

My
Peace

I give unto you



*A true story of hope & a young
girl that walks with Jesus*

**By Robert Adlai Lake
With Doug Mendenhall**

My
Peace

I give unto you

**The true story of hope and a young
girl who walks with Christ.**

Cover Art by
Kendra Parrish Burton
© 2001

used with permission from the artist

© 2001 by Doug Mendenhall

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any means without permission in writing from the authors:

Doug Mendenhall
PO Box 282
Mt Pleasant UT 84647

First paperbound printing, 2001

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: Pending

ISBN 1-930980-43-4

Printed in the United States of America



A fascinating true story of a man – Doug – who is financially ruined by two friends and learns to find gratitude for what they did to him. And just when he thinks he has learned the lesson, the Lord increases the stakes. Doug is tried with the impending death of his ten-year-old daughter. Can Doug find gratitude for something as devastating as the loss of a child?

After his daughter miraculously recovers, Doug finds that she has come back from the other side with an incredible story and wonderful gifts from the Lord. Through her gifts, Doug finds that the lesson of gratitude was just the beginning.

Follow Doug through an eight month trail of lessons and revelations as the Lord patiently teaches him about Peace.

Read the story that has helped many find the hope that seems so rare in the world today. The hope that comes from the knowledge that our Savior loves us and constantly watches over each of us, waiting for us to give our pain to Him so that He may bless us with His Peace.



This book is dedicated to a kind, loving Father in Heaven. He gave us Peace and a knowledge that His Son, Jesus Christ, is real. And He gave us our daughter back.

Special thanks to my sweetheart Dianne for her unending patience with me as I learn and re-learn the lessons Father teaches me. To my children for their patience with a hard-headed Dad. To Denise, who truly does walk and talk with Christ. Finally, to Robert, who willingly accepted this project not knowing what would happen or how he would ever do it.

Doug

This work could not have been written without the loving patience of my Savior who guided and taught me through every step of the way.

Thank you to my wonderful wife and sons who have supported me tirelessly through the past six months of writing, rewriting, and editing.

Thank you to Doug who let me live his life with him.

Special thanks to two wonderful and insightful editors, Natalie and Jean. Without the two of you, I'd still be searching through my thesaurus and grammar guide. As valuable as your time was, you found the patience to sit and guide my writing.

Robert

Contents

A New Beginning	1
Gratitude Begets	21
Through Pain and Tragedy	39
A Basket Weaver	67
Gifts	87
Revelations	105
Smokey	125
In His Hand	137
Hope	163
Look to Me and Live	181



Chapter 1

“A new beginning . . .”

“Hi Rob.”

“Hey Doug, what’s up?”

“Denise and I are headed down to Plymouth on Monday. Apparently there’s a great spot in a canyon just west of the town – I’ve heard there are some Indian ruins there. Just wondered if you’d like to go check it out with us, maybe picnic?”

Silence.

“Oh, and there’s a guy there who seems to know all about them, and, well . . . want to go?” I paused.

“Gee Doug, I don’t know. I’ve got to work, and . . . I guess I could take it off . . .” Rob hesitated.

“This guy’s supposed to know a lot about the ruins. Hey, if nothing else it’ll be a great picnic in the mountains!” I jumped in, hoping my excitement would be contagious.

Rob needed to come! Even before I’d picked up the phone to call him, I knew he needed to come. I just didn’t know why.

“Well, okay . . . sounds fun. Let me run it by Jenn.” Rob put the phone down. I smiled – he would come!

“Dad, Dad!” Eleven year old Denise popped into my bedroom. “Dad, Rob has to come! My Friend said he has to.” I looked over my shoulder where I felt her Friend – and mine – and smiled.

“I know, sweetie.” I winked at her and she winked back. Just then the phone came alive, Rob’s voice right in my ear. “Doug?”

“Rob! Well?” I left the question hanging in midair.

“I’m in. Jenn thinks it’s a little crazy, but I’ll go. When are we leaving?”

“I figure around ten o’clock.”

“Great, that’ll give me just enough time to go into work and beg off for the rest of the day!” I could hear the smile in Rob’s voice.

“Dad, Dad! Tell him I’m bringing Smokey, too!” Denise interrupted me, holding up her stuffed bear.

“Rob, Denise wants me to tell you she’s bringing Smokey with us.”

“Great, the more the merrier!” Rob answered. “I’ll run by your house Monday around ten o’clock. See you then.”

“Okay, see you then,” I responded, and the phone went dead between us.

Monday morning. Rob pulled up in his Dad’s Bronco. I watched him from the living room window as he jumped out of the car and headed for the front door of our split-level home.

“Well, it’s about time!” I smiled at his look of surprise as I threw the door open, before he could knock.

“Whoa! . . .”

“Okay, let’s go! Denise! Come on, let’s get going!” I yelled from the entryway.

“Coming!” She grabbed Smokey and her backpack and ran down the half flight of stairs, maneuvering between me and Rob to be the first out to the Bronco.

“Doug, don’t forget to take the insulin kit, and . . . oh, hi Rob . . . here are the snacks for Denise,” my wife, Dianne, offered. She held a bag of peanut butter granola bars over the railing.

“Thanks, dear,” I replied, and met her at the top of the stairs to retrieve the sack and a kiss goodbye. “Denise has the insulin kit in her backpack and, yes, I checked her

blood sugar before Rob got here. She's fine."

The whole diabetic thing was still kind of new to us. It was just last November, seven months ago, that Denise went into a diabetic coma. The coma was our first inkling that she had diabetes.

"Hello, Dianne," Rob said, "We ready to go, Doug?" Rob's enthusiasm showed on his face.

"Let's go!"

"What time do you think you'll be back?" Dianne asked.

I looked at Rob – he shrugged – I turned back to Dianne. "Don't know, probably before dark."

"I've got my cell phone," Rob spoke up. "I'll have Doug call you once we've started back." He headed for the Bronco with me right behind. We took the front seats.

"It's about time!" Denise spoke up from the back seat.

"Train them to be women rather young, don't you, Doug?" Rob joked, and smiled at Denise through the rearview mirror.

We began the two hour ride with rather generic talk about the weather and work, but it quickly turned spiritual. Rob was fascinated by my experiences with Denise. Since the moment she had awakened from her coma, she'd been manifesting exceptional gifts and Rob never tired of hearing our stories. The more I told him about her wonderful gifts, the more he wanted to hear. And the more he heard, the more he longed to talk to Denise directly about them – but something had always held him back.

As we talked of more sacred things, I often turned to Denise for confirmation and elaboration. Rob would look from Denise to me, and back to Denise. He really wanted to talk to *just* Denise. I wondered how long he could go on talking to her through me.

A few minutes passed. He found the courage.

"Denise, what color am I?" Rob glanced in the rearview

mirror where Denise smiled at him. Now it begins.

“Hmm, you’re kind of . . .” Denise started.

We both knew exactly what Rob wanted. The color of his aura was just the start! He was curious about so much more.

I smiled. Rob and Denise soon forgot I was there.

I turned to look out the window at the beautiful mountains passing by. Rob had finally taken the step that would start him on a journey – not unlike the one I had begun seven months earlier. I thought back, even farther, to where my journey had its roots, to where a door had opened for me and I had walked through, learning, growing and changing.

Memories cascaded around me as I remembered a Sunday afternoon in church, over three years earlier . . .



The teacher droned on about something trivial, consistently refusing attempts by class members to interject anything substantial. A prepared lesson is to be followed, not deviated from.

“I’m hungry,” I whispered to no one in particular.

Frustrated.

“Doug, it’s not my fault you skipped breakfast this morning. Please! Be quiet,” Dianne whispered, urgently. I sighed. She didn’t understand. I was critiquing the Sunday School lesson, not reporting on my stomach.

“I’m lost,” I muttered.

“Doug!”

My wife’s desire for quiet was punctuated with a nudge. I decided to accommodate her request – I stood and walked out of the class. I wandered around the halls, stopping at the most comfortable seats in the church, the coveted couches right outside the chapel. Their soft

cushions welcomed me home as I sank into them.

“ . . . ahh . . . ”

Thoughts of the lesson intruded. Obedience – simple on the surface but . . .

How could I comply with all things I’d been given? I couldn’t, not all the time. So why did God put me here knowing that my chances of returning to Him were getting less and less the more I learned? What a paradox. The more I knew, the less my chances of returning to Him, the more troubled I became.

Knowledge is dangerous!

Knowledge leaves me accountable!

I opened my Bible and found the words of Christ, recorded by John.

Peace I leave with you, my peace I
give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I
unto you. Let not your heart be troubled,
neither let it be afraid.

I wanted to be strong and faithful in all things. I wanted to be worthy of His Peace, and maybe . . . well . . . really, I guess I just wanted to know my Savior . . . but if I couldn’t be worthy of His Peace, could I ever really be worthy of His presence?

The couch was way too comfortable, certainly not the spot to be depressed over my eternal future. Happier thoughts began pushing away my worries . . . a church service just ending . . . a neighbor boy leaving for missionary service in a foreign country. I must have been all of eleven years old . . . I was very impressionable.

I remember standing in the hall of the church with my friends as they talked about where they wanted to serve a mission when they were old enough.

“I want to be just like him,” my buddy said to me,

commenting on the neighbor boy leaving, “I want to go to a foreign country too, and learn a new language.”

“Not me,” I replied, “I’m happy here. All my friends are here, why would I want to leave?”

I *was* happy then. I was a part of a group and though we didn’t always share the same ideas, we liked each other and we shared our time, we shared our lives.

Everything seemed so simple back then, so black and white. I guess it was because I was naïve and trusting. I never doubted what I was told, and if it came from a church leader, it had to be true and what’s more, I could do it.

But then, like most kids, a new day brought new adventures and yesterday’s lessons were hidden in memories. I couldn’t dwell on my weaknesses because as a kid, I didn’t have any – everything was within my grasp if it could be done in a day.

If only I could find that confidence again!

“Mind if I join you?” A voice intruded on my memories.

“What? No, go right ahead Jeff.” My close friend and neighbor sat beside me.

“You looked too comfortable to be left alone.”

“I was just remembering what it was like to be young and cocky. Always so sure, never any question as to where I was headed. I wonder if that’s part of what the Lord meant when He said we need to be like little children.” I mused.

“I always figured He meant teachable and humble,” Jeff shrugged. I ignored him.

“Jeff, do you remember how you felt the day you left to serve the Lord? Remember getting on that plane and how secure you were in what you knew?” I asked.

“Sure, I knew it all and I was going to change the world. Boy, but after two months away from home I began to realize just how little I did know.”

“Yeah, but wasn’t it nice to know you knew it all then, even if it only lasted a little while?”

My childhood memories began to fade.

“What? Doug, I don’t get what you’re saying.” He cocked his head, as if looking at me sideways would straighten out my words.

“Neither do I Jeff, neither do I. Well, looks like class is finally out. Time to round up all the kids and head home.” Quickly I derailed the conversation so I could leave.

Catching up to Dianne wasn’t a problem, she was waiting for me by the door. She looked at me, wanting an explanation for my quick exit from Sunday School. She wasn’t really pleased with it, but she understood after I explained how the lesson made me feel hopeless, how I couldn’t take the discomfort anymore.

My wife always seemed to understand. I thanked the Lord daily for Dianne’s love. Watching her gather the kids into the car, I realized just how truly lucky I was.

I had known her growing up. We went to the same high school together. There never was any chemistry between us, so I didn’t go out of my way to attract her attention. But when I came back from Spain a couple of years later, where I had just finished serving the Lord (despite my earlier convictions that I’d never serve), all of a sudden there was chemistry! All of a sudden I *did* want to get her attention.

And it didn’t take long for me to convince her that she wanted my attention as much as I wanted hers. We were married after a six month engagement and started our life together as an incredibly secure couple. We knew what we wanted – a family, with all the kids and amenities life had to offer. We knew that we had an eternity together, and we were filled with hope.

Once again a familiar voice brought me back from some comforting memories.

“Doug, Doug! Help Dwight and Denise get into the house and out of their Sunday clothes. I just washed those, and I don’t want them to get dirty. And see what you can do about getting the older kids to set the table while I finish dinner.”

“Okay dear. Kids, you heard her, let’s get moving! Come on Denise, Dwight! Into the house, let’s change your clothes!” I quickly herded Denise and Dwight, our two youngest, into the basement of my Mother’s house where we were currently living.

Though I was making good money, we still lived in the basement of my Mom’s house. I knew it irritated Dianne, not having her own home, but since Dad died, Mom needed us.

No, she really needed Dwight, our youngest.

Mom’s heart refused to mend when Dad died. It was obvious we needed to do something, but what? We had no clue. So we moved in to help shoulder her burden and provide company. I thought it would be impossible for her to be lonely with five kids around, but I was wrong. Mom was locked into a loneliness we couldn’t penetrate.

Shortly after moving in, Dianne announced she was pregnant. During her pregnancy, she frequently questioned having another child; after Denise had been born, we figured our family was complete. Even though Dianne loved the baby inside, she just wasn’t sure she wanted the responsibility of one more.

Then Dwight was born. Dwight opened Mom’s heart again and gave her a reason to live. Dwight was a godsend to Mom, and Mom was a godsend to Dianne – taking on much of the care of the new baby.

Now five years later, here we were still living in Mom’s basement but with plans to move into our own home soon. It was time to move on. We knew it and so did Mom.

“Dinner’s on!”

“It’s about time,” David, our seventeen-year-old, replied. “I thought I was going to starve to death!”

“Can’t we send him on a mission *now*, Mom? I’m sure the church’ll make an exception and take him now!” Deon, the sixteen-year-old remarked.

She loved her brother and was positive she would love him even more if he were overseas or, at least, across the country – away from her.

“Okay, enough already. Where’s Debi and Darin? Dwight, get in here!” It just wasn’t a meal without me adding to the confusion. “Denise, put that down and sit up to the table, young lady. Debi, did you wash your hands? Darin, stop it and just sit there!”

Dianne brought the last dish of hot food to the table. “What a sight, all my children sitting together without fighting. Darin! Debi! I said *without* fighting.”

“Time for the blessing on the food.” I announced, and eyed all the kids, expecting the fidgeting, poking and teasing to cease. “Now! Knock it off. I want a hot meal!” Finally, the desired effect. All heads bowed and most eyes closed.

“Our dear Father in Heaven....” I began the prayer.

Time passes. Children grow and their personalities develop. Though the face in the mirror shows the footprints of time, I refuse to believe I am any older. One fall or spring for me is the same as the next, or the previous – the changes on the calendar are only on paper. I am being lulled, I guess, into believing that time is circular, that I can just keep going around and around as if in a holding pattern.

Eighteen months has slipped by.

Mom is insistent that we move out soon. David, now nineteen, leaves in a few months to serve the Lord in

Honduras, as I did in Spain. Deon is ready to graduate high school into the ranks of young adults. Darin is a full-blown teenager with dreams of his own car and driving wherever his fancy takes him. Debi has begun to realize she is a girl – fashion and boys are taking precedence now over games and toys! Little Dwight and Denise have grown physically more than emotionally. They are our babies still, only inches taller.

“Enough reminiscing already, time to finish shaving and get on those business calls,” I frankly told the face in the mirror, wiping the last traces of shaving cream from its cheeks. I found comfortable clothes, dressed and headed for the office – Mom’s backyard.

The real joy for me in multi-level marketing is the connection I make with the people. Simply seeing them enjoy what they’re doing would have satisfied me, but since I do have bills to pay, I can’t complain about the money that comes from it. With the cordless phone in hand, I stepped into the beautiful morning.

“Let’s see, George is first,” I mumbled softly to myself. “555-4782.” I read the number from a small notepad. My fingers danced across the phone as I paced the backyard.

George’s wife answered and quickly put him on. We settled in on business after a few pleasantries.

“Really George, it’s a great way to make money and it satisfies a need for many people . . . yeah, you’re right, it seems like a lot of money up front, but it’ll all come back to you with just a few sales . . . no, no I’m here to help you. I make money only after *you do*, and I’ll do whatever it takes to see you make money.”

With the phone in hand, a client on the other end, the grass under my feet and nature in the background, I experienced a thrill, an adrenaline rush that no drug could match.

Selling was my drug of choice.

“Thanks George, I’ll get in touch with you next week . . . okay, bye.” I had a new distributor – only the formalities of signing the contracts remained.

“Daddy, push me,” Dwight begged from the swing set. I looked across the yard at him. When had he come out here?

“Okay, here I come!” Laughter pealed from him as he watched me hustle towards him. Oh, to have the vision of a child, where a swing becomes an incredible flight through the sky, where reality is beautifully colored by dreams. I loved watching Dwight and Denise play. They were young enough to believe that imagination is still a substantial part of reality.

“Gee, Doug, do you ever work?” It was Jeff, walking across the lawn to meet me at the swings. Though only midmorning, he had probably snuck away from his job to ask me to help him make a sale. I wanted him to succeed in this marketing business, not just because he was a good friend, but also because his family could use the extra income. Life hadn’t been as kind to Jeff as it had been to me.

“Hi Jeff, wanna join us? I’ll push you, too.” I grinned!

“No, Daddy! That’s my swing!” Denise rounded Jeff at a dead run, heading for the free swing. “It’s my turn, my turn!”

Jeff stopped in the middle of the yard and smiled after Denise, waiting for me to finish with the kids.

“Hey sweetie, don’t worry, there’s plenty of time and swings to go around,” I laughed with her.

A few well-timed pushes and then a dramatic run-through push brought squeals of laughter from the kids and the chance to meet Jeff in the middle of the yard.

“Well, you ready to make some money?” I questioned him.

“I hope so. This has been really frustrating.” Jeff

kicked the grass. “I can’t get Tony to commit. Can’t we do a three-way?” My friend tended to invent his own language during moments of stress. I’m sure he didn’t realize “flustrate” wasn’t a real word, but it certainly fit the way he felt, flustered and frustrated. It worked for him.

“Sure, you bet. Let’s get Tony on the phone, close this deal and make you some money! But only after I re-fuel my two little flying angels,” I added with a grin, and I headed for the swings.

“Higher, daddy, higher!” Speeding them on their way into the midmorning sky animated my own spirit, as if we were all flying! There’s no substitute to awaken a soul like taking part in a child’s dream.

“You got his number Jeff?” I asked, as I walked towards him. He handed me a greasy, wadded up paper. He was a mechanic from his hands to his heart. “Good, now go get the other cordless phone from the house and let’s make money!”

Jeff disappeared into the house. I glanced over to the swings, enjoying the sight and sounds of my children.

“So, what about the house hunting?” Jeff had returned without me noticing.

“I think we may have found one. It’s here in the neighborhood, not far away,” I said.

“Great!” I think Jeff was relieved that we would be staying close by.

“Yeah, all that’s left is to work out the details and pack the boxes.” I raised an eyebrow at the mention of packing boxes. I hoped he would catch the implication.

“Need help moving?” Jeff smiled.

I smiled back. “Yeah, always need help moving.”

“By the way Doug, any word from Randy Morris?” Jeff asked, maneuvering back to business.

Randy Morris wasn’t necessarily what I wanted to discuss at that time, or any time. He was one of the top

three people in the firm and in charge of product distribution – and he hated me. My sales force was responsible for more than 70% of the total sales every month and I was, therefore, making more than him. Jealousy oozed out every time we were together. He had made a habit of personally attacking me and my sales methods at recruitment and sales meetings every chance he got.

Lately, though, he criticized less. His silence was unnerving, and I had suspicions that something was going on behind the scenes, but I had no idea what it was – I just had a feeling.

“No, haven’t heard a word from him since the Vegas meeting, and it makes me nervous,” I answered.

Jeff quickly picked up on my discomfort and changed the direction again.

“So . . . how much this month?” he asked. He liked to hear how much money I was making. I think it became kind of a lucky charm or a good omen to him. If I made lots of money, some of the luck was bound to rub off on him, and he believed, his sales would close.

“Let’s see . . . I think the next check should be around \$14,000. Not bad for a month, now let’s get you some!” Once again my fingers flew across the telephone keypad.

Twenty minutes later, Jeff had a sale. Tony had just become our latest distributor and Jeff had financial breathing room for the next month.

“Feels great, doesn’t it Jeff? Could you hear it in his voice? He wanted to sign last night; you just needed to help him over the hump. Now it’s time to get to work and make him some money!”

I glanced over to the swings – they were empty, the yard was quiet.

“Doug! Doug!”

A cry came from the direction of the house.

“Sounds like it could be lunch, Jeff. Stay for a bite?” I asked.

“Uh . . . I don’t think it’s lunch. That is, unless you enjoy the taste of . . . paper?” Jeff pointed to the window where Dianne was waving a large envelope. She came out of the house and met us in the middle of the lawn. She traded the envelope for the phone in my hand.

“This just came. Registered mail.” Anxiety rippled across her face.

I scanned the envelope. It was from a local law firm. A nagging feeling in the pit of my stomach began to burn.

“Randy,” I muttered, under my breath. I opened the envelope.

“Well?” Dianne and Jeff both asked.

“It says . . . no . . . that can’t be right. WHAT?” I looked at both of them then quickly scanned the letter again.

“I can’t *believe* this! How can . . .they . . .they can’t . . .” I stared through the words on the paper.

“What? What is it?” Deep concern clouded Dianne’s face.

“They’ve stripped me of my downline!” I was stunned, shocked. “They’ve taken away my distributorship.”

“Doug, what does that mean?” I could read in her eyes that she already knew.

“It’s Randy, isn’t it!” Jeff quickly placed blame.

“There must be a mistake, this can’t be real,” I persisted. “They can’t do this to me! Where’s the phone?” I jerked the phone out of Dianne’s hand and – suddenly resolved – dialed Larry’s number. The owner.

“This is Doug, let me talk to Larry . . . I can appreciate that Janice, but this is urgent, I *really* need to talk to Larry now.” Larry’s secretary was stalling, making excuses.

“Get Larry for me . . . what do you mean he won’t take my call . . . Janice, this is DOUG!” I was beginning to lose

control – let me yell at someone, anyone – “WHAT . . . WAIT! NO! . . . I just . . .”

The phone dropped from my hand. It was dead.

Time crawled.

My personal pain scoffed at its belated progress – no more the fleeting seasons of unimpeded growth, of joy. I was robbed. Of my home, of my job, of my financial stability, the day – six long months ago – I received the registered letter. Now the best I could do, slogging through my financial mire, was stall on all my responsibilities. We rented – barely – a tiny split-level house right around the corner from Jeff.

Randy! Larry!

I’d spent these months trying every avenue open to me to convince Larry that Randy had lied, fabricated everything. Despite all the evidence, all the testimonials and witnesses, Larry stood firm and continued to back Randy. Once it became obvious that I wasn’t going back to work with Larry, Dianne quietly tried to persuade me to let it all go, to forget them and continue on with life.

I couldn’t.

Finally, with financial ruin looming, I turned to the law. I would sue. Larry, Randy and the company. I would get what was due me! I found a small law firm in the phone book and called to make an appointment.

. . . Against Dianne’s wishes.

An incredibly comfortable chair enveloped me in the reception area of the law office. Once my senses became accustomed to the luxury of the chair, I looked around to take in the rest of the room. The chair was definitely out of

place. The room was decorated with various cheap objects found in any department store.

“Looks like they might be within my budget,” I remarked under my breath.

The receptionist stood, and from behind her desk announced, “Mr. Mendenhall, Mr. Farnsworth will see you now.”

I followed her to a private office. It, at least, had a common decorating theme, unlike the reception area.

“Welcome, please come in.” The gentleman behind the desk – Mr. Farnsworth – stood and moved to greet me at the door. He offered me his hand. “Could I have the receptionist get you anything?”

Mr. Farnsworth was a youngish man who could have been a model. I guessed he was at least six foot two. He had wavy blonde hair, all in place and a complexion to rival any supermodel. His handshake felt as if it was the product of frequent workouts. Then there was his smile! His teeth were, well, stunning, perfectly complementing his sparkling blue eyes. What a cover this book had! I just hoped the content was comparable.

“No thanks,” I croaked, coughing to clear my throat. “Thanks for seeing me. I hope we can work something out.”

“Please have a seat.” He motioned to a chair in front of his desk and then returned to his. “I’m sure we can arrange something beneficial. Did you bring the letter of termination with you?” Even his voice was smooth. I began hoping he’d do something to show he was human, I don’t know, something like, pick his nose or even twitch.

“Yes, here it is.” I handed him the registered letter. He quietly perused it, then neatly folded it and placed it on his desk between us.

“Mr. Mendenhall, this is actually better than I thought. If what you told me over the phone is true and you have

evidence of it, they have maliciously slandered you. I feel fairly positive we can get you lost commissions and punitive damages.” He paused, obviously for effect.

“I would like to hear the entire story before we go any further. I’m sure that what you told me in the few minutes over the phone was simply a precursor. Afterwards we will talk about how to proceed.”

I began my story.

I recounted everything I could remember about my dealings with the company, including mean and slanderous things Randy had said about me in public. I related how we had lost everything, including toys, electronics, cars, credit, the home we were going to buy – everything – right up to the conversation I had had with Larry’s secretary six months earlier when she hung up on me.

Within moments I could taste bile. As with every other time I told this story, my fists clinched, involuntarily, and I felt incredibly potent anger. It welled up in my chest consuming me.

Revenge.

I wanted those men to suffer as I had.

Justice cried out for the heads of these men who did this to me. I wanted to ruin them! I would take every last thing they had.

I was consumed by rage as I finished the story. My teeth hurt from clenching, and my hands throbbed from the unintentional fists I made the entire time.

I took a deep breath.

“So . . . that’s what happened.”

“With some evidence,” Mr. Farnsworth said, “I think we can make this into a strong case. I would like to take it. I can start immediately – filing it, etc. – for a small retainer of \$1,000.” He smiled his perfect smile at me.

One thousand dollars! I had just explained that I’d been financially ruined, I didn’t have enough money to pay bills

or buy food for my family, and he wanted me to give up a small fortune. A thousand dollars!

“I’ll need a few days to come up with the money,” I looked past him, to his luxurious office mocking me.

“Alright then, when you have the retainer come see me and we will put together a game plan,” he said, as he stood from behind his desk and offered his hand in a parting gesture.

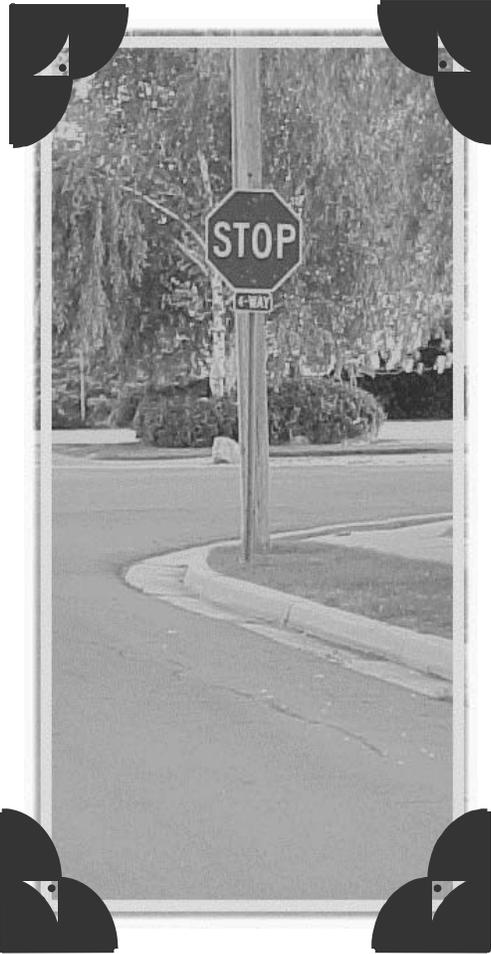
“Thanks for listening to my story. I’ll be in touch with you in a few days.” I took the proffered hand and gladly left the office. I’d hoped he would take my case on a contingency basis. I left, crushed.

I climbed into my beat-up car and slammed the door.

“Right! Where am I going to get a thousand bucks?! So much for seeing a lawyer!” I said to the face in the rearview mirror. “Justice! Yeah right, you have to have money to have justice!”

My anger grew and solidified as I finally resolved that there was nothing I could do. No money, no suit. Dianne was right, I had to find a way to move on. Justice?

Not!



“*Offer her a ride.*”

“Huh?” Sarah frowned. She braked slowly and the car coasted toward the intersection ahead. The short pause there allowed her and Erin to glance over at the old woman.

Offer her a ride, came the thought a second time as their car moved forward through the light.

Erin turned to Sarah. “I think you should turn around. I don’t know why, but we need to offer her a ride.”

“Yeah, I was thinking the same thing.” Sarah quickly turned the car around and headed back toward the intersection and the old woman. Once again turning, she drew up beside her on the curb and Erin rolled down the window.

“Ma’am, would you let us give you a ride?”

Shock, surprise and finally acceptance played out in turn on the old woman’s face.

“Okay.”

She placed her bag on the sidewalk and opened the back door of the car. “Now honey, be careful as you pick up my bag. Don’t drop anything!” She climbed into the car.

Erin glanced back at Sarah, shrugged, and got out of the car to pick up the woman’s bag.

“Honey, turn left here and go down to the store at the corner of Waterton and 3rd. I need to get my prescription.” She promptly settled back into the seat and closed her eyes.

They looked at each other in confusion, offering no comments or questions. Within minutes the car pulled up to the main door of the corner market.

“Okay, this will only take a minute.” The old woman came alive and worked her way out of the car and into the store.

Once again Sarah and Erin looked at each other, too stunned to speak. The brazen confidence, the *arrogance* of the old woman, had momentarily robbed them of their voices. Minutes later they saw her coming from the store.

“425 Washington, honey.”

The request – no, *command* – came as the old woman opened the car door and climbed back in.

“Okay . . . uh . . . that’s 425 Washington,” Sarah repeated, and shifted the car into gear. The short trip passed in silence until the old woman’s house came into view.

“The brick one, there, with the lilac bush in front. Just pull into the driveway. And you can bring the bag into the house for me.”

Sarah parked as instructed. Erin got out and followed the old woman through the front door, laden with her bag.

“Set it down here, honey.” The old woman pointed to a clear spot on the table. “And close the door tightly on your way out.” Then she disappeared into a nearby room.

Erin left, making sure the door was tightly closed and got back into the car. Sarah backed out into the street. Heavy silence continued through the short trip home. Neither one wanted to break the silence for fear of what they might say.

Sarah hung the car keys on the peg inside the back door as Erin got a glass of water.

Silence.

“She never even once said thank-you.” Finally, Sarah spoke. “I can’t believe she didn’t even say please.”

This seemed to thaw Erin. “We *were* supposed to help her, but I expected at least a thank-you. At least *that* would have taken the edge of her *arrogant* attitude.”

“I know,” said Sarah, warming to the conversation. “She just ordered us around. Can you believe it?”

“. . . why were we supposed to help her. . . ”

Erin opened her mouth to comment just as both of them felt, *and heard*, the soft, quiet voice.

“*Now you understand how I feel.*”

Their eyes dropped. In that moment, love filled the room.

Silence.

sedentary. Now I was carrying weight, doing a lot less and noticing discomfort with every activity.

The pains had become increasingly noticeable the last two months until now I found it hard to walk very far without losing my breath. In the last two weeks I'd noticed some slight numbness in my left arm. But any concerns I had for my health I ignored – our finances prevented me from seeing a doctor. We couldn't pay our regular bills, let alone assume medical costs. Besides, all I needed was exercise – or so I hoped.

For two days Sarah's story nudged at me. I wanted to know more. I began looking through religious and self-help books for insights on thankfulness. "gratitude" popped up as often as "thankfulness." Were they the same? A lot of what I read suggested they were. Was gratitude somehow different, something more than thankfulness? Or did I just need it to be?

I opened a book of quotes to the section labeled "Gratitude." I thumbed through it, stopping at a short passage by William Shakespeare:

I hate ingratitude in man more than
lying, vainness, babbling, drunkenness, or
any other taint or vice whose strong
corruption inhabits our frail blood.

I read and re-read the passage. First to understand what Shakespeare was saying, then to let it seep into my mind. Finally I went on to another quote. As I finished reading that one, I found myself going back to Shakespeare. I read his words again.

"Who hates it?" the question escaped my lips. The obvious answer, "Shakespeare," left me uneasy. I read

another quote, then again returned to Shakespeare's words.

"Who hates it?" The question came again, demanding, as I finished reading.

"I do."

The thought burst through my mind, shattering the obvious, leaving me to grasp for what I felt to be true.

"Father in Heaven," I whispered.

In deafening silence I sat reflecting on the gravity of *ingratitude*. My mind opened. Minutes later I thumbed through the book to another quote, by Joseph F. Smith:

The spirit of gratitude . . . begets love
and friendship, and engenders divine
influence.

The words whispered to me that gratitude was the beginning of a true friendship based in love.

"In gratitude will you find my love; in gratitude will you find me."

The voice was soft and comforting, more felt than heard.

My heart sang out in joy. I understood! Gratitude is the door He stands at – the door He waits for us to open! Gratitude for all that is within our lives.

I closed the book of quotes, closed my eyes, and just felt. I was encircled by a comforting sensation. My heart slowed to the rhythmic pulsing I felt from everything around me. I knew I understood.

The spitting sparklers were beautiful blossoms of light my children carried around the yard. The kids' enthusiasm spilled over to me and I eagerly picked one up and lit it.

"Look Daddy, I'm drawing pictures in the sky!" little Denise squealed with delight.

“Watch me, Daddy!” Little Dwight was not to be outdone. He ran around in large circles crisscrossing the front lawn.

“Wow!” I said in reply to both smiling faces.

“Dad, it’s lit!” Darin’s voice pulled my attention to the sputtering sparkler in my hand.

“Watch out, here I come,” I shouted. I headed into the front yard to my celebrating children.

The little jog to where Denise and Dwight stood left me gasping for breath. Thankfully, the kids didn’t notice the sudden stab of pain I felt.

I handed my sparkler to Denise. “Here sweetie, take mine.” She took it and headed around me to show Dwight she had another lit sparkler. With a squeal, Dwight saw her sparkler and raced over to Darin for a lit one.

I headed purposefully toward the cars in the driveway. With the little strength I had, I jogged behind the closest one. Hidden from my family’s view, I collapsed on the cement, face down, gasping and struggling for breath. The pain in my chest was unbearable. I tried to push myself up, but couldn’t – my left arm was numb, completely useless.

Pleas for help to my Savior caught in my throat and remained silent. As my mind spoke these prayers, I hurled curses at Randy and Larry, the two men I credited with ruining me financially, taking away my health and my insurance. With insurance I could have seen a doctor when the pains first started! I probably wouldn’t have even needed to see a doctor!

I hated them!

With each wrenching pain, my hate grew, silencing my pleas for help. I pleaded to my Lord for His help and mercy while I viciously spat curses at these men. It didn’t occur to me that the Lord would be bound by my curses, unable to help or comfort me. Each curse I spat at my enemies kept me from finding the help I pleaded for from

heaven.

An eternity ended.

My breath returned and the numbness faded. My world returned. I heard my family's voices. Thankfully, my absence had gone unnoticed. I thanked the Lord that life was still mine. I climbed to my feet, exhausted, and slowly returned to the sputtering display of my children's sparklers.

Our celebration wore on through the evening. Even as my face reflected the excitement of these moments, my soul anguished inside me. I could not put off the anger, the hatred for the men who stole my life. I tried to soften my heart through gratitude. Silently I started listing my blessings – the love of a devoted wife, wonderful children, a roof over our heads, food on the table, etc. My mood lightened. I forgot my enemies; I forgot my anger. By the end of our Fourth of July celebration, I felt calm once more.

The weeks following the Fourth were constant reminders of my poor health. Stairs were to be avoided. Walks longer than a few hundred feet were to be taken slowly. Gradually, I regained my strength and became more than a slug on our couch. Then it became possible to work again.

Shortly after I was fired, I had started up my own company, a survey business that provided leads for small businesses. It wasn't a great living, but it paid most of the bills, giving me time to think while I traveled to and from neighboring cities. It also allowed me to spend more time with the family. It became common for Dianne and me to run errands together.

The traffic light turned green, and the car jerked forward as I accidentally popped the clutch. Dianne

glanced at me as she lurched forward in the seat.

“Dear, what do you think of gratitude?” I asked her. “And I don’t mean gratitude for this beat up old car.”

“I don’t know. Too many people give way too little of it.” She hesitated.

“And?”

“Well . . . it’s important. We should be grateful for all we’ve been given . . . I guess even this car.” She eyed me somewhat warily.

I saw confusion in her eyes. She was trying to figure out where I was going with this conversation. I held her gaze.

“Do you think there’s such a thing as *misplaced* gratitude?”

“DOUG!” Her shout sent my eyes back to the road. “That was a red light you went through! Keep your eyes on the road.”

Adrenaline surged through me. Instantly I glanced in the mirrors to be sure there were no flashing red lights. Dianne continued.

“Misplaced gratitude? Do you mean like being grateful for not getting caught doing something wrong?” The jab was unmistakable; she smiled.

“Well . . . yeah, I guess that too,” I smirked back at her, and went on. “But what I was thinking of was feeling gratitude for the bad things that happen to us.”

Dianne paused. The momentary silence was punctuated by the “blink – blink” of the car’s turn signal as I steered into the right hand lane.

“Well, many times people feel grateful for trials they go through only *after* they’ve had a chance to sit back and reflect on how their life was changed for the better. Is that what you mean?”

“Well . . . kind of, I guess. I know we should be grateful for trials, and it’s much easier once we look back

on them. But what I was thinking was feeling grateful for malicious, evil things that may happen to us.”

“Do you mean you think we should feel grateful for the evil in our lives as well as the good?”

“Yeah, that’s it.”

“Why should we be grateful for something that comes from the devil or his angels? Nothing good can come from them, and if it isn’t good, why should we feel grateful for it? Doesn’t that move us further away from our Father in Heaven?” she replied.

I understood her argument, but it didn’t convince me. There was something in it that didn’t feel right, something that bothered me. What?

“Yeah . . . I guess so. But there’s something that’s been nagging at me and I can’t quite put my finger on it. I thought it had to do with gratitude, but . . . I don’t know . . .”

I went silent. The tangle of my thoughts was worse than the tangle of the roads in front of me.

“School starts in three weeks, doesn’t it?” I focused on the road.

“Yes, it does.”

“How much do you think we’ll need for school clothes?” I turned and asked Dianne.

“I’m not sure. How much do you think we have this month, Doug . . .?” She turned the question around on me, glad to be on more familiar ground. The conversation lightened.

We pulled into the driveway and I turned off the car. My nagging thoughts on gratitude returned and followed me into the house.

Later that evening, Dianne took the three youngest kids to find school clothes with the little money we had. The older kids played outside in the last rays of light. I was alone in the house.

Again I turned to my books. For some reason my

attention was drawn to the New Testament, in particular, First Corinthians. Thumbing through, I stopped at the 12th chapter and read Paul's analogy of the body of Christ. I read specifically with gratitude in mind.

“If the foot shall say, Because I am not the hand, I am not of the body; is it therefore not of the body?

If the whole body were an eye, where were the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where were the smelling? And if they were all one member, where were the body?

And the eye cannot say unto the hand, I have no need of thee; nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of you.”

A pattern began to emerge from my tangled thoughts:

If every man, woman and child that ever was, or ever will be, is a part of the body of Christ in some way that I can't yet understand, then all things we do must be according to His will or plan. Christ is the head of the body, and the body follows the desire and commands of the Head.

Then if everything is done according to His will or His plan – for the benefit of the entire body – wouldn't even the malicious and evil things people do be according to His will or plan – for some benefit I can't comprehend? In other words,

though I don't understand the workings of the foot because I am a hand, the foot is part of the body, necessary and directed by the head even as the hand is.

Then, for the hand not to be grateful for the actions of the foot – whether those actions are good, bad or evil – would be like the hand telling the foot that it isn't necessary, or it is bad for the body. That it should be cut off to improve the body.

Thus, the hand has set itself up as the head, by judging the foot. Neither knows the purpose of the other. So how can one judge the usefulness of the other to the body, regardless of whether it appears good, bad or evil?

Therefore:

By being grateful for the evil and the good, we accept all that He has here prepared for us and recognize that His hand is in all things, and acknowledge that all things serve a purpose, in Him, which we cannot now understand.

And through this acceptance of Him and His will in all things, we open the door to true forgiveness and love.

Through gratitude, we then forgive. Not because we want to

better ourselves or relieve our pain, but because we know that it is all according to His will, and that the wrong done to us serves a purpose in Him, even when we fail to comprehend it at the time.

And because we can now truly forgive all, we can truly *love* all, for all comes from Him.

And as we learn to truly forgive and love, then will we receive His peace, for we will understand His ways.

I knew in an instant that I had been given something of great worth. I also knew that not everyone would understand or benefit from it. His love filled my soul as I pondered again and again these thoughts. Gratitude should be offered to Him for all things, for He is *in* all things.

That night I slept peacefully and soundly for the first time in weeks.

“Doug, the phone’s for you,” Dianne called back to the bedroom where I was going over my schedule for the day.

“Thanks dear, I’ll get it in here.” I reached over and picked up the receiver. On the other end was a friend, a business associate I hadn’t talked to in over a year.

“. . . it’s good to hear from you, Frank,” I said into the receiver. “Yes it’s been quite a while . . . no, everything’s fine here . . . oh that, well, yeah, I’m no longer working for them. Yeah, that’s right, you’ve been under Randy for some months now.”

I waited.

Frank jumped in, demanding that I explain what had

happened, how I was fired. I obliged, and began relating, no *reliving*, the story of my ruin. I started where Randy had maligned me at a company meeting two years earlier, and continued with how Larry had taken my sales force and given it and its profits to Randy.

Frank was genuinely sorry for the way I'd been treated. He thanked me for clearing up all the rumors he'd heard and ended by saying, "Let's keep in touch."

The dial tone in my ear jolted me back to the present. I hung up the phone, but couldn't keep my mind from replaying those terrible events again. Anger continued to build within me and I became visibly upset. I realized that I needed to calm down and put away these destructive memories and feelings. I headed for my morning shower, hoping that the feel of warm cascading water would calm me so I could call on clients today.

"Doug, Debi's complaining of a toothache this morning. Is there any way we can come up with the money to take her to a dentist?" Dianne asked, as I crossed the hall to the shower.

"I don't know! You know we don't have any money right now! I'm doing the best I can, but if they don't buy the leads, there's no money! I can't just pull it out of thin air!" I was furious.

"Whoa, I was just asking. You don't have to bite my head off!" Dianne turned and stormed back into the kitchen, mumbling to herself about me waking up on the wrong side of the bed. "Kids, stay away from Dad, he's a royal grouch this morning."

In the shower I positioned myself so that the almost too-hot water could massage my back, softening my tense muscles and hopefully softening my mood. As I closed my eyes to enjoy the moment, all I could see were Randy and Larry's laughing faces. My fury was a knot in my gut and I could taste bile churning in my stomach. Their faces

disappeared, only to be replaced by the image of thousands of dollars in checks being torn up. My ruined financial situation hammered at my brain. My fists clenched, my heart seized with pain and tears of hate welled up in my eyes. I found myself craving revenge.

Be grateful for them.

I wasn't sure if I'd heard a voice or not.

Be grateful for them. This time I recognized the prompting.

"How, Father, can I thank them? How?" I pled out loud.

Remember what you were given.

The voice that wasn't a voice.

I knew instantly what was meant. I'd been told the night before to be grateful for all things – to accept what I didn't understand as His will, and be grateful for it.

"Thank you . . . Father, for . . . Randy," I stumbled. "For the way he treated me . . ." Anger flashed. I fought it and consciously pushed it away, concentrating on all that I had been given last night.

Gratitude . . . thankful to Him whose hand is in all things . . .

"Thank you, Father, for Randy and the way he treated me," I muttered, "and for the experiences that have come because of him. Thank you, Father, for Larry and his part in bringing me these experiences." My voice strengthened. "Thank you for these men and what they've given me."

A shiver ran the entire length of my body as all the hate and anger I had stored over the months whooshed out of me. I glanced down at the drain as if to see the emotional poison flow from me into the sewer. I was completely filled with warmth that blossomed into incredible peace.

All at once I knew that all was well, that we are a part of His plan – each of us as either the hand, the foot, the eye or the ear – each a benefit to the body of Christ.

How grateful I felt for these men, and now, how I loved them! How wonderful it was to be given Christ's Peace. Peace so pervasive that every cell in me cried out in happiness and joy. Peace so comprehensive I finally felt complete in a way I cannot describe or even understand.

Peace, that came by way of gratitude.

Mom please don't show or read this to any one. **I** hate school. School, its not because Mrs. banders or being in a split or anyone at school. Here are some thing I don't like. I have to wake up at 8:00 A.M. way to early and school starts at 9:00 A.M. That means I only have 1 hour to get to school not long and but to early. We sit all day on chairs and 45 mins on chairs and 45 mins you do that you hurt at the end of the day. Are class is hot or cold you can put a blanket on not me or a coat I will freeze or burn you try it. When we go to use the bath room and wash are hands there's no soap we tell people but they don't do any thing about it. When we go to recess its way to long in the hot or cold you have nothing to do you just sit there how boring. ~~At~~ lunch I just hate I don't like to pack lunch and don't like hot lunch very well. Lunch is to long but don't have time to eat 10 mins

20 minutes out side no time to eat. Some people don't like paper or pencils or to use your crayon well that just bugs me. When we edit are papers some are stupid to read that I don't like people reading my papers.

School is six hour and 45 minutes long it takes you a long time your family want you to sit home my letter are little copy ready

the circled letter
tell something
out

I know it will
probley a no
but I tride
thought I
might try it



*Chapter 3**“Through pain and tragedy . . .”*

I spent two weeks smiling.

Gratitude opened a door for me, and I was experiencing joy, great joy! Dianne frequently commented on my much-improved attitude. I could now relate the story of my financial ruin and feel nothing but love and appreciation for Randy and Larry.

Of all my children, Denise seemed to echo my new joyful attitude the most. She bubbled with excitement for life in general and school in particular.

She acted like I felt.

“Daddy, how many more days till school?” a pirouetting Denise asked.

“Sit down, brat!” Darin said, craning his neck to see the television as Denise danced around him.

She stopped in front of me – blocking my view of the show – hands on her hips, demanding an answer.

“Not many sweetie, only three days left.” I looked around her to the television.

“Oh, that’s a lot.” She lowered her head, frowning. “But it’ll go fast!” She bounced into a ball of energy and danced out of the room.

“Darin, why can’t you be that excited for school?” I nudged him.

“Yeah, right, Dad. No, thanks.” He rolled his eyes at me. Darin hid it well – but I could see it – it was there, sparkling in his eyes.

“What?” Darin met my knowing stare.

“Nothing.” I turned away from him. It was definitely there, the excitement for starting his senior year of high

school.

I raised myself off the couch and smiled at him.

“What?” Darin demanded again.

“Nothing, I’m just going to help Mom with dinner.” I walked into the kitchen.

“Why are you so happy?” Dianne asked.

“I don’t know. I just feel good.”

I was feeling better. The joy I felt every day echoed in my physical health. My chest pains had just about completely gone away. In fact, I hadn’t felt any numbness in my left arm since right after the Fourth of July. Gratitude had taken away the emotional poison – it started me down the path to health.

“Three more daaaays, just threeeee more daaaays!” Denise danced into the kitchen, singing at the top of her voice.

“Denise!” Now it was my turn to roll my eyes. “Quiet, please!”

She stopped and glared at me. At ten years old she was already practicing her coy female looks. I wasn’t impressed, and glared back.

“Humph!” She tossed her head, turned and marched out.

“You taught her that look, didn’t you?” I jokingly accused Dianne.

“What look?” She smiled innocently. “Oh, before I forget, your mother called. She has an appointment with the doctor tomorrow and needs you to run some errands for her while she’s gone.”

“Okay. You know, it is about time she went to see a doctor. She’s been complaining for a while now that she didn’t feel good,” I responded. I reached for the phone. It wasn’t in it’s cradle. When I finally found it hidden under Debi’s bedspread, I dialed Mom’s number.

School finally started and the first four weeks flew by. Everybody had a schedule. Everybody settled into a routine. Mornings were probably the most hectic now.

The phone rang.

“Hello,” I said and a familiar voice greeted me.

“Doug?”

“Morning, Mom.”

“I know you’re probably busy, what with trying to get the kids off to school and all, but do you have a minute?” she asked.

“Sure Mom, no problem, what’s going on?”

“Well, the doctor scheduled me for an angiogram tomorrow afternoon,” she started out, “and I was wondering if you would come over and give me a blessing sometime today? I think it would make me feel a lot better.”

“Of course . . . Mom, how long have you known about the angiogram?” I asked her.

“Oh . . . about three, maybe four weeks; I didn’t mention it before because it didn’t seem important,” she apologetically answered.

“Mom . . .” I began to reply, when shouting from the kitchen distracted me.

“NO! You can’t make me! I don’t want to go to school!” Denise’s voice reverberated through the entire house.

“Hang on a minute, Mom,” I put my hand over the receiver and yelled out to the kitchen.

“Denise, knock it off! Listen to Mom! You’re going and that’s final!” I put the phone back up to my ear. “Sorry, Mom, Denise was arguing with Dianne again.”

“Is something wrong, Doug?” Mom asked.

“I’m not sure. It’s really strange, Denise was so excited about school. Then about three weeks ago, her attitude

changed, just a little at first. But now, she doesn't want to go to school and complains about it every afternoon when she gets home," I began.

"Is something going on at school? One of the other kids picking on her?" Mom voiced the same questions Dianne and I had taken to Denise's teacher last week.

"No, nothing that her teacher can pinpoint. She said that the other kids really like Denise. In fact the only thing her teacher mentioned was that Denise fidgets a lot, always wanting to go to the bathroom or to get a drink. Really, nothing out of the ordinary," I explained.

"Well, that doesn't sound like Denise," Mom observed.

"I know. We're really confused about the whole thing. I guess we'll just have to keep watching her, trying to figure out what's going on." I heard signs of the argument starting up again. "Mom, I've got to go. How about if I come by tonight around, say, 7:00 to give you a blessing?"

"That would be fine, Doug. Good luck with Denise and have a good day son, love you," Mom finished.

"Love you too, Mom." I hung up the phone and headed for the kitchen – the battle ground.

"Knock it off! NOW! Denise, you're going and that's final!" My glare forced her out of the kitchen to her room to get her backpack.

"That was Mom." I began explaining to Dianne. "She said she's going in for an angiogram tomorrow. I know it has something to do with her heart but that's about it."

"Is something wrong with grandma?" Debi looked up from her half-finished breakfast.

"No dear, grandma's fine, she's just having a test, that's all," Dianne soothed Debi.

"Well, anyway, I'm going to call Mike. He'll tell me what this is all about." I gave Dianne a peck on the cheek and returned to the bedroom.

Mike is a good friend and a dentist. Granted, being a

dentist isn't the same as a medical doctor, but I figured Mike would know more about the procedure than I do. After a long conversation with him, I understood – it was a procedure used to diagnose heart problems; semi-invasive, painful and even dangerous.

Now I began to worry.

I went over to Mom's at 7:00, as promised, to give her a blessing. She became calm as we hugged and started talking. When she was ready, I laid my hands on her head the way the apostles did anciently, and gave her a blessing.

“...I bless you that tomorrow's procedure will not be painful and that you will recover from the discomfort you feel now. That your heart will be healed according to the mind and will of the Lord. He is very mindful of your trials and pains here and He loves you and is pleased with you. I bless you that you will rest easy this night knowing that tomorrow will bring you renewed health...”

As I removed my hands from her head, I marveled at what I could recall of the blessing. It felt like someone else had used my voice and I was an observer. I didn't know what to think, so I said nothing about it to Mom. I knew from Mike that the procedure tomorrow would be painful, yet the words I could remember spoke the promise that it would be painless, that she would be healed.

Another hug and a few comforting words later, I headed home.

“I don't know, Dianne . . . it was as if someone else was speaking through me tonight. They . . . I promised Mom there wouldn't be any pain tomorrow.” I recounted everything to her as we lay side by side in bed.

“I would think you'd be happy knowing your mom will be alright,” Dianne offered.

“I guess so. I must doubt too much. My faith must not

be what it should be . . .” I rolled over, disquieted.

“Good night dear. I love you.”

“I love you too. Don’t worry. Trust in the blessing and the Lord.”

Mom and I talked on the phone the day after the procedure. I had tried to reach her the night before, but couldn’t, and despite the blessing I’d given her and the confirmation that she would be just fine, I still doubted.

I needed to make sure she was okay.

Mom was in great spirits as she explained what happened. Apparently, as the physician maneuvered the camera toward her heart and after a few minutes of probing, he said, “I don’t know why you’re in here. You don’t need surgery, your heart is fine. There isn’t even a sign of a murmur.” And she felt no pain! As promised, the blessing had come – she was just fine.

At first I was a little stunned, but it quickly turned to gratitude as I considered how loving our Savior is, and how merciful His healing power. I also felt his gentle rebuke for not believing what He had told Mom in the blessing.

÷÷÷÷÷÷÷÷÷÷♥Denise♥÷÷÷÷÷÷÷÷÷÷

Slam!

Oops, I didn’t mean to do that! I hope Mommy didn’t hear.

“Denise! Don’t slam that door!” Mommy scolded me from the kitchen.

“FINE!” I shouted. “But I don’t care! I hate school and I’m never going back!” I yelled.

“But the Halloween Parade. It’s in two days. Don’t you want to dress up in your costume and show all your friends?” Mommy knew I did.

“Okay, I’ll go that day but that’s it,” I told her.

“Then what are you going to do all the other days?” Mommy asked, but she already knew what I really wanted.

“You can home-school me. Pleeeeee Mommy, home-school me. I don’t want to go back. I hate school, Mommy. PLEEEASE!”

“Dianne, please. Don’t get her started,” said Daddy from the living room.

Mommy and Daddy wouldn’t believe me when I told them why I hated school. I even wrote Mommy a secret note with a secret message in it, but she still didn’t believe me.

“No, there will be no home-school this year.”

“Pleeeeee! Pleeeeee! Just this year!” I begged.

“Young lady, we’ve been over this. I won’t home school you this year – you’re going!

“Please, please, please, please!”

“You’re going to school, and that’s final!” Mommy’s face turned a little red. I knew she meant what she said.

I still didn’t like it.

“FIIINE! I hate school, and I hate you too! Aaagh!” I ran to my room.

Slam!

Oops, I didn’t want to do that. I flopped on the bed.

I don’t really hate Mommy, I love her. I just hate school. I don’t want to go back.

I hate waking up early. I hate sitting in chairs all day – that’s all we ever do. I hate people reading my papers to correct them. Recess is just stupid and boring – I just sit there. Our class is too hot. Or too cold. Aaaagghh! There’s no soap in the bathroom. I don’t like sack lunch, and school lunch tastes yucky. I don’t like people asking to use my pencils or crayons, that’s stupid. I’m always thirsty and I can’t get a drink when I want to.

School is just stupid and I hate it.

Except – Halloween! Oh and next week.

Next week we get to walk to the high school and watch a play.

“Mommy, do I have to go to school? I don’t feel well . . . I’m tired. Please, Mommy, let me stay home.”

Daddy just sat there at the table. He didn’t say no, so I figured maybe Mommy would let me stay home.

“Well, it is Friday and it’s a short day.” Mommy sighed. She wanted to give in.

“Doug?” This was good! Mommy was asking Daddy.

“Well, I don’t know. That walk to the high school took a lot out of her. She still doesn’t look very well . . . I can’t see any real harm in letting her stay home.” Daddy smiled.

Yeah, I love Daddy! Sometimes it’s good to be sick because then you don’t have to go to school and I hate school.

“Okay,” Mommy smiled at me and I smiled back. “Here, eat some breakfast, then go back to bed.”

I ate what Mommy gave me, then curled up under my warm blankets. Staying home from school sick is better if you really don’t feel bad. I didn’t feel *too* sick, just tired. All I wanted to do was sleep.

I slept most the morning, but I was still tired. Lunch was fun – it wasn’t a sack lunch and it wasn’t school lunch. It was Mommy’s. And it was good, and I ate a lot. After lunch Daddy sat by me on the couch. He’s so soft and squishy around his tummy it makes it fun to snuggle with him.

“Denise, why don’t you go take a nap now?” Mommy said.

“Okay, can I sleep here with Daddy?” I squeezed Daddy harder and closed my eyes so Mommy could see I was really going to sleep.

“Sorry, sweetie,” Daddy said, “but I’ve got to run some errands. Let me carry you to your bed.” Daddy always knows the right thing to say.

He picked me up and carried me to my room, and even tucked me in. Mommy came in just as I was falling asleep and took my temperature. I wasn’t too hot.

Mommy came in a lot after lunch to sit with me. She read to me. She asked me if I wanted to watch television in the family room. That was way cool, Mommy asking me to watch television! But I was too tired. I just wanted to sleep.

“Mommy, I want to sleep.” She smiled. She has a very pretty smile. “Mommy?”

“Yes, Denise?”

“I love you.”

“I love you too, Denise.” Mommy hugged me. She gives great hugs, it makes me feel good when she hugs me.

“Supper will be in about an hour. I’ll check on you then. If you need anything, just call. I’ll be in the kitchen.” Mommy only closed the door part way. I think she did that so I could hear her making dinner.

I was really tired. I curled up under my covers and closed my eyes.

“Denise.” I heard a voice and looked around my room. Everything kind of looked different but it was okay and I didn’t feel tired.

“Come here, Denise.”

I looked around and saw Jesus standing there, looking at me with His arms out and a smile like Mommy’s. I was so happy, I kind of ran but didn’t really run into His arms. He gave me a big hug full of love.

“I love you, Jesus.” I really meant it. I didn’t want him to stop hugging me.

“And I love you, and always have, Denise.” I cried because I was so happy.

“Doug, this is my friend Greg – he came to help give Denise the blessing,” Mike answered my look.

“Thanks, Greg,” I stammered – he simply nodded.

Mike and Greg laid their hands on Denise’s head, “. . . I bless you Denise that the damage being done to your body will cease as of this moment and I do so in the name of our Savior, Jesus Christ, Amen.”

Mike finished the blessing before I even realized he had started.

“Doug, get her to the hospital, now! I’ll call ahead so they’ll be expecting you. Go!”

Our car sped through the streets, with a will of its own. It drove us into the hospital, swerving into an empty space near the main doors of the ER, barely missing a car parked next it. Denise, still bundled in Dianne’s arms, never moved. As fast as I could, I took her from my wife and whisked her through the doors. Dianne was right on my heels.

“Yes, may I help you?” A receptionist intercepted us.

“It’s my daughter, she won’t wake up.” I blurted out, looking around for a doctor or nurse to help me.

“Are you Mr. Mendenhall?”

I nodded.

“Dr. Jenson called and told us to expect you. Please follow me.” She turned and headed for one of the rooms – a trauma room.

“Doug, who is Doctor Jenson?” Dianne whispered.

“It’s Mike. He said he would call,” I whispered back.

I laid my priceless bundle on a table.

Dianne and I were pushed to the side of the room. A mass of people quickly descended on Denise. Questions and commands permeated the room – all meaningless to me.

“Dad! Dad!” Someone had broken away from the

mass – they were talking to me.

“Huh?”

“What’s your little girl’s name?”

“Uh . . .” I know she has a name, “. . . Denise.”

The person melted back into the mass.

“Denise! Denise! Sweetie, can you hear me?”

“She’s unresponsive.”

“Is the IV in yet?”

“Do you have that blood sugar count?”

“Mom, Dad . . . Mom, Dad?” Someone was standing in front of me. “I need to ask you a few questions.”

I forced my eyes from Denise to the person in front of me. I couldn’t focus.

“Huh? . . . Okay.”

A barrage of questions assaulted us. We answered as best we could, but not well enough, as many questions were repeated.

I looked at Dianne. She was paralyzed. I forced myself to take a deep breath. Confusion and chaos threatened to suffocate me.

“Push in another liter of saline.”

“Left pupil is still unresponsive”

“Where are the labs? I need a blood sugar stat.”

“Heart rate is steady.”

“Blood sugar is 680.”

A head protruded out from the mass surrounding Denise.

“Dad? Dad, is Denise diabetic?” Was that a question? Diabetic? No, why would he ask me that?

“No . . .” I stood frozen.

The head materialized into a complete person and walked towards us.

“Mom, Dad, I’m Dr. Smithfield.”

I focused on his face.

“We’ve stabilized Denise and are waiting for a bed up

in the Pediatric Intensive Care Unit to be freed. I think that on the way there we'll send her over for a CAT scan. It looks like a diabetic coma but I can't really tell you any more than that. The doctors in the PICU will be able to tell you more. I'll have a nurse give you directions to the PICU." He turned to the mass, issued a few orders and disappeared. The mass began to break up. Denise's table followed a piece of it towards the door.

We started to follow the table but were cut off by a nurse.

"If you turn left outside the door . . ."

Left? But the table went right.

"Go left out the door to the end of the hall, make a right, go through the double doors and you will find some elevators. Go to the second floor and follow the signs." We began moving.

Somehow we made it. Before us were two large doors labeled "PICU please stand clear, doors open outward." I pushed a large rectangular button on the wall.

Whoosh.

The doors opened towards us, beckoning us to enter. We stared at a world of moving people and blinking lights. Noise came from everywhere. There was a counter just inside the door.

We froze. Do we enter? The doors began to close. Their movement freed us and we bolted inside the PICU.

"May I help you?" A female voice came from behind the counter. A woman stood. Two nurses walked behind her; somewhere an alarm went off; a doctor pushed some papers at her. So many things, so much chaos.

"Yes, we're the parents of Denise Mendenhall," Dianne spoke. I couldn't find my voice.

"Mendenhall . . . Mendenhall," she repeated glancing behind us. I turned to see a large board filled with names and information.

“Yes, she will be in bed number two, but she isn’t here yet. Let’s see . . .” She turned to a computer screen this time.

“Looks like she’s still in Radiology. She’ll be here shortly. If you would go outside to the waiting room I’ll page you when she’s settled in.” She looked up from the screen and read our faces. “Better still, I’ll show you to where she’ll be and you can wait for her there.”

Two chairs were moved to the side of an empty space. We sat looking at where our daughter would be and wondered.

We waited; time stalled, leaving us hanging.

“Mr. and Mrs. Mendenhall?” A man appeared.

“Yes,” I managed.

“I’m Dr. Withers. I’ll be in charge of Denise’s care.”

“Yes,” Dianne spoke.

“Well, during the CAT scan they found that Denise had had a stroke which is probably the cause of the coma. The stroke has affected the majority of the left side of her brain. The damage appears to be very extensive . . .” he paused, then turned to watch some medical equipment being dragged towards us. A bed was tethered to the equipment. Denise was on the bed.

It was maneuvered into the space in front of us. The tethers weren’t attached to the bed, they were attached to Denise. Dianne gasped.

“The probes there above her left ear will allow us to monitor the pressure within her skull,” the doctor continued, obviously accustomed to such sights.

“If the pressure should increase too much,” he pointed to a monitor with flashing red numbers, “it will cause more damage to her brain, specifically her brain stem, which will cause her death.”

“Death? She could die?” Dianne whispered.

“For the time being she is stable. We will know more

when the rest of the test results come back. The one thing we know for sure is that she is diabetic and it is reasonable to assume that the stroke was caused by the diabetes.” He looked at us, expecting something. “Do you have any questions?” he prompted.

“Will she die?”

“That we don’t know yet, but her condition is very critical.” He turned to a nurse and issued a few orders, then left.

Too scared to talk, both Dianne and I pulled our chairs to the side of Denise’s bed. I held her little hand, fighting back tears of pain and fear. Dianne’s tears flowed freely as she rested her head on the side of Denise’s arm. She sobbed softly. I could hold back no longer. I looked at Denise’s face through a curtain of tears. How could life go on if she died?

Almost imperceptibly, a single tear grew in the corner of Denise’s eye, then fled to the pillow below.

÷÷÷÷÷÷÷÷÷÷♥Denise♥÷÷÷÷÷÷÷÷÷÷

“I don’t want Mommy and Daddy to cry.” For the first time with Jesus, I felt sad. I cried because Mommy and Daddy were crying.

“Please, will you help them?” I asked Jesus.

“Peace little one, I am with them and I will comfort them.” Jesus answered. I knew then everything would be all right because He said it would.

“It is time to go; there is more to see.” My sadness left as I took His hand.

We left.

“Jesus, who are they?” I pointed to some men in robes sitting around Him in front of us. He was there with those men but He was holding my hand standing next to me, too.

“Those are my apostles.” He looked at me and I

understood. He was giving them the sacrament. He loved them. One laid his head on Jesus and whispered. I looked at my Jesus next to me and He was crying. I felt very sad.

“Jesus, must we watch this? I don’t like it. It makes you sad.”

“Yes, little one, you must. I cry for what my beloved is about to do.”

Without really moving we were in a garden at night. I saw the other Jesus walking towards us with three of those men. The men stopped and knelt down to pray. He came closer and fell at a large rock. He was crying. I was crying and I looked up to my Jesus. He was crying, too.

“Please, Jesus, make the pain go away. I don’t want you to cry. Please make it go away.”

“Peace, little one, it will be over soon. Wait and watch.”

The other Jesus had fallen to the ground. He stood and went over to the three men and woke them up because they were asleep on the ground. Then He came back. Again, He cried and began to bleed from everywhere.

“Please stop it. He’s hurting too bad, please stop it, Jesus.” I begged my Jesus.

“Oh little one, He hurts because He loves. Watch.”

I turned my head back and saw Him wake the men again and then come back to the same spot. He knelt again to pray and tears came and so did the blood. He fell to the ground in pain. I cried but didn’t ask my Jesus to stop it. He finally stood up and went back to the three men. He touched each of them and prayed. I wanted Him to touch me and then I remembered that I was holding His hand. I gave my Jesus a big hug and told Him I loved Him and wanted to be with Him forever.

“Look, Denise.” He turned me around to see a large room but not really a room. I saw a king-man sitting on a chair above all the others. Then I saw Jesus on the ground

before the king-man. The king-man washed his hands in a bowl of water, then walked away. Jesus was hurt. He was bleeding again. I squeezed my Jesus' hand and He squeezed back.

"You must watch, Denise." He said to me.

"I don't want to see you get hurt anymore. Why did you let them hurt you?"

"Father wanted it to be so. I hurt, Denise, that I might love perfectly. I hurt, Denise, because I love you and want you to be with Me."

I understood, but I still didn't like to watch Him hurt. Those army men were so mean to Him. They made Him hurt more but He looked at them and loved them. They took Jesus to a hill. It was hot and cloudy. There were many people around, some were crying and some were smiling and laughing. He loved them all. I knew it because I saw it in His eyes as they took a board with two big nails and put it over His hand and wrist and hammered those nails into Him. The wood broke but the nails stayed in His wrist and hand. They did the same to his other hand. This time a woman, His Mother, cried out and He looked at her and smiled love at her through His pain. They started to raise Him up on a big log stuck in the ground. The mean crown with the big spikes fell off.

I cried and cried because He hurt so much. I felt the place in my Jesus' hand where the nail had gone in it. I looked at my Jesus and saw tears in His eyes but He wasn't watching Himself. He was watching His Mother. I looked back to Jesus on the cross and saw angels around Him then suddenly they all left Him alone and I cried even more. I didn't want Him to be alone.

"Must He be alone?" I cried to my Jesus.

"Yes."

Jesus on the cross yelled and He left his body. I buried my face in the robes of my Jesus.

“No, little one, you must watch.” He turned me back to see the army men stick a spear in His side. Then some other men came and took His body down and put it in a cave where His Mother and some other women cleaned it and wrapped it up.

We were outside the cave with a big rock in front of it. Two angels came and moved it and Jesus came out. He now looked just like my Jesus. He smiled love at the two angels and left. Then a woman came and started to cry and He was standing behind her. She turned and talked to Him but didn’t know it was Him until He smiled love at her and said ‘Mary.’ She wanted to hug Him but He wouldn’t let her. She cried and cried as He talked to her, then she went running away.

⋄⋄⋄⋄⋄⋄⋄⋄⋄♥Doug♥⋄⋄⋄⋄⋄⋄⋄⋄⋄

We left the conference room adjacent to the PICU in shock. The news the doctors had given us was bleak. They were very pessimistic. They didn’t expect Denise to live through the night. They tried to prepare us for the worst.

I was suffocating. I needed to leave the room, the hospital. I needed to talk to someone. I wanted to talk to Dianne but our pain was the same and I knew I would break down if we talked.

“I’m gonna call Mike,” I said, “and see if he will come and give her another blessing.” Dianne nodded.

“I’ve got to get out of here, I’ve got to walk,” I told her.

Dianne headed to the PICU waiting room and her family. I stopped and turned to go to the lobby where I knew I would find a phone, and at this late hour, privacy.

“Doug . . . I’ll be in the waiting room with the family.” Dianne opened the door as I left.

I made my way down to the lobby, found a phone and dialed Mike.

“Hello?” a sleepy voice answered.

“Hey, Mike.”

“Doug?”

“Yeah . . . hey, I’m sorry to bother you so late, but I need a favor,” I said.

“No bother at all, Doug. How’s Denise?” Concern in his voice almost brought back the tears.

“She isn’t doing well at all. They said that she’s in a diabetic coma, that she suffered a massive stroke destroying two-thirds of the left side of her brain. They’re worried about the pressure in her skull building up . . .” I had to stop. I was choking on tears.

“Oh no, I’m so sorry, Doug. I take it that they’ve drained off the blood from the stroke that’s causing the pressure.”

“No, they said they couldn’t. The blood had started to congeal and couldn’t be drained off . . . they said they are just waiting and watching the pressure. If it gets too high she’ll die.” A chill froze me. She couldn’t die.

“How are you and Dianne doing?” His voice took on a greater concern.

“I don’t know, I don’t know what to do, what to say, I just don’t know. They said on the off chance that she does live through the night the best we can expect is for her to be . . . a . . . vegetable. I don’t know what to do,” I blurted out to my friend.

“Oh, Doug, I’m so sorry. What can I do for you?” His offer released more tears that raced down my cheeks.

“Can . . . you . . . come give . . . her . . . another blessing?” I sobbed.

“Sure, you bet I will. I’ll be there as soon as possible.” I took strength from his voice.

“Thanks . . . I’ll meet you in the lobby.” I hung up.

I had to get out of the hospital.

I needed to walk, to think, to be outside.

I pushed through the revolving doors and found myself cloaked in a dark night. My breath created small, fragile clouds. If it was cold, I didn't notice, it nor did I care.

I walked.

"How could this happen, Father?" I pleaded, glancing up to the night stars.

"Father, Father," I pleaded through frozen tears, "I don't understand, please help me to understand, please help me. The pain and the fear are greater than I can bear . . . I'm so scared." I stumbled forward a few steps.

"I need thee. Please . . . please help me . . . please heal Denise." I fell to my knees and cried. My tears wet the sidewalk.

I stood after a time.

I walked.

One step followed another and I found myself at the back of the hospital. Loneliness encompassed me.

"Father . . . please," I started to plead again, begging for my daughter's life.

Remember gratitude.

"Father?"

Gratitude.

The thought came, a thought that was more of a feeling.

My mind opened up to three months ago. I saw myself in the shower as all the hate and anger for Randy and Larry were taken from me.

"Father, there is no hate or anger in my heart. I'm just really scared, I can't lose my daughter. The pain is too much. Please!"

Let not your heart be troubled or afraid.

It came again, more feeling than thought.

"How? Father, please . . ."

Through Gratitude comes My Peace.

It was unmistakable. I was supposed to be grateful. But, how could I be grateful for this? My little girl was

going to die and I couldn't stop it.

"Father in Heaven," I began a prayer.

"I give thee . . . thanks . . . for," I hesitated, distressed.

"I give unto thee thanks," I started over, "for my daughter and her life." Incredible pain filled me and forced me to my knees. Tears flowed as I thought of burying my little girl.

Somehow, I pushed the pain aside and continued.

"I give thee thanks, Father, for this . . . experience, for the pain and fear I feel."

As the last word left my lips, the fear melted; the pain left.

I caught my breath. A sensation, like being doused by ice water, enveloped me. I shivered. Warmth, beautiful warmth, began in my toes and filled my entire body, to the top of my head.

I exhaled.

Peace filled my heart. The warmth ushered in Peace. He gave me Peace. A Peace more profound than what I had experienced in the shower. A Peace that filled my soul to bursting, that left room for nothing else. Tears fell again, but this time they were tears of joy, of comfort.

Instantly, I knew all was well. It didn't matter if my little girl died or lived. I accepted, no, I agreed with whatever the outcome was to be. I knew no doubt, all was in His hands; the hands of my Lord and Savior. If my daughter died it was His will. If she lived as a vegetable it was His will. If she recovered it was His will. I was at peace – I accepted completely His will in all that happened.

I started walking again. I was filled with Peace, marveling at His love.

I found myself back by the revolving doors of the hospital just as Mike appeared from the parking lot.

÷÷÷÷÷÷÷÷÷÷♥Dianne♥÷÷÷÷÷÷÷÷÷÷

“Dianne, where did Doug go?” My brother asked me.

“He’s probably outside walking around.” I answered.

Doug left to be alone. He handled grief and pain better by himself. I found comfort in family; Doug didn’t. When his father died he went off by himself to think and deal with the pain and loneliness. It was only after those secluded moments that he was able to be with me and share my pain and grief. I knew that Doug was outside someplace trying to handle what I was trying to handle here with my family.

“Dianne, is there anything we can do?” my father asked.

“I don’t know, Dad, I just don’t know.”

Tears glistened in my eyes.

Tears usually soothed my aching soul, but not tonight. I had lost one child before birth, a stillborn, and I couldn’t imagine losing another. Denise could not die. I would die with her if she lost this struggle.

I listened to the gentle words of my family, all the while searching for some comfort, but none was to be found. I pleaded with my Father in Heaven from the depths of my soul for comfort and strength, but still felt empty. Then, when I thought I could feel no worse, I felt the weight of the pain and fear lift from me, and I was immediately filled with a calm and peace that I had never before experienced. Unbidden tears covered my cheeks as I buried my face within my hands. Those who waited with me quickly surrounded me. I felt the hugs and pats as they desperately tried to ease what they thought was my pain. To them it must have seemed as if I had finally broken down.

What I felt, though, was deep gratitude to my Savior for the love that encompassed me. I felt the peace of total acceptance. I knew that whatever happened, would happen according to His will. I felt joy at being relieved from the

Her eyes reflected what I felt. There was no fear or pain, just love.

I wanted – I needed to talk to her.

Much later that night, after all our family and friends had finally left the hospital, we were given a small room off the PICU waiting room to sleep. There was one bed and a small cot.

I finally had the chance to share with Dianne all that had happened to me as I walked around the hospital. To my amazement and relief, Dianne recounted her own experience with being blessed with that same Peace that I had. Our hearts opened to one another as we both expressed our surety that whatever happened was His will and was fine.

Very seldom in a marriage does a couple get the opportunity to join as one soul so completely as we did that early morning. We were truly one with our Savior and our Father in Heaven; one in heart and mind and joy and Peace!

We knelt down as one to offer up our gratitude and love for God in prayer. The prayer we shared was of complete oneness, for though the words came from my mouth, they were His. We were one together in Him.

÷÷÷÷÷÷÷÷÷÷♥Denise♥÷÷÷÷÷÷÷÷÷÷

I looked around at a big, beautiful field. It was bigger than any I had ever seen before. And it was surrounded with many pretty flowers.

Jesus knelt by me. “Denise, you may now return or you may stay here with me.”

I really wanted to stay with Him. I loved Him so much and wanted to hold His hand and hug Him forever, but after all He showed me and taught me I knew that I would

choose to go back.

I gave Him a big hug around His neck. "I never want to leave you but I will go back because I love You and Father." I knew I was choosing to go back to Mom and Dad, and I also knew that it would not be easy, but it would be okay.

"Look, my child." Jesus stood and pointed in a big circle.

I looked, and all around Jesus, me and Father, were people. Lots of very happy people watching us and waiting for something. Then the people nearest us came to me and each one handed me a rose, a beautiful rose. Then more came and each one handed me a rose. Some hugged me, some thanked me, and they all told me they loved me. My grandfather came and gave me a rose; he looked much younger and happier. My primary teacher came and gave me a rose; she smiled like Mommy does. Many more came, some that I remembered from the all things Jesus had shown me, some that I knew had not yet been born. All spoke love.

When the last had given me a rose and left, Jesus and I were alone again with Father. Father told me many things; things that I was to keep secret unless He told me I could share them.

"Father, why were grandpa and my primary teacher so young?" I asked Him.

"They are here as they choose to be." He said and smiled.

"Then why am I still a little girl instead of a woman?" I don't know why I asked or even why I thought it important.

"Oh, my precious one, not all is to be answered now. It is time for you to return. I love you and will always be with you."

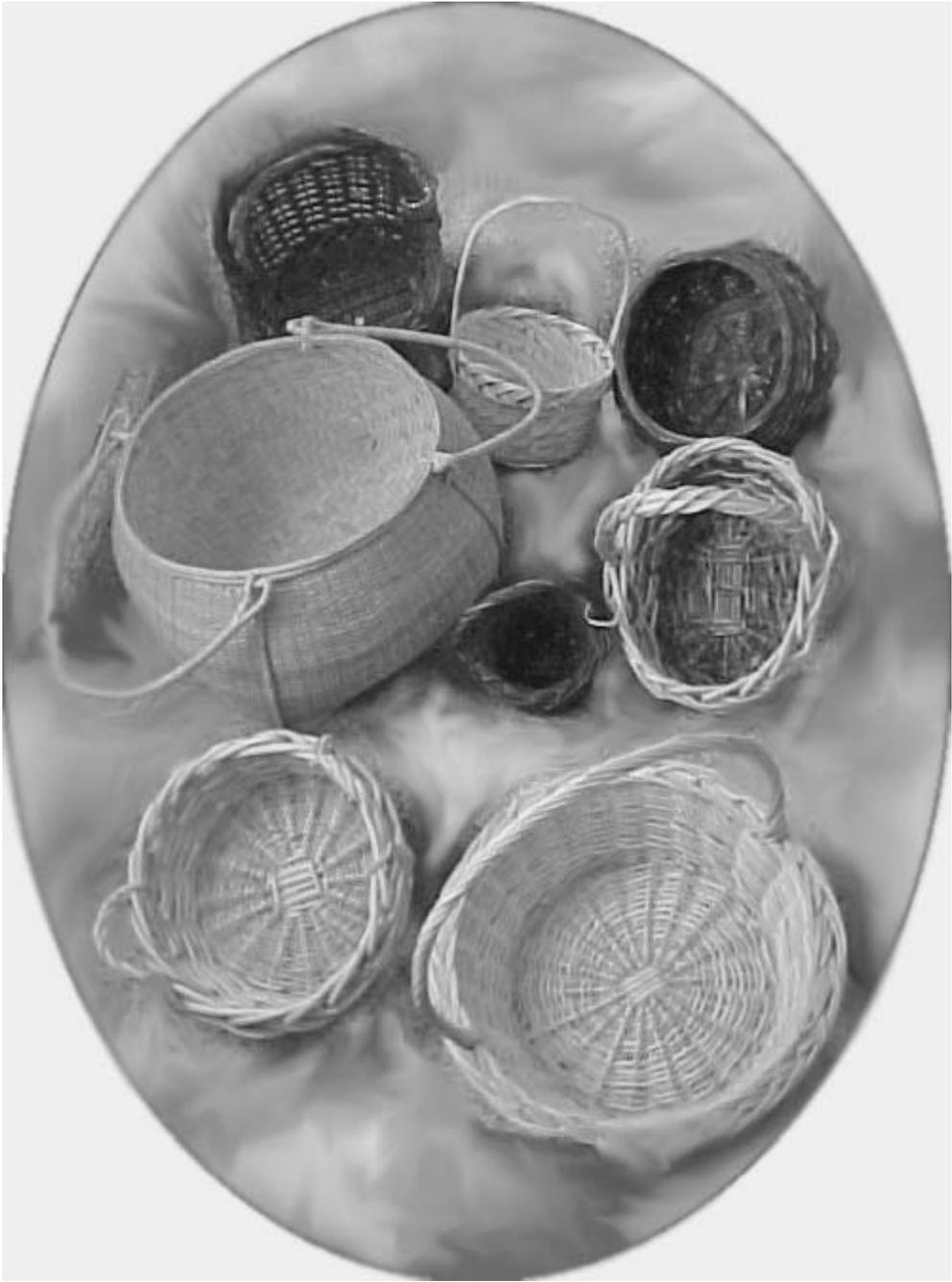
Jesus smiled love at me one more time and I gave both

given Dianne and me the miracle of His Peace. Now He blessed us with a second miracle; He gave us back Denise.

There is a place I retreat to from time to time; a place where I can ponder the defining moments of my life. It was there that I went to think and pray while Denise lay comatose.

As I pondered the majesty of His peace, I knew that it was this Peace I wanted every day of my life. I knew that to find His Peace I needed to understand it.





*Chapter 4**“A Basket Weaver . . .”*

The store was interestingly lit.

The spotlights were arrayed as though they were fireflies flitting around on a summers eve. The scents of too many candles mingled with the potpourri created an almost pleasant assault on your nose. Half of the back wall was dedicated to baskets of every imaginable shape and size. Some were tightly woven as if to hold water, some so loosely you could see through them. Some were large enough to hold a person, while some small enough that a ring would fill them. Some were shallow, while others deep enough to hold a curious cat until rescued. Some came with lids to contain secret treasures while others were woven to display their belongings to anyone who would look in their direction.

“Quite a collection isn’t it.” The store clerk replied to my intent study of the baskets.

“Yes it is . . . you know, I wonder about the weavers,” I candidly spoke my thoughts.

“Our baskets are hand woven by artisans in South East Asia and India. They are personally selected biannually by our cooperate buyers,” she spoke from an unseen script.

“Are they told what to weave and what materials to use or are they free to weave and use what materials they want? How could they know what kind of basket I need?” I wondered out loud.

This time the clerk simply smiled at me and shrugged her shoulders. I had ventured outside her prepared script, she didn’t know what to answer.

I smiled, thanked her for her time and left the store. The baskets were too expensive anyway.

I freed the car keys from my pocket.

An interesting thought tickled my mind as I climbed into my beat up little car.

We are like those distant weavers. From the first day of our life until the last, we weave a basket out of the knowledge we accumulate and the judgements we make. Our basket holds and defines all our experiences. It gives us meaning. Because no baskets are meant for the same purpose, shared experiences fit into some while not others. Some baskets are designed too small or woven too tight for some experiences to fit inside. Others are so loosely woven and open that small, precious things fall through. Each basket holds and defines that which it was designed for.

Only the buyer, Jesus Christ, can say with certainty the purpose of any given basket. All baskets are valuable to Him.

He sees and understands their purpose.

Our baskets now contained the miracle that was Denise. Many who shared the experience with us could not fit it into their baskets. They dismissed it. That did not make what we experienced any less real nor did it make them any less tolerant or discerning. Their baskets were not woven to fit such an experience; their baskets were woven for some other purpose only the Buyer knew.

Only a fool would count as worthless that which the Buyer paid full price for.

“Mr. Mendenhall?” a voice from the door asked.

“Yes . . .”

A young therapist pushed a wheelchair into the room. “The doctor sent me orders to have this wheel chair put together for Denise,”

“Whoa, that’s a lot a chair.” I said

“This particular chair was designed to give support to

the entire body including the neck and head. It has straps to make sure that her arms and legs will stay securely within the chair and her head won't flop around causing her injury . . ." she paused for a breath.

"Does Denise really need that much chair?" I quickly put in.

"Well, this is what the doctor ordered," she stated.

I shrugged, knowing it wasn't necessary.

"Okay Denise, how about we try it out?" She smiled, ignoring me.

Denise nodded her head.

"How about I help you into the chair," the therapist moved towards Denise expecting to lift her out of the bed.

Denise shook her head.

The confused therapist looked at me.

"Let her try," I shrugged my shoulders.

Denise raised herself up, eased her legs to the side of the bed and slid off it onto the floor. Steadying herself against the bed, she shakily walked to the chair.

The young therapist kept looking back and forth between the order sheet and Denise walking across the floor.

"This can't be right," confusion lit across her face.

Denise settled into the chair and smiled up at the therapist.

"I think we need a different chair." the therapist looked over at me.

"Probably," I stifled a laugh.

Somewhere a doctor's basket wouldn't hold the weave of Denise's miracle.

I found out that it wasn't just Denise's miracle that wouldn't fit into some baskets. The miracle of His peace that we were given wouldn't either.

The Sunday after Denise woke up from her coma, our Bishop asked me to visit him in his office after the service.

“Doug, come on in and have a seat,” the Bishop offered his hand while holding his office door open.

“Thanks Bishop,” I shook his hand and moved to a chair.

“I just wanted you to know how concerned I am . . . we are about Denise,” he started. The sadness in his eyes spoke volumes.

“Thank you.”

“How is she doing?” he asked.

“She woke up from the coma about a week ago. The doctors have ordered therapy for her. They gave her a wheelchair at first but now she walks as fast as they can push it. They are very encouraged by her progress even though they don’t understand it.” I explained.

“That’s great,” he smiled.

“I think everything is going to be just fine. Just the way it’s supposed to be.” I told him.

The Bishop began fidgeting in his chair, calculating how best to proceed.

“You know, don’t you, that there are many friends and neighbors here that love and support you in all your going through,” he started.

“I know. I can’t tell you the difference we’ve felt because of all their prayers. It really comforts us,” I opened up.

Many times we have felt the love and strength that comes from all the prayers offered in our behalf.

“Well . . . I don’t know how else to say this other than to just say it. . . .Some members of the congregation are worried and concerned for you and Dianne.” He hesitated.

“That’s very touching.”

His face became pained.

“No, you don’t understand, the concern is for your

mental health. Some are worried that you may be in denial about Denise's condition." He took a deep breath, and braced himself.

"I don't understand what you are trying to say Bishop," I was confused. What did he mean?

He paused, lowering his head as if praying.

"You and Dianne aren't showing any grief."

"Well, we don't publicly cry. Is that why people think we are in denial?" I asked.

I was shocked at the perceptions of those around us. They didn't understand. We had been blessed with the Lord's Peace and felt no fear or pain. We had been comforted like so many of them had prayed we would and now they couldn't accept that their prayers had been answered. I was astonished that they had assumed the worst.

"I'm sorry they feel that way. We understand the situation better than they realize. I will, however, sit down with Dianne tonight and discuss it with her. Please forgive me for rushing off now but I would like to get back to the hospital and sit with Dianne and Denise." I stood quickly, offered my hand and a weak smile as proof that no offense was taken.

"Thanks for talking to me Doug. If we can do anything at all please let me know." Relief flashed across his face as he accepted my handshake and smile.

The trip back to the hospital allowed me time to ponder what the Bishop had said. After an initial bout of anger at their arrogance I began to calm down. I saw them for what they were, people who loved us and were concerned for us. People who wanted to understand but had woven a basket that wouldn't allow them to understand our reactions to the tragedy. They had tried to fit their experiences with us into their baskets and they wouldn't fit, but because they loved us they had reinterpreted what they saw and came to the

conclusion, wrong as it was, that we were in denial. Once I looked at it in this new light, I realized that a year ago I too, would have probably come to the same conclusion. Peace in our lives during a tragedy was not a familiar experience; peace through most of our life experiences wasn't as familiar as it should have been.

At once I became saddened that we, as a people had come to the state where His peace was not a common occurrence. Yet I knew there were others out there that did understand, that knew of and had tasted of His peace-

Why just that morning in the church service I heard a neighbor stand and tell of receiving that same peace when her handicapped son had drowned while her family was away on vacation. She explained how the doctors had prepared her husband and her for the worst and yet a peace had come over them so that they were calm and accepting of whatever the outcome would be. As it so happened the Lord saw fit to bless them with a miracle and their little handicapped boy did not die nor encounter any lasting effects because of the drowning but recovered quickly and completely. Their baskets had encountered a new weave and they could now understand.

Their blessing of peace along with our own made me begin to wonder again if we could experience His peace only through tragedy and pain. I wondered if there was a peace that we could enjoy every day of our lives without having to experience the severe pain through trials. I contemplated how acceptance played into that peace. Was it that peace that takes the fear from our hearts and calms our troubled souls as He promised? Maybe it did take the tragic and painful events of our lives to define that peace so that we might be truly grateful, understanding and appreciative of the priceless gift. There must be opposition in all things, right? To understand the wonderful do we not have to experience the horrible? I finally concluded that I

was not ready to experience the horrible on a frequent basis just to enjoy His peace.

After arriving at the hospital I had a chance to recount the events to Dianne. She was disappointed at first then saddened, as was I. We decided that from that point on we would, when talking to others, concentrate on the love we felt from all the prayers in our behalf, for that love always brought tears to our eyes. That way, those who could not understand the peace we enjoyed would see the tears and be comforted that we grieved.

Days passed and Denise continued to get stronger. The stroke had left her right side incredibly weak. Her speech was very slow in returning and she became frustrated easily. She was beginning to relearn the basic skills that had been taken away due to the stroke. The semi-paralysis on the right side of her face left her with an adorable little half smile. We thought she was doing great and progressing on schedule. However, the doctors continually reminded us that she was progressing far faster than they could have imagined and continued desperately to search for some way to explain away the miracle of her life and recovery. I started to feel sorry for them until I realized that the Buyer paid full price for their baskets just as He did mine and found them worth the price He had paid. Their baskets were just woven differently, for a purpose that the Buyer knew and understood but that I could not comprehend.

The phone rang and for once I found it where it was supposed to be, in the kitchen.

“Hello...well Mike how are you...great, it’s my afternoon off.” Dianne and I had begun to take turns

staying with Denise in the hospital. After that first week we realized that one of us needed to be available to other kids and try to maintain some semblance of normalcy. "...Yes I'm due back up in just a couple hours...Sure, I'd love to stop by...Ok, I'll see you in just a bit."

"Deon, I'm going to go by Mike's on the way to the hospital. Can you handle things here for awhile until Mom makes it home?"

"Sure Dad, I'll keep them in line." She smiled menacingly but with a twinkle in her eyes. "Hey, does it matter what I fix for dinner?"

"Only to your brothers and sisters, they're the ones eating." I replied. "Seriously, you can fix whatever you can find. I'm sleeping with Denise tonight so I won't see you until tomorrow morning." I gave her a quick kiss on the forehead and headed out the door to rendezvous with Mike.

Although I first met Mike last August we had become fast friends. We shared many common beliefs and ideas and I always enjoyed our conversations. Since the day Denise had gone into the coma, he and his wife had become very supportive of us, helping us in anyway they could. We felt very blessed to have them as friends.

Mike and Ruth were both home when I arrived. They invited me in and served up a relaxing conversation. Mike figured I needed a brake from reality and suggested I watch a movie. He highly endorsed one that he had just rented and said it was just what I needed. I looked at my watch and realized that I wasn't expected at the hospital for almost 2 hours, so I agreed to the diversion and made myself comfortable in front of his large TV. To my surprise, Mike and Ruth had no intention of sharing the movie with me. Right after he started it, Mike quickly excused himself and Ruth and before I could say much in reply I heard the garage door close and they were gone to

run errands.

The movie's name escapes me but it was a story about a group of strangers who find that their lives become all interconnected until they find themselves sharing a beautiful moment on the rim of the Grand Canyon. After just a few minutes I started to see things implied within the movie, things that were not purposefully put there by its creators but things that struck a familiar cord within me. I found the movie portrayed certain ideas and thoughts that I had. I found it shouting out to me that God really is in all things. It helped me see Him in and through everything that was my life. I saw His hand in the worlds' events that I was familiar with. I saw Him everywhere and in everything and was overwhelmed by His presence around me. The movie ended. I sat stunned as I tried to process what I had just experienced

I closed my eyes to concentrate on the emotions and feelings that were surging through me when all at once I found myself somehow floating, floating in a sea of energy. I was no longer sure I was in my body. The sensation intensified and I recognized the feeling as a love. A love akin to what we experience daily from those we care about but far greater, maturer, complete, tangible, perfect and palpable. It was unconditional, it existed everywhere at once, it was Him. And through that love, that energy, through Him I could feel everyone at once. I was immersed, no, I was a part of what I floated through and so was everyone else. And because they were a part of it I could feel them, their emotions, their pains, as if I were them, too. At once I understood and accepted what I was experiencing. I knew at that moment that the weave of my life had been forever changed.

I opened my eyes not knowing if the experience would cease or not. I felt pain as my eyes adjusted to the light around me. How much time had passed that my eyes

would need to get readjusted to the light? I looked around to the wall clock but had a hard time focusing in on it. The love I had floated in still encompassed me and I enjoyed it.

I finally decided that I had better go, Dianne would be waiting for me and I didn't want to be too late. As I opened the front door I caught sight of myself in a hall mirror. I turned from the door and stared into the mirror. Staring back at me was my face but the eyes were different. I peered closer and then it hit me. My eyes were dilated as if I had gone to an optometrist. That explained the pain of my eyes adjusting to the light.

I left the house and drove to the hospital. My mind was racing with the wonder of what I was experiencing. I purposefully parked at the back of the hospital lot, the walk outside in the cold night air seemed very appealing all of a sudden. As I came closer to the main doors I realized that I had locked my keys in the truck. My next encounter with Dianne would not be pleasant.

My first sight inside the doors was of a little boy and his mother sitting on a bench to one side of the lobby. I sat on a bench on the opposite side of the lobby not far from the boy and his mother.

I looked at him and wondered what it must feel like to be him. All of a sudden I knew his happiness at having his mother at his side, I knew of his fear at having cancer and I could acutely feel the discomfort of the IV attached to his arm and the burning sensation the solution caused that he was receiving. The field of love I was attached to coupled me with that young boy in a way unexplainable by words. I knew of him because I was him.

"Mommy, I don't like this medicine, do I hafta have it?" We said to his mother. We were seeking for comfort from mommy.

"I know dear, but it will make you better. It will kill the bad cancer cells that make you sick." She replied. We

were satisfied at the answer. Somewhere in us we found again the hope that had momentarily faltered. Comfort mingled with pain encircled us.

I closed my eyes in an attempt to disassociate myself from the little boy. It worked and I again felt separate from him but still attached. I stood and went directly to the elevators. Dianne and Denise waited upstairs for me.

As I entered the elevator I became aware of a different sensation, a connection with all those around me in the elevator, one where if I looked at them I could share that moment of their lives with them. I became a party to their joys, pains, hopes and aspirations. I also became aware of thousands of “tiny pinpricks” beyond the elevator doors and I at once knew it to be the other people within the hospital. I knew also, though I don’t know how, that the stronger “pinpricks” came from the sick children, those whose experience was more severe and intense. I was sharing in the physical pain of some, the emotional anguish of others. There was hope and resignation throughout everything. There was desperation and anxiety. There was immense pain and blessed numbness. And through all those sensations was love; love and acceptance saturated everything I felt.

“Well it’s about time. I called home and they said you left over two and one half hours ago. Were have you been?” Dianne didn’t waste a moment dressing me down as I entered Denise’s room. Denise quickly closed her eyes to feign sleep.

I looked upon my wife and knew her as I had never known her before. I shared that moment of worry and anger with her. “I’m so sorry. I stopped off at Mike’s house and lost track of time.” Her emotions became charged with sadness. I felt a tinge of abandonment and loneliness creep in.

“Well that’s just great. Just forget about me and the

fact that I have things I need to do.” Her face only mirrored a fraction of what I knew she felt. I stood motionless.

“Well, give me the keys, I’m late as it is.”

I knew that I was going to be inundated by a new barrage of emotions after my next sentence and I knew of no way to brace for it.

“I locked the keys in the truck.” I said quietly.

No sooner had those words left my lips than disappointment and anger surfaced as the dominant emotions in my wife. I felt the physical discomfort my words caused and felt extreme remorse for my actions. I couldn’t believe that I could cause such anguish in someone I so loved. She turned around to hide her face from me as she gathered tolerance and patience to her.

“I’m sorry dear, I’ll call someone right now to bring the spare set of keys. I’m so sorry.” My words never had been more sincere for I understood my wife as she did herself. I lived that moment of her life with her.

I quickly made a number of calls to friends and neighbors but had no success in finding someone to help. I finally tried Mike even though I assumed that he and Ruth would still be out running errands. Not only was he home but he seemed most anxious to help me out.

“Mike is going to bring up the spare set of keys.” I felt relieved as I gave the news to Dianne.

“Hi Da..” Denise ‘awoke’ once she felt the tension ease. Even though her enunciation faltered her adorable half smiled shined bright.

“How’s my sweetie?” Tears welled up in my eyes as I felt her gratitude for having me there.

She nodded, “uh huh” Though she was progressing at a miraculous rate, exhaustion often over came her in the evening and her communication became more a series of grunts rather than words.

I hugged her and was stunned by the love and comfort she felt from it. It was an incredible gift to feel what others received from my simple actions.

“Well, are you going to tell me what happened at Mike’s?” Dianne had accepted the result of my actions and decided to move beyond them.

“Well after talking for a few minutes Mike set me in front of a movie he had rented then left with Ruth to run errands.” I started. “The movie became a powerful spiritual experience for me. As I watched it I understood how our Father and Christ are in everything. It was like a second testimony to what I had already thought I knew...” I could feel Dianne open towards me as she attempted to understand what I was telling her. I continued on with the experience of floating and the realization of what I was feeling. I told her of the little boy downstairs and what I felt in the elevator.

“Are you experiencing that with me?” She asked.

“Yes, and I’m so sorry I caused you that pain and loneliness.” Dianne’s eyes got big. She understood that we were sharing more than just a physical moment in time. She got up and walked over to me from the chair by the window and peered into my eyes.

“They are dilated...does that mean you can still feel the other children here, too?” She attentively gazed at me.

“Yes.” I answered and turned my attention away from the experience that was Dianne and opened up to all that was beyond the walls of the room. All of a sudden I felt what I had in the elevator. This time I let all that ‘energy’ rush into me as I shared the life of many sick children. The longer I concentrated on it, the worse I started to feel physically. I was suddenly nauseated and weak. I felt a headache grow swiftly behind my eyes. I needed to sit down before I fell.

“Doug? Are you all right? You don’t look so good

dear.” Dianne’s concern wrapped around me but did nothing to halt the degeneration of my physical state.

“There is so much pain and fear here. I can’t believe what these kids live with.” I sat down in the chair next to Denise’s bed. “I feel horrible Dianne.”

Denise watched with fascination as I continued to suffer from the pains of those around us. For the first time since I entered in the love I felt fear. I didn’t know how to stop what was happening to me.

“Hi Doug, Dianne and hello to you young lady.” Mike walked through the half-closed door with a large smile and swinging a set of keys.

“Thank you so much Mike, you’re a life saver.” Dianne quickly smiled and moved to collect the car keys from Mike.

“Cherry, I hope. I love cherry life savers,” he said more for Denise than for us. Denise gave him the smile he wanted.

Dianne tucked the keys away in her purse and turned back to me sitting by Denise’s bed. “I’m sorry to run like this but I need to get home to the other kids. Thanks again so much for bringing up the spare set of keys, Mike. Bye my little darling, take care of Daddy.” Dianne hugged and kissed Denise goodbye.

“I’ll see you in the morning, dear.” She turned to me and gave me a kiss. “Doug, you need to do something, you really don’t look well.” This time she hesitated as if she wasn’t sure whether or not to leave me. I felt her deep love and concern for me. My eyes teared up again and I smiled at her.

“Thank you, Dianne, for your love. You get going, I’ll be okay. I’ll call you later tonight.” I motioned for her to leave. She hesitated then left the room.

After Dianne’s departure I quickly filled in Mike concerning all that had happened since he left me watching

that movie at his house.

“Well, that explains why you look so bad now.” He replied. “You’re taking in everybody’s pain and sickness and keeping it.”

“What? I don’t understand what you’re saying Mike,” I said yet all of a sudden I did understand, I knew exactly what he meant about me keeping their pain. I felt it and drew it into me and I was affected by it as if I was them. “Okay, then what do I do? I don’t think I can take much more of this.”

“Let it pass through you to Christ.” Mike simply replied.

“How do I do that?” I asked

“Tell it to pass through you...seriously, tell it to pass through.” He insisted despite my look of disbelief.

“Please let the feelings and emotions pass through me.” I said. No difference, I still felt horrible. “Pass through me.”

This time I felt a perceptible change and then it was gone. The pain and nausea, headache, everything was gone and I could feel the love once again without the defining pain.

“You did it. I can tell because you look alive again.” Mike smiled at me. “There have been others that could do what you have just done. They had to learn to let it pass through them like you just did. Remember Doug, only Christ can keep and handle another’s pain. We can share it with them but only He can take it and survive.”

I sat stunned for a minute as I considered what he had just said. I knew he was right. This was an incredible gift of understanding and love. I wondered about my Savior who could take in all that pain and heal it. I enjoyed the love around us and decided to ponder on it later that night while I was alone.

“Thank you for showing me how to handle it.” I said.

“Anytime. I need to get going. Just remember to let it pass through you.” He ended his visit with a few words for Denise and left as suddenly as he arrived. After he left I spent awhile thinking about everything that had occurred and offered up my gratitude to my Savior for all He had taught me.

Denise finally drifted off so I took the opportunity to go down to the cafeteria and get a bite to eat. In the elevator I again opened up to the children in the hospital. It gave me such a renewed sense of awe in their strength knowing what they suffered. This time, though, I was able to let it all pass through me and I became aware of how the love pervaded all the pains and burdens, willing to comfort and relieve but waiting.

The elevator doors opened and I made my way the last fifty feet to the cafeteria. I noticed a small group of people about half way to the counter, a woman, a baby and a young man. The young man immediately caught my attention because he had the look of a hardened gang member. All the visible skin on his arms and neck was covered with harsh tattoos. His clothes looked like those worn by all the gang members highlighted by the media during drug raids and drive-by shootings. Where revulsion normally would have surfaced I felt love for him. I knew that the love around us didn't see the tattoos or clothes or anything that tied him to a degenerate lifestyle. It saw him as but a part of the whole that we all are. As I looked at him I felt his fear and uncertainty behind a façade of anger. I wanted to shout at him that his life choices had been paid for in full and that comfort was his if only he would ask our Father in Heaven.

Instead I approached him. I wanted to know more of this young man that I loved and appreciated.

“Hi, I couldn't help but notice your beautiful baby. It just breaks my heart to see such lovely children in the

hospital.”

“Uh...She isn't mine and no she isn't a patient here.” He reached into his back pocket for a wallet attached to a chain connected to a front belt loop. “It's my niece that is a patient here. She has leukemia. See here...this is her picture...She isn't very old but they say she needs a bone marrow transplant.” His openness filled me with wonder and awe.

“She looks like a little angel. I'm sorry to hear that she is so sick.”

“Yea, she isn't doing so well so I'm gonna be the donor for the transplant.” He flooded me with fear and concern. The love he felt for that little girl would have been noticeable even without the gift I was enjoying.

“Wow, that is very noble of you. Thank you for sharing that with me.” I replied. I was flooded with respect, love and empathy for him. I wanted to reach out and hug him and comfort him.

But instead I said. “Oh, I'm sorry, I'm keeping you from eating. Good luck, she's worth it.” I wanted to tell him that he was worth it, worth the price paid for by our Savior. But I had to leave before I broke down in tears at the love that I felt for that young man.

I headed back up to Denise's room where I sat and pondered the experiences of the day. I became acutely aware of the gift that our Savior is. He stands by us experiencing our lives with us, comforting and loving us, willing to take from us the pain we cause ourselves through our poor decisions and He comforts us in those trials we agreed to experience for all. I became completely humbled at what He had done for Dianne and myself just a few weeks earlier when He took our pain and anguish and suffered for us while He gave us His peace to comfort us.

I learned that night that the baskets we weave are but a part of His basket, a single basket that He loves and

“No, we were all joined...that’s it, isn’t it? The first step to peace is to accept that we are never alone, that Jesus never leaves us.” He smiled at me. “We are the ones that choose to ignore the whole that we are bound to...it’s our Father’s love that binds us together, isn’t it?”

“Yes, kind of.” He was beginning to understand. “In His peace, Daddy, were we all separate and then tied together?”

“No not really, we were more than tied together, we were all...we are all a part of each other, a part of Him. We aren’t connected, we are one.” He looked at me kind of funny.

“Yes we are.” I hugged him.

“The peace that Mom and I felt was really our remembering that we are really a part of Him.”

“Yes, Jesus didn’t take your pain, it was already His that He paid for and you had to let it go.”

We went to a different place where there were some very poor people. They were very dirty and sad. They sat on the street trying to leave their bodies. They didn’t like themselves and they were mad at everyone. Some other people walked by them and felt mad that the poor people were there. When they looked at the poor people, they didn’t see the poor people, they saw animals.

“I see two groups of people but then I really only see one person.” Daddy said.

“What does that mean, Daddy?” I asked him. Jesus wouldn’t let me tell him. Daddy had to find out the answer by himself.

“It’s all part of the oneness, isn’t it? When they reject the poor people they are really rejecting themselves, aren’t they?” Daddy asked but he already knew.

“Yes.”

“And the more they reject the others the more they reject themselves...and the more they reject themselves the

more they reject the oneness...and the more they reject the oneness the more they accept the lie that is loneliness and the pain that comes with it, pushing away His peace.” He said and then looked at me to tell him he was right.

“Yes.” I smiled. “You can’t love that which you reject. His peace comes from His love.”

“Denise, do you know how I will learn this?” Daddy knew that he wouldn’t remember the answer to the question but that didn’t matter.

“Yes, but I can’t tell you.” I knew that if I did it wouldn’t be as neat for him when it happened. “Daddy, it’s time to go back.”

⋄⋄⋄⋄⋄⋄⋄⋄⋄♥Doug♥⋄⋄⋄⋄⋄⋄⋄⋄⋄

I was startled awake when I just about rolled off the cot and onto the floor. New sunshine peaked through the blinds to tell me I had been asleep for at least three hours despite the screaming denial of my body. Slowly I sat up and stretched. I looked over to Denise and found her intently studying me.

“Morning sweetie.” A smile was too much to give out with the stiffness I felt, so I settled on a half grin.

“Hi Daddy.” She replied.

I felt a twinge of energy around me and suddenly memories of yesterday exploded within my mind. Could I still feel the people around me? Somehow I opened myself up like I had yesterday. Yes, it was still there, the gift hadn’t been taken away yet.

I stood and stretched some more, opening up to the people within the hospital. Denise watched me with what seemed to be understanding and smiled.

*Chapter 5**“Gifts . . .”*

“Well, Denise, I think we’ve just about got everything packed up so that you can go home,” Mary, one of her favorite nurses, said, and smiled at her. We were finally getting ready to leave the hospital. All that we lacked was a doctor’s signature.

“I miss you now,” Denise replied. Over the past two weeks as she dramatically improved she had become even more attached to her nurses and also to her routine. She loved to go walking around the hospital. Three weeks after her coma the physical therapist finally threw up her hands and declared that there was nothing more she could do for her; she was walking her to exhaustion.

“I’ll miss you, too. It makes me feel so good when such a darling patient goes home healthy, and you are doing great!” She gave Denise a hug. “Okay, Mom and Dad, here are some extra syringes and alcohol preps. Did you get the lotion and the extra vials of insulin? Don’t leave anything you can use. They will charge you for it whether you take it or not, so take it.”

It wasn’t just Denise that Mary gladly took care of, she watched out for us parents, too. She had been very encouraging while we learned to test Denise’s blood sugar and give her insulin shots. She was always very thoughtful of us while we lived our lives tethered to the hospital room.

“Mary, did the doctor ever say when she was going to come around to sign us out?” Dianne asked.

“We’ve paged her twice and she hasn’t responded. I’m sure she will be here very soon.” She always tried to put a positive spin on the actions of the doctors.

In fact it was Mary who had suggested that Denise was

probably ready to be discharged one and a half weeks ago, before Thanksgiving. But the doctors weren't ready to give her up. They couldn't understand what had happened to Denise. They were determined to do everything they could to figure out how a little girl comes into the hospital dead, one third of her brain destroyed by a massive stroke, and yet wakes up within three days, talking and walking within a week. To their benefit they did let us take her home on Thanksgiving for our family dinner but we did have to bring her back that night.

"Now, are you sure you have the speech and occupational therapy instructions? You will need to call for therapy appointments when you get home. Do you still have the phone numbers? No, wait, I'll just write them on the discharge papers." She was determined that nothing would be forgotten.

"My bears!" Denise gestured towards a large collection of stuffed bears she had received during her four-week stay. "Don't forget the bears!"

"Ah! Not to worry, I found two large garbage sacks to put them in." I produced the bags with a flourish. "I'll pack them while you put your shoes on."

Denise nodded and sat down on the floor to tie her shoes. Without warning the doctor appeared at the door. She looked at the chart in her hand, wrote feverishly, then looked up long enough to watch Denise tie her last shoe, shook her head and left without a single word to anyone in the room.

"If I were to interpret that, I would say it means you're free to go." Mary commented with a strange look towards the doorway the doctor just vacated.

"Great, we're out of here!" I picked up the bags of bears and pushed Denise and Dianne out of the door.

“It is time, Denise.” His voice surrounded me and comforted me.

“I’m scared he won’t believe me yet, Father.” I knew Father was right. He is always right.

“Denise, my little one, that is why you chose him to be your father on earth. He will believe you and you will teach him.” He gave me one last hug and sent me back to my body.

I didn’t always leave my body at night, only when I was to be taught. Christ and others would come and get me, and take me and teach me. Tonight though, Father came to tell me it was time to begin teaching Daddy. I love being with Father.

I woke up and remembered everything Father had said.

I went in to breakfast and watched Daddy. Christ was by him, smiling. Christ told me that I was to help Daddy remember the things he had been taught, and He said He would help me. He said that before Daddy could accept the lessons we were going to teach him, he needed to believe in my gifts. I smiled back at Christ and felt His love for Daddy and me. Tonight I would tell Daddy I could see colors around people.

Once Daddy accepted that I could see colors around people I could tell him I could see the spirits around us. Some were spirits of people who had died, some were people waiting to be born, some were good and some were bad. The bad ones had tried to hurt me at first, but then they found out that I could see them and that I knew who they were, so they didn’t scare me anymore. Christ is always with me when I need Him.

I followed Daddy from the kitchen to the bathroom.

“Denise, why are you following me?” Daddy was getting tired of me always being with him. But I had to be with him, or the bad people would hurt him and make it so

I couldn't teach him.

"I dunno." I couldn't tell Daddy the truth. Christ said it wasn't the right time for him to know that I could see spirits.

"Well, I'm going to the bathroom. Why don't you help Mom wash the dishes?" Daddy really wanted to be away from me and the bad people wanted me to leave him alone, too.

"Denise, you must stay with him," Christ told me. He didn't really talk like we talk. He said it was clearer if He spoke to my heart and mind because then I understood perfectly.

"Okay, I will," I told Christ.

"Daddy, I'll be here by the door, hurry."

"Denise?!" Daddy was getting upset.

"Daddy, are you done yet?" I was bored sitting by the bathroom door.

⋄⋄⋄⋄⋄⋄⋄⋄⋄♥Doug♥⋄⋄⋄⋄⋄⋄⋄⋄⋄

"NO! You no get me!" Denise squealed and ran just past my reach.

Still with some frequency, Denise showed a little incoherence when she talked; she also had problems coming up with the correct word for the situation. The effects of the stroke continued to linger on.

"Denise, you get back here!" I gritted my teeth and grabbed her. "You need this shot and you're getting it!"

"NO! You get it." She squirmed just enough to prevent me from sticking her with the needle. She knew I wouldn't stick her unless she held still because of the fear I had of what might happen. I hated giving her shots and not just because she usually made it a twenty-minute production. I hated causing her pain even if it was necessary.

I reached over to grab the syringe and she slipped out of my grasp and headed into the kitchen at a run.

“DENISE!” My frustration was about to boil over.

If she would just let Dianne give her the shot. But she wouldn't, she would only allow me to give it. It always ended up being a long, drawn out production.

“GET BACK HERE, YOUNG LADY!”

I charged out of the bedroom into the kitchen and cornered her. “You will sit still, and you will get this shot!” I demanded between clenched teeth.

“Wow, now you're really red!” She pointed above my head and started to laugh.

I figured that she had confused the words red and mad. “Huh, what are you talking about?” My frustration still fed my anger.

“You're red now, you're really mad.” She said it with such delight that it caught me off guard.

There was a tickle in the back of my memory. Something about auras, you know, the lights they say that extend out from each of us. I had seen a few people using special film or cameras or something like that to photograph them. I had always wanted to get mine photographed but never had the twenty-five dollars on me that they always seemed to charge.

“You can see . . . colors . . . around me?” Astonishment replaced my frustration and the anger melted.

Did I really understand what she said?

“You can really see colors around me?” I asked again. I was dumbfounded.

“Uh huh, now you're not so red,” she replied, as if commenting about the weather.

She acted as if it was natural, so natural that it must be as obvious to me as it was to her.

“How long have you been able to see colors?” Frustration turned to fascination.

“Since I woke up.”

“Do you see colors around everybody?”

“Duh,” she stated as a matter of fact.

“Daddy, my shot.”

“Yeah, okay, let’s give it to you.”

My mind filled with questions. She quietly sat next to me while I gave her the shot.

“I’ll be in the bedroom.” I announced to no one in particular. Denise followed me down the hall.

“Daddy, where are you going?”

“My bedroom. I want to be alone. Why don’t you go watch television or something.” I waved her off.

I closed the bedroom door and sat on the bed. My daughter could see auras.

Knock, knock.

“Daddy, are you in there?” It was Denise.

“You know I am.”

Since coming home from the hospital a week and a half ago, she wouldn’t leave my side. She slept in our bedroom, she followed me around the house, and if I went into the bathroom, she sat out by the door knocking every few minutes asking if I was finished.

“Denise, what do you want?” There was no place in the house safe from her.

“Daddy, can I come in? Are you done thinking now?”

“Yes, Denise, you can come in.” I gave up trying to be alone.

“Daddy, don’t you believe me?”

“Yeah, I do.” I thought for a moment. “Would you do something for me?”

“Sure, Daddy. What do you want?”

“Come with me.” A totally unnecessary request considering her recent clingy behavior.

We walked into the kitchen where Dianne had started lunch.

“Okay, look at Mom. What color is she?” Dianne glanced at me and shrugged.

“Pretty yellow.”

“Bright or light yellow?” I responded.

“Who cares as long as it’s pretty!” Dianne joked.

“Light yellow.”

We looked around the corner at Darin watching television.

“What color is Darin?”

“Yellow, too.”

I turned and pointed to Debi in the living room.

“ . . . and Debi?”

“Yellow, duh.”

“Is anybody not yellow?”

“Sure, the doctors were purple . . . oh, and one nurse was very blue.”

“Is the color all around us?”

“Uh huh.”

“Is it a thick band of color?” I punctuated my question by motioning with my hand, trying to portray the color coming out from my head to a distance of about four inches.

“Sometimes, sometimes no.” She understood my question and mimicked several thicknesses.

“Are there many colors?” I wasn’t sure how well a ten-year old could describe different color hues, not to mention that she was still having some trouble with her selection of words.

“Uh huh.” She nodded her head. “There’s yellow, red, blue, purple, green, white.” As she said each color she checked them off on her fingers.

“Do you know what the colors mean?”

“Huh?”

“Well, if I was red and angry, then what am I when I’m green?”

“Sick.”

“What about purple, if doctors are purple does that mean that they are smart?”

“No.”

“Are all doctors purple?”

“No, not that one from the long ways away.” Frustration crossed her face. She knew the word she wanted to use but couldn’t get it out.

“You mean that nice doctor from South Africa?” I guessed that the one doctor that stood out in my memory would be the same one that stood out in hers.

“Yeah, I like him. He’s funny.” She smiled.

I wondered why wasn’t he purple like the others?

“Who is white?”

“Jesus and John, his friend.”

Why didn’t I think to ask how she knew that Jesus had a white aura? And who was John and why was he white? Those questions didn’t even cross my mind at that time. It was as if I was not to ask them.

“Okay, then it sounds like if you’re sick your aura is green. If you’re a doctor, your aura is purple. And if you’re in the Mendenhall family, your aura is yellow.” I joked.

“Daddy!” She laughed.

“Okay then, yellow is most people,” she nodded her head, “and red is me giving you a shot, uh, no, angry.” We both smiled.

“So what is purple?” I asked and she shrugged.

“Hmm, what was different about the South African doctor?”

“He was nice,” Denise said.

“He listened to us and treated us like we knew something.” I added and she nodded.

“Oh, of course, purple is pride.” I looked at her; she was confused.

“Pride is where you think you are better than somebody else.” I explained.

“That’s it.” She nodded

“So, what is blue? . . . ”

I continued to ask her questions through the rest of the afternoon until she wouldn’t answer any more.

I was fascinated by my little girl and all that I had learned from her.

I went to bed that night in a chaotic cloud of questions and thoughts. Denise slept just a few feet from Dianne and me.

“Break time, how about we sit over there on that bench.” I pointed to a particular bench that had good view of the passing crowd in the mall.

“Okay.” Denise agreed and raced me to the bench. She won.

“See any whites yet?” I asked, settling on the bench.

“Nope, but lots of reds.”

We were walking around the mall observing people. I wanted to know everything I could about auras.

We figured out that most people’s auras were some shade of yellow. Blue and green auras were rare but not near as rare as white. Red auras seem to apply to a lot of parents with children. Because of our inability to find any white auras, I became obsessed with them.

“Ooh, she is really red.” Denise motioned toward a woman wagging her finger at her little girl. The little girl was in tears, confused and fearful but the woman wouldn’t stop. She vented all her anger on that one little girl. I turned away, uncomfortable at the display.

“Still no whites?” I asked.

“He is.” She pointed out across the courtyard.

“What? Which one?” I quickly scanned the area.

“The one in the wheelchair, over there.” She pointed again.

I focused on a middle aged man seated in a wheelchair. What made him different? The obvious of course; he was in a wheelchair. Anything else? I studied him. Nothing out of the ordinary struck me. So, why was he white? Jesus was white and so was that man.

Sunday arrived. We left for church a little earlier than normal. An outside group was putting on the service. We found our usual pew and sat as a family. Denise, of course, was right by me.

Within minutes I could feel Denise getting a little edgy, uncomfortable. I looked around and could see no reason for her discomfort.

“Who is he, Daddy?” Denise secretly pointed to the back of a man of medium stature that could have been in his late twenties.

“I don’t know. He must be with the performing group. Why?” I bent my head a little so that I could clearly see her face.

“He’s white, Daddy!” She seemed almost puzzled.

After three days of looking for whites in the mall, we had found only one. The man in the wheelchair. Now here was a second.

“Daddy, they’re all white, too.” She motioned to the other side of the chapel where a small group of presenters were finding their seats.

“They’re handicapped, Denise.” I pointed out to her as if that was what attracted her attention and not the auras.

“Oh.” She breathed a small sigh and settled contentedly back into the bench.

I turned to look at the man she had first pointed out. As he turned around it became apparent that he had Downs

Syndrome. He, too, was handicapped and he was white. The handicapped presenters on the other side were not necessarily physically handicapped but mentally handicapped. An idea started to gel within my thoughts.

“Denise, what color are babies?” I whispered to her.

“White, Daddy.”

“What about little kids?” An idea took shape; Denise’s responses polished it.

“White, Daddy.”

The pew in front of us suddenly filled with the Lake family. It was their handicapped boy – Erik – who had nearly drowned on vacation the week before Denise went into the coma. The two parents were sorely outnumbered by their five boys. Erik, himself, would have kept one parent busy with his behavior and special needs, but he had a twin even more rambunctious than a normal child. The parents were in trouble.

Erik poked his head above the pew and smiled at me. His little misshapen head and face quickly melted my heart as I figured it would have any heart. There was just something special about him.

“Denise, what color is Erik?” He continued smiling at us.

“Duh, Daddy!”

It wasn’t the response I expected but it confirmed what I knew. Those spirits with a body that prevented them from understanding and taking responsibility for their actions, as well as all little children, were white. They truly were heavenly beings. No wonder the penalty was so harsh for harming any of them.

“Denise, when you’re with someone like Erik, or a baby, can they change your color?” I quickly whispered because the service was about to begin.

“Duh, Daddy.” She nudged me and looked straight ahead.

I knew that Denise was finished answering questions for at least the duration of the service. I spent the next hour in awe of those special souls, wondering what they were really like without the limitations of the physical body.

I marveled again at the gift given my little girl. And how through that gift, we were learning so many wonderful things.

⋈⋈⋈⋈⋈⋈⋈⋈⋈⋈⋈♥Denise♥⋈⋈⋈⋈⋈⋈⋈⋈⋈⋈⋈

“So what do you think, Denise?” Mommy asked.

Mommy and Daddy set up a slumber party for me, Deon and Debi. They wanted to sleep in their room alone and this slumber party was to get me to sleep downstairs away from them.

“It sounds fun!” I answered. “Do we get treats?”

Christ had already told me this was how I was going to tell Daddy that I can see spirits.

“Sure, and we’ll make one big bed for the three of you to sleep in. It’ll be fun!”

Daddy didn’t understand just how much fun it would be. I was excited to tell him about the spirits.

Deon, Debi and I went downstairs and played some games. When it got late we went into the bedroom where Daddy had set up the big bed for us.

The man who used to live in our house was in the room again. He was there almost every night, but I was never allowed to mention him to anybody.

He had died awhile ago but didn’t want to believe it, so he stayed around the house looking for his family. He always asked me where they were. He also complained that we were haunting him and needed to go away. He was too scared to listen to the angels that were always around him.

“Denise, it is time to tell your father of another of your

gifts.”

Christ smiled at me and at the man who wouldn't believe he was dead. The man didn't see Christ because he only wanted to be a part of this life.

“Aarrgh! There he is! Tell him to leave! Aarrgh! He won't leave me alone!” My sisters didn't know what to do.

“HEY! What's going on down there!?” Daddy yelled, so I screamed again and pointed at the man who was getting scared. I could hear Daddy running down the stairs.

“What's all the racket in here!?” Daddy was kind of red.

“It's him! He won't leave me alone!” I kind of yelled.

“Who? Who are you talking about, Denise? There's no one here but us.” Daddy kept looking right where I was pointing but didn't see anything.

“Him! The man who used to live here and died.” I pointed to him again. The man was really scared because I kept yelling about him and pointing to him.

“You can see someone over there?” Daddy's color changed. He was really confused.

“Yes, and he won't leave.” I told Daddy.

“Dad, what's she talking about?” Deon asked. She didn't know about the man who used to live here but died.

“About 8 years ago, the father of the family that used to live here was killed in a car accident.” Daddy looked really puzzled.

“And it's him, he's right there!” I pointed to the man again. He looked really afraid.

“Denise can see him?” Deon asked Daddy again, not me. People always ask the grown-ups if kids are telling the truth.

“Denise, can you see him now?” Daddy asked.

“Yeah, he's walking back and forth at the bottom of the bed.” Daddy was believing me.

“Denise, can you see other spirits?” Daddy was being

filled with questions. If I wanted to bad enough, I could hear his questions before he asked them.

“Yes.”

“Are there other spirits here with us?” I looked at Christ and He told me to answer Daddy with only a yes.

“Yes.”

“Can you talk to them?” Daddy asked.

“Denise, tell him you can, but say no more,” Christ told me.

“Yes.”

Daddy thought a moment, then looked at the bottom of the bed. He was looking to see if he could see the man. Daddy squinted.

“Why don’t you tell him to leave the house?”

“Okay.”

I looked at the man and told him to leave the house, and he told me it was his house and that we should leave.

“He said it was his house and that we need to leave.” I told Daddy.

Daddy thought again. “Tell him to go to the light, that there is great joy in the light.” I knew that Daddy had read that in one of his books.

I looked at Christ.

“He doesn’t understand yet, Denise. It is okay, he will understand later.” Christ told me.

I turned to the man.

“Daddy says you’re to go to the light.”

“What light? There is no light. What did you do to my family? Where are they? You’re the ones that are dead. Why don’t you go to the light and leave me alone?” he was very sad but he wouldn’t look for Christ.

“It’s okay, Denise. I know his pain and will never leave him alone. When he is ready, he will find Me.” Christ looked love at the man. “Tell your Dad what he said.”

“He said there is no light, Daddy. He said we are the ones who are dead, not him, and we should be going to the light.”

“He did?”

“Yep.”

“Denise, why don’t we go upstairs for awhile and leave your sisters alone.” Deon and Debi looked a little upset that Daddy was going to leave them with the dead man. Daddy took my hand anyway and we went up to the living room to talk.

“Denise, where is the spirit world?” Daddy was believing me. Now he had a lot of questions.

“Christ, may I answer Daddy’s questions?” He was standing next to Daddy.

“Yes, Denise, you may answer the questions he asks tonight, then you will sleep in the room next to your parents.” Christ smiled and left.

I didn’t like Him to go. I always feel so good when He is around.

⋄⋄⋄⋄⋄⋄⋄⋄⋄⋄♥Doug♥⋄⋄⋄⋄⋄⋄⋄⋄⋄⋄

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. Denise insisted she could see and talk to the spirits around us. What spirits were around us?

“Denise, where is the spirit world?” I asked her once we were upstairs.

“Here.” Denise waved her arm out in front of her in an arc.

“All around us?” I knew what she meant, I just needed to be sure.

“Yes.”

“Do you only see dead people?” With a thousand questions swimming around in my mind, I could only ask a stupid one. If she saw the spirit world wouldn’t she also see spirits not yet born?

“No, others too.”

“Can you see Jesus?” Wasn’t He in the spirit world?

“Yes.”

I believe her! My daughter can see the Savior.

“Is Jesus here now?”

“No. We were playing outside yesterday, then Mommy made me come in and He left.”

“Can you talk to Jesus?” If she can see Him why wouldn’t she be able to talk to him? And if she can talk to Him, she could ask Him all the questions I have always wanted to.

“Yes, but it isn’t like when we talk, it’s better.”

I spent the next hour or so asking her questions about the spirit world and about Jesus Christ. She answered every question but never volunteered more than a simple yes or no.

That night I gave thanks to my Heavenly Father for my daughter’s gift. I felt so blessed that I had someone who knew the spirit world, someone who could answer all my questions, someone who could quiet all my fears.

As I drifted off to sleep I felt bad for those who didn’t have a daughter like mine to answer their questions. Life would be so different from now on. I had a gift from God, an oracle to give me wisdom and knowledge.

÷÷÷÷÷÷÷÷÷÷♥Denise♥÷÷÷÷÷÷÷÷÷÷

“Can I teach him now?” I asked Christ. I liked to teach Daddy.

“No, the time is not yet, Denise. Soon you will teach your father those truths about Our Father’s Peace that he desires to know. Right now you must help him have faith in your gifts. If he finds no hope in your gifts, he will find no truth in your teachings.” Christ knelt beside me to hug me.

“Sometimes when I’m with Mommy and Daddy I wish I

could be here with you instead. I love you so much.” I snuggled into His chest.

“I know, little one. I love you.” He squeezed me and I was very happy.



*Chapter 6**“Revelations . . .”*

“What do you mean you travel?” I asked in disbelief.

Four days ago my life had completely changed. Denise had told me she could see the spirit world like I could see this world. Even though Denise wouldn’t answer every question I put to her, she answered enough to create a hurricane within my soul. Question after question either confirmed or denied things that I had long held to be true.

She created shifts in my whole system of beliefs. My views of death and our existence here were changing. My experience with the oneness while Denise was in the hospital had opened me up and Denise was filling me.

“I leave and go wherever I want to.” She replied.

“Anywhere?”

“Yes.” She smiled.

She knew my next question. Since telling me about the spirit world I realized that she could tell what I was thinking. This bothered me at first until I realized she didn’t do it very often. In fact, she seemed to do it only when I was asking her questions or while we were playing games.

“I went to see David in Honduras last night.”

She couldn’t say Honduras yet, but she sure tried.

“You saw your brother last night?”

This was starting to become a fantasy trip. I believed the fantastic things she told me, I just couldn’t understand why.

“Yeah, and he’s okay.”

“Can you go across the ocean?”

“Duh, I can go anywhere I want.”

“Does anybody go with you?”

I secretly wanted to have the experience she was describing. To fly anywhere in the world under my own power was a childhood fantasy.

“Sometimes my teachers.”

“Teachers? What teachers?”

It seemed that every answer she gave invited two more questions I hadn’t thought of until her answer.

“ . . .God’s men.” There was frustration on her face. She went over to a child’s Bible and opened it to the pictures of ancient prophets. “These guys.”

“You mean prophets? You are taught by ancient prophets?” I was dazed.

She hesitated for just an instant. “Yeah, those guys. Sometimes they come to teach me things or take me places.”

Through our entire conversation, she would often look past my left shoulder after my question as if she was being coached by someone. It felt like she was just relaying answers to me from an anonymous person.

“Who are you talking to?” I looked over my shoulder as if I could see someone I couldn’t identify.

“Christ.”

I was dumbfounded.

No other answer could have left me more speechless. I believed my little girl! If she said that my Savior was standing next to me, I knew He was. I closed my eyes and said a little prayer of gratitude and felt a heat to my left.

“Is He,” I pointed to where I felt the heat, “giving you all the answers?”

“Not all of them.”

“Does He . . . take you and teach you?”

“Sometimes.”

My Savior was in the same room with me. My heart leapt for joy. Then I thought of my sins. I wasn’t worthy to be in His presence.

Denise giggled at my reaction.

“Daddy, it’s okay, you don’t have to be perfect. He loves you anyway.” She read my heart and I knew she was right. Worthiness was not the question, faith was. I smiled; I wanted to know Him.

“What does He look like? . . . Does He look like that?” I pointed to a picture of the Savior hanging in the living room.

“No, more like . . .” she went to the hallway and removed a picture, “this, this is what He looks like, except He smiles a lot more.”

I sat staring at the picture. It was as if I was introduced to Him for the first time. In an instant He became more than a being out there somewhere, a concept or a symbol. He became tangible to me, I felt I knew His face. I felt an incredible love for Him.

“Will He let you tell me about traveling?” Denise became my interpreter. I looked at her but knew I was talking to Him.

“Yes.”

“Will He let you take me traveling?”

“Yes, He said that I can take you with me tonight if you want to go, but you won’t remember it.” She smiled. She knew exactly what I wanted.

I looked to my left where I still felt the heat and silently thanked Him for understanding and loving me.

Was I awake? It didn’t feel like I had slept. I went to bed very excited at the prospect of flying with Denise but now, the next morning, I was tired and worn out. The clock said I had slept eight hours. It felt more like two. Who had been messing with my clock?

I sat up in bed just as Denise bounded through the door.

“Daddy, Daddy! Boy, did we have fun last night! You

went flying all over.” Her enthusiasm was contagious and I smiled weakly.

“Did I fly most the night? Is that why it doesn’t feel like I slept at all?” I asked.

“You did big loop-de-loops,” she made circles with her arm, “through the sky and you laughed a lot!” Her eyes twinkled and she started giggling at what must have been her memory of our time together.

“I kind of remember doing circles or something.” Fuzzy images tempted me to try to remember more. “Is that why I’m so tired?”

“Yes, but it was worth it!” She answered. I wished I could remember. Maybe then I would be convinced it was worth it, too.

“How come you’re not tired like me?” I asked.

“You don’t leave your body as much as I do. I’m used to it.”

“Does everyone leave their bodies?”

“Sometimes.”

An idea popped into my head. I rubbed the little sleep I had from my eyes.

“Can handicapped people, like Erik Lake, leave their bodies?”

“Yes.”

Erik’s crooked little smile flashed before me. I remembered talking to Rob, his dad, after church about his aura and what it meant. I remembered the look of relief in his eyes, as if I had answered some question that he had long harbored about Erik.

“Can you talk to Erik when he leaves his body, I mean, talk to his spirit?”

“Yes.”

“Would he be like he is now, or different?” I had trouble fitting my thoughts into the question I really wanted to ask.

“Daddy, his body is bad, his spirit isn’t.” She understood exactly what I wanted to know.

“Would you go and ask Erik some questions for his Mom and Dad?” Denise looked to the side of the bed. I instantly knew to whom she was talking. I think I felt the heat that was there the night before. It didn’t matter though, somehow, I knew that my Savior was in the room with us.

“Okay, I will.” She agreed.

÷÷÷÷÷÷÷÷÷÷♥Denise♥÷÷÷÷÷÷÷÷÷÷

Traveling is different when I’m not in my body. I just kind of think where I want to go and I’m there. It’s like that with talking, too. I think it and feel it and they understand exactly what I want them to.

I left my body right after I went to sleep. I was a little scared to go see Erik. When I got Daddy he looked like himself because that is how he thinks of himself. I didn’t know how Erik would think of himself.

“It will be okay, Denise.” Christ told me.

“Will Erik be free like me?” I asked Him.

“Yes, he will. He is waiting for you now.”

“Okay.” I went to Erik’s room. He was sleeping next to his brother.

“Erik, come with me.” I said to him. The body stayed where it was and a beautiful man stood before me. He was like Christ because he loved like Christ.

“Hi, Erik. My Dad wanted me to ask you some questions for your parents.” I smiled.

“Hi, Denise,” he didn’t say that name, he knew my real name I have when I’m out of my body. “I’m glad you are here. Christ told me you would be coming to talk with me.”

“I’m supposed to ask you if you are happy.” I told him. He smiled.

“Mom and Dad can see me smile yet they still worry. They don’t understand the veil that I have. How it’s different from theirs.”

“I know. Mine’s gone and my parents still wonder what it means.” I said.

“They’re not supposed to know yet.” He hinted to me. He remembered what was said in the field with the roses.

“I know my parents are worried about me. They have trouble seeing past my limitations and wonder what I can understand. They don’t really realize that I came here because of them and my brothers. I love them. I chose this body because I promised I would help them learn and grow and they promised to guide and protect me. Tell them that the pain and discomfort is but for a short time, it won’t last. Let them know that I love them now as much as I did when I first chose them as my parents. I understand their spiritual weaknesses as they understand my physical limitations. Tell them that the time we share together is a glorious gift from Father. I know it isn’t easy for them, but when we finish they will understand; they will remember.” I felt great love the whole time he spoke.

I hugged him and told him I loved him. He told me he loved me and was happy I had chosen to do what Father wanted.

“Thank you for helping my parents understand.” He said and really meant it, I could tell.

Erik and I spent more time together as he shared his life with me and I shared mine with him. We shared more than stories, we shared feelings and experiences. I cried when I experienced his operations. Not all the doctors were gentle with him. He thanked me for sharing the experience of running and eating because he can’t do those things in his body. Christ finally came and told us it was time to return. He blessed Erik and thanked him for what he had chosen to do. Then Erik went back into his little

body. I hugged Christ and went back to my own.

When I woke up I thought about what Erik had said and what he was doing for his family. I remembered his pain. He loved a whole lot. I thought of all the others like Erik. All day I thought of Erik.

“Denise, Denise?” It was Daddy. I fell asleep on the couch. “Are you okay?”

“Yes.”

“Do you think we should check your blood sugar?”

“No, He says it’s okay. I’m fine.”

“Who says . . . oh, Christ.” Daddy thought for a moment, “Did you go visit Erik last night?”

“Yes,” Christ stood by Daddy and me.

“What did he say?” Daddy asked.

“*Christ, what can I tell Daddy?*”

“Tell him that Erik is happy and that he chose to come down as he is, to help his family.”

“He said that he was happy and he chose that body to help his parents.” Daddy seemed happy with my answer. He asked me a couple more questions and Christ let me answer them. After that I went into Mommy and Daddy’s room to listen to music. I didn’t want to talk about Erik anymore.

÷÷÷÷÷÷÷÷÷÷♥Doug♥÷÷÷÷÷÷÷÷÷÷

I was a little surprised at Denise’s reaction to visiting Erik. She wouldn’t say much about it except that Erik chose what he was experiencing and was happy with it. I didn’t really know what to think but I figured that Rob and his wife would appreciate knowing what Denise had told me. So I made arrangements for us to go over, about a week before Christmas, and talk to them about Erik.

“Thanks for coming over, Doug. Hi, Denise, you look great,” Rob said to break the tension as he showed us upstairs to his office.

He knew why we were there and accepted us with open arms, and yet, I don’t think he believed half of what I told him about Denise over the phone. And I didn’t even tell him that much.

“Here dear, sit here . . . would you like something, Denise?” Jenn, Rob’s wife, was as gracious as ever.

“Uh, uh.” Denise shook her head.

“Like I told you over the phone, Rob, Denise has some very special gifts,” I began. “One of them is that she can travel outside her body at night like I mentioned before. Well, the other day I asked her to go visit Erik. I wanted her to ask him some of the questions you asked me last Sunday after church.” Jenn looked at me a little strangely.

“Did she visit Erik?” Rob asked me then turned to Denise. “Did you visit Erik?”

“Uh, huh.” Denise answered demurely.

“Did he want to tell us anything?” Rob moved to the edge of his seat.

Whether or not he believed any of my stories of Denise’s gifts was immaterial. He suspended his beliefs at the hope of learning something about his son that was impossible to learn by any other means. I had never before realized how hard it must be to not be able to communicate with your child.

“Well . . .” Denise’s voice trailed off. She was nervous about talking to Rob. Rob turned to me as if to ask me to translate what Denise hadn’t spoken.

“The day after she visited Erik, she was so reserved and quiet. I’ve never seen her like that before. The visit with Erik really made an impression on her.” I had Rob’s attention now. Even Jenn was intently listening. Denise

melted into the background as I continued.

I told them everything that Denise had told me. I told them that Erik chose to come to that little body. I told them that he was happy with them and loved them. I then gave them my impressions of Denise's visit and finished by saying how special I thought they were to have agreed to have Erik come to them, that through great trials came greater blessings.

As I looked from one to the other I noticed tears in both sets of eyes. I realized that I had said exactly what they needed to hear.

Denise remained motionless the entire time.

÷:÷:÷:÷:÷:÷:÷:÷:♥Denise♥÷:÷:÷:÷:÷:÷:÷:÷:

I looked at Christ and asked him, "What do I say to them?"

"Say nothing. Your dad will tell them what they need to hear and they will believe him as if you had spoken it." He answered.

"Why?"

"It is better that they begin to have faith in your dad now so that their lives may become woven with yours. In time, Rob will come to your dad for help and without the faith that now grows within him, he would not choose to weave his life with yours."

"Okay." I smiled and hugged Him.

Daddy finally finished talking and we left for home.

"Denise, was Jesus there?" Daddy asked.

"You know." I looked at him funny.

I knew that Christ didn't want me to tell him. He had told me that Daddy needed to know for himself when He was there.

"I thought so." Daddy smiled at me.

÷÷÷÷÷÷÷÷÷÷♥Doug♥÷÷÷÷÷÷÷÷÷÷

Telling Rob and his wife just the little bit that I did created a strong desire within me to tell the whole story. I wanted to share all of Denise's gifts with someone but I didn't know who I could tell.

I had shared a few of the things with some of our family but the reception was cold enough to prevent me from telling them any more and I was afraid that if I told anybody in our congregation they would reject us. But I couldn't keep it in. I just had to share it! I had to tell someone of all the miraculous events happening to us.

And then a few days before Christmas He gave me the opportunity I asked for. My good friend Jeff and his wife, who had moved eight hours to the south of us last summer, was in town visiting family.

They had heard of Denise's stroke and about the coma, but hadn't heard much more than that. They had no idea of the gifts Denise had been blessed with. I decided that I could tell them about Denise's gifts, because we had shared so much together over the years. I figured they were close enough friends that they wouldn't think us crazy. I even hoped that they would believe what we were about to tell them.

"Come on in, Jeff and Sharon, it's cold out there." I stepped aside. "Go on up. We're so thrilled to see you guys. I'm glad you were able to stop by."

"Sit down Sharon. Can I get you a drink? We have some soda." Dianne offered.

"Oh, thank you, water would be fine." She refused to sit. "You look good, Dianne. After all I had heard about what you've been through, I wasn't sure . . ." Sharon hesitated, "Well . . . I'd be a wreck now if it were me." She

followed Dianne into the kitchen, talking.

“So Doug, how goes the survey business?” Jeff always wanted to know the particulars of my business ventures.

“Doing okay. It’s really slow this time of year, but it will pick up after the holidays.” I couldn’t tell him that we were financially destitute. A hundred and thirty thousand in medical bills wasn’t material for conversation. Besides, I didn’t want to burden him with my financial news. I wanted to share with him the wonderful experiences we were having.

“I hear ya, it’s slow for me down south, too.” He edged towards the front of the couch. “I did, however, hear of a great opportunity to make some real money.”

Ever the dreamer, always looking to the next horizon.

I knew that he trusted my financial sense when it came to multi-level marketing and he never passed up an opportunity to get my take on a new venture.

“Really, what’s the deal?”

“You purchase one eight hundred numbers that are linked to different support centers. Then as people call in to get help, you get a percentage of the cost of the call. Once this takes off there is a real possibility of making some good money and you don’t have to do anything.” His eyes lit up at the expectation of perceived riches.

“Well . . . sounds intriguing. Makes me wonder what the pay out is compared to the investment and is that the only way you make money? Who does the marketing for the support centers and the phone numbers?” I went down my usual checklist.

I knew many people feared multi-level marketing as if it was the devil incarnate but I had learned, that, given the right company and product, you could do well, very well. The problem stemmed from the hundreds of shady multi-level businesses that were set up to do one thing, take your money and run.

“Well Jeff, why don’t you send me some information about it and I’ll look it over and let you know what I think.”

“Great, I’ll do that. So what has been going on in the neighborhood?” His smile was a sure indication that he was satisfied with my answer and now he wanted to hear the local gossip. He loved knowing everything about everybody.

“Not much new. You know how we are here.” I didn’t really want to gossip with him, I wanted to share with him.

“So, where’s Denise?” Sharon asked Dianne as they reentered the living room. “Here’s your drink, Jeff. Anyway, that must have been very scary, Dianne. I had no idea you were that close to losing her.”

“What did I miss?” Jeff asked his wife.

“Dianne started telling me about what happened with Denise.”

Dianne continued on as if Jeff and I had been listening from the beginning.

“The doctors had written her off. In fact, we just found out a few days ago that the first two days she was in a coma they were wanting to talk about organ donation,” Dianne replied as Denise entered the room and sat next to her. Denise seemed a little subdued for some reason.

“You look great, Denise!” Sharon smiled at her.

“So what did happen?” Jeff asked.

“Well, the Friday after Halloween she went into a coma.” I restarted the story. “When we went into her room we couldn’t wake her. We had no idea she was diabetic and no clue what was wrong with her, just that she wouldn’t wake up. The doctors figured that it was at that time she suffered the stroke.”

I recounted our experience of our flight to the hospital. I told them of the dire outcome the doctors told us to expect, of how the stroke she suffered had destroyed two-thirds of the left side of her brain. I explained to them the

hopelessness and pain we felt, and how at its worst, we were given the gift of His Peace. I explained that afterward we were okay with whatever the outcome would be. I recounted how the following Monday afternoon Denise woke up and spoke to me, going against everything the doctors had predicted and expected.

Dianne told of Denise's miraculous recovery that confused the doctors. How, in just a few weeks, Denise had progressed more than they had expected her to do in nine months. She retold of how Denise would walk the physical therapists to exhaustion. She told of our incredible Thanksgiving due to the generosity of others.

"We had no idea, none." Sharon said and reached over to pat Denise's leg while she snuggled up to Dianne.

"Few people did. We didn't say much because we had already accepted whatever the outcome was to be. We were at complete peace," I said and noticed a brief look of disbelief on Jeff's face. I realized that he probably had no basis to understand the incredible Peace our Father in Heaven blessed us with.

"And then things started happening." I led into Denise's wondrous gifts.

I told them of how I discovered Denise could see auras and explained each of the colors to them. I explained Denise's ability to leave her body at night and travel. How she was often taught by people in the spirit world, including some ancient prophets. I recounted the night of the slumber party downstairs and how Denise could see spirits. Then I told them of how Denise could see Jesus Christ and how the Savior often spoke to her and spent time with her, teaching her.

"Why would the Savior spend so much time with a ten-year old little girl? I would think that He would have more important things to do." Jeff commented.

I looked in his eyes and saw skepticism. I looked at

Sharon and saw sympathy. “He would because He loves her like He loves all of us. He would spend the time with all of us if we would let Him.” I answered.

“That’s a beautiful story, Doug, Dianne. The Lord truly does work in mysterious ways.” Sharon said and at once I knew, by the sound of her voice, that the sympathy I saw was not directed towards Jeff for his lack of understanding but to us. She believed we were confused, misled and even delusional.

“Denise, where is Christ?” I turned to my daughter for help. I thought she might be able to prove to them that what we had said was the truth. They had to believe us. They were our close friends.

Denise looked at me and smiled as if to say, ‘It’s okay Daddy, they don’t have to believe for it to be true.’ She looked at Jeff and Sharon in turn and smiled at each one, but said nothing.

“Wow! Sharon, look at the time! We really have to be going.” Jeff quickly stood, motioning Sharon to get up and leave. “That was some story. I’m just glad that Denise is okay.”

He quickly directed Sharon to the stairs as he reached out to shake my hand. His face smiled but his eyes revealed fear. Sharon said her good-byes from the bottom of the stairs and Jeff hurriedly followed her out the door with promises to visit again the next time they were in town. The door closed. Dianne and I stood at the top of the stairs unsure of what had just happened.

“I guess it’s kind of hard to accept the first time you hear it all.” I said to no one in particular. “Denise, Christ was with us tonight, right?”

“Yes.” She said.

“Why didn’t you say anything when I asked you where He was?” I turned trying to read her facial expressions as well as understand her words.

“He didn’t want me to. He said they wouldn’t understand what you told them even if I helped.”

I so wanted them to believe us and thought Denise could have helped had she spoken up. I peered into her eyes and acknowledged to myself once again that I did believe regardless of Jeff and Sharon’s reaction. Even more than that, I knew that she had those gifts. I knew that she spoke to my Savior. I knew because my experiences encompassed much more than just my senses.

My Savior had spoken to my heart and I knew that what I had told Jeff and Sharon was true.

“Looks like it is just us.” I said to Denise and Dwight.

Dianne had just left with Debi and Deon to go to a women’s Christmas party at the church. Darin was out with friends. Tomorrow was Christmas Eve and they wanted to get together before they all went their separate ways for the holidays.

“Can I watch a movie?” Dwight asked. He saw an opportunity to watch what he wanted and not what was forced on him by one of the older kids.

“You betcha.” I smiled at him.

He raced off to the family room with Denise hot on his heels.

“I’ll be in my bedroom if you kids need anything,” I yelled in their direction.

I didn’t often get the chance to relax and read in solitude, so I was looking forward to the next two hours. The two youngest would be occupied by a movie and everyone else was out and about.

I picked up a book and began to read. Within minutes I became lost in the words of the author as he opened up the world of the South American Shamans, their unique way of obtaining knowledge and passing it on to subsequent

“No, it just looks yucky.”

“When did you see a baby be born?” My mind instantly left South America. Denise had my full attention.

“Not very long ago.”

“Who did you see be born?”

“Jesus.”

“Jesus? When did you see Him be born?”

“While I was in my coma.” She came and sat next to me on the bed and looked into my eyes. “You can’t tell anyone, okay?”

“Okay, but can I tell just Mommy?”

“Well . . .” she thought for a moment, “just Mommy.”

She then proceeded to tell me about her experience while she was in the coma. How for those three days, she actually spent the time with Jesus Christ and Heavenly Father. She then described in great detail the birth, life and crucifixion of the Savior. She mentioned things that only a ten-year-old would remember, but only a scholar would know.

When she finished her story she looked at me and smiled. I guess I smiled back, I don’t know. My mind was a whirlwind of thoughts, ideas and questions. I looked at the open book at my side and back to Denise. No book written could compare to what my little girl had to offer.

For the first time since I learned of her gifts I openly wondered what else she knew and what else she could do.

“Denise, how much did They tell you while you were with Them?”

“You mean Heavenly Father and Jesus?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t know.” She shrugged her shoulders and then gave me a big hug.

“I love you, Daddy.”

“I love you, too.” I wasn’t ready for the conversation to end so quickly.

“Denise, who else did you talk to while you were in the coma?”

She smiled and started to answer then stopped, contorted her face and said, “Your big guy.”

It was clear that she wanted to say something else but that was the only thing she could get to come out.

“My big guy?” I tried to puzzle out her meaning, then it hit me. “You mean grandpa?”

“Yep.” She smiled, vigorously nodding her head.

“You saw my Dad?”

It had been years since his death, yet the memories were as vibrant as yesterday’s recollections. I still really missed him. “Did he say anything to you?”

“Yes, he said he loves you very much and that he is very proud of you.”

Tears came unbidden.

“Thank you.” I paused to enjoy some of my favorite memories of Dad.

Denise waited patiently.

“Was anyone else there?” I asked.

“Yes, my teacher.”

“You mean your primary teacher? Mrs. Jensen who died last summer?” Denise nodded her head.

Her teacher had had a progressive disease that wasn’t kind to her body. It quickly took her mobility and speech but never touched her dignity or spirit.

“Did you see Dawn?” Denise never knew her older sister that was stillborn.

“Yes. She is very pretty.”

I couldn’t respond. My emotions threatened to overpower me and I realized that I wanted and needed to be alone. I wanted to be alone to remember the times with my Dad and mourn for the times that could have been with my daughter.

Denise knew what I needed and left me to ponder the

gifts she had given me.

Handmade decorations covered the little Christmas tree while a host of teddy bears given as gifts to a little girl in a hospital surrounded it, replacing the bright and shiny wrapped gifts that would normally occupy the coveted space beneath the beautifully decorated branches. As the family enjoyed the comfort of each other's presence, a little ten-year-old girl stood and began to tell the story of the first Christmas. The Christmas tree faded into the background as the story of Mary and Joseph came alive through her words. The family knew then, that truly, she had witnessed that humble event, the birth of the Savior of all mankind.

That Christmas Eve, all thoughts of sugarplums and tinsel willingly gave way to the little girl's memory of the greatest gift of all.



*Chapter 7**“Smokey . . .”*

“Hey, Denise, would you like to go with me to pick up Deon at work?” I asked as I headed for the door. For some reason, I didn’t want to go alone.

“Sure!” She grabbed her coat and ran to catch me at the top of the stairs.

It took a minute for our car to warm up. It didn’t like the cold and if you didn’t let it warm up, it would sputter and cough for the first two miles.

It was a short ride to Deon’s job at a nearby copy and mailing store. I pulled the car into a spot right in front of the neighboring store dedicated to smokers. I wasn’t a smoker and had no interest in anything having to do with what I always thought of as a dirty habit.

Deon, it appeared, was going to be a few minutes. She was still closing up the store. I made myself comfortable and turned on the radio.

÷÷÷÷÷÷÷÷÷÷♥Denise♥÷÷÷÷÷÷÷÷÷÷

“Denise.” Christ came by me while I sat in the car with Daddy.

“Yes.”

“You and your dad need to go into the cigarette store. Your sister needs your help.” Christ told me.

I knew He was talking about the lady behind the counter and not Deon. He had taught me how we were all really brothers and sisters, all part of Him, we just didn’t remember it.

“Christ, Daddy won’t go in there. He thinks it’s a bad store filled with bad things.” I told Him.

“His heart is open. He will follow you in.”

“Okay.” I wanted to do what Christ asked me.

“Daddy, what’s in that store?” I pointed to the cigarette store.

“Oh, there is nothing inside there but nasty cigarettes. We don’t go in there because we don’t like cigarettes. They make you sick and they make you smell bad.” Daddy was happy just waiting in the car for Deon. He didn’t want to go inside.

“Oh Daddy, please! Can we go in? Please, Daddy!” If I asked enough I knew he would take me into the store.

“No, Denise, let’s just sit here and wait for Deon.”

“But look Daddy, they have a teddy bear in the window.” I pointed at the store window, “Pleeeeee, Daddy, pleeeeee?”

Daddy turned off the car.

“Okay, but just for a minute. I’m telling you, there is nothing of any value in there.”

We both got out of the car and went into the store.

⋄⋄⋄⋄⋄⋄⋄⋄⋄♥Doug♥⋄⋄⋄⋄⋄⋄⋄⋄⋄

Since Denise got home from the hospital I’ve had a difficult time telling her no. I can’t endure inflicting any kind of mental or physical discomfort on her. I guess it’s just my reaction to almost losing her. So when she set her heart on checking out the cigarette store I knew I was going to succumb to her pleadings.

“Hi, can I help you find anything?” The woman behind the counter asked as we entered.

“Not really. My daughter just saw the bear in the window and wanted to get a closer look. Thanks anyway.” I replied.

“It’s a cute, cuddly bear and it’s on sale. There’s no reason why she can’t cuddle up to it and take it home.” She

smiled at me and then glanced over to Denise who had rescued the bear from the window display.

“Thanks, but no.” I cut off our conversation and turned to Denise. “Sweetie, why don’t you go get a soda and you can drink it in the car while we wait for Deon.” All of a sudden, I felt very uncomfortable.

The congregation all knew of my strong dislike of cigarettes and I didn’t want them to see me inside the store. It was an image thing and I became very self-conscious.

“Oh Daddy, look how cute the bear is. He is so soft and cute, Daddy.” Denise had no intention of letting this end quickly or painlessly. I reached in my pocket just to confirm that I had barely enough money for a soda. There was no way I could get her the twenty-five dollar bear even if I wanted to.

“Oh, just go ahead and get her the bear. She has become so attached to it.” The clerk apparently worked on commission or so it appeared.

I walked over to the sodas and picked one up for Denise then pulled out all the money I had – pocket change – and paid for the soda.

“You sure you won’t buy her the bear? They look so adorable together. You’re going to break her heart if you don’t.” A smile of victory crossed the clerk’s lips.

“Please Daddy! I really want him!” Denise appealed to the clerk as much as to me.

“Look lady, I’m sorry, but I can’t buy the bear. The change I just gave you was the last money I have in this world.” I turned to face the clerk directly, “My daughter was just released from the hospital a few weeks ago. She had a massive stroke and went into a coma. She was in the hospital for over four weeks and the bill is staggering. I have no money to buy her or her brothers and sisters food or clothes, much less a bear. I’m sorry to disappoint you both, but I can’t produce money out of thin air.” I finished

and turned towards Denise.

“I’m sorry. I had no idea.” The clerk humbly apologized.

“It’s okay, it’s not something that you would know. Thank you for your time.” I reached out to Denise to pluck the bear from her hands.

“Wait . . . excuse me but,” the clerk spoke up, “would you permit me to buy her the bear?”

Confusion and disbelief colored my face.

“Please, really, I would like to buy it for her.” Tears glistened in the clerk’s eyes as she grabbed her purse from beneath the counter and retrieved a few bills from her wallet.

“Well . . . if you want. That would be very kind of you.”

“Thank you for letting me do this.” She caught a loose tear on her check with the back of her hand and then rang up the sale of the bear and handed me the receipt. This time her smile was one of love and compassion.

“Thank you very much.” I can’t remember who spoke those words though we both meant them. I shook her hand and pushed Denise out of the store.

We settled back into the car and Denise held up the bear for me to see.

“See Daddy, want to hold him?”

“No, he stinks.” I said.

“I don’t smell a thing!”

She snuggled her face into the bear.

“I told you there was more than cigarettes in the store. There are nice people there, too.”

I looked at her and felt the precision cut of a knife to my soul as my little girl showed me the wisdom that I should have possessed.

⋄⋄⋄⋄⋄⋄⋄⋄⋄♥Denise♥⋄⋄⋄⋄⋄⋄⋄⋄⋄

“That was fun.” I told Christ.

“Thank you, Denise for doing what was needed.” He answered me.

“What was it that my sister needed?” I knew that Daddy needed to learn about judging but I wasn’t sure what my sister learned.

“Her heart needed to be softened to others. She has spent too much time concentrating on the world’s riches and needed to see beyond herself to Me. You opened the door for her to change her life. She will ponder on what she did for you and remember Me. She now has a choice that she didn’t have before,” Christ told me then hugged me and filled me with His love.

“Will she choose You?” I hoped she would.

“Denise, you can see for yourself. I taught you how.”

“But it scares me to see the future. It’s all fuzzy. I can’t see it like you do.” He had taught me to see what could happen but I didn’t like to. It was better to experience it as the present.

“Peace little one, be satisfied to know that she will accept Me when she finishes what she has agreed to do here.” I knew what that meant. I was a little sad because I knew that her life would be lonelier than mine; she would wait until she left this life to find Christ.

“Denise, you are to name your bear Smokey. Keep him close by and he will help your family remember not to judge your brothers and sisters. You will need to help your dad understand the importance of Smokey. This will be the first lesson of My Peace you will teach your dad.” Christ was very serious. I knew what he told me now was very important.

“Okay, I will.” I smiled at Him and He smiled back.

Most people thought He was always serious, but with

me He smiled and laughed a lot. He could be funny, too.

⋮⋮⋮⋮⋮⋮⋮⋮♥Doug♥⋮⋮⋮⋮⋮⋮⋮⋮

“Thanks for waiting for me, Dad.” Deon exclaimed as she tucked herself into the back seat.

“No problem.” I replied hesitantly. I was still contemplating what Denise had said.

“Is that a new bear, Denise?” Deon leaned up to the front seat to get a clearer view of what Denise held in her lap.

“Uh huh.” Denise triumphantly smiled.

Deon gently took him from Denise, “Ooh, why does he smell like cigarettes?”

“He doesn’t smell like that. I don’t smell anything.” Denise protectively took him back and cuddled him. “And his name is Smokey!”

“Smokey, as in Smokey the Bear?” Deon asked.

“Noo! Just Smokey because the nice lady in the cigarette store gave him to me.” Denise confidently replied.

“You went into the cigarette store? Dad, I didn’t think there was anything in there but cigarettes.” Deon looked to me to clarify things.

“I didn’t either.” I told her, “but I was wrong. There are very nice people in there, too.”

The drive home was one of banter between Denise and Deon. I wasn’t in a conversational mood. What Denise had said still greatly affected me.

Later that night, before retiring to bed, I found myself staring past the pages of a book. I had no idea what book it was, for each word I read replayed Denise’s statement over and over again.

“See Daddy, I told you there was more than cigarettes in the store. There are nice people there, too.”

“Yes.”

“Is it like a court room?” He looked at me like he wanted to hear what I was thinking.

“If that’s what you want.” I told him what I had been taught.

“What? I don’t understand.” He turned his head and looked right where Christ was. “If it is what I want it to be? Is it when I want it to be, too?”

“Kind of.” I couldn’t tell him any more because he was supposed to figure it out by himself.

“So . . . when is the final judgement?” Daddy was very confused.

It was funny watching the faces he made as he tried to figure it out.

“When you stop judging.” I told him. I wanted to tell him that when we stop judging others He stops judging us, but I knew Christ didn’t want me to yet.

Daddy looked back to where Christ was and smiled. He was starting to understand. Christ was helping him remember what he had been taught by his teachers while he was out of his body.

“Denise . . . while Adam and Eve were in the Garden of Eden . . . eating a piece of fruit didn’t get them kicked out, did it?” Daddy was finally seeing the truth about judgement.

“Duh, Daddy.” I smiled at him. I really wanted to tell him but Christ wouldn’t let me.

“Well then . . . what got them kicked out . . . I mean, what was the original sin . . . was it judgement?” Daddy now knew.

“Yes.”

“They judged something? That’s why it’s called the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Only through judgement is something seen as good or evil. The tree was really the tree of judgement.” I could see him growing.

Christ was very happy now. He was really smiling.

“Yes.”

“What did they judge?” He asked.

“Denise, he doesn’t need to know. It is not important what was judged.” Christ said. “He now knows that which he needs to know at this time.”

“I don’t know.” I told him and smiled at Christ.

“You don’t know or it doesn’t matter?” Daddy stopped for a second. “No, I guess it doesn’t matter, does it?”

Daddy closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

“Denise, if it was judgement that was their sin in the Garden of Eden, where they lived in our Father’s presence or in the oneness that I experienced, then it was judgement that separated them from the oneness. They judged something as either good or bad. It was judgement that got them kicked out of the Garden. Then every time we judge, we separate ourselves further from the oneness and His Peace, right?”

“Yes.”

“And every time we label something as good or bad, we judge it and move further away from His Peace, from Him. Peace comes through accepting, not judging.”

Daddy knew but he didn’t trust himself. He did trust me, though, and my gifts, just like Christ said he would.

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Then we shouldn’t judge, righteous or not. We should accept and love, right?”

“Yes. Just like the lady in the store did.”

“Now your father knows. Because of his great faith in you and your gifts, Denise, he was able to receive My Truth and Light. Without his faith in your gifts, he would doubt My Truth and continue searching for that which he already knows, and he would look for it where it is not and find that which it is not.”

“Thank you, Christ, for teaching Daddy.”

“The next lesson will be more difficult. To learn that which will bring your dad closer to Me, his heart and mind must be united in the desire to know. It is through very strong emotions, Denise, that the heart is awakened to a single desire. Through strong, compelling need the thoughts of the mind are focused on a single intent. When the awakened heart and the focused mind share the same hope or desire, then I may come and give of My Light and Truth. Many fail in that their hearts desire Me while their minds clutch those things contrary to Me or their minds are focused on Me while their hearts desire the things of this world. Your dad will unite his heart and mind in Me.” Christ looked at me. He knew I understood.

I felt a lot of happiness for Daddy because he had great things waiting for him.

I left Christ and Daddy in Daddy’s room and went in to watch a movie with Darin. It was a fun movie that I really wanted to see.

⋄⋄⋄⋄⋄⋄⋄⋄⋄⋄♥Doug♥⋄⋄⋄⋄⋄⋄⋄⋄⋄⋄

Denise left me alone in the room with Smokey. I picked him up and studied him as if he were the one who had taught me. I guess, in a way, he did teach me.

I raised him to my nose and inhaled deeply. The mingled smell of cigarettes and cigars assaulted my nose at first until I remembered again Denise’s comment, “See Daddy, there are more than just cigarettes in there. There are nice people there, too.”

Suddenly Smokey didn’t smell that bad. Dianne entered the bedroom.

“Doug, Deon and Denise were talking about some bear that Denise was given . . .” I held out Smokey to Dianne, “So what is the deal with the bear?” She took it from me and looked at the seemingly ordinary stuffed bear.

“Ooh, it reeks of cigarettes.” Dianne wrinkled her nose and handed Smokey back to me.

“Not really, not when you get to know Smokey.” I said off-handedly.

“What?” Dianne sat down on the bed with me expecting an explanation.

I started the story with how I couldn't say no to Denise's desire to enter the cigarette store. I told of my fear of being seen inside the store and then continued on to narrate the rest of the events including what Denise had told me of Adam and Eve and the final judgement.

“All that came about just because of this one smelly little bear?” She asked.

“Yes, just because of Smokey, our little judgement bear.”

*Chapter 8**“In His Hand . . .”*

“They called again.” Dianne said. The tone of her voice announced the caller.

“Not again. I already told those people at the hospital that we don’t have any money.”

“Well, they called again. Are you going to call them back?”

“Why? So they can hassle me again? They just don’t get it. No job means no money.”

“Don’t tell me, tell them.” Dianne handed me the phone.

For the past four weeks, hospital collections had been calling trying to arrange payment on the one-hundred-thirty-thousand dollar bill Denise had run up. I had no job, no savings, no retirement, nothing worth even a thousand dollars, and yet they expected me to pay on that enormous bill.

“I don’t want to call them.” I stated.

“They’re not going away. At least talk to them, maybe they know something about the Medicaid.”

Two weeks before Christmas the hospital had put me in contact with the state Medicaid people to see if we could arrange payment through them. I had been willing to try at first but they had an endless number of hoops to jump through and I couldn’t produce half the information they required.

“You can’t keep putting it off. They deserve at least a call.” Dianne pointed at the phone in my hand.

“It won’t make any difference. But if that’s what you want, fine, I’ll call them right now.” I gave in. I didn’t have it in me to fight with Dianne about something as

trivial as a phone call.

“Thank you.” Dianne smiled.

I went into the living room.

“Thank you for calling the Childrens Hospital. This is Shawna.”

“Hi Shawna, I’m Doug Mendenhall. I got a message that you called.”

“Yes, Mr. Mendenhall, I called about your account. It seems that nothing has been done to arrange payment.” She was polite and straight to the point.

“Yes, well it’s like I told the last person that called. I have no job, no savings, no nothing. I’m fighting just to put food on the table. I can’t make payments and I have no rich uncle.” I tried not to sound angry and frustrated but it wasn’t working.

“I’m sorry to hear about your trouble but we need to make some kind of arrangement.” She wouldn’t let up. “My records state that you were trying to arrange payment through Medicaid.”

“Yes, your records are right but I haven’t heard a thing from them.”

“Well, may I suggest you call them and see how far along the paperwork is and then if you would get back in touch with me so that I can update your account, I would be grateful.” Prim and proper the whole way.

“Okay, I’ll do that and be in touch with you.” I replied.

“Thank you Mr. Mendenhall, have a nice day.” The phone went dead.

It was mid-January and I hadn’t brought any money in since November. We had lived off the charity of others while Denise was in the hospital, and thanks to the Christmas spirit, our needs were met in December. But there is no holiday in January to inspire generosity and with Denise out of the hospital, there was no tragic event to spur on charity. We were fast becoming destitute.

The phone call brought back to mind our need for food and rent. I bowed my head.

“Father in Heaven,” I whispered, “please help me provide for my family. We need food and rent. Please, Father, tell me what to do.”

“Daddy, will you play a game with me?” It was Denise; she held a guessing game in her hand.

It was the same game we had often played in the hospital. You each picked a card with a cartoon type character on it and then you played 20 questions until one of you was able to deduce the character the other person had.

“Oh, Denise, I don’t think so.” I didn’t feel like doing anything but wallowing in self-pity.

“Please, Daddy!” She smiled at me.

I was about to reject the offer again when, in my mind, I heard, ‘ . . . nothing energizes a soul like taking part in the dreams of a child . . . ’ I couldn’t say no, I needed that energizing and I needed to forget my problems again.

“Okay, maybe just a game or two.”

“Yeah!” Her squeals of delight were like a salve to an open wound. I began to turn from my wallowing.

We each chose a card and I began.

“Do you have glasses?”

“Nope. Are you a boy?” She asked.

“Yes.”

“Are you Peter?” She smiled as if she knew my answer already.

“Yes, how did you know?” One guess and she knew my card. “Were you reading my mind?”

“Nope.”

We played again and once more she guessed correctly after just one question. I began to wonder what she was doing.

“How did you do that? Can you tell what card I have

“It will be all right, Denise. This is what will turn his heart and mind to Me.” Christ smiled and I felt His love.

“Okay.”

“How do you do that?” Daddy asked me after I told him the card he was holding without asking him any questions.

“Denise, tell him you do not know.” Christ told me.

“I dunno. It’s easy. I just want to know so I do.” I looked at Daddy and I knew he was hoping I could do this to make money. He hurt a lot because we owed a lot of money.

“Christ, I’m scared. He wants me to get him money and I can’t do that.” I looked at Christ, then I looked behind Daddy and saw Lucifer.

“Child, I am always here. You do not need to fear.” Christ touched my head and I felt better.

“What about Daddy? Lucifer is yelling at him.” I looked at Daddy and watched as Lucifer and two of my brothers yelled and poked at him, trying to get him to ask me to make him money, lots of money.

“I’ll ruin you, girl! Leave your daddy to me!” Lucifer spat at me.

“Peace, Denise. Lucifer, you will not harm Denise.” Christ commanded.

“Denise, can you do that with anything? I mean, could you do that with, say, lottery numbers?” Daddy repeated what Lucifer said to him. It made me sad.

“Yes.” I answered him. I didn’t want to but I had to.

“You mean you could tell me the winning lottery numbers before they select them?” Daddy smiled and so did Lucifer.

“Yes.”

Lucifer yelled. I could tell he was very happy because Daddy was thinking of how to use me to get money.

“Can I leave, Christ? I don’t want to answer any more

of Daddy's questions." I was sad that Daddy was listening to Lucifer instead of trying to feel Christ.

"No Denise, he needs to learn this and this is how he chose to learn it. It will be alright, I will always be with him and you." Christ put his arms around me and I felt stronger.

"Denise, when you were sick in the hospital it cost a lot of money. The hospital wants us to pay that money and we don't have any. We need rent and we need food. Do you understand?" Daddy held my hand and talked very nice to me. I knew he just wanted to get me to win him some money.

"Christ, he is trying to trick me into getting him money."

"It is alright, tell him you understand." Christ said.

"If you don't help him, Denise, he'll hate you. You know that, don't you?" Lucifer laughed at me.

"I'm not listening to you!" I didn't like it when Lucifer talked to me. He never made me feel good.

"Yes, I understand." I answered Daddy.

"Good. Now you have a very special gift that can help us pay the hospital. I promise you that we will only use the money to pay back the hospital and pay rent and buy food, okay? If you will tell me the numbers I need, I will go enter the lottery tomorrow. Will you do that for me?" Daddy was very excited. He really believed that he would use the money only for good.

"Tell him, Denise, to ask Me and I will prepare a way for everything to be taken care of." Christ told me.

"Okay."

"He'll hate you if you don't give him the numbers, Denise. Just give him the numbers! It doesn't matter, remember Jesus won't leave you. He promised He would always be with you." Lucifer wouldn't leave me alone.

"Daddy, look in here," I pointed to his heart. I wanted

hits me! For once I can see the light at the end of the tunnel, and just as quickly a ten-year-old takes it all away from me. I was so confused. Why did she tell me those things if she wasn't willing to use them for us? I knew she wanted me to pray about it, and I would, but I was pretty sure this was the answer to my earlier prayers.

All of a sudden I felt really strange, like I had stepped in something but couldn't really tell because there wasn't a smell to it.

I was really confused.

“Doug, will you please ask the Bishop for help?” Dianne urged. “There isn't much food left and the landlord called about rent again. Please promise me, Doug, that you will talk to him tomorrow at church.” Dianne was very insistent.

“Okay, I'll talk to him tomorrow.” I looked down and walked away.

I couldn't believe this. Two days ago I learned that Denise had the power and ability to completely take away our financial stress, and yet she refused. I had asked her over and over the past two days and each time she kind of scowled at me and told me, “No, Daddy, look inside.”

If she said that one more time, I thought I would strangle her. Why couldn't she just give me those numbers?

I had prayed every night and morning that her heart would be softened, that she would tell me what I needed to know, but she was as stubborn as I was. She left me no choice but to go begging to the Bishop tomorrow. Oh, I hated the thought of that. I just wanted to provide for my family and she was standing in my way.

Just yesterday, I had talked to our caseworker at Medicaid. She gave me a list of documents that they

needed before they could rule on our case. But because I hadn't licensed my survey business, I didn't have the documents she wanted. I tried to tell her that I couldn't get some of the information, but she was very insistent and wouldn't be satisfied until I promised her something I couldn't deliver.

“Bishop, can we talk?” I cornered him after services.

“Sure, Doug, come into my office where it's a little more private. You know, this actually works out well because I need to talk to you.” He held the door for me.

“Sit down, Doug, make yourself comfortable.” He smiled warmly and took the chair behind his desk.

“What can I do for you?”

“Well, you see, Bishop,” I bowed my head, “I haven't been able to work since Denise was in the hospital. I've tried but everything has gone wrong and, well, we have very little food left and our landlord is threatening to kick us out of the house if I don't give him the rent. The hospital and state are arguing about the medical bills and we are caught in the middle without a penny. I guess what I'm saying . . . no, what I'm asking is, well . . . please, we need rent and food. Can the Church help us?” I finished with flowing tears.

I had been raised to be self-reliant and to actually admit that I wasn't, hurt me more than I thought it could. I couldn't believe I had just asked someone else to provide for my family.

“Oh, Doug, you know we love you and understand your pain. The Church would be honored to help. How much is your rent and who is your landlord and I will take care of it. As far as food goes, we have food vouchers redeemable at the local market that I will gladly give you. We love you and want to help you. You have been there in the past for

us donating your time and money, so much so, that we cannot deny you in your time of need. Thank you for letting us help you.” He smiled again.

Bitterness filled me, I was angry at having to ask. If only Denise . . .

“Thank you, Bishop. I don’t know what to say,” I replied, his generosity amazed me.

“Now that that is taken care of, I need to talk to you about something that troubles me.” As he began his posture changed. He fidgeted with the pen on his desk. “I received a call last week from a former member of our congregation. He kept me on the phone for almost an hour as he told me a story he had heard.”

He lowered his eyes. His discomfort was beginning to affect me. “Doug, it was Jeff, your good friend and former neighbor, who called me. The story you told him had him very upset.”

He looked at me as if expecting something. I had no clue what.

“Doug, he asked – no, demanded, that you be removed from our congregation. He said you were involved in things unholy and blasphemous before God. He warned me not to let you infect anyone else in the congregation.” He paused to let his words register with me.

“Wha . . . Jeff said what . . . about me? I don’t understand.” I was shocked, stunned and incredibly hurt.

“Doug, I told Jeff to mind his own business and that I didn’t need his counsel on what to do with my congregation. He hung up but he wasn’t satisfied with my response. I feel that he will try to cause you more problems.” He took courage in the fact that he had stood up for me. He raised his eyes to meet mine.

“I need you to tell me what you told Jeff.”

“I just told him what was happening with Denise.” I answered, still shocked, trying desperately to understand

Jeff's reaction.

"Doug, will you tell me what has been going on with Denise?" He tried to get me to focus on what he wanted to hear; namely, Denise's story.

"Well, since she woke up from the coma amazing things have been happening," I started but hesitated. If the story had that effect on Jeff, what would it do to the Bishop?

Tell him about her gifts.

The voice, that is more felt than heard, whispered.

It was a feeling I realized I hadn't felt for some days now.

"Bishop, she came back to us with no veil."

The Bishop sat back in his chair.

I told him how, just a few days after coming home from the hospital, she revealed that she could see auras. I told him of how she could see spirits and then I retold the story of the slumber party. I didn't mention Denise's ability to leave her body and be taught by ancient prophets but I did talk about the three days she spent with our Heavenly Father and Christ and how she still sees Christ at times, how He talks to her and teaches her.

I was going to tell him about her ability to know things like the cards and lottery numbers but I was told not to.

I then expressed how much I had learned about my Savior and how my love for Him had grown, thanks to Denise's gifts.

I noticed the Bishop's posture. He had gone from stiff to edgy. He was sitting forward in his chair intently studying me.

"She has greatly blessed the whole family, Bishop. We know now that the Savior is our personal friend and guide. We know that He will come and sit with us should we ask Him. His love for us has become real as we have learned to know Him." I finished somewhat timidly.

“Are you sure that who she sees is Jesus Christ?”

He startled me.

“Yes.”

“Are you positive? Satan is very good at deception. Did she ask to shake the Savior’s hand?”

“Shake His hand? No. She says she hugs Him, though.”

“Are you serious?” Now he looked confused.

“Bishop, I have no doubt that she actually sees the Savior. I know, in part, because I, too, have felt Him with us. I’m positive she is not being deceived.”

“Okay, I just wanted to make sure.” He calmed down.

“I don’t think Lucifer can give you the Peace that we have been experiencing.”

He changed his line of thought.

“Well, I guess the Savior would spend time with a child. He did love the little children.” He thought for a moment.

“Doug, that is a very special and sacred story. I wonder if you should tell anyone else. The Savior often warned against throwing pearls before swine. You know, some things are wasted on the unbelieving. They just aren’t meant to understand. I think that is why Jeff called me. He’s not meant to understand Denise’s gifts and abilities.”

“But I was sure, Bishop, that I needed to tell him. I felt it was okay for him to know.”

“Doug, even Mary, the mother of Christ, pondered many things in her heart without divulging them. I worry how others in the congregation will react to Denise’s story. Will you do me a favor and not tell the story anymore, unless you are absolutely positive the Lord wants you to share it?”

“Okay, Bishop.”

“Great! Thanks for sharing those experiences with me. I know the Lord will help you in deciding who to share

them with and who not to share them with.” He finished and searched in his drawer for the food vouchers.

“I’ll drop the rent check by first thing in the morning. God bless you.”

“Thank you again for helping us.”

I left his office with renewed vigor, lighter; some of my troubles had been temporarily lifted. Even though he had a hard time understanding what I had told him about Denise, he was truly concerned for us and I was very grateful for that.

I will provide.

“What?” I asked but no one was around.

I love you and will provide.

Of course! Denise had insisted that the Lord would provide for us if I but looked inside for Him. She was right, He did provide.

Maybe the lottery wasn’t meant to feed my family or pay the rent.

Maybe the Lord wanted me to rely on Him, not on Denise.

Maybe the Lord preferred this to the lottery because it gave others the opportunity to serve Him.

As I walked home I felt a strong feeling of Peace knowing that the Lord’s will had been done.

But what about the medical bills?

January moved aside for February and before I knew it, February was looking longingly towards March. Over a month had passed by since I met with the Bishop and we still had our home and food on the table. I had tried one last time to get Denise to help me select some lottery numbers but she had stubbornly refused, so I dropped any more attempts to persuade her to help.

At one point, I had actually considered taking Denise to

Las Vegas but somehow knew that her response to gambling there wouldn't be any different than that of the lottery. Finally I decided that there must be some other way that Denise could help me find the money to pay off the hospital. I just needed to figure out what it was.

"Doug, the phone's for you."

"What? Okay, I'm coming." I put aside my book.

"Hello."

"Mr. Mendenhall?"

"Yes . . ."

"This is Clair Poulson from the Medicaid office, we talked about two weeks ago."

I remembered her.

"Yes."

"Well, I've been working on your case and there are still some documents that I need before we can rule on your request. Do you still have the list? I sent it to you last week."

"Yes, I've got it but I can't get all those things."

"But do you understand that unless I have those papers in my hand by this Friday, I will be forced to close your case and you will not receive any state aid?"

"Yes, but . . ."

"It is very important I get those papers in the next few days. I called just to remind you. Please don't forget, we want to help you but without those papers our hands are tied."

"Okay, I'll do what I can."

"Great. I'll call you again after I get your papers. Goodbye."

I was grateful she hung up.

"Doug?" Dianne poked her head around the corner.

"It was the state Medicaid office. They want the papers by Friday or else they'll close our case."

“What are we going to do, Doug? We don’t have those records.”

“I don’t know . . . Denise! Come here.” I called out to my one last hope of paying off the hospital.

“Yeah, Daddy?”

“I know you won’t gamble with the lottery or go to Vegas with me, but there has to be something you can do to help me find the money. The hospital wants to sue us and Medicaid won’t help. You’re our last hope, sweetie. I need you to help me find the money.”

“But Daddy, I told you, look in here,” she pointed to my heart. “Just ask Jesus, He’ll help you.”

“I did, Denise. Now it’s your turn. How can we get the money?”

“No, Daddy, really ask Jesus. He’ll help you.”

“No, Denise, I need you!” She was frustrating me. How could I make her see she was the answer to my prayers?

“No.” She folded her arms and refused to say anymore.

“Great! Now what do I do?”

“Trust Jesus.” She blurted out and walked away.

I fell asleep that night wondering how I could use Denise’s gifts to come up with the money we needed.

The next morning I arose early, eager to start the day. While soaking in a hot shower I felt a very strong impression that I needed to go to the Childrens Hospital. I ignored it at first but it wouldn’t go away.

“Fine, then, I’ll go.” I mumbled.

After dressing I called to Denise.

“Yeah, Daddy?” She answered.

“Am I supposed to go to the Childrens Hospital today?” I asked.

Despite her unwillingness to help me with the finances, I knew she still talked to Christ and that I could talk to Him through her.

“Uh, yes.”

“Does it matter what time I go up?”

“No.”

“Does someone up there need my help?”

“Yes.”

“Well, would you like to go up to the Childrens Hospital with me?”

“Sure!”

“Doug?” Dianne appeared.

“Yes, dear.”

“Don’t forget that tonight is the family birthday party. We all need to go.” She reminded me.

“Oh, I’d almost forgotten it. Don’t worry, we’ll only spend an hour or so at the hospital then meet you at the party. It’s at your parent’s house, isn’t it?”

“Yes. Please don’t be late.”

It wasn’t until later in the afternoon that Denise and I were finally free to leave.

÷÷÷÷÷÷÷÷÷÷♥Denise♥÷÷÷÷÷÷÷÷÷÷

“Denise, you are not allowed to lead him anywhere or say anything about why he is here.” Christ said.

I knew what was going to happen and I was excited that Daddy would finally learn the lesson.

“Okay.”

“Okay, Denise, we’re here. Which patient is it that we need to visit with?” Daddy said as we pushed through the doors.

“Look in here, Daddy. He will tell you.” I pointed to his heart.

“Okay then, is the patient on the third floor?” Daddy wanted to play the guessing game.

“Tell him you don’t know. Let him guide you around the hospital.” Christ told me.

“Okay. This will be fun.”

I just hoped it wouldn't take him too long cause Mommy wanted us to go to grandma's party tonight.

“I don't know.” I answered Daddy.

“Well, will you ask your Friend?” He wanted me to ask Christ.

“He won't tell me.”

“He won't? Okay, then let's go up to the third floor.” Daddy wasn't sure where we should go but that was okay because it didn't matter.

We walked around and around the third floor. Each room we passed Daddy would ask me if the person we needed to help was in that room. Each time I told him to look inside and each time he said okay but he never did look inside.

We stopped walking.

“Denise, we've walked the entire third floor twice. Is the patient on the third floor or not?”

“I dunno.”

“How long will we have to walk around, Christ?” I knew Daddy wasn't looking to Christ like I told him to.

“Until he gives up and needs Me.” Christ said.

“Okay.”

“Okay, Denise, it has been almost two hours of walking around the hospital and every time I ask you who the patient is or if they are in a room, you either say ‘I dunno’ or ‘Look in here.’ It's getting late and we don't want to miss the party so I'll sit here and you do whatever it is you do and ask your Friend who it is we need to help.” Daddy sat down and folded his arms and just looked at me.

“Christ, he is getting angry. I don't want him to be mad at me. Can I help him a little?” I asked.

“No. If you help him, Denise, he won't learn. Learning and growing are not always easy. I won't leave you, everything will be fine.” Christ smiled at me and then

gave me a hug. I felt his love for me and Daddy.

“He won’t tell me.” I told Daddy and he got angrier.

“Fine, then we’ll just have to come up again tomorrow. We can’t miss the party. Your mother would be very upset at me if we did.” I could see he wanted to leave.

“Denise, you must stay until he softens his heart towards me.”

“Okay, but how do I stop him from going?” I asked Him.

“You know how.”

“Okay.”

“Daddy, please, we can’t go yet. Tomorrow will be too late. We have to stay. He told me we must stay!” I had tears in my eyes because I was afraid Daddy would leave and Christ would be upset with Daddy.

“But Denise, Mommy is expecting us at the party. We have to go!”

“NO. We can’t go yet. Someone here needs us very badly. Please, Daddy, let’s go walk around the hospital again and if you look inside you’ll know who it is!” I begged Daddy. His heart melted a little because he didn’t like to see me cry.

“Okay, we have time to walk the hospital once more.” Daddy wasn’t happy but he was staying.

We walked all four floors but he wouldn’t look inside. He just kept asking me questions. Finally he stopped outside where the kids with cancer are and got mad at me.

“Great! We’re late and Mom’s going to shoot me.” He looked very angry.

“You know, maybe this is all a game to you but I have a life and your mother is part of it. I don’t want to upset her! We are late and need to leave.” He started to leave me.

“No, Daddy, please stay. Christ wants you to stay.” I begged.

“How do you know? Maybe you don’t talk to Christ.

but I don't know who. Denise, on the other hand, knows who but won't say anything. And what's worse, she won't let me leave until we help this mystery person. Now Dianne's going to kill me for being late to the family party. I'm just confused." I dumped my story on Mike.

"So, it sounds like you could be there for a while."

"I hope not."

"Would you like a little company while you wait? I can bring David with me to occupy Denise," he suggested. David, Mike's youngest son, was only a few years older than Denise.

"I don't want to put you out but that would be great."

"I wasn't doing anything anyway. Mind if bring up a letter I wrote for my Dad? I'd like you to read it."

"Sure, Mike."

"Great! See you in a few minutes." He hung up the phone.

I walked back over to the couch where Denise contentedly sat.

"Denise, Mike's coming up to wait with us and he's bringing David. Is it okay?" I asked her, knowing she would ask the Savior.

"Sure!"

"Christ doesn't care if Mike and David come and sit with us?"

"No."

Frustration consumed me.

"Great." I said.

When Mike arrived with David he found one very happy ten-year-old sitting with a seriously depressed man.

"Hi, Doug. You don't look so good." Mike commented.

Denise jumped up and grabbed David's hand before I could say anything.

"Daddy, I'm going to show David the hospital!"

“Great, why not?” I didn’t care what she did.

Denise whisked him away down the hall and into the elevator.

Mike sat down by me on the couch.

“Doug, there is a reason you’re going through this. I don’t know what it is but it is important.” His comment didn’t reassure me at all.

“Sure, whatever.”

“I was just going to give you a copy of the letter to my Dad but I think I would rather read it to you. Do you mind?” Mike ignored my attitude.

“Sure, if you want. I’ve got all night.”

I finally accepted that I was not going to make it to the party, that Dianne was going to kill me and that I had no idea who I needed to help. It didn’t matter what happened now.

Mike took out a notebook.

“All that’s a letter?” I asked.

“Well, I had a lot to say to my Dad.” He smiled and started reading the lengthy letter.

I wasn’t really interested in it so I didn’t pay much attention. After a few minutes, Mike put down the notebook.

“Just needed to stretch for a second.” He stood, took a deep breath and smiled.

He started reading again. Within two sentences his whole demeanor changed. I was looking at Mike, but it wasn’t Mike. Even his voice was different.

I started to pay attention now to what he said. It wasn’t a letter to his Dad.

I listened for a few more minutes. The words he spoke held no meaning to me. I tried to concentrate on them but the feelings, the intense feelings, pushed away all the meaning. It wasn’t the words that were important, it was the feelings. Whoever was speaking through Mike was

communicating directly to my heart, no, to my heart and mind, for I instantly felt and understood with clarity what was being communicated.

You have tried to twist Denise's wondrous gifts to your own purposes. You have tried to use her gifts to buffer your pride against the truth. You have tried to use her gifts to satisfy your own desires and lusts. You have tried to use her gifts to bring you the things of this world. You have caused her great pain and sorrow through your greed.

As I heard my actions described, I knew the immense pain they had caused.

"Stop . . . please, stop," I mouthed. I wanted to shut it out but I was powerless to stop listening. Understanding continued.

I offered you love; you have shown Me pride. I offered you Peace, you chose greed. I waited; you refused to ask.

I didn't want to know any more. I tried to leave but couldn't.

"No more . . . please," I pleaded but I had to stay and listen.

You will stop immediately the struggle for control of her gifts. If you choose not to stop I will replace you with someone else. My work will go forth with or without you. Great blessings await you or terrible misfortunes will follow you. The choice is yours. Seek no more to destroy My work.

Follow Me or leave.

"Please, please help me." I silently begged. I didn't think I could bear the pain of truth anymore. I needed help.

I now knew I was the patient.

I have blessed Denise with wonderful gifts. Gifts meant to help everyone. Gifts meant to spread My Love through these times of trouble. Gifts meant to bring others the Hope and Peace I have blessed you with. Her gifts are for My purposes.

She is true and faithful to Me; will you be?

My heart broke.

Mike finished reading. His voice changed. His face became familiar. He became Mike again.

“What time is it?” he asked.

“It’s just about eight p.m., Mike.” I answered.

“Wow, it feels like I just started reading and yet it’s been, what? Forty-five minutes?” He was clearly confused.

“More like an hour.”

David and Denise stood motionless by the couch.

“How long have you two been standing there?” I asked them.

“Not long.” Denise replied.

“I was the patient.” I said. Denise took it as a question.

“Yes.”

“We can leave now, can’t we?”

“Yes.” She smiled.

Mike watched me.

“Did I read the letter?” he asked.

“No, Mike. What I heard wasn’t your letter.”

“It was Christ, Daddy. He was the one talking to you.” Denise explained.

“He had a message for you and I was the tool, wasn’t I?” Mike said.

“Yes, Mike. Do you remember anything that you said

to me?" I didn't think he would.

"Well . . . no." He smiled.

"Good. It was what I needed to hear but didn't want to. Let's go home, Denise." I averted my eyes from her.

"It's okay, Daddy. I love you."

I looked into her eyes expecting to see judgement or condemnation for what I had done but it wasn't there. Only love.

"Thanks for coming, Mike."

"My pleasure, Doug."

The four of us headed down the stairs and out the main doors together in silence. As we separated to go to our cars, I thanked Mike and David one more time.

We pulled into our driveway. I took my daughter by the hand and together we walked towards the front door where more disappointment awaited. As I opened the door I looked back into the night sky but found no solace.

"Doug, phone!" Dianne yelled.

At least she was speaking to me. After I missed the family party, it took her three days before she would speak to me. She had been furious.

"Thanks, dear. I'll get it in here." I said from the living room.

"Hello."

"Mr. Mendenhall?"

"Yes."

"This is Clair Poulson from the Medicaid office, we talked last week."

"Yes, I remember." I expected her to announce that she had closed our case and that we were on our own for the hospital bill.

"Well, I just wanted to let you know that we have paid Childrens Hospital and they have accepted our payment as

payment in full. Also, you will be covered for the two months of therapy.”

“Really! It’s paid in full?”

“Yes it is, Mr. Mendenhall. Thank you for letting us help you. If there is anything else I can do, please let me know.”

“Sure.”

“Have a great day. Goodbye.”

“But I didn’t send you any of the papers you wanted.” I said to the dial tone.

“Doug, who was that?” Dianne entered the room.

“It was Medicaid.” I was still stunned.

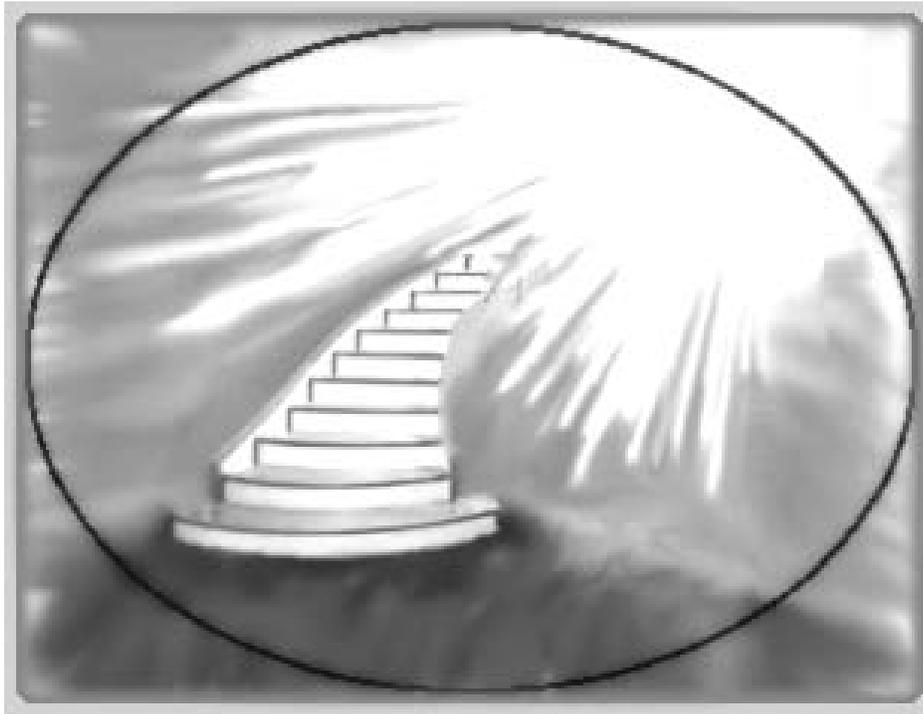
“They won’t pay, will they?” Her face dropped.

“No, they did pay. They paid the entire bill . . .”

Silence.

Denise’s head appeared from around the corner.

“See, I told you Christ would take care of it!” Her head disappeared; laughter filled the room.



*Chapter 9**“Hope . . .”*

Five weeks had passed since the experience at the hospital. I pondered often those first few days on what He meant by Denise’s gifts spreading His love and peace.

Then two weeks after the hospital experience, Denise and I were directed to an old friend. We met with him and his wife at a restaurant and told them the story; actually I spoke and Denise sat and smiled. They seemed somehow changed when I finished.

Then it happened again. We found ourselves in the home of a neighbor.

Within a week we were spending almost every night at a different house telling the story, relating the experiences that had changed our lives. If we weren’t directed to somebody then we would receive a phone call from a friend of a friend.

“Hello.”

“Doug Mendenhall?”

“Yes, that’s me.”

“Hi, I’m Jodi Peterson. You don’t know me but I’m a friend of the Webb’s. Lisa Webb gave me your number.”

“Lisa Webb?” A week ago Denise and I had been directed to an acquaintance and his wife.

We went and related to them our experiences and talked about Denise’s gifts. Both Cliff and Lisa seemed very touched by what we told them. They thanked us and asked if they could mention our story to a friend who was really depressed. It was fine with me.

I guessed Jodi was that friend.

“Yes, I just spent some time over at their house a week ago.”

“Yes. Well, Lisa tried to explain to me what you had told them and I was very touched with what she had to say. So much so that I knew I had to have you come over and talk to my husband. I think he needs to hear your story.”

“Okay, will you hold on for a second?” I put my hand over the mouthpiece. “Denise! Denise.”

“Yeah, Daddy.”

“Are we supposed to go over to the Peterson’s?”

“Who are the Peterson’s, Daddy?”

“It doesn’t matter. Are we supposed to talk to them?”

“Yes.”

I put the receiver back up to my ear.

“Jodi?”

“Yes.”

“We’d love to come over and talk with both of you. When would you like us to stop by?”

“Tomorrow night would be great, if it’s not too much of an imposition.”

“That’s fine, just give me your address . . .”

I often wondered what was it that these people found in the story of our experiences.

“Hey, Doug!” A voice yelled out a greeting as a passing car stopped next to where I stood.

“Hi,” I paused and looked down into the car to see Rob’s face. I hadn’t really spoken to him since Denise and I told him and his wife of Denise’s visit with Erik.

“How are you doing, Rob?”

“Fine, I just had to stop when I saw you walking there. I wanted to thank you for that letter you gave me a few weeks back.” He shifted the car to park.

Every so often I felt prompted to write a letter to a friend or acquaintance. I never knew what I was going to say until I sat at the computer and started writing. Many

times I had no idea what I had written until I reread it after I finished. I had sent one of those letters to Rob.

“I’m glad you liked it. Some interesting stuff, isn’t it?” I barely remembered what was written in his letter. But I knew it was filled with things that he needed.

“Yeah, it really was. I’d love to sit down and talk to you about some of those things you wrote, and about Denise. Jenn and I still talk about what you told us of her visit with Erik.”

“I’d love to talk to you anytime you want.”

Not yet, he is not ready.

“How about if you call me, Rob, and we’ll get together.” Somehow I knew he wouldn’t call.

“Great, I’ll do that.”

We spent the next 15 minutes chatting about trivial things, always skirting around what he really wanted to talk about. Finally he shifted into drive and disappeared down the street.

And I headed home.

÷÷÷÷÷÷÷÷÷÷♥Rob♥÷÷÷÷÷÷÷÷÷÷

I don’t know why I stopped to talk to Doug. I was in a hurry to get home and yet I knew that I had to stop. We talked about a lot of things but not what I really wanted to.

The mental torture I had been going through the past eight years was finally taking control of my life. His letter to me hinted that he just might have something for me to help me regain what I had lost.

Seven years ago, right before Erik and Ethan, our twins, were born, I had been diagnosed as severely depressed. It took my wife and mother-in-law to drag me in to see a doctor; one who was eager to prescribe anti-depressants.

After Erik’s birth – he was born with a multitude of birth defects while his twin Ethan was born normal – his

many problems didn't help my mental condition but it didn't appear to hurt it either. Having Erik and, to a lesser extent, Jenn, my wife, to worry about gave me a way to conceal the depression I suffered from and it also gave me an excuse for my somewhat erratic behavior. I dutifully took the drugs prescribed but all they seemed to do was deaden the pain, not cure my depression.

Then as Erik stabilized over the next three years, I realized that not only had the drugs deadened the pain of depression, they had deadened everything else, too. I found it hard to feel anything at all. And then the unthinkable happened.

The previous October we had taken our first family vacation with Erik. He was seven and we decided that he needed to see something besides our home and the hospital. So we rented a van, packed up the entire family and headed for Jenn's sisters' home. Within twelve hours of arriving at the house, Erik drowned in their pool. Our oldest boy, AJ, found him floating face down and pulled him out. Because of Erik's trach – the hole in his throat that he breathes through – there was no way for him to hold his breath and because of his physical problems, he had no hope of keeping his trach above water. When he fell into the pool his fate was sealed and he drowned. Jenn raced to him and performed CPR, starting his heart beating again. It was a long few minutes before he started breathing. He was rushed to the hospital where we were told that he would probably die. His lungs wouldn't be able to recover from the damage of the drowning.

Something finally broke through the barrier that all those years of anti-depressants had built up. I finally felt something. It was great fear and severe pain.

In desperation I found an isolated place. While the trauma team worked on my son, I poured out my soul to God. After several minutes of pleading and begging

through a curtain of tears, I finally accepted His will. Whatever might happen was according to His plan for us. At that precise moment, I was filled with a comforting peace. I knew that I completely accepted whatever was to come, death or life. I was okay with it, and even more, I was grateful for whatever outcome the Lord blessed us with.

Erik awoke the next morning and began entertaining the nurses in the intensive care unit. The damage the doctors feared never materialized. The day after that, Erik was released to us and within twenty-four hours of his release, we were on the road headed for home.

That whole experience awoke me to an acute realization of the deadness I felt. I began from that time on to search for something to awaken me so that I might feel again.

Then one Sunday at church Doug told me how Denise, his daughter, could see auras. He told me that Erik had a white one. Weeks after that he and Denise came to my home to tell me that she had visited with Erik outside his body.

It sounded far-fetched, but the more I heard the more I felt that within the story he told, was something I was searching for. Then Doug sent me a letter two months later that talked of my fears and gave me reason to think that I might burst through the barrier of deadness I was trapped behind.

So when I saw Doug walking along the sidewalk I really had no choice but to stop. He had something I needed, but what that was, I didn't really know.

Five weeks had passed since I stopped Doug along side the road. My search seemed completely futile. I was sliding further and further down into the depths of depression – hopeless. No amount of medication helped.

I came home early from work. I couldn't stay. As bright as the sun shown I could only see darkness.

I hid in my office, away from my wife and sons. Pain and anguish are for the solitary.

"Please, Father, I can take no more. I will do whatever thou requires of me. Father, I don't think I can take the pain, the deadness any more. Father, please..." My pleas surged from my lips as the tears flowed from my eyes.

Once more in my mind's eye I saw a dream from years ago. The dream never dimmed, always waiting for a chance to be replayed. The dream I didn't want to see again.

–I was just fifteen years old, filled with hope for my future and pride in my abilities. I remembered pouring out my soul to my Father in Heaven as I knelt by my bed one night and feeling His spirit surround and fill me. I remember how grateful I was for all my choice blessings especially for the blessing of being one of His chosen. I climbed into bed and quickly fell asleep. §

I was in a huge field. As I stood I noticed the sky was gray and filled with clouds as if it threatened a downpour, but there was no smell of rain or any hint of a breeze. I looked about me and saw hundreds of people milling around in the field.

I started to drift through the crowd. I looked into the faces of the people I passed and they were all filled with pain, with sorrow. Few of the people met my eyes and when one did I

was shocked by the hopelessness I saw there. I found a space in the middle of the field that was elevated enough for me to see out over the heads of those closest to me. As I looked out over the crowd I saw not hundreds, but thousands of people extending beyond my sight. Cries of pain and anguish reached my ears. I stepped down from the rise and melted into the crowd and began to echo their cries and pleadings for help.

Suddenly, thunder rumbled through the field and we all looked up as one to see the dark clouds part and bright rays of light fall upon the rise where I had been standing. In the rays of light a stairway descended, resting upon the rise.

I looked at the foot of the stairs and noticed that they were flared as if to welcome all who climbed them. On each side of the stairs stood a majestic man robed in white, holding a scroll. I looked again to the source of the light and saw a multitude of people in white surrounding the upper portion of the staircase.

My attention was quickly pulled back to the foot of the stairs by the sound of names being called out. I realized that the two men robed in white

were reading names from the scrolls they held at arms length. As the robed men called out a name, someone came forth from the multitude and began ascending the staircase. Peace and joy flowed from those climbing.

I felt very anxious as I waited for them to call out my name. In that moment I wanted to ascend the stairs more than I had ever wanted anything in my life. I knew that joy and peace awaited all those who climbed the stairs.

I looked around me and realized that the crowd had dwindled to a small number of people, perhaps only hundreds.

Fear enveloped me. I knew the men were reaching the end of the list of names.

As one, they stopped calling out and rolled up the scrolls. As I realized my name had not been read I panicked and ran to the foot of the stairs. I dropped to my knees and begged them to check once more for my name. I pleaded with them to let me ascend the stairs. All the others who were left with me also begged and pleaded.

The men in white looked at me with compassion and one of them told me that there was no mistake, I was to stay. They turned away from me and ascended

into that beautiful light from above. I watched as the men and the stairs disappeared. The clouds swallowed up the spot where the light had descended.

I stood and found myself again on the little rise. I looked out over the people and realized that they were looking at me. They began crowding towards me from all sides, pleading for help. Their tears fell on my clothes as they crowded in closer.

I looked back to heaven and felt great despair, for I had been left behind despite all that I could do. I looked back over the people who were begging me for something. I knew I had nothing to give them. I too, had been left behind. ✎

I woke with a clear recollection of the dream. I knew at once that it wasn't an ordinary dream. It felt different, important somehow. As I showered and got ready for school the dream played out over and over in my mind, becoming more clear each time.

That night I again went to my knees, this time to ask for an interpretation of the dream. I couldn't accept the meaning I understood, and so I asked for a different one.

I knew at once the interpretation. The meaning I had rejected was the correct one.

I cried that night for I was sure I had witnessed my own damnation –

I forced those memories away.

All these years I had tried to live so as to not realize my dream. But with each sin I committed, with each poor choice I made, I knew in my heart that I was that much closer to its fulfillment. I could never do enough to free myself of the dream.

I put aside my pain and got off my knees. I wiped the tears from my eyes and steadied myself. I had a Cub Scout pack meeting to attend with one of my boys.

“Rob, are you okay?” Jenn asked as I left the office. She probably saw the remnants of the memories in my eyes.

“Yeah, I’m okay, let’s get going. We can’t keep the Cub Scouts waiting.” I buried the fresh pain as deep as I could so that it wouldn’t show on my face.

“Sam! Get in the car!” I yelled to get my ten-year-old moving.

Jenn maneuvered Erik towards the car.

I watched him as he worked with Jenn to position himself in his car seat. I envied him. He was hidden behind a veil that hopelessness such as mine could not reach. He would know salvation; he would ascend those stairs as I watched from below.

We arrived at the Cub Pack meeting just in time for Sam to take his place in the flag ceremony. I sat as far away from everyone as I could. The work it took to conceal the pain made conversation difficult at best.

I looked up from the floor just as Doug and his family walked in. A sliver of hope struck my heart.

The Cub Pack meeting lasted only thirty minutes. Treats were brought out to the delight of the Cub Scouts. The parents began to mingle. I watched Doug out of the corner of my eye because I didn’t have the strength to go over and talk to him.

“Hi, Rob.” Doug answered my prayer and came over to me. “How’s everything going?”

“Okay, I guess.” I didn’t dare waste the opportunity. “Doug, you mentioned awhile ago that we might get together and talk about things.”

“Sure, I’d love to.” He smiled and it reminded me of how much I wanted to smile again.

“Do you think you could come over Sunday afternoon?”

“Sounds great, I’ll come over to your house and we’ll chat.” Doug smiled knowingly.

Just then his wife called to him and they left. I stood there trying to will him not to forget to come by my home on Sunday because I didn’t have the courage to call and remind him.

Stop taking your anti-depressants.

A voice from behind whispered.

I looked around and found no one.

Stop taking your anti-depressants.

This time there was no mistake. I heard – no, felt – a voice and what’s more, I felt it to the core of my soul and somehow knew it was from my Father in Heaven.

I had begged Him daily for over two months for relief and promised that I would do anything He asked and now He asked me to stop taking my medication. I felt I had to do what He asked so I promised myself and Him that from then on I would not take another anti-depressant. That was Thursday night.

Friday came and I wanted death to take me more than I had ever wanted anything before. What was the point of living? I was damned anyway. Death wouldn’t comply.

I awoke Saturday in a sort of detached melancholy. The day floated past but I was not a part of it.

Sunday finally arrived and I prayed that Doug would remember.

I felt something different in the room. I don't know what it was but it felt very comforting somehow.

Doug began talking about Denise and the coma and mentioned the Peace he and Dianne had received that night at the hospital. I remembered Erik's drowning and the Peace I had experienced. I completely understood what he told me.

I interrupted the story.

"That Peace is what I felt the night Erik drowned. I knew that whatever happened was according to the Lord's will and I was fine with it."

"Yeah, I remember Jenn talking about that Peace the Sunday after Denise went into the coma." Doug commented and then continued.

Doug recounted the story about the auras and then explained how Denise could see the spirit world around us.

He then taught me about the spirit world and unknowingly answered a few questions I had harbored for many years. He mentioned guardian angels and assured me that I, too, had some that watched over me and taught me and helped me.

"Denise can see Christ. He is with her quite a bit, teaching and guiding her. In fact, Rob, I know He is standing right there." Doug pointed to a spot just a few feet from me.

I looked at the spot. Is that why I felt so different?

For some reason I believed Doug. Somehow I knew he spoke the truth. My heart opened and feelings and emotions inundated me. I knew He was there in front of me. I wanted to fall at His feet and beg for mercy.

"One of the lessons I have learned, Rob, is that Christ is with us all the time. He desires a personal relationship with each of us. All we need to do is desire it also." Doug continued.

He then told me about a oneness he experienced in the hospital. He explained how we were really all a part of each other, a part of the oneness. That we were all here, among other things, to experience that which we could share with others in a way that he described but I couldn't understand. That through this sharing we could have every experience we needed to give us an understanding of who and what we truly are without each of us suffering or enjoying everything that this world had to offer.

"I'm not sure I understand what it is you're telling me. It seems to be the opposite of what we are taught in church but it feels right. It feels true in here." I pointed to my heart.

"Believe it or not, it is what we are taught but don't understand because we look at it and teach it to each other through the eyes of judgement." Doug's words flowed, creating a beautiful weave that somehow I understood.

I don't know how but at that moment I understood perfectly what he was telling me, though I knew it would be impossible for me to explain it to anyone else.

"A few months back I had a very humbling experience with a stuffed bear and a cigarette store." Doug began again.

He told me how Denise, with the help of a store clerk, taught him about judgement. When he finished the story he explained about Adam and Eve and the original sin; how it was judgement.

"You see, we see and understand things through the filter of judgement but if you take that filter from before your eyes, if you take judgement out of your life you will see just how really simple it all becomes." Doug paused as Jenn came into the room bearing drinks.

During that momentary lull while Jenn chatted with Doug, my dream flashed again before me, but this time I saw it without the impetuosity of youth.

I finally understood a greater meaning to my dream. I understood that it was my pride as a young man and the judgement of myself and others that prevented me from climbing those stairs. That was why everyone who was left in the field looked to me for something. I was meant to learn that I had nothing more to give than they already had, which was nothing. And consequently, I was no better than them. We were the same.

All those years I had been unable to understand that I was no more his chosen than anyone else was. That in His eyes we are all His chosen regardless of our condition within this world. As long as I judged myself better than the others, I rejected His atonement for me and remained in that field, for somehow our judgements block the blessings of His mercy. I knew also that my condition in that field was not permanent. Through giving up judgement I could also ascend those stairs! I felt my life begin anew. My Savior had healed my tortured soul.

Doug sat his drink down after Jenn left the room and started in on the next story about Denise's near death experience.

"Then one evening while Dianne and the older girls were gone to a church party, Denise came in exclaiming how yucky it was to be a mommy . . ." He continued.

Though in many ways, Denise's near death experience was a much more compelling story than that of the stuffed bear, Smokey stayed in my mind. It was in that story of judgement that I found what I had been looking for.

I found hope.

Hope that my dream was not permanent. Hope in the Lord's mercy and love for me. I finally realized that He had already paid the price for all our souls.

Doug continued on for a little while longer but I didn't really hear anything. I felt my Savior and thanked Him for His presence and the hope He blessed me with.

My heart and mind came together and I knew that salvation through His atonement was mine.

÷÷÷÷÷÷÷÷÷÷♥Doug♥÷÷÷÷÷÷÷÷÷÷

When I finished I looked down at my watch and realized that over two hours had passed since I began recounting my experiences. I noticed that Rob's countenance had changed in that time. The hollowness I saw at first was gone. I watched as Rob fought for control of his emotions. Tears threatened but he wouldn't succumb.

"Thank you, Doug. You have given me more than you will ever know. For the first time in years I feel hope. Thank you." He offered me his hand and I took it.

The time to go had come. Rob needed to be left alone to ponder what had been said.

"Thanks for letting me come over and talk to you. If you need anything just let me know. If you want to talk some more, you have my phone number. Please don't be afraid to use it."

"Okay, I won't." Rob answered and followed me to the door.

As I heard the door close behind me I knew that something extraordinary had taken place; that Rob and I had become linked in some way I couldn't begin to describe. I knew our lives would be woven together for a time, maybe the rest of our lives.

I sat in my car and offered another silent prayer of gratitude for what He had blessed me with, for the truths He had taught me again that day.



*Chapter 10**“Look to Me and Live . . .”*

I thought it would be weeks before Rob called to talk again. After all, I had bombarded him with so many concepts and ideas. But it wasn't so. He called Tuesday, then again on Friday.

He had accepted everything I had said and wanted more. Pretty soon I started taking him with Denise and me when we went to talk to people. I don't why, except that I was told to. Not once did he say no, he always came.

I picked up the phone to call Rob.

“Hi, Rob.”

“Hey, Doug, what's up?”

“Denise and I are headed down to Plymouth on Monday. Apparently there's a great spot in a canyon just west of the town – I've heard there are some Indian ruins there. Just wondered if you'd like to go check it out with us, maybe picnic?”

Silence.

“Oh, and there's a guy there who claims to know all about them, and, well . . . want to go?” I paused.

“Gee, Doug, I don't know. I've got to work, and . . . I guess I could take it off . . .” Rob hesitated.

“This guy's supposed to know a lot about the ruins. Hey, if nothing else it'll be a great picnic in the mountains!” I jumped in, hoping my excitement would be contagious.

Rob needed to come! Even before I'd picked up the phone to call him, I knew he needed to come. I just didn't know why.

“Well, okay . . . sounds fun. Let me run it by Jenn.”

Rob put the phone down. I smiled – he would come!

“Dad, Dad!” Eleven-year-old Denise popped into my bedroom. “Dad, Rob has to come! My Friend said he has to.” I looked over my shoulder where I felt her Friend – and mine – and smiled.

“I know, sweetie.” I winked at her and she winked back. Just then the phone came alive, Rob’s voice right in my ear. “Doug?”

“Rob! Well?” I left the question hanging in midair.

“I’m in. Jenn thinks it’s a little crazy, but I’ll go. When are we leaving?”

“I figure around ten o’clock.”

“Great, that’ll give me just enough time to go into work and beg off for the rest of the day!” I could hear the smile in Rob’s voice.

“Dad, Dad! Tell him I’m bringing Smokey, too!” Denise interrupted me, holding up her stuffed bear.

“Rob, Denise wants me to tell you she’s bringing Smokey with us.”

“Great, the more the merrier!” Rob answered. “I’ll run by your house Monday around ten o’clock. See you then.”

“Okay, see you then,” I responded, and the phone went dead between us.

÷÷÷÷÷÷÷÷÷÷♥Rob♥÷÷÷÷÷÷÷÷÷÷

“Monday, how can I get out of work on Monday?” I asked no one after the phone went dead.

I had been going with Doug and Denise to visit people quite a bit lately. I don’t know why except that I just knew I needed to. Each time was an incredible experience.

For years I hadn’t really felt much of anything until Erik almost died and reminded me of what I was missing. Since Doug came over to my home that Sunday afternoon,

every day was a feast of emotions and feelings. The time with Doug and Denise was the main course. Every time he retold the story – he never told it the same way twice – I felt the presence of the Savior. What a feast.

“What, Rob?” Jenn asked.

“Nothing, just wondering how I’m going to leave work early on Monday to go with Doug and Denise.”

Jenn never really said anything when I went with Doug. She’d just smile. She had noticed a change in me that Sunday after Doug left and I think she was just so thrilled to have me back among the living that she was willing to put up with a few outings now and again.

The next morning at work I planned my escape for the following Monday. Being a teacher, all it required was getting some of my colleagues to cover my last three classes. I started to work on them early. Before my last class, I had everything arranged; I was leaving after the first block.

“Mr. Lake?” I looked up from a stack of quizzes.

“Yes, Josh.”

“I still don’t get this. I know you explained ‘completing the square’ but I just don’t get it.” His face registered mass confusion. I was used to seeing it in my second year algebra students.

“Well, let’s go over the steps again.” I carefully worked one of his homework problems pointing out every step that I took. I even went so far as to number the steps and write them down on a separate piece of paper. Now he could follow the steps and see them applied in a problem.

“Okay, cool!” He seemed eager to try one on his own.

I went back to the quizzes in front of me.

“Mr. Lake?”

“Yes, Josh.” He couldn’t have tried more than two or three problems.

“I still don’t get this. I followed the steps and I’m

confused.” He dropped his notebook in front of me.

“Let’s look at where you’re stuck.” He pointed to a problem on his paper. He hadn’t gotten past the second step.

“See, this has a number in front of it and when I divide it out it makes this into a fraction. What do I do with a fraction?”

He had been following the steps exactly. The problem that confused him added a slight twist. It threw in a fraction. He should have been able to handle it, though. He could handle fractions. I’d seen him add and subtract them with ease.

“Josh, you already know how to work with fractions.” I was a little perturbed.

“Yeah, but this is ‘completing the square,’ not a fraction problem.”

“Yeah, but you can do a fraction problem, right?” I asked him.

“Yeah, but . . .”

“No buts. Think of this part as a fraction problem all by itself. Solve it then put your answer back into the original problem and then ‘complete the square.’ Just because we’re doing ‘completing the square’ doesn’t mean that you can’t do fractions, too.”

“Well, okay. But I still don’t think I understand.” He looked very confused.

“Josh, just because you move on to the next concept doesn’t mean that you forget what got you here. One of the reasons we do problems like this is so that as you progress and learn more complex things you can still practice the things you already learned. Do you understand?”

“Yeah, kind of. Would you show me how to do the problem? I still don’t understand it.”

I was getting nowhere, fast.

“Yeah, I guess so.”

I was relieved to think that they were under the car.

“Hang on, Dianne. I’ll go get the keys.” I called from the front door.

I knelt down and scanned the ground under the car, plenty of oil but no keys. I headed back to the house to ask Denise what happened to the keys.

I opened the front door and yelled to Dianne.

“Dianne, I can’t find them. I’ll get you the spare set.”

I headed to Darin’s room to retrieve the other keys I knew must be hiding there. And just as I thought, they were on his dresser. I pocketed them and went upstairs.

“Here you go. Have fun with Deon.” I kissed Dianne on the cheek as she passed me on her way out.

I headed into the family room to have a chat with Denise.

“Denise, the keys weren’t under the car.” I said.

“I know.” She just looked at me.

“Then why did you tell me they were?”

“I dunno.”

“Well, do you know where they are?”

Denise was becoming more and more stubborn lately. She wouldn’t give me a straight answer on anything. Most of the time though, it didn’t matter because I seemed to know the answer before I asked her the question, but not today.

“Yes, but I can’t tell you.”

“Your Friend won’t let you?” She nodded her head.

Okay, I knew now that I was going to have to go about this another way.

“Well then, if I ask you a question can you tell me if I’m right or not?”

“Yes.”

“Good, then let’s think about this. If the keys were under the car and they are no longer there, then that must mean they were moved. Seeing as how keys don’t walk

away by themselves, someone must have picked them up. So, Denise, did someone take the keys from under the car?" If she wanted to play games I was willing. She knew what I needed to know and I was determined to get it out of her.

"Yes."

"Okay, why would anybody take the keys?"

"I dunno." She wasn't about to give me any help.

"I wonder if it was one of the neighbor kids? No, it couldn't be. I haven't seen any of the kids around the house and besides, why would they go to the effort of getting the keys from under the car?"

"I dunno." She was beginning to be a little annoying.

"Wait a minute . . . remember that strange call a few days ago from Mike's friend Devin?"

I had met Devin some months ago at Mike's house. My arrival had interrupted their conversation and Devin seemed very upset about it. I didn't stay long. Two days after, Mike called to tell me that that night Devin had tried to commit suicide. He only survived the night because Mike refused to let him go. Mike literally held on to him all night long until the momentary insanity passed. Unfortunately it wasn't the last time Mike saved Devin from himself. Devin was definitely mentally unstable.

"I remember."

"He was upset with us for telling your story. He wanted us to stop." I recalled. "Denise, did Devin come and take the keys?"

"Yes."

"Why would Devin take the keys?"

The doorbell chimed. I left Denise and went to answer it, still pondering on what she had told me.

Once the person at the front door left, I busied myself with some honey-do's, completely forgetting Devin and the keys.

"Doug, come see what we found." It was always

interesting to see what Dianne and Deon could find for a few dollars.

They showed me a bag of bargains. I have always been amazed at my wife's ability to make money stretch.

"By the way, Doug, did you ever find the keys?" Dianne asked.

"No, I didn't. But come to think of it, Denise said that Devin had taken them from under the car." I remembered.

"Devin? Why would Devin want the keys? It's an old beat up car, surely not worth stealing." She said.

Then it came to me . . . the key ring held the house key too.

"No, I don't think it's the car he wants. I'll bet he wanted the key to the house. Denise! Denise, come here, quick." She scurried around the corner into the kitchen.

"Yes, Daddy."

"Did Devin take the keys so he would have a key to the house?"

"Yes."

"Oh no, he means to break into our home, Doug." Fear crept into Dianne's voice.

"Dianne, we don't have anything for him to steal. Besides he's mad at me and Denise . . . Denise, does he want to hurt you?"

"Yes."

It was all falling into place now.

"Doug, we can't let him do that." Fear was now obvious in Dianne and I felt it seeping into me.

"Don't worry, Dianne. I won't let him hurt any of us. We have the upper hand. We know what he intends to do and we can stop him. First we take care of the obvious. We replace all the locks on the house."

"I don't think we have enough money left." Dianne held out the change from her afternoon with Deon; the last money we had.

“See, barely enough for a few milk shakes.” She looked at the items she had just purchased.

“It’s okay.” I knew what she was thinking. “We don’t need to return anything. I can borrow enough from Sarah to buy the locks. Darin, you want to go with me?”

“Sure, Dad.” He pulled his head out of the refrigerator long enough to answer.

Sarah was very willing to loan me the money without any explanation, but I told her of the day’s events anyway

Darin and I went and bought the locks and took the next thirty minutes installing them.

“See, nothing to worry about.” I tossed the new house keys to Dianne.

“Well, I feel a little better. I just don’t understand why Devin would want to hurt Denise.” Dianne commented.

Debi entered the room.

“Who’s Devin?” She asked.

“Some guy who stole our house keys,” Darin volunteered.

“Why?”

“He wants to hurt Denise.”

I wished Darin would keep quiet. I didn’t want to alarm the whole family.

“It’s not as bad as Darin makes it out to be.” I stepped in.

“Debi, it’s nothing you need to worry about.” Dianne grabbed me, pulling me into the bedroom for privacy.

“Doug, I’m worried.”

“I know, but don’t be. It’ll be fine. Christ wouldn’t let anything happen to Denise.”

“I guess you’re right. But what about the rest of the family?”

“Dianne, I don’t know Devin that well but I don’t think we have too much to worry about. Between Darin and myself, I think we can handle him.”

“Okay, if you say so.”

“It’ll be just fine.”

“You know, I wouldn’t think that Devin was capable of hurting anyone. Granted, he’s tried to hurt himself a lot but has never, to my knowledge, hurt anybody else.”

“You know, you’re right. He’s done some stupid things but Mike has never mentioned him hurting anyone else. I doubt he could harm Denise. It’s probably just a scare tactic, you know, to get us to shut up.” I was feeling better already.

“But is he crazy enough that he might hire somebody to harm her?” Dianne’s words filled me with fear.

“He just might be. I could see him hiring somebody.”

“Doug, I’m nervous.”

“Me, too. The thought of a hit man coming after Denise, well, I’d rather not go there.”

“We need help.”

“You’re right. I just wish I knew when this ‘hit man’ was going to show up. DENISE! DENISE!” I yelled through the house.

“Yes, Daddy.”

“Did Devin hire a hit man to come harm us?” I had to be sure. I didn’t want us acting out of fear. Assumptions have a way of growing way out of proportion.

“Yes.”

“Do you know when he is coming?” By this time Debi and Darin had come to the door of our bedroom and were listening.

“I dunno.” She smiled.

“Yeah, I forgot. Only yes or no questions. Denise, is he coming tonight?”

“Yes.”

“Oh boy, what time? I’m not sure but eleven o’clock keeps coming to my mind. Denise, is he going to show up at eleven o’clock?”

“Yes.”

Dianne caught her breath; fear played across the faces of the other kids.

“Dad, what are we going to do?” Debi asked.

“You want me to call all my friends and set a trap for him, Dad?” Darin asked.

“I don’t know yet. I need to think.” I looked at the clock. It read 7:00 pm.

Fear caused the bile in my stomach to rise. I had until eleven tonight to prepare for some hired bully that wanted to hurt my daughter.

Dianne got out some games to play with the kids as I made a few phone calls from the bedroom.

Time passed slowly as we waited for the ‘Hit Man’ to do his worst. We talked of leaving, of setting traps, of arming ourselves but in the end we figured we would put our trust in the Lord and wait it out.

By nine-thirty that evening the tension was so thick within the house that I felt I was suffocating. I pulled Dianne into the bedroom so that we might offer a prayer to our Father in Heaven for safety.

“I’m really scared.” Dianne said.

“Me, too.”

And then I remembered the scripture in John:

Peace I leave with you, my peace I give
unto you: not as the world giveth, give I
unto you. Let not your heart be troubled,
neither let it be afraid.

“Dianne, where does fear come from?” An idea began.

“Well, not from Christ. I guess Satan.”

“Exactly, from Satan. Since this whole ‘Hit Man’ thing began I have felt nothing but fear.”

“What are you saying?”

“This whole thing is based in fear. Every question I’ve asked Denise today, she answered ‘yes’ without even thinking about it. Usually she hesitates before she answers, as if she is listening to someone.” I began to feel foolish.

“She is listening to someone. She is listening to Christ.” Dianne commented.

This was all a setup based in fear and fueled by assumptions.

“Dianne, I think this is all a hoax.” I stood and headed for the front room where the kids were.

“Denise, there isn’t really any hit man coming tonight at eleven is there?”

“Duh, ha, ha,” she began laughing and jumped up to dance around the room. “Nope, there isn’t! Boy, you guys really looked silly! I’m a great actress, aren’t I? I had you all fooled! Ha, ha.” She continued laughing as she danced towards her bedroom.

“Dad, I don’t understand.” Debi watched Denise dance away.

“It was all just a game. You kids can all go to bed now. Nothing is going to happen. I just lost the keys and they will turn up somewhere. There is nothing to worry about.”

And then I remembered.

The keys dropped out of my pocket while I sat on my neighbor’s couch this morning. I actually felt them fall out and decided I would wait until I stood up before retrieving them. I never picked them up. I knew all along where they were. Christ let me believe a lie.

I was hurt.

Why would the Lord do this to us, to me?

By morning I knew. It was to teach me to look to the Lord, not a ten-year-old girl for my answers, regardless of the gifts she had.

I had been leaning on and looking towards her, using her as my interpreter to Father rather than going to Him.

His words echoed in my mind. “Lean not on the arm of flesh but rather look to your Father in Heaven and live.” Those weren’t the exact words but the meaning was the same.

I had set myself up to worship a little girl rather than Him who created the little girl, Him who created everything that is.

Monday came and Denise and I went to Plymouth with Rob. Rob seemed a little disappointed by the time we got home. Denise hadn’t been very straightforward with the answers to his questions. At one point she simply just started saying yes to everything he asked.

I smiled and remembered the ‘Hit Man.’

Life changed for me. I asked Denise a lot fewer questions and looked inside a lot more. Life at home almost mellowed out completely for the two weeks following the ‘Hit Man’ experience.

“Dad, phone!” Debi yelled from downstairs.

“Hang it up, I got it.” I yelled back.

“Hello, this is Doug.” I greeted the person on the other end.

“Mr. Mendenhall, this is Cindy Steadman from the Division of Family Services. Do you know what the Division of Family Services is?”

“Yes.”

What would DFS want with us?

“Yes, well, we’ve received a call from a concerned person who claims that there are some problems in your home.”

“Problems? What kind of problems?”

“There is some concern that your daughter Denise

might be abused.”

“Abused? No, that’s crazy.”

“Regardless, I would like to come out and visit with you and your wife about the allegations.”

“Fine, whatever you want.”

“Good. Would tomorrow, say around four be okay?”

“Sure.”

I slowly hung up the phone as my mind raced with possibilities. Who? Who would turn us in as child abusers?

I walked into the kitchen where Dianne was busy preparing dinner.

“Dianne, that was the Division of Family Services. They had a complaint that we’re abusing Denise. Someone called and turned us in to DFS as abusers.”

“What? We don’t abuse anybody, especially not our kids. Who would accuse us of that? It must be a mistake.” She refused to believe any part of what I had said.

“I have no clue, but DFS is coming over here tomorrow at four to talk with us.”

“Great! Now what?” She turned from me and furiously attacked the vegetables in front of her.

I went for a walk.

I thought back through my memories. Was there ever any mention of abuse by anybody? The more I thought, the less I could come up with. I quickly ruled out the hospital and therapists. They kept telling us Denise was doing great. The only time I could recall anybody mentioning anything remotely like abuse came from Dianne’s brother a month or so ago.

He had just returned from a business trip down south where he had spent some time with Jeff. They had been good friends before Jeff moved and remained friends in spite of the distance. This was the same Jeff that called our Bishop.

Dianne's brother came back with some crazy accusations from Jeff. He stopped by our home first thing to clear them up. He was somewhat satisfied with what we told him even though I knew he didn't believe a word about Denise's gifts.

I made it back home in time for dinner. We ate without discussing the phone call.

"Denise, it's your turn to clear the table." Dianne said.

"Aah, Mom!" Denise began to complain and then attempted to talk her way out of it.

"Do it now, young lady!" Dianne started, then got a funny look on her face as if she was weighing her actions against her definition of abuse.

"Doug, will you help me with the dishes?" She asked somewhat offhandedly.

"Sure." I replied thinking that she probably wanted to discuss the phone call.

We worked in silence until halfway through the dishes.

"Dianne, I know who it is. I know who's accusing us." I whispered over a sink full of suds.

"It was Jeff. Remember those crazy stories he told your brother? He wasn't satisfied with just turning your brother against us."

"Doug, you don't know that for sure. Don't jump to any conclusions, yet. Remember the 'Hit Man.' Just don't jump to conclusions," she said.

"But do you realize what DFS can do? They can take all the kids from us. You've heard the stories, they act first then ask questions later. We could lose our kids because of Jeff." I felt the heat of anger rise within me.

"Just wait, let's see what happens. Remember the 'Hit Man.'" She reminded me a second time.

"Okay, I'll wait and see what happens," I promised, but the anger was still there.

By the next morning I was so worked up that I was

determined to take Denise and run off to a hotel. DFS wasn't taking our daughter.

"Dianne, what would you think if Denise and I went to stay at a hotel until this DFS thing all disappears?" I asked.

"Doug, I think you are jumping to conclusions again. You said yourself they just want to talk to us. What can that hurt?" She calmly said as she picked up the dirty clothes around our bedroom.

"But you don't understand the power that they have. . . ." I started to protest.

"I understand that you see a 'Hit Man' coming!" She stopped, fixing me with a stare. "Now listen, there are two things you can do. One, you can sit there on the bed and work yourself up to a heart attack over an imaginary 'Hit Man' or two, you can go get in the shower so that I can finish making the bed!"

"Maybe I should ask Denise?" I replied, refusing to listen to her.

"And just what do you think she would say?" Her stare hadn't wavered.

I thought a moment.

"Hit Man." I said.

"There is hope for you yet." She smiled and went back to picking up the room.

"You're right, I'll wait. I know, look in here," I pointed at my heart, "and trust Jesus and stop jumping to conclusions. The only 'Hit Man' is the one in my head." With my concession she left to discharge her load on the washer downstairs.

I gathered myself together and went to prepare for the day.

I knew she was right, but the anger inside me demanded that I produce a 'Hit Man' to lash out at.

The social worker from DFS was right on time. Dianne showed her into our home and played the gracious hostess.

We introduced her to Denise and talked for about ten minutes. She then asked us some pointed questions and spoke to Denise for a few more minutes. Apparently satisfied, she abruptly stood.

“I can see that whoever made this complaint does not know you and has no idea what goes on in your home. It’s obvious that there is no abuse here. Forgive me for taking up your time. I will label the case as a hoax and close it when I get back to my office.” She excused herself and headed for the front door.

I quickly followed her to the door, where she again apologized for taking up our time on such an obvious hoax.

“Well, I don’t know about you Doug, but she sure didn’t look like ‘Hit Man’ to me.” She smiled a loving smile as if to say, “Trust in the Lord.”

“You’re right,” I conceded, “I jumped to too many conclusions. But I wonder what Jeff will try next?”

“Oh, brother!” She threw up her hands and headed into the kitchen mumbling under her breath about me being too stubborn to learn anything.

I didn’t want to let go of my anger. It satisfied some need within me. It screamed out to me for a ‘Hit Man’, somebody to accuse, blame and condemn. It screamed for vengeance.

My attitude didn’t improve with time. The anger within continued to boil giving me plenty of excuses to lash out at the family whenever I felt like it.

By Sunday I had no desire to go to church but did anyway to set the proper example for the children.

Sitting in the service I found myself looking at all my neighbors and friends as threats to my family. I no longer saw people who loved and cared for us, I saw only ‘Hit Men’ in suits and nice dresses. I decided then and there that I would have nothing more to do with these people.

“Doug, are you coming into Sunday School?” Dianne

asked.

“I’d rather be shot than be seen with them!” I growled at her.

“Well, that can be arranged.” She snipped at me and went into class.

I wandered around the church waiting for Sunday School to end. I wanted to be away from these vicious vipers. Let them strike at each other.

I found myself on the most comfortable seat in the church, the couch outside the chapel. The physical comfort refused to give me any emotional support.

“Hey, Doug.” Rob was out wandering around, too. “You don’t look good. What’s wrong?”

“It’s been a horrible last few days . . .” and with that I began the story about DFS and my anger towards Jeff.

“Doug, you know that there are many of us here that love and appreciate you and your family. We would never believe any rumors about you, much less any that came from Jeff. Do you remember the story you told me about those men who took your business from you?”

His concern for me became apparent. He was trying to help me work through my anger the way that I had helped him work through his hopelessness.

Only I wasn’t ready to give up my anger. I wanted to hate Jeff. I quickly excused myself and left him open mouthed sitting on the couch.

“Doug, what’s wrong?” It was a sweet friend of Dianne’s that met me just outside the door of the church. Her heart was golden and she truly cared.

“I’ve just had a hard few days is all.” I answered and found myself telling her, also. And like with Rob she tried to help me diffuse my anger towards Jeff.

Luckily, Sunday services concluded before she succeeded. I again quickly excused myself and gathered up the family.

“I’m going to my room.” I announced as soon as I entered the house.

“Good.” Dianne replied. “And don’t come out until you’ve change your attitude.” She was finally fed up with my anger.

For two hours I sat in my room stewing. I pondered the last few days and what was missing from my life.

I finally comprehended that while I was in the throes of anger I became distanced from my Savior. I missed and longed for His presence again. Suddenly I realized that I could give up my anger whenever I wanted to. Through His atonement He was willing and able to take it whenever I was willing to release it.

I thought of Him and the pain and anger that He was willing to take. Tears came to my eyes.

I finally grasped that my suffering was really His.

“Father, thank you for the experience with the anger I have felt. Please forgive me for causing thy Beloved Son pain.”

The words came.

“My friend, I forgave you as it happened and have waited for you to accept my gift of forgiveness. Freely, I give it unto you. Go in peace, forget me not.”

The words were understood within my heart and mind as one and I rejoiced in His majesty and mercy.

With the anger gone from my soul, I now pondered His love for me and the Peace I felt and enjoyed. Slowly at first and then with remarkable clarity, the events of the past year played out in my mind.

I felt again the anger that melted away in the shower last summer as I learned to show gratitude for the men that ruined me. I experienced once more the blessing I gave my mother and tasted the joy of the miracle of her healing. I endured the pain of Denise’s coma and with it tasted anew the Peace that enveloped me that holy night. I became

immersed again in the oneness that is us and once more comprehended our true nature. I felt the thrill of the revelations of Denise's gifts and gloried in our Lord's benevolence.

Once more I knew the pain of guilt and shame as I judged His daughter, my sister, in that cigarette store and felt Him take from me that pain as I learned that judgement moves me further from His love. I felt renewed guilt and remorse as I tried to manipulate my daughter to my ends and then gloried in His mercy as He taught me to see His hand in all things and to cleave unto Him. I encountered the joy and amazement of the atonement again as I saw His hope spring up in the eyes of a friend who had had none. I understood once again His desire that I trust Him and fear no more for He will be with me in all that I do.

Finally, He reassured me through His love that He would take my pain, anger and guilt as soon as I was willing to give it to Him.

Tears rained from my eyes and cleansed my soul. I felt encompassed by His Peace as the voice that speaks to heart and mind as one came to me.

“My Peace is your journey. You travel here by gratitude through understanding your true nature in Me and accepting My hand in all things. Your destination becomes clear when you forsake all judgement. Only then will you be eternally embraced by My love. Through trusting in Me and My wisdom on your journey will you find the power to abandon fear forever more. Look to Me and live for My Peace I give unto you, let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.”

I wept for joy.

A fascinating true story of a man – Doug – who is financially ruined by two friends and learns to find gratitude for what they did to him. And just when he thinks he has learned the lesson, the Lord increases the stakes. Doug is tried with the impending death of his ten-year-old daughter. Can Doug find gratitude for something as devastating as the loss of a child?

After his daughter miraculously recovers, Doug finds that she has come back from the other side with an incredible story and wonderful gifts from the Lord. Through her gifts, Doug finds that the lesson of gratitude was just the beginning

