

Engraved on the palm of His hand

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WHITE OAK, Texas—God never promised us a life on easy street. No matter how diligent we are in studying our Bible or spending time in prayer, we can expect that things will go wrong. We can count on health problems, financial burdens and relationship issues. God did not promise us a life free of hard times. He did, however, promise us He would be there to help us through the problems.

You would think that knowing beyond doubt that things would go wrong would help prepare us. Nevertheless, things often happen that completely blindside us.

Nothing could've prepared me for the events of 1995. It was the year that I lost my daddy.

Walked and talked

Daddy was a devout Christian man. He was the spiritual leader of our home. He walked the walk and talked the talk. He was a very hard worker and often had a money-making hobby to supplement his full-time job so he could provide for us.

We were not a wealthy family, by any means, but, because Daddy worked so hard, we did have extras like piano lessons and braces for our crooked smiles, and we took a vacation every summer.

We were in church every time the doors were open. Daddy did not drink or smoke or even use curse words (even when he hit his thumb with a hammer), so I know that clean living does not insure a life without problems.

Daddy had retired the year before, and my mom and dad purchased a little RV and were finally relaxing and enjoying the fruits of their many years of labor.

Then, in September of 1994, Daddy had to have a heart valve replaced. It was a harrowing surgery, yet he recovered at an amazing rate. By December, he was even playing golf again. He was still hoarse, but the doctor said his hoarseness was caused by the tubes down his throat and it was just taking time to heal. Mama and Daddy started traveling again, planning RV trips at least once a month.

Pea-sized lump

In early January of 1995, Mama noticed a tiny pea-sized bump on Daddy's throat. She pointed it out to his heart doctor, who ordered a test. One test led to another, then came a referral to a specialist, more tests, then a referral to a surgeon, and all the while the tiny knot grew larger. Then there were three, and by this time several weeks had passed.

Near the end of February on a Sunday afternoon, I called Daddy, and in his hoarse whisper he told me they were going to operate the next day. He said the doctors were sure that the knots were goiters and they were just going to remove them.

Although the doctors were optimistic, Daddy admitted to me that for the first time he was frightened. I don't think I ever heard him admit that to me before. He was my superman. He could fix anything. How could there be a problem that scared him?

26 friends and relatives

Even though Daddy said there was no need, I drove to Dallas early the next morning, Monday, Feb. 27. They had just taken Daddy into surgery when I walked into the waiting room. I looked around in amazement. There, waiting with my mother were 26 friends and relatives.

I lived two hours away. I had not seen Daddy in a couple of months. They all had watched those knots grow. They had seen Daddy go downhill, and they were terrified for him. He was so well loved, and they were all there to pray for him and be there for him and for my mother.

After what seemed like an eternity, the surgeon came out. Mother and I stood there in front of him with the others in the waiting room crowding in behind us.

The news was devastating. Daddy's major blood vessels were threaded around and through the knots, and the masses had invaded his thyroid, larynx and neck muscles as well. There was no "removing" to be done.

The surgeon said that while he had Daddy's neck open he put his hand all the way back to Daddy's spine, and there was never a moment that his hand was not full of cancer.

With the mention of the dreaded C word, my knees buckled and someone caught me and eased me into a chair. Everything after that was a blur as a wave of shock settled over me. God created shock to help us through deeply traumatic times in our lives. The numbness of shock let me know that God was there.

Intense chemo

Daddy was a realist. If the doctors had told him the cancer was going to get him and to get his affairs in order, he would have spent the last weeks of his life very differently. He would have gotten on an airplane and gone to see his beloved grandchildren one more time. Instead, the doctors assured him the massive chemotherapy would work.

After the grueling days of intense chemo treatments, which made Daddy very sick, tests were done to determine how much the tumors had shrunk. But the chemo had just made the cancer mad and it grew like wildfire. The affected area was now halfway into his brain and all the way down past his heart, below that brand-new stainless-steel heart valve.

Dallas again

On Saturday, March 18, not quite three weeks after the surgery and subsequent cancer diagnosis, I again went to Dallas. The entire family was gathering to celebrate my grandmother's 85th birthday. For the only time that I ever remember, Daddy didn't really want to go to a family event. He would have preferred to stay home and us to stay home with him.

His voice was only a whisper by then, and he asked me to stay close by him so that I could "talk" for him if needed. He did say these words of wisdom to me:

"Life is short. You better have your priorities in order because you never know what tomorrow holds. It seems like only yesterday that your Mama and I were dating in that old white truck, and then we got married, and a few years later you were born, then Becky came along, and we have been very happy all these years."

That was almost the only thing he said all weekend. At that point he could barely swallow. He was unable to do the two things he loved: to talk and to eat. He had always been the life of the party, and it was very hard to see him so broken and defeated and in such pain.

Because he could barely speak, I gave him a journal that day. I thought that maybe he could write and record his recovery.

Last words

After the birthday party, we prepared to travel back home to East Texas. Daddy was always very affectionate, with a ready bear hug, even if he rarely said the words "I love you." As he hugged me good-bye that day, he hoarsely whispered, "I love you, Martha." Those were the last words I ever heard him speak.

By this time, the knots on his throat had grown to look like one of those big collars paramedics use after an accident, only it was covered in Daddy's skin.

On Monday, exactly three weeks from the surgery, Daddy was fitted with the armor he would wear during the radiation treatments. The area to be radiated was staggering, covering almost half of his body.

On that Monday night, Daddy went to bed. Because his sleep had been so fitful and because he was in such pain, Mama had been sleeping in the bedroom that had been my sister's.

Antique Winchester

As he lay down that night, his throat closed even further, and it became a labor to gasp for breath. He took a pen and scribbled a note on a scrap of

paper. Then he took an antique Winchester rifle from the corner of his closet, where it had rested untouched for 35 years, and shot himself, aiming right at that stainless-steel heart valve.

Mama heard the noise, ran into the room, saw him lying face down on the carpet and called 911. Although she had cared for him and had been lifting him for months since his heart surgery, she was unable to even turn him over.

God was there. He protected her from seeing. It wasn't until the paramedics talked to her, as they wheeled him into the ambulance, that she had any idea of what had happened.

Daddy was gone before he ever hit the floor, yet the EMTs took him to Baylor's Emergency Trauma unit. Mama made some phone calls, then she sat down to wait on me.

Deep shock

Howard, a lifelong family friend, called me. He just said that Daddy had been rushed to the hospital, that it was bad and to come. I quickly packed a bag instinctively including a navy-blue suit and my pearls—appropriate attire for a funeral.

The drive to Dallas seemed to take forever. About an hour into the trip, I used a borrowed cell phone (in those days not everyone had one) and called my sister in Colorado Springs to see when they would arrive and if they were driving or flying. My sister answered in a sleepy voice. I was alarmed. Why weren't they up and packing? Why weren't they on the road? Didn't she realize that this could be it?

She asked me what Howard had told me. Then there, at the big green road sign for the exit to Van, Texas, I learned that my precious father was dead and that he had shot himself.

Deep shock washed over me. God was there to ease this awful journey.

The journal

Finally, we reached the hospital. My mother had waited those hours in that bleak waiting room because she knew I would have to see Daddy right away. Even at 3 a.m. my mother was surrounded by 15 to 20 friends and relatives and both pastors from their church. I arrived to hugs and tears, and then Brother Steve led me into the trauma room where Daddy lay. I had to see him. I had to see that his face was okay.

We went back to Mother's, and at 4 a.m. there were still eight to 10 people with us. I asked Mama where "it" was. She knew I meant the journal. I sat and read it aloud to the circle of loved ones. Daddy must've written in it all day long on Sunday, because I had given him the notebook only two days before, and there were a dozen or more pages scribbled in his familiar scrawl.

He wrote about how he knew the very first time he saw her he wanted my mother to be his wife. He wrote about when I was born, then my sister, and how he had loved having daughters. He wrote about lifelong friends and the new

friends they had made since they had started RVing. The one thing he did not mention in the journal was his two precious grandchildren, Jessica and Bryan.

Daddy also left a note. He wrote: "My heart is very heavy, my mind is a blur. This thing around my neck is like a snake squeezing its prey. I cannot face the days to come. Maybe time will heal all wounds left behind. I am in a cold sweat. Jesus must have been in a cold sweat when He stood in court knowing what the day would bring. The doctors cannot identify it. God sure gave them a challenge this time."

Whirlwind of people

The next few days were a foggy whirlwind of people coming and going and endless phone calls. While we had been at the hospital that night, the neighbor next door (who had been the little "brat" next door decades before) came in and cut away the blood-soaked carpet and removed it. What an unspeakable blessing. God was certainly there.

My sister flew in, and then her family arrived after they made the long drive from Colorado. We were together, holding each other up. Mountains of food arrived, but we didn't feel like eating.

Daddy's hobby for years had been picture framing. An incident happened involving some unfinished frames and some angels, which is a story for another time, but God was definitely there.

We speculated about that Winchester rifle. Forty years before, right before Daddy was deployed to Korea by the U.S. Army, a pal of Daddy's wanted to sell the rifle, and Daddy wanted to buy it. Mama said they did not have the money, but Mama's plans were to move back to the farm while Daddy was away and help care for her little brothers and sisters. The little black-and-white TV would not even work out in the country, so she suggested that Daddy trade the little TV for the rifle.

Daddy used the rifle to hunt for quail and squirrels with his daddy until 1960, when my grandfather died. From 1960 until 1995, the rifle rested in the corner of Daddy's closet, protected by its green-padded sleeve.

Visitation night

Family visitation night at the funeral home was unbelievable. They had to open up extra rooms to accommodate the crowd.

On Thursday we buried Daddy. The church was packed, including the balcony—standing room only. There were 129 family members there—we filled the first 20 rows of seats—and 40 deacons were present. Daddy was so well loved by so many people.

I spoke at the service. I did not know what I said until I heard the tape later, but I remember thinking that speaking was the least that I could do.

Brother Steve gave a moving sermon. He said that you learn the true mettle of a man when you play golf with him and when he hits a really bad shot the worst that comes from his mouth is "rats" or "brother."

Brother Steve addressed the suicide too. Did Daddy make a bad decision that Monday night? Yes. Did that decision affect his eternity with Jesus? No. Nothing can separate us from God's love.

Years later

Years have passed, and, as predicted by so many, time has indeed made the loss easier to cope with. I never read Psalm 139 without thinking of Daddy—that was one of his favorites—and he lived his life with the hope that Jesus provides to us.

Some of what he wrote in his journal was about Jesus and what He did for us by dying on the cross. I will never hear "Amazing Grace" or "How Great Thou Art" without missing him.

I so wanted him to be there when Jessica walked down the aisle last summer and when Jessica and Bryan graduated from college. My sister wondered why Daddy didn't mention Jessica and Bryan in his journal. I know why. He couldn't bear to. He couldn't bear facing that he would never see them again before he died.

Speculation

There was also speculation about whether we could've said or done something to change what happened. There is always that question when someone takes his own life. So many whys.

I think the why is clear. Daddy was already unable to speak above a whisper or eat solid foods. After a few more radiation treatments, the doctor said Daddy would lose his ability to speak at all, and in a few days, when he could no longer swallow at all, they would just put in a feeding tube.

Truth is, the doctors really didn't expect him to live past the next weekend. But Daddy knew that the doctors would just keep on putting in tubes and hooking up machines just to keep him alive, and then, when all of his life savings had been completely depleted by hospital bills, they would finally let him die.

Daddy may have made a bad decision that night. Nevertheless I believe that God was there with him every moment.

There are reasons

There is a reason and a lesson for every trial we go through. Daddy's death at age 62 has taught me compassion and sympathy, and I have certainly learned the things *not* to say when someone has lost a loved one. At some point, I will be able to help and comfort someone else who has to deal with suicide.

Time helps us accept the death, but I'm not sure that anything helps us deal with the suicide, except knowing that nothing can separate us from God. Isaiah 49 says that God holds us so tightly that we are engraved on the palm of His Hand.

I know I will see Daddy again someday because my Bible says so, and in the meantime God is always here.