

If you could ever pick a place to be when crisis hit, we would recommend picking Sanctuary—this church. We experienced and unbelievable outpouring of love and physical support. My BLC, my small group, Ken's CLC, old friends, new friends—what they did and financial help with doctors' bills. Along with that my work at the National Peanut Board—work from home, full pay, even farmers helped. Our families helped long distance. It buoyed us and people helped us figure things out. Someone was always coming up with a creative way of doing things.

It's no accident we live in a city that's home to this country's premier spinal cord injury rehabilitation center. Through prayer and with the help of Ken's surgeon, Shepherd Center found a place for Ken. The professionals there go the extra mile—live the gospel everyday—the month we spent there went a long way to preparing Ken to live in a wheelchair and preparing me to deal with living with someone in a wheelchair.

One of the first hurdles was our house. It wasn't ready for a wheelchair. Major decisions had to be made. Skilled professionals and added bonus was they really seemed to take an interest in our lives, to offer creative ways to reconfigure things to make life easier in a wheelchair. The experience was more of a blessing than a hassle, as you sometimes hear. And I noticed a change in us. Ordinarily if we had been re-doing or updating our home, we'd have been in a hurry; not spent much time with subcontractors or workmen on the job. But because our lives had been slowed way down and we'd refocused on the people and not whether they were doing a quality job, we had a ministry in each others' lives. Ken built a relationship with and had a ministry with the guys who came by each day to paint, do the final work.

Those of us who suffer from unexpected crisis and loss—and there is no way we can grasp all the suffering in the world—find ourselves in the position of coping with daily living while trying to fathom God's will. Although it would be the height of presumption to declare with confidence "What It All Means," I've found light along the path I've been on for a year and a half. My story includes Scriptural light posts which provide powerful hints and consolations about God and His plan for us.

I like to tell people that while Ken's loss is visible and he is in a wheelchair, my loss is invisible. When this happened even though I walked out of the hospital visibly unchanged on the outside; on the inside my heart was broken. I felt vulnerable, raw and open, confused, and overwhelmed by the magnitude of this tragedy in our lives. So my journey has taken place on the inside—in my heart.

In the past, in times of trials and struggles, the circumstances had cleared up, we'd recovered and gone on with our lives. When we were trying to have children and couldn't, we went to the doctors and now we have two beautiful grown daughters, we'd lost jobs, but there were better ones given to us. Kids had struggled in classes, but we'd overcome things and they're now out of college. We'd bounced back and moved on. But this current situation has no bow on the package. It is life-altering on every level and ongoing.

I've been a Christian about 40 years and my faith had grown strong, been tested and found firm and I loved and followed God. So in the early days of this crisis, with everything in chaos, I didn't have time to

read the Bible or keep any kind of schedule for church or Bible studies. But Scripture verses, God's Words, kept ringing in my ears. One that was louder than others was what Jesus said in Luke 19:10 "I have come to seek and to save that which is lost." I've always thought of that verse when I thought of evangelism. But as I thought more about it, I realized God had not stopped seeking—reaching out to me even though this situation didn't feel that He had been there. He is perpetually a seeking God and He was inviting me to something. This verse includes two very positive words—seek and save. He saves. He IS a Saviour and He saves the lost. I was not lost in an eternal salvation sense, but there were lost places in my life and places where I'd lost my way.

So the first glimmer of hope—and first adjustment-- was that Jesus came to seek—to initiate, to want me, to look out for me, or to love me—and to save—to redeem. He had not left me but was seeking. His purpose has not changed, but did I dare believe these wonderful words were true for me and at this impossible time?

Through a Bible Study here at Sanctuary called BLC—Becoming Like Christ—we were reading a book called *The Pursuit of God* by a classic author, A.W. Tozer. There was a part that spoke to me about the story of Abraham and his son Isaac. Isaac was promised to Sarah and Abraham long after their childbearing years and the baby represented everything sacred to Abraham's heart; the promises of God, the covenants, and the hopes of the years and the long messianic dream. That resonated with me because my marriage to Ken had long been the fulfillment of my dreams and, after being the product of a divorced family, it was part of seeing God work continuously in my life to have a 30-year, long and happy marriage. It was MY STORY. Tozer pointed out that Abraham's heart delighted in his son and they were knit closer and closer together—until the relationship bordered on the perilous. It was then that God stepped in to save both father and son from the consequences of an uncleansed love.

As we know, God lead Abraham to sacrifice His Son. I believe this was the struggle and agony of Abraham's life—to give up his son to God—to sacrifice his son. God let Abraham struggle until the point that there was no turning back and He intervened and, as Tozer puts it, "I never intended that you should actually slay the lad. I only wanted to remove him from the temple of your heart that I might reign unchallenged there.

This was the first time in my journey that I really felt God loved me through this tragedy. Had my husband and family and dreams of a good marriage—all good and worthwhile ambitions in and of themselves—taken first place in my heart? Abraham had to choose to give up what was most dear to him; God had done that for me. I was possibly not strong enough to choose to let go of my deepest dreams and what was at the center of my life. God does seek us in all of life—in tragedy and loss and in good times. The tragedies make our hearts fertile ground to hear His Voice.

Matthew 16:25 says "Whosoever will lose his life for My sake will find it." We were grieving through the loss, but if there was a promise to **find** something, then I wanted to find it. As I prayed and sought God through all this, I could see clearly see two roads ahead of me. The fork in the road had to do with faith. I could continue with the level of belief I had about who God is and this faith had brought me along well to this point of crisis—or risk asking God the hard questions, looking at this painful situation with a

realistic eye and facing all its problems, crying out to God to save us, surrendering and finding a new and unknown place of belief—something He calls “Life..” In the end, there’s only one road to choose. My prayer is that God will give me the strength and power through the Holy Spirit to find His life.

We had a good 30-year marriage—better than I could have ever dreamed possible, coming from a broken family. Now, my “better half” had been stricken and the partnership and life we’d had together was radically changed.

Grief counselors tell us that when you lose a parent you lose a part of your past, when you lose a child you lose a part of your future and when you lose a spouse you lose your present. I hadn’t lost my spouse to death, but there was a lot of loss that I felt—and we felt together--daily.

There was confusion as to what my marriage would look like in the future. Leaving was never an option but I had questions—What does my marriage look like from here on out? How do I define—or re-define—my role as a wife now that my husband is living with a disability?

For those who know Ken-- he’s a strong, capable leader—Type A personality— independent, in business for himself, upbeat, positive. When you live with a person like that, they naturally take on a lot of things and do them well—from taking care of finances, bills, investments to ideas to where to visit on vacation to what activities or ministries to be involved in. I always felt the freedom to develop myself and be myself, but when you live with a person like that, your life becomes absorbed in their large personality. Suddenly everything had reversed. Ken was learning how to do the very basic things in life, learning how to dress himself, get in and out of a car, etc.-- the whole thing has been so humbling for him and me. But, where does this leave me? We had a lot going on in our lives when his spinal cord stroke happened. It leaves me stepping up my game and filling in a lot of the gaps and taking on a lot of what he naturally took care of.

Adjustment—stepping up my game. It meant getting out of my comfort zone and paying bills and contacting financial and medical communities, to talking to contractors and builders and making decisions in an area I knew very little about and I’d always done in partnership with my husband—and these were areas of strength and confidence for him.

I spent a lot of time with these questions when Ken was in Shepherd Center and in the early months afterward—asking God and reading good books. Some questions I could only answer for myself and some questions Ken and I needed to answer together.

Attitude of openness—when something is broken, it breaks open. God showed me I need to have a posture of openness to Him and what he wanted to create in my marriage. Through a wonderful book I was reading at the time through this same Bible Study here at Sanctuary—I learned of the Hebrew word that God used when He created woman or Eve in the first place. God called Eve a “strong help” or Ezer. The word is used in the Old Testament to describe Eve’s role—a strong helper for Adam—and throughout the Old Testament in places like God’s help in battle or in the Psalms to describe God’s help—“God is a very present help in times of trouble.”

As I opened myself up to what God wanted of me as a wife in this new “wheelchair wife” life, I came to understand it wasn’t so much doing specific or narrow tasks to help him as it was rising to the challenge of solving new problems and dealing with new circumstances. It’s important to see this as a life process but through seeking God in his word and prayer, I saw that I’m to step into every arena of my husband’s life—as a strength and with capability—so his life and my life is made easier because we operate in the “two are better than one” principle. This is broad and is a path to life, but one that gives me hope and dignity as a wife—a partner and ally—as we fight the problems that living with spinal cord injury can bring. This path is seen more as a creative adventure than as a confining or discouraging path.

I’ve gotten to know myself a lot better, trust myself and decisions more and grown. The verse “I can do all things through Him who strengthens me” is one I apply by faith every day.

How are we doing this?

We are learning to let go. This crisis has focused our attention on what’s really important. When you let go of things—material things, clutter, busyness, unproductive things—I’ve learned I can see God better.

We communicate and talk and share more openly than ever before. Our marriage is in the process of being redeemed by discovering the true meaning of intimacy—in sharing feelings—and we’ve had a broad, broad range of them over the last year and a half.

For example, at first I didn’t want to share my disappointment and hurt over this injury because who was I—walking around and able to live life as I used to—to feel pain when Ken was the one who was in a wheelchair. But I grew to understand openness and honesty must be a two-way street, or how could we grow in trusting each other with hard feelings. As we “work” at and learn to share honestly with other, we learn to comfort each other and find clearer minds to solve daily issues. We are closer today than before Ken’s injury.

Through this experience, we really believe we entered the ranks of the suffering. I needed to dig deeper into my faith. I questioned everything that had happened and gave myself the freedom to do so, to ask God the hard questions. If God is good, how could this bad thing happen to us? Why did this happen to us? What is the meaning of all this suffering on every level? How could I ever be happy again?

I needed to adjust my beliefs about suffering—It was not to be something to be afraid of, even to just have to put up with, or God’s response to our sin. If I believed this way, it would have the paralyzing effect of discouragement, self-pity, feeling as if I was a victim to our lousy circumstances—to be avoided at all costs.

Through reading some of the present-day theologian’s works—John Piper—I came to a new understanding of suffering. One essay called *The Suffering of Christ and the Sovereignty of God* was a turning point for me. Piper says the glory of God shines most brightly, most fully, most beautifully in the manifestation of the glory of his grace. Hang with me here. The book of Revelation talks about a “book of life of the Lamb that was slain and that names are written in it before the foundation of the world.” (Rev. 13:8). Therefore, before God made the world, he had in view Jesus Christ slain—means

slaughtered—and he had in view a people purchased by his blood written in the book. The suffering of Jesus was not a plan b, an afterthought. God planned it before the creation of the world. And why? Because the cross is the clearest display of the greatness of the glory of the grace of God. And that display would be the slaughter of the best thing being in the universe for millions of undeserving sinners.

Revelation 5: 9-12 says in heaven everyone is worshiping the Lamb precisely because He was slain. “And they sang a new song, saying, ‘Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.’”

Christ’s suffering was planned, it had purpose. His suffering shows God’s greatest glory and grace to all of us and to the world. So, for me and my attitude toward suffering—far from feeling dejected or rejected by God—or feeling punished somehow—I felt an overwhelming sense of belonging—of linking our life story to the greatest all stories—that of Jesus Christ and his suffering. I felt I was “in” and not cast out. The world might cast us aside, we would continue to struggle in this life, but God had brought us closer to himself. There is a mystery to suffering and a special fellowship to suffering. When there is loss, and when I don’t fight it or get angry about the way things have turned out, but accept the loss, there comes a contentment and peace.

Another milestone came as a result of feeling confused and struggling in prayer over many “why” questions. Why did this happen when our doctor was out of town? Why did we not do surgery the first time this happen—why did Ken’s aorta “right itself” only to collapse again—this time mostly fatally? Why didn’t God bring Ken’s legs back as He did the first time? In talking with many doctors after the surgery, while there was a risk of paralysis had we chosen the surgery ahead of time, they did not expect there to be paralysis after the surgery. A particularly bewildering doctor’s appointment, about 2 months after surgery, revealed that our doctor was also surprised about the paralysis and had not expected the outcome to be paralysis.

In reading a devotional book one day, I read about the story of Moses as he encounters the burning bush. I noticed in verse 2 that Moses “looked” and then went closer to try to understand why the bush was burning but was not consumed or burned up. What first got Moses’ attention was the science of this unnatural or supernatural event. It’s as if he said, this is not the way thing usually go—everyone knows that when a bush is on fire—especially in a desert—the bush burns to the ground very quickly. I believe Moses questions as he looked, maybe for days, and it was his curiosity about this strange phenomenon that led him over to study and ask more and more questions about the bush. What happened as he asked and asked was Moses never found out the scientific reason behind the bush not being consumed. What he did find out as he asked the hard questions was—he heard the voice of God. He found God in the middle of all his questions. Moses didn’t leave the desert with an answer, that we know of, to his first questions; but he left with a new view of God and a new call on his life.

God said, “you are standing on holy ground”—a place set apart that is unique and special. My hard questions, my sorrow, my desert experiences, I believe, and take strength in, are part of God’s plan of setting me and my husband apart to reflect His grace and His glory.