



CHAPTER 1

Giant Mountains Ahead

Climb though the rocks be rugged.
- Dan Myers

A hundred years from now it will not matter what your bank account was, the sort of house you lived in, or the kind of car you drove. But the world may be different because you were important in the life of a child.

- Mac Anderson

Where Was God

The phone rang. I tried to determine where the ringing was coming from. When I looked to the back of the hall a man was holding a phone pointing to me and then the phone.

I had just finished speaking to the Christian Women's Club in Boron, CA. The occasion was their annual Christmas dinner with husbands or special friends invited. When I reached the man in the back he said, "You need to take this." On the other end of the line was an officer with the L. A. County Sheriff's Department. He was calling from Lancaster, our home city, about 60 miles away. He wanted to know if we had a daughter named Renee. I said, "yes." He said, "She has been in an auto accident," and suggested we return to the Antelope Valley Medical Center as soon as possible.

Renee, our youngest fourteen-year-old daughter, had been to a Christmas party in a private home with several of her friends from our church family. On the way home, a woman under the influence failed to stop at a stop sign hitting the car she was in. Her injury came from the severe force of her head hitting the window on the passenger side of the vehicle.

For more than ten years I had served as the pastor of the King's Place, a growing, loving group of people who had been a significant focus of my life.

About seventy-five of our people had arrived at the hospital before we were able to get there from Boron. They were there to support us, and for the next three weeks, different ones from the church family met in the hospital chapel every hour around the clock. They petitioned God for a miracle that only He could perform. It was a remarkable demonstration of love and devotion that we will never forget and will always be grateful for.

The Family

When we arrived at the hospital, Renee was lying on a gurney and appeared to be asleep; however, we were soon to learn, she was not asleep, but in a coma.

Immediately the hospital staff, many who were my personal friends, started moving her into the intensive care unit. Every piece of equipment known to the medical profession seemed to be employed. CAT scanners were relatively new, and our hospitals in the High Desert did not have one yet. Dr. Birsner's only option was to do a brain angiogram. He explained an angiogram presented a greater risk than a CAT but since no scanner was available this was his only means to discover the damage to Renee's brain and where that damage occurred. We agreed to the angiogram.

It was only hours before the accident, the three of us were in our kitchen, Mother, Renee and me. We were about to leave with another couple for my speaking commitment sixty miles to the north in Boron. I remember lifting Renee by her waist and sitting her on the kitchen counter. It was an unforgettable moment, one of her last conscious moment for the next eight to ten months. I told her I loved her, kissed her and said, Mom and I will see you when we get back."

When we walked into the hospital emergency there was no reason to be particularly overwhelmed since Renee didn't have a mark on her body from the accident. Her injuries were not external, but unseen inside her head. The doctor said something about a coma, but don't most people come out of comas eventually?

Dr. Birsner performed the angiogram. He was an excellent and skilled neurosurgeon, the only one in the valley at that time. He invited Renee's mother and me into a side room so he could explain the results. He said, "What we have found is not good news, and it supports my earlier diagnosis. Renee has severe damage to her brain stem. He suggested we go down-stairs and sign papers to harvest those parts of her body that could be helpful to others. Without any sign of emotion, he said, "She will not be alive when morning comes." His words felt like a sledgehammer striking a bowl of Jell-O. I looked at Renee's mother, tears were cascading down her cheeks. She held on to me and said, "God will help us through this Dear!"

I had thought of myself as a person with considerable faith. I believed God

not only teaches us to pray for healing, but is the One who heals today. I had not only taught that from the pulpit but practiced praying for the sick and injured as instructed in God's word. But somehow this test of faith, praying for the healing of our daughter's brain stem didn't seem to be in the same category of praying for a person with a case of the flu. Do I have the faith to believe God for the greatest miracle request of my lifetime? Renee's mother does.

The events of that night came in such rapid succession, I did not have time to doubt God's ability. No matter what Dr. Birsner reported, I honestly felt that God could do what the medical profession could not do. A real encouragement to our faith came from the 75-100 people who had gathered at the emergency room that night, some remaining all night in the chapel as they prayed for Renee, the medical staff, and our family. It seemed that we had covered all the bases. We were now in God's hands. We just simply needed to be patient and wait for Him to honor our faith.

In that moment at the hospital we were not questioning one of the great promises of scripture, however, that would change, Romans 8:28, *"And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."* The *"all things"* of this verse became increasingly difficult to understand what God meant as we continued to pray without the evidence that God was hearing and responding to our petition. *"Where Was God When I Really Needed Him?"* That question is the result of what appeared to be God's silence. Was God silent, unconcerned, or uninterested? Could it be there is a better way to understand this verse? This book is written to reveal my understanding for the purpose and truth of Romans 8:28, especially when faced with tragedy.

Renee didn't die that night, or the next night, or any of the nights that followed for the next thirty-one years.

Dana, Renee's only sister had recently married and was living in the state of Washington with her husband at the time of the accident. When we called her from the hospital she was devastated unable to deal with the first major tragedy in her life. Since Renee was in a coma and not expected to live through the night, she decided to wait a few days before flying down. Theron, Renee's brother was away with one of his best friends, the son of a much-loved staff member. As two sixteen-year old kids they enjoyed a day at the beach, a stark contrast to our high desert climate. When they were returning home that evening, ironically, they saw the flashing lights and heard the sirens of the ambulance taking Renee to the hospital. Little did Theron know or realize his sister was in that ambulance. When Theron returned home, we were not there, but he knew that we were away for my speaking engagement, so he wasn't concerned. One of our elders called Theron and told him what had happened. Since we lived only a few blocks from the hospital he drove over immediately, and once he arrived, he was overwhelmed to see his sister in a coma. I have found through the years that

tragedy often brings people together. That would not be true for our family at least for that period of Renee's hospitalization. That was the beginning of a dark night for both Renee and her brother Theron.

The older children's hurt was turning to rebellion, and rebellion was taking them beyond their questions, which was turning to anger against God. With very different personalities, one responded with passive rage and the other with enormous, aggressive anger. They just could not understand why God would allow what had become the tragedy of their young lives.

It didn't help that for those first thirteen months Mother was living at the hospitals in a recreational vehicle endeavoring to help with the restoration and healing of Renee. Added to the absence of Mother in the home, Dad was consumed with his responsibilities as the pastor of The King's Place. At the time the choices we made seems to be the right thing to do. Looking through the lenses of the past, we would have made different decisions.

The rebellion of Renee's brother and sister added another layer of questions and guilt which happens so often when family members respond in such a negative way when caught in tough times. I was never a person who struggled with "false" guilt, feeling guilty for the behavior of others who tried to make me feel guilty for something they had done; however, this was different. I'm looking at our two teenagers, asking myself, what have I not done, or what did I do that's causing them to move away from the Lord instead of seeking Him for help and comfort?

When I speak of my consuming attention to the church family, some might have thought "how noble, and how committed he was." The truth is, my unreasonable "commitment" became cathartic and perhaps even self-serving, my way of dealing with the pain. I was beginning to feel like a juggler unable to keep a single ball moving. Already, I had prayed, our family engaged in counseling, and still, it appeared God was like the images at Stonehenge, impressive, but without feeling. Admittedly my temporary attitude about God was conditioned by my expectations and personal desires for Renee and the whole family. It was difficult to believe that God would want anything less than what I wanted, the full restoration of my daughter, now the family could be added to that request.

I knew all of the instructive passages of scripture that encourages one when in the middle of a storm. I had preached hundreds of times about such crisis, yet every time I walked into her room her condition was overwhelming, and tears seemed to be the only release, tears that for the moment replaced everything I believed and had taught. It was a different kind of crisis. The crisis was not limited to just Renee, it had become a family crisis. This would not be resolved in a quickie crisis management seminar.

What I thought was a core principle of my life turned out not to be. I had

proclaimed from the pulpit, God first, wife second, children third, and church fourth. Somehow in the mixing bowl of chaos I allowed a rearrangement of my priorities. If I had followed what I said I believed and taught, I would have taken a six-month sabbatical to focus on the family in search of a different kind of healing. The church would have agreed.

The process of healing began with a period of time that became the most humbling experiences of my life. The process continues because of a mother's unconditional love and because friends prayed with us. We were beginning to learn the meaning of "*Trust in the Lord with all of your heart . . .*" Proverbs 3:5, when you don't see the results from the One you are trying to place your trust?

We discovered that God is not just a God of rainbows (promises), but He is a God of silver-linings as well. We were beginning to see and feel how God heals hurting hearts even when we don't get the desires of our hearts.

It appeared the intensive care nurses had taken up residence in our daughter's room. The cadence of the breathing machine was overwhelming. At the time we didn't know the severity or details of the injury to her brain stem since the angiogram had revealed the initial diagnosis. As we moved to Renee's side, she looked so peaceful. There was no external physical damage, and even with all the tubes and equipment, she didn't appear as though she would leave us soon. Could it be the doctor's diagnosis was wrong or incomplete?

In the accident that took less than a second, she fell into a coma, lost her gag reflex, which enables a person to swallow, and she could no longer control the temperature of her body. A special blanket was placed underneath her to compensate for what the brain usually does. The purpose of the blanket was to cool her when she ran excessively high temps and warm her when her body chilled. In spite of all the equipment, she looked like a sleeping angel ready to wake up if only her pastor father could figure this out in finding the right scripture, offer the right prayer, and say the right thing. Often fathers have this idea they can make most anything right, but even fathers learn some things are beyond their reach and expressions of love.

Most people have doubts, but you could say I really didn't, as we stood there in the emergency room. It seemed impossible that our vibrant daughter would be gone. Along with our friends who continued to pray and encourage us, we all believed that God would provide a miracle, but her coma continued.

It would not be long until I discovered there are times when great passages of God's Word are not helpful. I am not suggesting that truth is not truth, but there are moments when the vessel or well-meaning person has become cracked and broken, and while the truth is present it often is not recognized and undoubtedly doesn't provide what the person intends or what is desired by the person hurting. In my case, the Apostle Paul's words in Romans 8:28 would serve for illustration. "*And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love*

him, who have been called according to his purpose."

In that moment of emotional pain Paul's words seemed less than comforting. When you have just been told to sign papers that would allow the medical staff to harvest the body of our daughter so other would have a chance at life, I wasn't thinking about gifts of life for others, I was wanting my beautiful daughter to live. In that moment how could I not cry out against Paul when he said, "*And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.*" I loved the Lord, and I knew that I was called, but I couldn't process the "*all things.*"

I looked at Renee's mother, tears were cascading down her cheeks. She held on to me and said, "God will help us through this."

With all of my being, I wanted to cry out, REALLY?

My conversations with God went something like this. "Father, I understand that I am not someone special or unique. IF I once felt that way, I don't now. I realize that I can't avoid tragedy or loss. I know other wonderful people have experienced excruciating pain of heart and mind that exceeds anything I shall ever know, yet I plead my case before you. You know of my love for you, and you know my life has been committed to you. Not man, but you, has placed this calling on my life. Haven't I met at least minimal conditions making it possible for you to come through with this promise about '*all things working together for good.*'" What am I not understanding about "*all things?*" Is it realistic for me to expect that I am able or should be able to understand every detail of a world that was beginning to seem alien? "God, I can't process all of this." Time seemed to have stopped, or at least moving in slow motion.

Earlier when we walked into the emergency room, at first I felt emboldened. I knew our friends were people of faith, and my faith at that moment was strong, but that would change when the doctor came back and reported his assessment of the angiogram, followed by his suggestion to sign the papers for harvesting our daughter's body. I felt like my friend when he described the moment when his hang glider broke in mid-flight, and the fear that gripped him when he pulled the ring and the chute didn't open. He knew he had a backup-chute, but in those first moments while grabbing for that illusive backup ring, he nearly became a mortal casualty. Like my friend, I needed a back-up since fear was leaving little room for faith. Dorene and I held one another, we talked, wept and then simply prayed, prayers that appeared to be trapped by the ceiling. In my own desperation, I nearly shouted, "God where are you when we really need you?"

After the Rains, the Tsunami

I wasn't doing well in finding an answer, and it wasn't to get better. Within twenty-four hours of our daughter's accident, the question would become even

more intense when a horrible crime took the life of my secretary's daughter.

On that Sunday evening, one of our young mothers was working alone, in a service station, hoping to earn a few dollars for that extra room to accommodate her young family of three young babies all under the age of five. Leslie was one of four daughters of Pat Combs one of our church secretaries. Leslie's young husband, Jim, was learning what it meant to be both a husband and father.

Sometime between 8:00 -10:00 on that Sunday evening, two young men ordered her to open the safe at gunpoint. She was working at a local gas station located in the Antelope Valley. After cleaning out the safe, they abducted her, drove eight miles to a deserted spot in the desert where both assaulted her. Before leaving that tragic scene, they shot her five times and left her at the foot of a hill, the place where she would take her last breath. Jim, her young husband, and father of their babies was devastated and would join his wife almost to the year when he died from a motorcycle accident.

Leslie's sister and her husband took the babies into their home. Both sisters had married brothers. Patsy and Mark Long offered a gift to Leslie and Jim Long, a priceless gift they would never know, yet a gift that would last a lifetime for these three babies. They offered the children their love and raised them with their own four children. Patsy and Mark were not only the aunt and uncle to these orphans but now Mother and Dad as well. The Mark Longs have never considered what they did as a sacrifice, but love, yes. Their expression of love was not only for the children, but for their father as well. The loss of his young wife, the thought of trying to be a single father to three small babies, caused Jim to fall into a dark place from which he never recovered. Jim, unable to cope with his own grief lost his life in a motorcycle accident less than a year after Leslie's death.

On December 11, 1978, our church family gathered in the sanctuary for Leslie's memorial service. It was only days after Renee's accident and Leslie's murder. If I said, it was a great celebratory gathering that would not be true. Of the hundreds of memorial services I've conducted, Leslie's was the most difficult. How do you tell a mother, sisters, the husband, and other members of the family that their loved one is in a better place? You can tell them, but when the pain is so intense because of the unspeakable circumstances of Leslie's death, there is little immediate comfort. While the babies were not at the memorial service the aunt and uncle reported the challenges of raising these babies with their own four children. It was most unfortunate the father of the babies unable to cope with his own grief lost his life in a motorcycle accident less than a year after his wife's death. The adult Christian members of the family grieved, yet, they were grateful to know that Leslie was in the presence of the Lord and were thankful for that reality.

As I recall, I found myself living in what seemed to be a mixing bowl, and I'm

now asking my question with a greater sense of urgency and desperation, "God, where are You when we really need You?" The question is no longer the piercing cry from my family, but now my bowl is filling with the members of the Long and Comb families asking the same question. If possible, we are asking the question but with even greater intensity, and together we struggle with Romans 8:28, *"And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."* We all agreed we loved the Lord and there was no question that we believed we're called according to His purpose and will. There must have been something we didn't understand about God's purpose. "God help us understand Your word!"

I continued to serve for another eight years at the King's Place. During that time and for many years the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department, and the Los Angeles County District Attorney's Office were diligent in pursuing every clue and lead of Leslie's cold case, but none led to the two who were eventually convicted of this unspeakable but not forgotten crime. It took nearly four decades before Terry Moses, 59 and Neal Antoine Matthew, 58, were charged and later convicted. Both of these men eventually received life sentences without the possibility of patrol.

The case was finally broken and prosecuted because of the untiring efforts of three very special people that worked on this case for nearly forty years, the prosecutor Tannaz Mokayef, the investigators, Sgt. Brian Schoonmaker and Deputy Steven Lankford.

Sargent Brian Schoonmaker, the lead investigator and a member of Leslie's church family sought to break this case until the day of his retirement. When he retired, he requested special permission from the L.A. County Sheriffs Department to continue on the cold-case. After more than 30 years of researching every lead and detail, he eventually broke the case and found a measure of justice for Leslie and her family.

Singing in a Cave

In those somewhat desperate moments when I felt that God had abandoned our family and the dear families of Leslie, I read something Elisabeth Elliot had said. Elisabeth was the wife of Jim Elliot one of the five men who was martyred as they tried to take the gospel to the hostile Auca tribe of Ecuador in 1956.ⁱ Elisabeth, after losing her husband was struggling with some of the same questions with which I labored. She felt she had to understand why God would allow the death of these five missionaries including her husband to find peace with God.

In 1975, nineteen years after Jim's Elliot's death Elisabeth was addressing the Urbana Missions Conference. She told of being in Wales, watching a shepherd

and his dog, she found a simple answer to questions that had troubled her since her husband's death. Let me allow her to tell her story of how the Lord helped her through a tough time.

"The dog would herd the sheep up a ramp and into a tank of antiseptic in which they had to be bathed to protect them from parasites. As soon as they would come up out of the tank, the shepherd would grab the rams by the horns and fling them back into the tank and hold them under the antiseptic for a few more seconds. Mrs. Elliot asked the shepherd's wife if the sheep understood what was happening. 'They haven't got a clue,' she said.

Mrs. Elliot said, 'I've had some experiences in my life that have made me feel very sympathetic to those poor rams--I couldn't figure out any reason for the treatment I was getting from the Shepherd I trusted. And He didn't give a hint of explanation.'

If you've been a Christian for very long, you've been there. You might have felt the Shepherd you trusted threw you into some circumstances that were quite unpleasant, and you didn't have a clue as to why He was doing it. David had been there. He wrote Psalm 57 out of the depths of just such an experience. When he was a teenager, David had been anointed as king to replace the disobedient King Saul. Then he slew the giant Goliath and was thrust into instant national fame. But King Saul's jealous rage sent David running for his life. He spent the better part of his twenties dodging Saul's repeated attempts on his life. The title tells us that he wrote this psalm 'when he fled from Saul, in the cave.' Caves are interesting places to visit once in a while."ⁱⁱ

Elisabeth Elliot had found peace with a shepherd and some dumb sheep. In 1993 she included this event in her lesson on Psalm 57. She titled it "Singing in a Cave." Her lesson from that great Psalm seemed to be reserved for me. My thought, if David could sing in a cave when his life was threatened, I can as well. If Elisabeth Elliot can sing after watching her husband and the others brutally murdered, so can I. Let the song begin? With a brave heart calling for the song, little did I realize just how that song would play.

i. Adapted from Steven J. Cole, "Psalm 57: Singing In The Cave Bible Org, 2019, www.bible.org/seriespage/psalm-57-singing-cave

ii. Ibid.