

Forward

“Did I not tell you and promise you that if you would believe and rely on me, you would see the glory of God?” John 11:40

I found this verse just weeks before completing my first book. I wasn't totally surprised, as it seemed to be the message I needed to hear. I recalled that lonely evening in 2005 when I prayed, “God ... I need You. I don't know what to do. I wish I were stronger, and I know I can't turn back the clock, but I wish you would help me find my way on this wretched, frightening path. Tell me how can I go on?”

I heard a voice say, “Tell the stories.”

I could feel my heart beating and whispered my reply, “What did you say?”

There was no thunder, no flashes of light. Just a gentle voice that told me directly and to the point, “Tell the stories.”

In my wildest dreams, I had never imagined myself as a writer, and telling the stories would be a difficult task. Somehow, I knew that I needed to listen to the voice I heard, and I promised that night to tell the stories.

Throughout the process, I learned that telling was a lot easier than writing. I tried to educate myself as best as I could, and, I attended author workshops and visited online instructional sites. I recall going early on to a local author's meeting at the library, and must chuckle. I was so naïve. My writer voice was strong, but an editor would have to correct grammar and punctuation. I paid attention and took notes. Ultimately, I relied on God, and believed that God would help me figure out what needed to be done. Our Father would be my guiding light. I dedicated my time and energy to keep my promise. Upon completion, one of the first authors I met suggested I enter my book in the Florida Writers Association "Royal Palm Literary Awards" contest. "I Must be in Heaven, a promise kept" won Best Memoir of

2008. The following year, the book won first place in the inspirational category of the nation-wide “2009 Next Generation Indie Awards” contest.

Writing a sequel was not something I planned, but I have learned during my journey: I shouldn’t question God’s plan. It’s been another arduous task, but if I can reach out to just one person, so they, too, can see the glory of God, I won’t be silent. I’ll share the stories.

Chapter One

I figured now was as good a time as any to give a little more thought to the promise I made over six years ago, I'd been lying in bed for the last two hours, my mind racing like a runaway train. For quite some time, perhaps once...maybe twice a month, this happened to me. Seemed like work, bills to pay, and kids all hindered peaceful rest. My brain would then rewind and play my thoughts repeatedly ... over and over again.

Bill fell asleep promptly tonight. His rather light snoring and very still body were not bothering me at all. My excessive imagination took over and I was being victimized by my own thoughts. In the pitch blackness, the rambling conversations one has with oneself can get very redundant, and needless to say, annoying.

Typically, after I hashed things over in my mind, I felt satisfied that I'd come up with enough answers to solve all the whys and wherefores. My mind

now quieted, I believed I might possibly sleep. But a bug in my bed triggered an additional blast of adrenaline and I shot right out of the sheets. God knew I hated bugs!

Tonight, it was a bit too dark in the room with the door closed. We decided to leave the dogs in the living room. Being on the other side of our bedroom door meant they couldn't disturb us. Seemed rather ironic to me that I slept better with two dogs scratching and licking themselves...an annoyance that had become just another part of my crazy life. Seriously, I preferred to hear dogs licking in the dark than to deal with my own unleashed feelings. That's how bad things had gotten.

Jake, the elder of our two Labrador retrievers, is almost sixteen years old. In dog years he was well into his ninety's. For an old man, he still got around reasonably well. Fetching a ball and other tricks no longer interested him, though. Eating and sleeping seemed to be his primary goal in life. His

hearing and eyesight were another issue, not at all like his younger days. And when I asked the vet why Jake sometimes ate dirt, the doc told me he probably had a touch of Alzheimer's.

Riddled with arthritis, poor Jake's hind end slowed him down significantly, yet with all his troubles, he woke up from naps with a wagging tail and "it's a new day" attitude. Worrying had never been a factor for Jake, except when this old guy of mine experienced his one major time of distress.

It was 2005, early spring. Bill and I planned to sell our home and move to the farm. The farm consisted of three and a half acres in northern Pasco County Florida. We were purchasing the land from friends of our son. I called it a farm because of the acreage, and after living in a typical sub-division, the place seemed enormous.

We had financially planned for this time in our lives. We were finally ready to leave our home of thirty years, and in exchange, have an adventure

in our senior years. We planned to do something quirky and un-establishment-like and live off the land. It would be a move into the future...a place to keep fit and young at heart. We'd make time for gardening and sipping lemonade. There'd be a wraparound porch with two rocking chairs, one for me, one for Bill—the love of my life. Jake would be with us, lying on the porch and catching a summer breeze...and I'd be singing the song, by country singer Tim McGraw.

About living where the green grass grows-

And planting my corn in long straight rows.

Building a home our good Lord's blessed

Pointing our rocking chairs towards the west...

Problem with the whole scenario was my husband woke up on one of the best days of our lives. He seemed in good health and had not a care in the world. We planned to go to work...instead; sirens could be heard coming

down the street until they ended in an abrupt death-type silence. Bill went unconscious. The medics rushed him to the hospital. Poor Jake flipped out like a human would! He was one concerned dog, and it showed.

Fortunately, Bill recovered from the ruptured brain aneurysm. And though we all had our share of worry and doubt, thankfully, we all survived the crisis. Faith, love, and a ton of miracles resulting from answered prayer carried us through. Honestly, I never imagined anything worse could happen to us, and I reminded myself of that often.

So, while my mind bounced from one thought to another and I flipped my pillows while tossing and turning, it hit me. I needed to use the restless times in my life to rethink my purpose...keep the promise...I needed to tell the stories.

After my gradual healing, I went from being a scared little girl, to a woman that grew up. I could face the issues that had literally tormented

me...the worst being the frightening thought that I might be left alone in this world. Then, the brain-boggling fact hit me. I wasn't left alone, but instead would have to step up to the plate.

Initially I found the strength required to become head of household. Bill seemed to appreciate this newer improved and, self-confident wife he had acquired. He'd had a lot on his plate with his medical worries and faith concerns. Reality had slapped him upside the head. He'd have to make some changes in his lifestyle to remain the uncommon statistic—someone who almost died—but didn't! Almost is a strange word when it's related to life and death. Makes you consider all the what if's...and we all have them.

Bill had been the focus of so much of my life that I sometimes thought I lost a little bit of the 'me' in our relationship. Don't get me wrong...love like ours was indeed something special. Not too many people could go through life with their lover, best friend, and soul-mate like I did, and still am. But

reality was we married young. He was my hero. My handsome knight in shining armor. He was a nurturing husband and encouraged me to grow within our relationship. I did, and yet I didn't. Looking back, I depended on him to be the rock...the man...the grown-up that took care of us both.

When he stepped off the plate, I felt like I went up to bat with two strikes and three balls against me. And the stress...it ravaged my body and tore holes in my being. Made me want to scream, "Help! God, where are you? I can't do this anymore!"

We've all heard the expression "in God's time." Most of us wonder, just what time is that anyway? Well, I want to share something with you. God's timing is explicit...He's there and ready to help at all times. We just need to have faith and trust Him. Amen?

Easier said than done. Most of us rely on our own skills and thus remain threatened by whatever happens to us at any given moment. I've been asked before, "How do you keep your faith when...?"

My answer? When it appears, I've got nowhere to turn, nowhere to go, and no happy ending... well, that's when I have to be my strongest! We must take our doubts and put them in God's hands. Amen?

That said, now I'll begin my story.

Once upon a time...

Chapter Two

November-2008 I had finished up the books for the month and knew being in the red again was not a good thing. Bill was at his desk playing solitaire; I was at my desk back to back in our office and I wondered how stressful this dilemma would be on him. I questioned myself, 'Should I mention the facts, or keep this stomach-wrenching news to myself?' "Lordy, Lordy, Lordy..." Seemed the words spewed out of my mouth without notice.

"What are you mumbling?"

Bill turned in his chair and I knew he expected an answer. I could feel his eyes on my back and turned to face him.

"I don't know. I guess I was just going over the bills and what still needs to be paid. Now I'm wondering how we're going to accomplish that with no money." There, I said it. Now I could watch him hold his heart and keel over in pain and have a stroke and this time...quite probably, die. I watched him

closely for any ill effects. Breathing, normal. He didn't grab his chest. His body hadn't begun convulsing...these were good signs. But wait, the brows were changing. Whenever I had been nonsensical, single minded, dense, or even thick-headed in the past, his eyebrows would take on a different shape. Seemed the logical side of his brain connected the furry strips above his eyes and he couldn't hide his apprehension. He was busted. They were primarily straight at the moment, except for the outer edges. They curved up a tad...a little bit like a Vulcan from Star Trek. Then the sigh, or maybe it was a bit more than a sigh. It was more of a grunt or snort when he asked, "Where's your faith?" I suppose because Bill had made it through the first round and came out alive, I suddenly had the nerve to stop holding in. "Where's my faith? I have plenty of faith! We just have no money! I don't know how to pay the bills! You're playing solitaire and I'm the one stressing over money we don't have. Think maybe you could help me out here?"

He must've known I was in a mood to fight with anyone and anything and put his silencer guard on to protect himself. I've always been one for instant or at least conservatively speaking, a fairly immediate fix to our problems. I liked to tackle things and get them out of the way. Bill was the thinker. He'd prefer to think about the problem and ...well sometimes, he just thought on something way too long. Naturally whenever he's thinking, he's quiet. He spun his chair back around and that was that. I was frustrated and my brain was running a thousand miles a second. What do we do? How can this be happening? Where's the solution? How am I going to pay these bills? "I've had enough. I'm going to go get in the shower." As I headed out of the office, I heard Bill say, "I'll be up soon, we'll come up with something. Chill out."

Showers were always a good place for me to let it all out and cry. The water soothed the heartache and the tears all dissolved in to the water, and

well, it just helped. My mind wouldn't turn off, but washing my hair drowned the clatter that was banging around in my head. I didn't come up with any immediate resource while I shaved my legs, but I definitely had a few moments to reconsider my frustrations. Water therapy was Godlike...the grime and torment flow off your body and down the drain. Just got to keep the faith! And keep telling myself - we'll come up with something.

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“You smell good. Feel better after getting a shower?”

Bill was already in bed, propped up with bed pillows. “Yea, it helped. I'm sorry for screaming at you.”

He reached out a hand to me as I climbed into bed. “It's okay; you've had a lot to deal with. We'll work on it tomorrow, when we can get our heads on and think straight.”

“Fine, can I get hugs tonight.”

“Absolutely, that’s one thing I’ve got plenty of.”

I snuggled up close to him and rested my head on his shoulder. “I love you, Bill.”

It felt good in his arms. All the worrying in the world could just melt away for the moment. Bill smoothed away the strands of my hair that frisked his face, and switched off the lamp. In the darkness, I looked up to see the silhouette of his face and waited for his kiss. Tenderly his lips touched mine, and then he whispered, “I love you more, and this.... this is always the best time of the day.”

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A good night’s sleep can solve at least half your problems, and I believe it was just what the doctor ordered... along with shimmering strands of sunshine that beamed through the windows, shining crisscrosses about the

room. "I'll get the coffee going." I snapped my fingers. "Time to get up, honey. It's another day in paradise!"

Bill moaned and turned over to his side. He pulled all the covers with him except for the edge of the bed where I sat. I made an effort to get my work shoes unknotted and on without making the bed wiggle. Then I thought, why was I being so considerate? "It's a beautiful day, rise and shine!"

A muffled 'okay' came from under the sheets. I knew it was safe to presume Bill was awake enough and would not be able to sleep once the coffee was on. I could hear the Folgers commercial in my head as I nudged our big blond lab with my foot. He didn't seem very ready to get up either. "Come on Jake; let's go, old man...time to go outside." If Jake could talk it would've been, "Huh...what? Can't you see I'm sleeping? Why are you poking me with your foot? Go away! Dad and I want to sleep!" I stared down at Jake

and tapped my shoe on the floor to try to get his attention one more time.

His eyes remained shut. I supposed he thought if he couldn't see me I wasn't really there. I reached down and gently rubbed his ear. "Come on Jake-y...wake up – you're such a good boy." His tail began wagging. "Okay' ...you're awake! Come on boy, downstairs." Jake followed as I headed down the steps and turned the lights on in the kitchen. Many times, I had wished the morning sun would hit the back side of our house, which faced the north, or that we had put a window in the dining room that would have allowed light into our kitchen from the east. Oh well, that was neither here nor there and after 30 something years in the same house, I was used to a dark kitchen in the morning. "Outside, Jake." He strolled out and our cat R.C scrambled to the door. I ran hot water into the coffee maker hoping it would speed up the process. I sat down at the table and considered making a list of things to do,

then promptly decided to wait for the java first. R.C. wanted food and meowed her command. "Okay-okay already. I'll get it in a minute."

Ring ring... 'Geez..." it was too early to talk business, so I let the call go to the answering machine. "I'll return the call when I feel ready to be at work," I told the inanimate object.

"This is an important call! Please stay on the line and an operator will be right with you. This is an attempt to collect a debt... blah blah blah..."

"Damn!" I shook my head in dismay. "Can't you guys give us a break? It's not even 8:00 and ... oh, the hell with it." I sat at the table screeching at the phone. "Here we go again...this day is turning into shit!" Within seconds a beeping sound reflected that the party was disconnected. I stared at the blinking missed call light. I grasped both hands bowed my head. I could hear Bill coming down the stairs and frantically whispered, "God? It's me again. Help...please?"

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Bill and I put our heads together and considered all the possibilities. Seemed conclusive we might have to rethink selling the house. It had been five years since I urgently took it off the market...when he had the ruptured brain aneurysm I couldn't imagine even thinking about selling ...plus a move? Not gonna happen. I remembered we had had so many plans and dreams at that time, and the realtor had the market value set at \$450,000. Times had changed since then, and we'd be lucky if we could get \$300,000-\$350,000. Bill searched the tax records for comparables, and found none. Our home was unique in style, had waterfront and a pool, all making it worth more than the average sub-division tract homes that were built in the '80's. We discussed getting a realtor and thought if we could sell on our own we'd increase our net profit at least by the commission to a sales person. "Buy Owner" had upfront fees but considerably lower than the typical broker

charged. “Val, if I sign us up they’ll call us within a few days to schedule pictures, and within the week it could be online. With Christmas around the corner, maybe some of the Snowbirds will want a big house in the warm south.” I could see Bill was enthusiastic about doing it on our own with just a little help from the pros. So I took a deep breath, and told him to go ahead.

While he kept busy filling out all the information, I tackled some more of the bills. As always, when we pooled our efforts we would feel like we were taking steps in the right direction. Being a team had always worked best for us. “Okay, I’ve paid everything I’m able to for today, want some lunch?”

“That sounds good. Ummm...” Bills was typing away and then continued,

“Ummm...” “What? Please finish instead of Umzing.”

“Well...uh...” “Uh, What?” I felt like smacking him on the head when he left me hanging. I put my readers on to see his monitor a bit clearer and

understood. He had to write up detailed descriptions for each room including square footage and answer preliminary questions about our property. “Need some help?” “Nah... I’m.... good.” “Alright, you finish. I’ll get lunch ready.

We can talk then.”

“Uh uh...” Bill continued staring at the monitor.

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I had the tuna fish made and the table set. I sat down and waited for Bill to come in and eat. The kitchen had always been a happy place in our home. An ache in my chest already had me mourning the sale of the house we had lived in for so long. I couldn’t imagine life anywhere else... Had it been a dream? All the years, all the memories? I glanced at the dry sink counter with macaroni drawers and white tiled counter top. A bowl held some leftover Halloween candy and it was as though the sight flooded my thoughts with a day about 20 years ago. The kids were little, Stacie maybe 12,

Billy 8 and Shaye 4. Bill had the video camera going as we readied to carve pumpkins and set up for Halloween. The kids were excited and 'acting' up for the video production a bit more than usual. None of them seemed to remember that chairs were for sitting in... that permanent magic markers should not go beyond the newspaper place mats they had been given to work on...and the fun activity that was planned was not supposed to develop into a quarreling, upheaval. I recalled Bill scolding them to calm down, but the raving little maniacs didn't seem to hear him. Patiently, I directed them in an artsy-crafty-teacher-like attitude and attempted to make this day one they'd recall in later years. I wanted them to remember family unity...you know...those good times that warm your heart and soul.

They were all quite hyper, and I didn't want anyone to get hurt, so I calmly suggested that no child would be left out of the great time we were

having, as long as they shut up. I removed all of their utensils. With arms akimbo and my chest puffed out, I resembled a drill sergeant. “Enough!”

The kids looked at their mom in horror. Always soft-spoken, they questioned with their eyes, "why did mom just scream at her dear angels? I yanked a few papers from the pile and set them down on the table in front of where I stood. I snatched the first, very large pumpkin, held the carving knife in my right hand and began to slice the thick orange skin. The tough casing wouldn't be penetrated easily and all eyes watched as I lifted my weapon, holding it with both hands, and stabbed the surface. My perfect strike gouged the membrane; allowing the inner juices to squirt out through the slice. I sawed the top of the pumpkin to make a removable lid and handed it to the kids. They loved to reach inside and snag the stringy stuff and pull it out.

They giggled as they clenched the ooey gooey mass of innards. I chiseled away. Eyes formed. The children approved. A triangle nose was

centered evenly below the eyes. The kids were tickled with simple attributes. The mouth was almost finished; the jack-o-lantern almost complete, when suddenly and unexpectedly, the knife blade broke in two. One half of the blade went flying. I ducked - the kids gasped as the steel strip had glided inches from my shoulder, and pinged on the wall before falling to the floor.

Silence! The four of us gaped at each other, eyes wide. All of us were rendered speechless except Bill who said, "And ...Cut!"

Our heads turned towards him in dismay. He had the camera in hand, and sheepishly confessed, "I got it all on tape."

Bill nudged my arm, "What are you thinking about?" "Uh...oh nothing. You ready to eat?" "Yep." He sat down, grabbed two slices of bread, and looked my way. "\$289,999...that's where we'll start."

Can't say I was thrilled with the idea of taking such a loss, but I knew in my heart we were pretty much against the wall. If we could sell the house,

we could move on and start over. We could make a new, better life for the two of us.

Taking a deep breath, I squeezed the words out, “Sounds good. Let's do it.” Bill smiled as though I had just given him permission to put his hand in a cookie jar...and I suddenly felt the heavy weight of decision-making bearing down on my shoulders. I really wished he and I could get back on track. I just hated being the one with the final say. I was fond of the way life had been...I had always dreamed up the craziest ideas and he was the strong hand of common sense. When I'd lose sight of reality, he'd have sound reasoning and authoritative answers to stabilize the situation...now it appeared to be my turn to be the voice or reason in our marriage. That's a difficult task for a dreamer!

He inhaled his sandwich. We didn't talk about anything during lunch. Within minutes Bill was pushing his chair from the table and heading back

to the office. He seemed to be on a rampage to finish the process. I had nothing more to say...sadness filled the quiet, yet in a strange way I also felt relief. My body experienced the weight lifting from my shoulders - ever so slightly. I sat a bit taller in my chair. My mind had remarkably taken a break from thinking. "Thank you, honey." I loved this man. I wouldn't know if we had done the right thing for our future until this whole mess was sorted out and we found our way again, but I did know we'd gone through so much worse together...

