

Through Tears to
TRIUMPH

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*God's Gracious Help
Through Grief and Sorrow*

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Dedication

*To the hundreds of Christians who have
earnestly prayed for me in my grief*

and

*to those who are still struggling under
the weight of their own grief.*

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Foreword

Human tragedy is always unplanned. Often it hurts so deeply that it crushes the heart, mind, and body. The total impact often finds us trying to find someone who will listen or someone who has experienced an unannounced crisis.

This author knows firsthand what he is writing about. He has been there. He has felt the pain and suffered a severe loss of both wife and daughter. There was no way he could have been prepared for such a serious loss. It happened so suddenly and during a time when everything else in his life pointed toward peace, success, and great advance in his missionary career.

Just like an unexpected bolt of lightning across the darkened sky, so this disaster struck at the very heart and home of the author. It forces us to ask, Why did God allow this catastrophe to hit the very core of the author's life? That question is always justified, but we cannot answer it with complete satisfaction. However, the sovereign plan of God, while oftentimes a secret down here, will be totally revealed in eternity.

The following chapters unfold a saga that will enrich the reader's life and bring comfort to the heart. It will also reveal practical principles that will assist you in moving through human tragedy. At the end of each chapter, there are thought-provoking questions that can also be used for group discussions. This volume is worth your time investment and will result in helping you see, "As for God, his way is perfect."

Wendell Kempton

Preface

Until recently, I was the least likely candidate to write a book on grief. As a pastor and missionary since 1962, I had often tried to comfort the bereaved. I never considered myself especially capable or able to speak from experience in encouraging those who were sorrowing. Lightning fast, however, my life changed dramatically. This is my story of how God graciously helped me through tears to triumph.

For months after the May 1993 car accident that killed my wife and daughter, I felt a deep need to write my thoughts and feelings and the Scripture passages that God was showing me in relation to healing my broken heart.

I began writing in November 1993, while I was in Cape Town, South Africa. I shared some of my articles with friends, Norm Maasdorp and Joyce Eaton, who encouraged me to continue.

In April 1994, on a visit to the headquarters of my mission, the Association of Baptists for World Evangelism (ABWE) in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, I shared several articles with Dr. Wendell Kempton, ABWE's president at that time. He told me to get writing: this story must be published. He also introduced me to Kristen Stagg, who greatly helped and challenged me to show, not tell, the message. In 1995, a gifted missionary writer, Jeannie Lockerbie, returned from Bangladesh to head up publications at the ABWE headquarters. She patiently and skillfully guided the editing to completion.

I have nothing but praise to God for His presence and power in my life while seeing me on this journey *Through Tears to Triumph*.

The Stephenson Family



Wally



Louise



David



Ruth

1

That Saturday in May

Shortly after midnight on Saturday, May 22, 1993, I was awakened by urgent knocking at the bedroom door of the home where I was staying during my speaking tour in the Atlantic provinces of Canada. A grave voice told me, “Someone just telephoned, and you are to call back right away!” I supposed that somebody needed pastoral counsel and/or comfort. Oh, how I disliked urgent phone calls in the middle of the night. Half asleep, I stumbled down to the kitchen to make the call where I wouldn’t waken anyone else. The phone number belonged to my good friend Alex McCready! *What could be the matter? Had something happened to Alex’s wife, Grace?* Mentally preparing myself, I dialed the number.

Alex picked up the phone on the first ring. “Sit down, Wally. I have terrible news. . . . Louise and Ruth were killed.” The words struck me like bullets from an assault rifle, leaving a gaping hole in my heart. My brain froze instantly. Alex kindly gave me more information and prayed with me before hanging up. In unbelievable

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calmness, which could have come only from God, in my mind I said, “They’re Home.” Second Corinthians 5:8 says, “Absent from the body, . . . present with the Lord.” God was so good in reminding me they were Home with Him. Now a theological fact was personal and was a doxology to my heart. I made a number of phone calls to police and family. But my heart kept thinking, *No, no, it can’t be true. This can’t be happening! Louise and Ruth are really just at home.*

My mind flew back over the years to when I first met Louise. I had worked at Kodak in Toronto for four years after high school before going to the London Bible Institute in London, Ontario. Entering the halls of higher learning, I inquired at the business office where I might find a part-time job to help pay my way. I was told to see a student secretary who could give me the information I needed. I walked into the secretary’s office and parked myself, as a farm boy would, on top of her desk. Louise never batted an eye at my unorthodox behavior. (She came from a farm background too.) We chatted about jobs, and in a few days I had one. Two months later I invited her to a hockey game, and that was the start of a great relationship—ended now by a tragic accident.

The previous evening I had telephoned Louise at our home in Burford, Ontario, about 75 miles southwest of Toronto. Louise knew that I was to meet Brian and Sheena Miller, who live in Lakeside, a suburb of Halifax, Nova Scotia, that Saturday afternoon. I was scheduled to speak in the Millers’ church on Sunday morning and in a nearby church on Sunday evening. Up to that point on my speaking tour, I had immensely enjoyed meeting pastors and church members. I certainly did not enjoy being apart from my wife. But the trip was two-thirds over, and I was growing excited about returning home, especially since Saturday, May 22, was our thirty-third wedding anniversary. We were going to celebrate ten days late when I returned home.

Talking to Louise on the phone was a great joy and uplift to me. She was upbeat after having received good news regarding her health. She told me her plans: Alex and Grace McCready had come to visit. On Saturday Alex was going to clean up the front lawn where two large evergreen trees had been removed. Then, in the afternoon, Louise and our daughter, Ruth, would drive to Louise’s mother’s apartment in Oshawa, about 40 miles east of Toronto. They

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planned to stay overnight with Grandma and bring her back to Burford on Sunday afternoon for a week's visit.

Louise and I were scheduled to return on June 30 to our missionary service as interim pastor of Everglen Baptist Church in Cape Town, South Africa, while fellow missionaries Dave and Julie Rudolph were home on furlough. Our house in Burford had not yet been rented for the time we would be in South Africa, but we knew God would work out this detail as He had thousands of previous ones. After talking about all these plans, Louise and I pledged our love and said good-bye. Ruth wanted to talk to me too.

Our only daughter, Ruth, an unmarried schoolteacher, lived in Guelph, about 50 miles west of Toronto, where she owned a home. She was excited as she updated me about her plans to go to Norway for six weeks as part of a team from our mission, the Association of Baptists for World Evangelism (ABWE), with international headquarters in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. After her trip to Norway, Ruth planned to fly to California for her cousin's wedding.

Then the conversation took a more serious turn. Ruth questioned certain situations in the past and wondered how God was going to guide in her life in the future. We agreed that God did have a plan for her life and that He was in control. Then we made our cheery farewells. I could not have asked for a more happy, loving conversation.

As had been planned, at about 3:00 P.M. that Saturday afternoon, I arrived at my hosts' home. The Millers were a delightful young couple with three elementary-school-age boys. I helped Brian move some furniture that he had been given; then I joined the family for supper. Later Brian and I set up my slide projector/tape presentation at his church, and we visited one of Brian's friends. After we returned to the Millers' home, we chatted briefly; then I went to bed.

Back home in Burford that Saturday, Alex and Grace's visit and "Mission Front Lawn" had gone on as planned. In mid-afternoon, Louise and Ruth drove their own cars the one-hour trip to Ruth's house. They left Ruth's car there, and Louise drove our Oldsmobile Ciera. It takes almost two hours to get to Grandma's apartment in Oshawa. Louise telephoned her mother to say they planned to arrive in time for supper.

On highway 401 just east of Guelph, a car heading in the oppo-

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site direction was traveling about 70 mph when the driver fell asleep. His car veered across the narrow grass median and appeared slightly airborne as it struck our car near the driver's door. The outcome: Code 4—death at the scene. Death came instantaneously for both Louise and Ruth; they did not suffer at all.

Some hours after the accident, a policeman arrived at our home in Burford to try to locate me. He spoke to our friend Nick Chosen, who had also worked on the front lawn. They went inside but could not locate my itinerary. Louise had not posted it in its usual place on the refrigerator. After futile searching, Nick made contact with Alex, who had a copy. It was then that Alex awakened me from sleep with his urgent phone call.

After speaking with Alex, I spent the remainder of the night in numbness and disbelief. My emotions were frozen, except for the occasional soft whimpers that escaped from my throat. Brian and Sheena quietly did all they could to help, including arranging a flight home. We prayed and read several psalms. "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help. My help cometh from the LORD" (Ps. 121:1, 2). "The LORD upholdeth all that fall, and raises up all those that are bowed down. . . . The LORD is nigh unto all them that call upon him" (Ps. 145:14, 18).

Waiting for morning, I lay on a couch in the living room with only a little light from the kitchen straying in. Events and segments of our lives together flashed on the screen of my mind. I remembered when Ruth was born in Exeter, Ontario, on August 29, 1963. A nurse held her up to the window of the hospital nursery, and even my unprejudiced eye could see that she was the most beautiful little girl ever born. With her big blue eyes set wide apart and her chubby cheeks, Ruth was a marvelously formed eight pounds and fifteen ounces. I was so proud of this little gift from God. I was sure I detected a faint smile from Ruth for her daddy—it was impossible that now she was dead!

At 6:00 A.M. on Sunday, May 23, Brian drove me to the church to pick up my equipment and then to the Halifax airport to catch a flight to Toronto. I do not know if Brian had tipped off the fellow at the counter, but he was extra courteous and helpful. I went through airport security and sat in a waiting area. Crowds of people surrounded me, but I felt as if I were the only person on earth.

On the two-hour flight, terribly bereft, I stared out the window

That Saturday in May

at the clouds. As the Boeing 737 sped on, I sat like a stone. I had been looking forward to preaching that day, getting home in ten days, belatedly celebrating our anniversary, then heading for South Africa in forty days. My plans were shattered. I felt as if God had led me out on a limb of service for Him and then cut the limb off behind me. I was immediately ashamed of myself for thinking that, but my heart hurt so much and I felt forsaken.

Fellow mission friends, Reg and Helen Snell, and my brother Al and his wife, Gail, met my plane in Toronto. Al and Gail took me to Ruth's house where, after a number of futile attempts, I was finally able to contact our twenty-seven-year-old son, David, in Victoria, British Columbia. Since attending university and going out into the work world, David had lived away from home. I broke the tragic news to him as gently as I could, trying to help him with his loss. I knew he was devastated. He had enjoyed such a close, special relationship with his mother. Talking with David, I realized I wasn't the only one hurting. Our only other child was also crushed in grief, and I had to help him. With this burden I returned to our memory-filled home. David arrived the following morning.

The house in Burford was a beehive of activity, yet a haven of comforting, praying friends and family. A support team stayed with me twenty-four hours a day for several days. The mission sent Rev. Mel Cuthbert to minister to me. His first wife, Dorothy, had been killed in a car accident in São Paulo, Brazil, in 1974. I received tremendous empathy from Mel. No one understands as well as a person who has had a similar experience.

Dale Renout, pastor of our church in Burford, and Don Perkins, my long-term pastor friend from Bible school days, helped me plan the funeral. I gave some input, but I wasn't really there. Everything seemed a blur of people and motion. Only when I was alone in the quietness of my bedroom did my emotions start to thaw and tears gush.

We held the viewing on Tuesday afternoon and evening at Fellowship Baptist Church in Burford, where I had pastored for six years immediately prior to starting our missionary career in 1991. During that horrendous week, hundreds of people came to express their sympathy, prayers and concern. I was overwhelmed by the outpouring of love.

The funeral was conducted on Wednesday afternoon. Louise

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had been teaching prekindergarten at Central Baptist Academy of Brantford, Ontario, and Ruth had taught sixth grade for one year at the same school, so I chose to hold the funeral service at Central Baptist Church. Approximately 800 people attended. Don Perkins preached from the book of Job. He stressed the points that God knew Job and Job knew God. Then he asked those assembled, “Do you know God, and does God know you?” My greatest desire was that God would be made real to both believers and unbelievers. A number of Christian leaders who had worked with and had known Louise and Ruth testified of their genuine faith in action. God gave me the strength to stand and spontaneously express, without breaking down, my gratitude to the assembled friends for their love and prayers. I knew I was being carried along by God. With the congregation, I joined in triumphantly singing the concluding hymn, “How Great Thou Art.”

A funeral is a community event. Family and friends want to pay their respects and to say their good-byes.

On Thursday morning, we held a private family interment at the Pioneer Cemetery in Burford. Pastor Dale read Scripture passages focusing on our hope of the Resurrection, such as Jesus’ words in John 11:25: “I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live.” Walking back to the car from the graveside, I experienced the most overwhelming sense of loss I had ever known. A gut-wrenching emptiness seized me like a gigantic vise, squeezing me until I almost fainted. I had said my final good-byes to Louise and Ruth. I was thunderstruck by the finality of death. My two vivacious ladies lay silent beneath the sod. We are separated for now, but not for eternity.

With the funeral over and the crowds gone, I started the long, slow road back to a new normality. I wanted then—and still want—to walk triumphantly through the valley of grief and adjustment. With His help, God and I will make it happen. I never doubted that I would return to Cape Town as originally planned, and I flew out of Toronto on September 2, 1993.

I marvel at how God upholds us through tragedy. Within two weeks of the funeral, I resumed my speaking schedule. I was able to go through personal effects, meet people and carry out duties in a satisfactory way. God helped me in ways “exceedingly abundantly above all” that I could ask or think. In addition to this enabling, I

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knew the power of the heartfelt prayers of hundreds of God's people. Even two years later, friends and even strangers speak to me or send cards and letters assuring me of their prayers. Recently I had a card from a lady in her nineties who told me that she prays for me daily. I am deeply humbled by such encouragement.

God's Word has been my constant consolation and companion. It has been a "lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path" (Ps. 119:105) during this horrific storm in my life. I have discovered afresh God's wonderful, sufficient grace in the deepest of trials. I know through experience that God will not put us through more than we can bear. I am learning the reality of the words, "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me" (Phil. 4:13), in the process of moving through tears to triumph.



Questions

1. "I have terrible news. Louise and Ruth were killed." These are the words Wally heard "that Saturday in May." He now advises the following in communicating with a person who has suffered a significant loss:
 - **Establish your purpose:** Why are you visiting or calling? Determine what you hope to accomplish: comfort, encourage, express your love, provide practical help.
 - **Formulate your plan:** How are you going to carry out your purpose successfully?
 - **Pray** for wisdom and divine guidance so that you will truly be helpful.

If you had been the person calling Wally, what would you have said?

Create a hypothetical tragic loss. Using purpose, plan and prayer (see above), outline your response to your friend.

2. If you were in a situation similar to the Millers', with a severely hurting person in your home, what three things would you say or do?

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3. Wally's family, church, and mission organization went into immediate action. If your church or organization asked you to form a Crisis Reaction Committee, outline what you would expect the committee to do.
4. From the following verses, discover and write down what a believer needs to realize about God:
 - Psalm 121:1, 2
 - Isaiah 51:12a
 - 2 Corinthians 1:3, 4
5. Explain from the following verses why a griever should trust God:
 - Psalm 46:1, 2
 - Psalm 145:8, 9
 - Psalm 147:3

Quotes

(Many of the quotes in the quote sections throughout this book come from participants at "Through Tears to Triumph" seminars.)

"Prayer isn't the last resource;
it's the only resource."

"Man's extremity is God's opportunity."
—*John Flavel*

"Death is the golden key that opens the
palace of eternity." —*John Milton*

"Trust in him at all times; ye people, pour
out your heart before him: God is
a refuge for us" (Ps. 62:8).