaved was simply, “Repent or perish!” To believers not walking in obedience, it was “Get back to your first love of Jesus and bear fruit, or find yourselves as branches cut off from the Vine!”

The parable of ten virgins had particular impact. Backsliders came under conviction when realizing that those who know the bridegroom but fail to stay prepared are left behind. That foolish virgins were excluded from the wedding feast despite their later efforts to be obedient was a theme that consistently brought large numbers to their knees.

Each evening, altars were filled by those seeking salvation, those confessing their lukewarm love for Jesus, and the sick. And just as God’s Word tells us repeatedly how preaching of uncompromised truth

was followed by many signs and wonders, so it was in Honduras!

Healings occurred nightly. Not only relief of such things as headaches and pain, but instant melting of visible tumors and swollen abdomens, straightening of bent limbs, and casting out of demons. Paul said his preaching was not with eloquent words but with God's truth being confirmed by a demonstration of Holy Spirit power. And so it was in Honduras!

Friday was our last full day before returning. In high spirits, we drove to Rio Linde where eighteen months earlier the dying pastor had been restored to health by the healing power of God. The prospect of returning filled me with excitement, especially after the news that a revival had taken place.

To our surprise, we found the pastor had recently had a relapse of his cancer and died. However, the revival continued and two new churches already had been built and a third was being planned.

Some Christians incorrectly believe that a touch from God must always be complete and permanent. But that isn't scriptural. King Hezekiah became terminally ill and prayed for relief. Isaiah came to tell Hezekiah that God said, "*I have heard your prayer and seen your tears; I will heal you...I will add fifteen years to your life*" (2 Kings 20:5,6). But the king didn't live forever, nor did Lazarus after being raised from the dead.

God may place His hand on a person for a season and once His purpose is completed in that person's life, the season is over. The pastor in Rio Linde had a miracle touch from God, as did Jamie. And we'll see in a few pages that the same is taking place in

my life. God's protection is often for a season, and it's His season.

The church in Rio Linde had a much different appearance than previously. New pews along with shuttered windows were in place, the building was freshly painted, the floor swept clean, and brightly colored ribbons were strung across the ceiling. And the church was completely packed with people one full hour before worship was to begin.

And it would be an evening to long remember.

There was an incredible response to the invitation for altar ministry. "Alex, so many are coming! We can't possibly ask each person what to pray for! Just tell them we ask God to meet their needs in the name of Jesus as I lay hands on them."

Then we watched Jehovah Rapha – the God who heals – touch one sheep after another. In some cases there were healings visible at once. What happened to others we'll never know on this side of glory. But that isn't really important.

God allowed us to see Him do what doctors only dream of doing. Were it possible, I'd have stayed in Honduras the rest of my life and traded my medical practice for the privilege of continuing to see the *Healer* touch His children.

That evening changed me forever. Not since that time have I felt pride when writing a prescription or being referred to as "doctor."

The second reason for not forgetting that evening is more personal. After the service came to a close, we went into the small house behind the church to eat a meal prepared by the new pastor's family. And I began to weep, unable to keep my composure.

“What’s wrong?” asked Alex and Frank?

“God is awesome!” was all I could say between spasms of coughing.

They looked even more puzzled as they picked up their forks. “Aren’t you going to eat with us?”

“I can’t! I’m too sick!”

The moment I sat down, there was instant return of every symptom I had experienced the previous week. It was as though I had never touched the TV screen in faith on that day.

The headache was back! Swallowing was painful as my throat was inflamed again. Chills swept over me and my eyes burned with fever. And coughing began to produce the same yellow-green sputum as ten days earlier.

While the others ate, I could only give thanks to a gracious God for what He was making clear. As with Jamie and the former pastor of this Honduran church, God’s hand would rest on me as long as it pleased Him to work His purpose through my life.

I couldn’t ask any more! The Good Shepherd is caring in a sovereign way, and will be a shield from cancer, sickness, and all other danger. But it will be *according to His will and purpose* for our lives.

Waiting for Frank and Alex to finish eating, I recalled Jesus talking about two sparrows sold for a penny: *“Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. So do not be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows”*

18. Walking on Water

January of 1993 saw us resume Friday evening Bible study and prayer meetings at our home after a interlude of several months. I could now gratefully say “us” because God was bringing such a precious unity into our marriage.

As only a loving God can arrange, my wife and I found ourselves used as refining tools to overcome a lack of humility in each other. Of course it didn’t seem I needed to change, but it was quite wonderful to watch God working in my wife’s life. *(If you take that at face value, I’ve got a bridge to sell you.)*

The thrust of our home meetings was to disciple new Christians. Some were invited by Sylvia as a product of her ministry at the Christian Television Network. Others were met in a variety of ways such as at the Free Clinic or my oncology practice.

Joe came to the office with his wife Rita and a newly diagnosed cancer. They inquired as to how I came to St. Petersburg, and this opened the door for witnessing. Although they’d not attended church for years, their hearts were already prepared by God to hear a testimony of God’s mercy and grace.

Before leaving the Cancer Center, they’d invited Jesus into their hearts and were filled with the joy of salvation. Shortly they received baptism in the Holy Spirit, started growing in the Lord, and began witnessing to family, friends and neighbors.

John and Betty came to the Free Clinic, lacking medical insurance. John was in severe pain due to kidney stones and paced the waiting room until his turn to be seen. I entered the exam room without any type of information except a note written by the nurse as to John's prior history of stones.

"John, you don't need the doctor as much as you need God. May I please pray with you?"

His eyes immediately filled with tears on hearing these unplanned words. Never could I have known that this man walked away from God twenty years earlier and had not darkened the door of a church since. Unemployed, they were far from the family home in Illinois when we first met.

As we prayed, John's relationship with God was restored. He experienced immediate pain relief, and had no further pain while continuing to pass stones for several days. Soon this couple was sharing their testimony to the glory of God as their first love for Jesus returned anew.

Then in the late winter of 1993, I had a desire for increased faith. I told Sylvia I was going to pray for "faith to walk on water, whatever that means." And to my surprise, the next PSA test for prostate cancer showed a rise for the very first time.

"What does it mean?" Sylvia asked.

I quickly replied, "Most likely it's a recurrence of cancer, but I have more faith than ever!"

Repeat tests showed continuing rise of the PSA, but there was lack of concern. Still I couldn't help thinking, "What an unusual way to develop greater faith I'm praying for." Then I'd thank God for His love and mercy, and forget about the test results.

Until late September of 1993.

We were visiting my mother in Chicago on her 87th birthday when a backache started. Nothing had happened to cause a problem and I expected to feel fine the next day as we retired for the night. But the pain was excruciating, and it was nearly impossible to get out of bed the next morning. Our visit ended that day with Sylvia pushing me through O'Hare Airport in a wheelchair.

Back in St. Pete for tests, my sympathy quickly increased for patients with back problems who must endure x-rays, radioisotope bone scans, and MRI's. Lying on hard couches leaves much to be desired.

When the MRI of the spine was reported as being "suspicious for metastasis," it told me the rise in the PSA was a warning that things were not as ideal as they might be.

A variety of pain medicines, heat, and ultrasound therapy provided only temporary relief of pain over the next week or so. As to more invasive treatment, however, I was reluctant.

God had supernaturally disclosed the existence of cancer in the first place. Then He'd prompted me to seek greater faith and trust in Him. I needed to not forget that the Bible gives a recipe for the refining and strengthening of faith. This recipe is called the "*furnace of affliction*" (Isaiah 48:10).

Perhaps this affliction of mine needed to be seen differently. We usually tend to see trials as a work of the enemy. Why not allow pain to be a 'servant' drawing me closer to God? Wasn't that the example I'd seen in the life of Jamie Buckingham? Of course it was!

New light began to shine on my situation. That light was Jesus who was watching patiently. Faith began to soar as I recalled that *“in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”*

Then I found myself reading how the disciples’ boat was buffeted by a storm just as our lives today are buffeted by troubles. The scriptures spoke about that for which I’d prayed...faith to walk on water.

When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. “It’s a ghost,” they said, and cried out in fear.

But Jesus said to them, “Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.”

“Lord, if it’s you,” Peter replied, “tell me to come to you on the water.”

“Come,” he said.

Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out “Lord, save me!”

Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. “You of little faith,” he said, “why did you doubt?” (Matthew 14:26-31).

The Holy Spirit was specific! This biblical story was about my situation. The pain in my back was as the wind Peter felt. The PSA and scan reports were like the waves Peter saw. It wasn’t that Peter didn’t find himself in a storm. What caused him to sink was paying too much attention to the storm and not keeping his eyes focused on Jesus!

Peter doubted and became fearful. The message was clear! Get attention off the pain and reports, and keep my eyes on the Good Shepherd.

It was time to trust God! It was time to praise the One deserving praise. It was time for rejoicing! And time to remember the rhema Word I'd been given: *"He sent forth his word and healed their disease. He rescued them from the grave."*

As I continued to praise Jesus and delight in His Word over the weeks that followed, the pain slowly subsided. It is now seven years since this incident. No medical treatment of any kind has been required for prostate cancer in the interim.

Yes, the PSA does continue to rise gradually but steadily each year. And yes, my back does act up a little bit on occasion. But meanwhile, I use each of these occasions to increase my faith in the Lord.

And by the way, I really enjoy walking on water.

19. New Beginnings

1994 was the year we no longer had the house to maintain. We committed to buy a condominium and our house had been on the market for two years. So we lowered the price once again, yet still no offers were made by potential buyers.

The Friday evening meetings continued, and just before the people arrived in late May, I felt we were to wind up these Bible study and prayer times.

“Friends, I told Sylvia a few minutes ago that I feel we’re to finish the meetings for now. I have two lessons prepared, so let’s plan our final meeting in two weeks with a party afterward.”

Only three days after this last Bible study, the real estate agent brought a client who immediately decided to buy. Perfect timing! We were able to close on the sale one week before a long-arranged visit to the YWAM base in Kono, Hawaii.

Part of this visit was to see the Norments whose friendship had been helpful during times of stress in our marriage. It was a delight to visit under very different circumstances. God had miraculously done a makeover on our marriage once we became willing to get out of His way.

By grace alone, God softened my problem with a ‘short fuse.’ Sylvia also learned to trust in the Lord regarding her children to a much greater extent, and credit card bills were no longer causing a monthly

meltdown of plastic. Most significantly, we had put Jesus at the center of our hopes and dreams instead of ourselves. In a manner of speaking, our marriage had become Christ-centered instead of one that was self-centered on both of our parts.

The trip to Kono was very refreshing. YWAM's *University of the Nations* is an impressive center but neither Sylvia nor I felt a prompting to prepare for full-time missions, at least at that time. On our one Sunday there, the Norments took us to worship at their church. It was an independent pentecostal congregation that met in an open air pavilion overlooking the Pacific Ocean.

The location was inspiring, but even more so was the message in its faithfulness to the gospel. It was the first time I'd heard water baptism presented as John the Baptist might have done, if not Jesus. No compromise! If one were not willing to repent and permit the old self to die, he wasn't ready to be baptized. It was a "*first count the cost*" message as Jesus taught during His earthly ministry.

I found this uplifting! We live at a time when the truth handed down to us by the apostles is often so diluted. But the most significant event for me took place as I opened the church bulletin. A single page insert announced a new program for people having alcohol and drug dependencies.

A program called *New Wine Ministry*.

"Sylvia! Bobby! Jean! Isn't it a wonderful name for an addiction recovery program? The name *New Wine* makes my heart burn inside of me.

Little did I realize that I'd start such a ministry in the future. Yet over the next few days, the Holy

Spirit kept reminding me of my past. Gradually a vision began to form about working with those in bondage to addiction.

My prayer became, “Lord, I’ll do what you want, but not in my own strength. I’ve done that too many times without seeking Your will. It always ends in failure. You need to confirm my working with those in the pig-pen of addiction *where You found me.*”

And confirm the Lord did!

The following Sunday, a stranger approached me at church. “Are you Dr. Johnson?” he asked.

“Yes. Can I help you?”

“I’m told you might know of a Christian program for alcoholics. I’ve tried secular AA programs, and they haven’t helped.” The desperation in his voice touched my heart. And that evening, I was called at home with the same request by two more people searching for a Christ-centered recovery program.

The next morning a package arrived at my office. It was a book outlining a Christ-centered 12-step program called *Recovery in Christ...* mailed by a former nurse at the Free Clinic whom I’d not seen in years. That was confirmation enough! God had revealed His will for me!

Passage of time helped to ease the strain in my relationship with the children after having divorced their mother. However, reconciliation had not come easily with my oldest daughter. And after our trip to Kono, a strong desire developed to visit her in West Virginia where I’d gone previously in an effort to “mend fences.” But a wide gulf still existed in spite of these past efforts.

Sylvia and I went up to see Kay in November at a time she suggested. She made reservations for us at a bed and breakfast near her home just outside of Harrisville in the northern part of the state. We flew to Pittsburgh that morning on an uneventful flight, and rented a car to drive south into West Virginia.

On the way, I told Sylvia how God would have to intervene somehow to help bring closer relationship with Kay. I'd tried as best I knew without success, and it would clearly require divine help.

Arriving mid-afternoon, we visited briefly with Kay and the grandchildren before going to supper at a local restaurant. And then my hopes were dashed.

"Dad, I'm going to Charleston tomorrow for a show. It's two hours each way, so I'll be gone most of the day. If it's OK, the kids can spend the day with you and Sylvia."

My heart sank. It seemed God had ignored all my prayers. The past still haunted my efforts to bring a reconciliation. But at least, I didn't blurt out like I might have in the past. Something like, "How can you do that when we've come all this way to see you?" God was beginning to grant me serenity to accept things I could not change. Besides, my wife had a 'plan B' in mind.

Most men aren't born shoppers. For certain, I'm not! Yet I appreciated Sylvia taking charge of early Christmas shopping with three grandchildren on the next day. After breakfast, we drove about 60 miles to the town of Parkersburg, and shopped until it was time to drop. It was an experience to not repeat if other options are available. Spending time in retail stores isn't ever likely to become my cup of tea.

During the day, Sylvia and I spoke about the next morning. “I’d like to visit with Kay before we head back to Pittsburgh. But it’s the Lord’s day, and He always deserves to come first.”

Sylvia replied, “Maybe we can meet Kay and the kids for a quick lunch after church.” And that evening after Kay returned, we made plans to do so.

The B & B house owner fixed a lovely breakfast the next morning. After a second cup of coffee, I strolled across the street to see the worship schedule as the B & B just happened to be directly across the street from the *First Assembly of God* church in Harrisville. But there were no hours for worship on a simple sign, nor was there a phone number to call.

I walked to the front door. It was locked, but in peeking through the window, a man could be seen pacing back and forth inside. And he came to the front door in response to my persistent knocking.

“Good morning! We’re visiting and would like to join you for worship. Would you please tell me the time for service?”

With a friendly smile, he answered, “Ten thirty.”

“That leaves some time. Can I possibly help you with anything?” I asked.

“No, but thanks anyway. I’m the pastor and I’m trying to prepare the message. But I’m not hearing from God. It’s been the same all week. I thought it would be a special service today because this is our wedding anniversary. ”

“I understand,” I replied. “There was a time when my eyes and ears were blocked as well. But unlike you, I didn’t want to listen!”

“Wait a minute,” he interrupted. “The Holy Spirit is telling me not to preach. You’ve been sent with a message. That’s why I’ve had a block all week!”

I was absolutely flabbergasted! This person never laid eyes on me before. Now he’s asking me to fill the pulpit in his church!

“Sylvia, something quite unusual just happened.” I related what had taken place, and asked, “Would you please call Kay and ask if she’d come with the children to church? I’d like her with us, but she may resist if I call myself.”

At 10:25 a.m., Kay and her children were seated beside us in the front row. Hardly what I’d expected when I got out of bed that morning. And now I was being prompted to tell the church exactly why I was visiting. How God had blessed me with a precious family, and how I wasted my inheritance in riotous living just like the prodigal son.

I was to speak of the love and forgiveness of our merciful God who will restore years the locust have eaten, provided we repent and allow Jesus to be the Lord of our lives.

Silently I prayed, “Lord, I’ve already said this to my daughter in the past. It means nothing at all to others.” But I knew in my heart there was no choice in the matter. It was the message I had to bring.

While speaking about having deserted a faithful wife and four children, my daughter began to sob. Sylvia gently cradled her arm around Kay. And in my spirit, I saw walls which had existed for twenty years begin to crumble...walls of rejection, pain, and bitterness.

In describing the hurt that wrongdoing – failure to obey God, alcoholism, adultery – brought to my family, other people began to weep openly.

“Folks, I’m not certain what the Holy Spirit is doing right now. But this altar is open. I’ll be happy to pray with those who’d like to come up.”

With that invitation, one man after another came forward. Some alone, others accompanied by a wife or their entire family. They wept, under conviction, and asked God to forgive unfaithfulness, failure to be godly fathers, and addictions which hadn’t been overcome. It was just awesome to watch God bring restoration to broken and contrite hearts as well as reconciliation between estranged family members.

During a brief lunch that followed with Kay and her children, a quiet peace prevailed. Somehow it didn’t seem necessary to discuss what’d taken place during the church service.

But as we walked to our cars after lunch, Kay put her arms around me. And her words are still fresh in my ears today.

“Thanks for coming Dad. I love you very much.”

20. Work of the Spirit

A telephone call came from Holland, Michigan in February of 1995. Indeed it was a call of remarkable timing. I had just read the last two Old Testament verses and was meditating on God's words to the prophet Malachi:

“See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse.”

I was considering how our land seems under a curse. How my father had not raised me in ways of the Lord. How I'd failed to raise my children in the ways of God. And it was during this meditation that the senior pastor of *First Assembly of God* church in Holland called.

I'd met Cal Garcia previously when his brother-in-law was terminally ill in St. Petersburg. But he obviously couldn't have known what I'd just been reading. However, the Holy Spirit did. And I found myself invited to speak at their church on the next Father's Day, four months away!

It didn't take rocket scientist intelligence to know what kind of message God wanted given. It wasn't

a cheering of fathers, the flag, or apple pie! It was to call fathers to repent:

“If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land” (2 Chronicles 7:14).

Seventy-some fathers and sons met for breakfast on that Saturday morning, and I thought of my own father. For a number of years he frequently drove to the city of Holland from our Chicago home. Wood products he sold were manufactured in that city and this was my first chance to visit the place of which he was quite fond.

After sharing some experiences of my childhood with these fathers and sons, I exhorted the fathers to be Christ-like role models for their children. I made mention how Jesus showed the disciples how to live by His example. And to be a servant of others was illustrated by the washing of feet at the Last Supper.

“I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them” (John 13:15).

For weeks I had prayed the Holy Spirit would use a foot washing to touch the hearts of the fathers and sons. It was a moving experience to watch fathers kneeling before sons and lovingly wash their feet. Nearly every father prayed while doing so, some

crying unashamedly. And when fathers finished the washing, most embraced their sons with such great affection as to fill my eyes with tears.

The following morning also was a blessing. Once again the Lord used my past to bring conviction. “If you fathers wish to avoid grief and sorrow in your lives, then listen to what happened when I failed to be a godly example for my own children.”

Several weeks after returning from Michigan, a pleasant lady in her fifties named Rosa came to the Free Clinic on a Tuesday afternoon. She was under treatment for severe hypertension but despite taking medication, her pressure remained quite elevated. Four days earlier, she had suffered a stroke that left her with paralysis of the right arm and leg as well as garbled speech.

Rosa came to the Clinic, not having seen a doctor since the stroke. I was asked to see her briefly while the nurse called a cab to transport her to a hospital.

“Rosa, your blood pressure is high today. Have you taken all of your medicine?”

She assured me that she hadn’t missed any of her blood pressure pills, even on the day of the stroke.

“Any idea why your blood pressure is so high,” I asked.

“Well, I’ve been under a lot of stress.” She told of a wayward son who’d run afoul of the law. With good intentions, she had tried to solve his problems instead of permitting him to become responsible.

“Do you have a relationship with Jesus, Rosa?”

“Oh yes,” she answered quickly. “I couldn’t live without Jesus!”

“But Rosa, you aren’t trusting Him. You doubt He can work things out. Trying to fix problems for your son only makes your blood pressure get worse. And it probably gets in the way of God being able to change his life as only God can do.”

“I know that. I’ve been thinking maybe I need to let go, and let God take over.”

“That’s right! And I struggle as you do, Rosa. So before you go to the hospital, let’s pray together and ask God to forgive us for not trusting Him. Let’s both ask Him for the grace to stop our doubting.”

She answered without hesitation, “Let’s do that!”

After praying, I asked Jesus to reveal Himself to my sister as *The Healer* of her stroke. Instantly she spoke in a voice that wasn’t slurred. “I felt God touch me!”

The paralysis of her stroke was healed at once. Three days later, a neurologist confirmed there was no sign of residual weakness. This experience had taught some powerful lessons. Not only did it speak of learning to trust God. It also bore strong witness to the admonition of the apostle James: “*Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.*”

Rosa left the Clinic singing praises to her Lord and Savior. And I felt as though I could almost see Jamie Buckingham saying in his encouraging way, “That was good, Ralph! Now practice what you just said, and trust God with all of *your* heart.”

21. Following the Cloud

After confirmation that I was to involve myself in Christ-centered recovery from addiction, I made a proposal we begin such a program at our church. Enthusiasm marked the initial meetings with quite a number of people being in attendance..

However it quickly became apparent that most of these persons had little willingness to consecrate their lives to Jesus.

“Want to get over my addiction? Of course I do!”

“Surrender my life to Jesus? Don’t be foolish!”

It was a drastic contrast to my prior experience in watching God move in the lives of people with drug and alcohol dependencies. The first step had always been godly sorrow resulting from conviction by the Holy Spirit. This sorrow led to repenting...a *turning away* from “pig pens” plus a *turning toward* God, just like the prodigal in Jesus’ parable.

I tried with little success to teach that Jesus was the answer, not a 12 Step program. That surrender was required! But most were like me in my earlier years: “I can do it my way!”

As a result I became discouraged. I couldn’t even depend on having announcements of our meetings included in the regular schedule of church events. So we discontinued meeting after six months.

In the process, I almost forgot God had planted the idea and confirmed the direction of my steps in

the first place. Here I was again, leaning on my own understanding instead of trusting God. Then all of a sudden, a receptive door opened to start a program at a Salvation Army rehabilitation center. In excess of one hundred men were in residence, nearly all in a struggle with substance abuse.

About this time, an invitation also came to bring chapel messages monthly at the Lighthouse Gospel Mission. This was a faith-based residential program for the restoration and spiritual discipling of men whose lives were impacted by addiction problems.

In the meantime, the Friday evening Bible study and prayer meetings resumed in our new condo. As before, we enjoyed the presence of the Holy Spirit in guiding the teaching and anointing of our prayers for healing of soul and body.

Then a pivotal event took place at church.

A small group developed a burden for outreach to low income neighborhoods. They started sidewalk evangelism, distribution of food, and busing of the children to Sunday school. These efforts were very productive until resistance developed on the part of church administration over several minor issues.

I personally went to the church leadership, being in distress over termination of this outreach. What I was told was so upsetting that I immediately wrote down the exact words so as to pray over the matter.

“It’s not the mission of this church to reach out to the poor!” And my spirit was grieved.

Then I realized I must find another fellowship at which to worship. And weeks later, in June of 1996, a schedule of monthly events at Calvary Chapel of St. Petersburg arrived at my office. The envelope

was plain and lacked a return address. There was no indication whatsoever as to source of the mailing. I later learned that the church itself doesn't mail these schedules. They are only distributed at the worship services at the beginning of each month.

My spirit quickened in reviewing a list of regular activities. The homeless were fed, nursing homes visited, and home groups were active. There were new believer's classes at church along with several weekly bible studies. And outreach to area prisons as well as to the county jail and Juvenile Detention Center.

As to prison ministry, however, I had no interest.

Or so I thought!

I'd worshipped at Calvary for four months when expansion of the prison ministry was announced in October of 1996.

"Sylvia, I'm going to an informational meeting at church. They've invited a prison chaplain to talk, and I'd like to hear what he has to say."

That evening, the Holy Spirit spoke to my heart. Without apparent reason, this chaplain walked into the audience, and put a hand on my shoulder while he was speaking. He had never seen me before, nor I him. But on returning home, I said a most unusual thing to my wife.

"I have such a burden for men incarcerated as a result of alcohol and drug addiction. Enough so that I can imagine leaving my medical practice."

A few days later, I told our Friday evening group, "A fire is in my belly to do volunteer work in jail or the prisons. Would you please pray that the Lord will open doors if it's His idea and not mine?"

It was four days later that nurse Lucy at the Free Clinic told me, “Your last patient was just released from prison after nine years.”

“Wonderful!” I replied. “I can’t wait to see him.”

After meeting James, I asked him, “Please tell me how you met the Lord while in prison.”

James explained that people from a church called *Calvary Chapel* came to the Polk C.I. where he’d been incarcerated. Then he added, “My father used to work with Chaplain Kenneth Holley before they both entered the ministry.” It was the same Kenneth Holley I’d heard speak at Calvary!

Less than a week passed when a young man by the name of Kenneth Holley was referred to me for treatment of a benign condition. It was the son of the chaplain. He could have been sent to any one of twenty specialists in my field locally. The referring physician had no possible way of knowing about my connection with his patient’s father.

God’s hand was so obvious!

A few days later, I spoke to Chaplain Holley and he offered to arrange access into Polk C.I. where a friend of our family was an inmate. And it was after this visit about two weeks later that a rather unusual incident took place.

I was scheduled to speak at a Lighthouse chapel service on December 5th. It was the same day I went to Polk C.I. in the early afternoon as arranged by Chaplain Holley. And as I was returning to St. Pete on I-4 that afternoon, I suddenly realized that I had forgotten to prepare my message for chapel in the midst of excitement over visiting a prison for the first time.

Indeed, it was the first time I hadn't prepared my message in advance in two years. Instead of going home, I decided to go directly to the Lighthouse and use the extra time to prepare for chapel. In this way I found myself seated in the library, asking the Holy Spirit to guide my time of preparation.

A quiet inner voice spoke, "Get a book from the middle second shelf of the bookcase to your right!"

As so often in the past, I began to question in my mind, "You're making this up!" Then I remembered it was the same inner voice which spoke to me back in Honduras: "I want you to skip sightseeing and do something in the countryside!"

Getting up from my chair, I crossed the room to the second shelf of the wall-to-wall bookcase. To a worn paperback all but hidden from view by larger books. Removing this paperback with its torn cover, I read the title: *Born Again* by Charles W. Colson. Surprisingly, I wasn't familiar with the story of the former President Nixon's counsel being converted. Nor did I realize how Colson had been used of God to start a prison ministry called Prison Fellowship.

Sitting down, I began to scan the book. I quickly recognized that Colson was telling about things that were necessary to understand in order to work with incarcerated men.

Then the inner voice spoke again.

"There's another book...middle third shelf on the opposite wall!"

This time I didn't hesitate! Quickly crossing the room, my eyes focused on another paperback in the middle of the 3rd shelf. No other book was given a glance. Its title was *Life Sentence* by the very same

author...Charles W. Colson. It was the sequel to Colson's first book, and described his commitment to developing a prison ministry.

The guiding of the Holy Spirit was nothing short of incredible! And the service that evening was also orchestrated entirely by God.

There were several men about to graduate who wished to share testimonies with new men entering the year-long program. So instead of teaching, I was blessed to listen to talks about the redeeming and restoring work of God in the lives of men who had reached a point of brokenness.

Driving home later that evening, I felt a renewal of dedication to whatever *New Wine* ministry the Holy Spirit might have for me down the road.

22. Recent Footsteps

People often ask if I miss practicing medicine. If they have a few minutes to listen, I love to tell how I've been blessed watching the *Great Physician* at work. One of many such stories involves my first prison chapel at Polk C.I. in February of 1997.

Two brothers from Calvary Chapel joined me to provide a time of praise which I've learned is so greatly appreciated. There'd been a most specific prompting for this service, so I gave a brief personal testimony. Then I explained that God had directed me to pray for those seeking deliverance from any type of addiction or besetting sin.

The line of brothers who came forward stretched the entire width of the chapel, far too many for the three of us to pray with individually. As time was in short supply, I decided to simply go down the line and briefly lay hands on each man.

I began at the far right where a man stood bent over at the waist, hands folded in prayer. What I did not realize was that he'd broken his back several years earlier. His posture was not just a position of humility as I assumed. He walked around the prison yard in that identical way every day.

"In the name of Jesus, be healed!"

I moved to the next man on my left. But before I could pray for him, the crippled inmate gave a loud yell and then straightened until he was fully erect.

“I’m healed! God has healed my back!

The other inmates looked in astonishment as their brother continued to leap up and down in joy. It was what happened at the temple gate called Beautiful when Peter prayed for a man crippled from birth. A compassionate God healed a cripple, no doubt in part to let others know that they could be healed of their addictions if they’d believe in Him.

Shortly the guards called for ‘head count’ and the inmates began to file out. One particular inmate, a huge fellow covered with tattoos, stood in front of me with tears spilling from his eyes. “I know my drug habit is gone!” Then he left to join the others.

Over the coming months, I completed a volunteer training program given by Bruce Anderson, the area director for the Prison Fellowship ministry. Bruce also invited Sylvia and me to attend an outreach at Hernando C.I. where Chuck Colson spoke, and we shared with him the experience with his books.

Several weeks later, my Prison Fellowship training certificate arrived by mail. It spoke about being now equipped “*to offer hope through Jesus Christ to those touched by crime.*” A lump quickly formed in my throat. Again the word “*hope*” had appeared.

By the end of 1997, I had permanently closed my medical practice. God had laid the groundwork for a ministry of *New Wine* in my life. My work as a cancer doctor was being replaced by treating cancer of the heart through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Through Bruce Anderson of Prison Fellowship, I met Chaplain Bob Loeffler who was responsible for starting the *Life Learning Program* at the Pinellas County Jail under the auspices of Good New Jail

and Prison Ministry. I was given the opportunity to ‘shadow’ Chaplain Bob at least twice weekly for approximately six months. And during this time, I became familiar with a new profession... that of a chaplain volunteer.

With this began a new career. It would find many open doors in the years ahead, each with the chance to tell others about Jesus...the One who came to set captives free.

23. Reflections

At times, it is only in looking back that we can appreciate the mercy and grace of God. For so long my life was a total reproach to the Father in heaven. Yet He graciously arranged to have me hear the testimony of a recovered alcoholic whose life was changed by coming to know Jesus Christ.

This entire matter of making an ‘about face’ was orchestrated by God. Having my spiritual blindness removed and being convicted of sin didn’t happen because of any conscious deliberation on my part. It was conviction brought about by the Holy Spirit.

It then became my responsibility to acknowledge my sin, to ask God to forgive me, and to repent by leaving the pig pen where I was living and allowing Jesus to become the Lord of my life.

I must admit that my obedience to Jesus has too often met with rebellion during the seventeen years since my conversion. I realize that fish need to be cleaned once they are caught. But I’m not always in favor of the way this cleaning takes place.

God usually refines us in a furnace of affliction. The furnace can take many forms, many if not most of which are rather unpleasant. At times, we are the ones who are responsible for the garbage cans we find ourselves inside. That has certainly been true in my own life.

At other times, God is trying to get our attention. Scripture makes it very clear that God disciplines everyone he loves. Those who are not put through the fire of chastening are not legitimate children of God (Hebrews 12:5-8).

It is in the deep valleys and dark tunnels through which we pass that our character is molded by God. Only in this way do we ever learn dependence on God. Jesus explains it this way:

“I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life” (John 12:24,25).

As my prostate cancer test continues to rise, it always blesses me greatly to remember how Jamie Buckingham approached his final days. He showed me that clouds have silver linings. Most importantly for me, it is learning to trust the Lord and not allow my priorities to get out of order.

Cancer has also helped to diminish the attraction of worldly trappings and pleasures which can be so seductive. A lifelong tendency to base my decisions on wanting to please people is gradually turning into determination to depend on the grace of God to do only what finds His approval. In that way - and in that way only - can I become a better husband, father, grandfather, and friend to others.

It's exciting to follow Jesus by leaving a practice of medicine to encourage men to surrender lives to the One who died to save their life. It is no longer necessary for me to tell anyone that their prognosis is hopeless. I can hold out *hope* to everyone, even though circumstances may appear grim at any given moment. And all this is possible only because I've come to know Him who tells us the following:

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:28-30).

No one else is so faithful to give us rest in times of trouble, so faithful to never leave nor forsake us, and so faithful to stick closer than any brother. And there is no way to heaven except through Him, for He *is* the way.

No one else has advice for us that is always so dependable. We can be absolutely certain that what Jesus tells us to do is the best thing for our lives. He tells us nothing but truth, because He *is* the truth.

And Jesus never turns away a person who comes to Him in true repentance, and makes Him the Lord of his life. In fact, outside of Jesus there really is no hope for life because He alone *is* the life.

The dictionary describes addiction as a condition of having given oneself over to something. So it seems I'm addicted again. But now it's an addiction having eternal value...an addiction to the *hope* that

is found only in Jesus. I pray the same hope will be yours...if it isn't already. Amen!

Hooked on Hope is the true story of one man's attempt to find self-acceptance and contentment by what the world promotes as "success." When fame and wealth failed to satisfy emptiness in the heart of this cancer specialist, alcohol and substance abuse took charge. The result was moral, emotional, and spiritual bankruptcy.

Only when hope seemed impossible did Ralph Johnson have a personal encounter with Jesus Christ. Peace filled his heart for the first time, as did a sense of purpose in the joys and trials of life. He found not only more than he asked for, but more than he could have ever imagined.

And now Ralph Johnson is *really* hooked—on Jesus! He invites you to come along . . .

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.

2 Corinthians 1:3,4