

A BEAUTIFUL HERITAGE

*The LORD is the portion of my inheritance and my cup;
Thou dost support my lot.
The lines have fallen to me in pleasant places;
Indeed, my heritage is beautiful to me. – PSA. 16:5-6 (NASB)*

In 1985, while serving as music minister in Pastor Dick Iverson's Bible Temple in Portland, Oregon, I read that the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Chicago had been sued for copying lyrics without the publisher's permission. Oh, the irony: a Christian publisher suing other Christians. And, deepening the incongruity, one song in the lawsuit was "And They'll Know We Are Christians By Our Love." Naturally, that story got our attention; our church was using 400 song lyric overhead projector (OHP) transparencies and we sent out 60,000 worship service tapes annually.

We needed permission to copy songs? I didn't know that. No one knew it. We were stunned to realize that churches could

be sued for projecting the songs of our Lord on the wall. Whom should we contact to get permission for all the songs we were using? How much would that cost?

That led to my intense study of copyright law. Of necessity, I learned the whole terrain of that arcane and tedious subject. I came to realize that, for all its great strengths and fairness, copyright law wasn't practical for churches. At a time when churches were moving from songbooks to OHP transparencies, there

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really was no structure or method to help churches legally license music for congregational singing. But, after my research, I told my pastor I thought we could do something about that. And we did.

I began traveling around the country, explaining to publishers how we could solve this emerging crisis. That educational process took a long time, but in 1988 the *Church Music Publishers Association* endorsed our efforts. That gave us legitimacy in the eyes of the publishers, the churches, and the songwriters. I am forever grateful that we

were able to serve local churches by providing affordable and legal content, resources, and media.

It took three and one-half years to figure out all the copyright entanglement for churches. We wrote letters to those publishers we knew to be the owners of songs. Sometimes, it took six weeks to get a reply – they were just as frustrated as the churches. When we got a response, the cost of their permission was across the board – some said “free,” others said “\$60” per song. Our church was large, but just to get copyright permission

for the 400 songs we used would have cost us \$6000! Churches couldn't afford the cost and publishers couldn't afford to administer the requests. A real nightmare! The shift from the written culture of hymnals to the digital culture of lyrics projected onto screens had inadvertently and innocently severed the remuneration to composers. Churches had now become publishers and there was no mechanism to rightly honor the songwriter. Very simply, CCLI built a bridge – we found a way to assure the fair and honorable return on their intellectual property. It saved churches many millions of dollars of unnecessary expense and it enabled songwriters, who were blessing churches with their skill, to survive!

After serving as CCLI's CEO for 27 years, I was humbled and overwhelmed to be a 2016 inductee into the Gospel Music Hall of Fame. Even more precious than being recognized and saluted by my peers, I was stunned to see the beauty and kindness of the Lord extended to me at the end of my CCLI career. “Now,” as broadcaster Paul Harvey used to say, “you know the rest of the story.” Except that is not really the rest of the story.

Peter actually completed the story when he wrote: “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing; so that also at the revelation of His glory, you may rejoice with exultation. – 1 Peter 4:12-13 (NASB)

Lest you think that GMA Hall of Fame induction night represents the whole story, let me take you back almost a quarter-century before that beautiful moment. Do you remember the first incursion of reality into your religious construct? Well, here's mine.

TORNADO IN MY HEART

In November 1992, a few months before her 39th birthday, my sister Myrna was diagnosed with an advanced stage of melanoma. She, like our whole family, was blessed with a rich and wonderful heritage of faith in Jesus Christ. So, our family came together to wage a battle for her life; *her* crisis became *our* crisis. We spiritually equipped ourselves and focused our faith on the magnificent mystery of healing. We fasted, we prayed, and we anointed her with oil.

And, in a true biblical pattern, we even saw “signs.” The most dramatic one occurred in April 1993. As I flew to Tulsa, Oklahoma, to attend a church conference, I asked the Lord to show me a tornado as a sign my sister would be healed. Why a tornado? I don’t know; I was frantic in my “faith” and that’s just what popped into my head. Two nights later, while standing on my hotel balcony, I watched a tornado pass by! Naturally, I began shouting with joy. It was 6 p.m. Tulsa time, the exact time that a group of ministers gathered at my sister’s home, anointed her with oil, and prayed for her healing.

Of course, with the backdrop of that high drama, I was convinced that Myrna would be healed. But two months later, on June 25, 1993, while changing planes in Minneapolis, I called my voicemail and learned that Myrna had passed away. I was confused and crushed, overwhelmed with unanswerable questions, and completely ravaged by the horrific pain of losing my sister. Like everyone who has experienced such agony, a tornado ripped through my heart. It left a wide swath of total destruction. I asked for a tornado. And I got it.

WHY? WHY? WHY?

That tumultuous experience left a scar on my spirit. People say that time heals the pain. It didn’t for me. The ordeal is permanently imprinted on my mind. All of my life’s patterns and routines were drastically altered by the loss of Myrna. And, the aftermath became a desperate search for emotional, mental, spiritual, and physical stability.

For the next 10 months, I felt trapped in a vortex of shipwrecked faith, trying to act “normal” on the outside, but lost and empty on the inside. Demonic accusations tormented my mind; “There was a reason that Myrna died. She died because your family didn’t have enough faith. She died because of secret sin. She died because of God’s punishment.” Was I to blame? Was she to blame? Were we all to blame? Fear, guilt, shame, and doubt haunted me. My heart was hollow; I was one “shell-of-a-Christian!” And I was the CEO of a large international Christian company! Naturally, some of those leaders who stood close to me became concerned about the effect of my grief on the business. And, I understood; when King David grieved the death of his son, Absalom, Joab (the captain of the king’s army) told David that his behavior was shaming all those who were following him. Basically, Joab told David to “smarten up.” They told me the same thing; since people were watching me, I needed to be an “example.”

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So, I tried to act like the leader that so many saw me to be. I tried to cover my deep pain and grieve in an “acceptable” fashion. I stayed very busy being a Christian. But, I felt like a

hamster feverishly spinning the wheel, running very fast but getting nowhere. My smile was simply a weak and false attempt to hide the toxins in my spirit. I couldn't talk to others about it; I couldn't even utter her name. I couldn't pray, read His Word, or worship. And, I certainly couldn't thank Him.

One year later, in April 1994, I once again flew to Tulsa to attend that same annual conference. And on a Friday afternoon, in the same hotel where I saw my "sign" the year before, I found myself on my knees beside my bed. For the first time in 10 months, I began to thank the Lord. For two hours, a torrent of tears poured down my face as I lifted my hands and began to express my love and gratitude to Him. I emptied everything and unabashedly began to praise the Lord. I felt so light, so relieved, and so expecting that the Lord was going to do something special in the service that evening.

So, with a heart full of newfound hope, I went to the evening service, where the host pastor seated me on the front row. I was ready; I was expectant. What was God going to say? What was He going to do? My spirit seemed to hold its breath with hushed anticipation. Then the host pastor went to the podium and said, "Before we start our service tonight, I would like to introduce my sister, who was diagnosed with melanoma six months ago, and the Lord has healed her."

WHAT???

That pastor's words detonated like a bomb in the deep recesses of my soul, and every spiritual sense within me convulsed into numbness. The concussion of that announcement shredded me. How could God do such a horrible thing to ME? I had finally opened up my heart to Him after 10 months, and that was how

He paid me back? He rubbed my sister's death in my face by healing my friend's sister. Of the same disease! I felt humiliated and abandoned; God's "sadistic joke" devastated me. I had summoned the courage to once again expose my "open" heart to God, and in my moment of vulnerability, I felt He had humiliated me!

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"Go ahead, God; take my life!" I was frustrated, I was confused, and I was angry.

A few minutes after my angry outburst at God, a flatbed truck carrying a car body came toward me in the other lane. Then, in slow motion, I watched as the securing straps detached, and the wind lifted the car body off the truck bed and hurled it straight at me. Just before the inevitable impact, my car passed a concrete pillar. At that moment, that concrete pillar took the full blow of the car body. I drove on to the airport. My rental car was untouched. But I was totaled.

I was scared, terrified—God was taking me up on my dare! I called my wife, Donna, and asked her to pray for me.

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THE WHISPERS OF HIS LOVE

For the next several hours on that flight, I cried out to God. I sincerely repented; I asked Him to forgive me for my arrogant ignorance. I told Him I was lost and confused. And that is how my desperate search for a true foundation for my faith began.

Over the next 12 months, I continuously asked God to clear the clutter of my mental, emotional, and spiritual ugliness. I couldn't put the pieces of my life puzzle together. I had to cast off the rationalism of my own understanding and search for Him. I had to find Him.

I did not find Him immediately or in a single moment or event. But, little by little and piece by piece, I began to hear His whisper in my spirit again. The first real sound of His Presence was in October 1995, a full year and a half after I started reaching out for Him. That's when I met Bishop Frank Retief, Senior Pastor of St. James Church in Cape Town, South Africa. In the middle of my explanation of the ministry that my company, Christian Copyright Licensing International, Inc. (CCLI),

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– Bishop Frank Retief

provided churches around the world, Bishop Retief interrupted me by saying, “Howard, I believe the Lord wants me to give you this book.”

He handed me *“Tragedy To Triumph—A Christian Response To Trials And Suffering.”* Bishop Retief had written the book about a wild shooting

spree that had erupted in his church during apartheid. Eleven of his congregants died, and 55 were injured. The horrible event occurred July 25, 1993, exactly 30 days after my sister had passed away. After handing me the book, the bishop made a statement that sent a shock through my spiritual nerves—“Howard, it is OK to not feel like praying while you recover from your trauma.” I had shared nothing with him about my journey.

I politely mumbled my thanks for the book and for his spiritual discernment. His words had sliced through the root of blame that had been secretly planted in my heart. No one had ever told me it was OK to feel what I did! Later that night I read

the whole book. That's when I started to step out of the quagmire of my confusion. Something happened deep in my spirit when I read this passage from the bishop's book:

“The loss of confidence after a traumatic event is a well-known phenomenon...Christians do not escape the consequences of trauma. After the massacre in our church, one of the most common complaints by Christians was ‘I can't pray.’ Maybe you have felt the same way. Your old confidence in going to God in prayer has deserted you...A loss of spiritual orientation is quite normal during and after times of great stress...For Christians, the apparent loss of a sense of God's presence is often the most distressing aspect of suffering...”

Through the bishop's words, I saw that I had allowed myself to become estranged from His Presence; I could not have a “real” conversation with Him. Somehow, I had interpreted my circumstances as evidence or a measurement of God's love and care for me. I had drifted into translating my circumstances as confirmations of the “blessing” for obedience and the “cursing” for disobedience. I had been carrying an unnecessary burden of religious baggage.

After years of Christian rationalism, I was beginning to see a glimmer of light, and hope, and true faith. The process of recovery had begun.