

Hope through the Shadow of Death

The phone call came on Christmas Day. I was putting finishing touches on dinner. I set down my spatula and answered, "Merry Christmas!"

"Susan? Can you sit down?"

"Ok, I'll humor you." Smilingly I sat on the edge of a chair and prepared for a chat with my sister. Her words crashed into my joy.

"Mom got the best Christmas present ever. She was on the way to church to see Baby Jesus...but now...Mom is seeing Jesus in heaven."

I didn't understand. I had just talked to Mom on the phone a few hours ago, just as she was leaving for church. We said we'd talk later. "What are you talking about?"

"There was a car accident...someone ran a red light...Mom was killed instantly...."

"Oh." My knees felt strangely weak. My hands were trembling. But I tried to be strong, to comfort my sister. "Mom's in heaven. We just talked about...heaven...the other day. How beautiful...." My voice faded away as my heart struggled to accept the news.

"There's more. Dad...ribs broken, liver bleeding. Roxanne...head injury...may not live through the night."

We needed to go. Now. We didn't know how much time we would have.

I was in quiet shock for the ten hour drive. Over and over in the dark, I imagined I was my mom, happily riding in a car to church--when out of the blue--a crash hit so hard, I died. What was it like, at that moment? I kept punching the replay button on the hymn, "Once in Royal David's City."

*Not in that poor, lowly stable
With the oxen standing by
Shall we see him, but in heaven,
Set at God's right hand on high.
Then like stars his children crowned,
All in white, his praise will sound. (CW 50)*

The sight of the hospital slapped me out of my fog. I was scared. Scared of what I might see. Scared of what I might feel. Scared to tell my dad that my mom died. Scared that my little sister might die.

I had to force my feet to take each step that led into the ICU. I met my five sisters in the hall. I fell into their arms and wept. Then I stepped into my dad's and Roxanne's cubicles.

I was brought to my knees in grief. My dad and my sister looked like broken dolls, flung onto their hospital beds. I was completely helpless. I couldn't say a word.

But we could sing.

*Surely it is God who saves me;
 I will trust in him and not be afraid.
 For the Lord is my stronghold and my sure defense,
 and he will be my Savior. (CW Psalm 31)*

Wavering and tear-clogged, my sisters and I sang the Song of Isaiah weakly at first, then with growing strength. Soon the ICU was resonating with the powerful promises of our Savior. Our feelings of sick helplessness were replaced by our knowledge of the Lord's loving presence.

The days that followed were not easy. Roxanne made it through the first critical 24 hours, but she was not the same. She moved convulsively, like a newborn baby, kicking her legs and smiling reflexively. She couldn't eat and couldn't communicate in any way. We didn't know just what she could understand.

My dad's unconscious state only grew worse. He was put into a medically-induced coma. We touched his arm and shuddered at the cold, death-like effect of the medication. We asked the doctor for updates. He just shook his head, "I don't know."

Anguish and uncertainty wore us down. Daily the Lord lifted us up through his faithful servants who spoke God's Word to us and through the prayers of his people around the world. These gave us hope amidst our tears.

Dear sisters in Christ, when life leaves you weak and shaking, read **Zephaniah 3:16-17**:

"Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands hang limp. The LORD your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing."

We had to make the heartrending decision to bury my mom without my dad or sister even knowing of her death. We cried over her broken body in the grip of death—the wages of sin. We lowered it into the ground and covered it with hymns, following the pastor's beautiful resurrection message. We knew she died with hope in her Savior. We knew her soul, her life, was with Jesus.

Dear sisters in Christ, when you are forced to look upon death, look beyond what is seen, towards what is unseen. Cling to the glorious resurrection promises which blaze with a power so great, sin must relinquish its claim. Read in **I Corinthians 15:55-57** – the victory shout:

**"Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?"
 The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.**

By God's grace, my dad woke up almost two weeks following the accident. Joy was quickly doused by the heart-wrenching fact that we had to tell him my mom had died and was buried. But the Lord heard my soul cry, "Lord, give me strength. I can't do this. I can only do this with you." He answered with strength for the moment.

I eventually went home. The adrenaline of living moment by moment finally gave way to exhaustion. It was then that the enormity of living without my wonderful, encouraging mom hit me. Yet the Lord was still there. He gave me the courage to face each day, each week, without her. How? He gave me himself in his Word, in his promises, and in the comforting psalms read by my husband as I went to sleep each night.

Dear sisters in Christ, when your heart aches with the loss of a loved one who has died in the Lord, read of their life in heaven in **Isaiah 51:11**,

"They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away."

Trust these words from **Isaiah 25:8-9**. You will meet again.

"He will swallow up death forever. The Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears from all faces....In that day they will say, 'Surely this is our God; we trusted in him, and he saved us.'"

See your Savior gently wiping away your tears with his own nail-marked hands. He is holding you; giving you hope through the shadow of death.

Prayer:

Out of the depths, I cry to you, Lord! My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow; have mercy on me, according to your unfailing love. May your Word of truth comfort and strengthen my soul. You are the Resurrection and the Life. He who believes in you will live, even though he dies! Be my Light, my Strength, my Hope and my Peace. Amen.

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