

A Journal of Hope

The following content was written by Carrie and Gary Oliver between 2005 and 2018. It was originally hosted at <https://carrieoliversblog.wixsite.com/carrie/journal>

May 17-19, 2005

During the first few days of my diagnosis, so similar to many of you going through crisis, I felt an on slot of emotions most of which could come under the good 'ole category of terrifying fear. I mean what else does someone feel when after a CT scan when the technician says the doctor will be calling you as soon as possible?

The doctor did exactly that and "invited" us to come to the office to talk with him. We all know what that means. We arrived at the office and listened with those ringing ears one gets when the news is difficult. That in fact I had a very large tumor in my pancreas and that he would like to send me to Kansas City to see a surgeon there to remove it.

We liked that idea of removal, so we pursued that fast. We received a call that afternoon from Dr. Delcore in Kansas City and drove up the next afternoon with our x-rays to see him. Gary and I sat in his office (for an eternity) as he reviewed the scan and watched him as he walked into the room knowing the look on his face was less than hopeful.

Don't you love those words, "Has anyone prepared you for how serious this tumor is?"

Once again the ringing ears and need to disassociate but I looked into his face and worked hard to hear every word he had to say, meanwhile melting into my husband's arms. My tumor was large and wrapped around a major blood vessel. Can't operate on that kind or I would bleed to death. We talked for at least an hour. I needed a stint to relief the pressure on my bile duct so he set that right up with a physician the next afternoon. I needed official biopsies of the type of cancer, that would be done at the same time.

I also saw the head of oncology that afternoon. Everyone is so thorough at KU Med! Sometimes you need the illusion that if they miss it then it isn't there. They found a lymph node in my neck nobody else had and ordered a chest CT to be done the next week and a biopsy of the node.

May 21, 2005

We were surrounded by dear Church friends that anointed us with oil and prayed for us that evening.

May 24, 2005

Gary and I came back up to Kansas City to consult with this oncologist. My lungs were clear but that node had adenocarcinoma, the same cancer as in pancreas. At this time we talked about going to MD Anderson.

We packed up and headed back to Siloam Springs and then packed to go to California to our son Nathan's college graduation from Biola. A breath of fresh air in our life. What a gift to be in California with our children, their friends, and new daughter-in-law-to-be. During this time God was working miracles to get us to MD Anderson through dear people we know and our appointment was set for Tuesday May 31st with the head of gastroenterology.

We spent that Tuesday afternoon with a dear, knowledgeable, positive, and very hopeful physician, Dr. Abruzzese. I am not on a trial. We didn't talk staging, or prognosis (yes, I am beyond one and two and yes, I have metastasis... but what is important is that there is hope for a battle). I was set to begin 2 forms of chemotherapy beginning that week at MD and then will be able to follow-up here in Northwest Arkansas for 6 months. I will go back down to MD for CT scans and re-evaluation every 2 months. My physician shared hope with me that this chemo has the potential to "kill" the cancer and shrink the tumor. I will treasure those words of battle in my heart! I will go to chemo each time with the thought that the only toxic shock that is going on in my body is that creepy tumor is getting a good dose of chemo off that blood vessel it seems to enjoy being wrapped around!

Will you join me in that prayer process?

Tuesday, June 14, 2005

God Does Not Allow "Harbor Clinging"

During those first few hours of terrifying fear while we were in Kansas City, I could not sleep and would wake Gary and touch him often and awaken early in the morning. Thoughts of what will happen to my kids, how can I go to my son's wedding, what about those grand-babies, who the heck will take care of Allie since she only likes me. The poor cat will die of a heart attack. All those really hard thoughts that we humans think when we are scared, when our life has changed, when there seems like there is no where to go.

On the second early morning, (about 4:30 AM) my Psalm for the day was Psalm 91. God began to show me that there are no dangers during the day or terrors by night that He

cannot protect me from. This was going to be a whole new faith walk. God so clearly had been working right up to this point. There was not one thing that I could have done differently to find out this diagnosis any earlier. My sovereign Lord has allowed this and He has also been at work manifesting himself to me in blessing, in His presence, in His working out of fine details and in people's love for me and most importantly that God is still using me. I have a purpose every day that I awaken for every moment that I am still on this earth. I knew I needed to journal this every step of the way so thus I began my journal of hope by writing Psalm 91 from the "New Living Testament" and have written everyday of God's treasures for me and gifts and blessings and the peace he has given me that have protected me from the dangers of the day and the terrors of the night.

I write what people say to me, people's prayers, particular songs of praise, when I have made a memory I don't want to forget, scriptures. Someone gave us a little ringlet of scriptures of healing. They are recorded in my journal. Recently I was given one of Beth Moore's bible study teachings and here we go, it is on Job. I am so deeply, profoundly blessed by this teaching. It gets journaled.

Beth says that if we cling to the harbor our purpose will never be fulfilled. I think harbors are nice, don't you? You can sit and eat at a nice restaurant, enjoying viewing ships, watch sunsets,etc! But God does not allow harbor clinging. We as humans want to protect and manage our pain when God is the only one that can deal with our pain. I believe that more than ever in my life. I am giving him my pain, my sorrow, my grief, my hopes my dreams and my heart. He has given me his mercy, his grace, his love and peace, for this I would not trade sitting in the harbor as opposed to jumping into the ocean.

Prayer requests:

- Chemo kills the cancer. My current scheduled times of chemo are: June 3rd, June 4th (completed at MD), June 17th, and June 18th, July 1st, and July 2nd, July 22nd and July 23rd.
- The tumor shrinks and shrinks off the blood vessel.
- If a particularly frisky prayer, total cancer healing!!!!!!!!!!!!!!
- Need to gain weight, very hard to keep weight on due to constant malabsorption issues and diarrhea.
- Pray for sons watching who God is in this hard crisis.
- Pray for Gary's walk with God and need for love and support from men.
- Constant awareness of what my purpose is each day-how is God working in me.
- My life is not just about cancer.
- Pray that God would bring to my mind and heart those needing exactly these prayers in their life.
- Watching for God to provide for the medical expenses.
- Pray that my immune system can fight infection and that the white count behaves!
- Pray I rest when I need to.

- Pray that we do not miss one blessing every day has to offer, not one even if it is very tiny!
 - Pray that nothing keeps us from attending Nathan and Amy's July 15th wedding!
- I love you all and am overwhelmed by your love for me!

Thoughts on Hope

June 20, 2005

Thoughts on Hope" (dedicated to Larry Seward)

Yesterday was Father's Day. The Olivers held hands and dedicated our Father's Day to Gary's dad, George, who died recently in April. It was a beautiful day as we brunched on the deck, enjoying good food, laughter and what I do recently quite often "make memories".

That afternoon we all decided it was time to hit the Star Wars movie since we are radical Star Wars fans. There was a line in the movie that I won't forget that leads me into my journal entry on hope. The line said by one of the Jedi knights was this, "The 'Fear of Loss' will always lead you down the pathway to the Dark Side."

Real loss is sad, and hard and sometimes gives us the feeling we simply cannot bear it but "fear" of something that has not happened always despairs us, discourages us, paralyzes us and robs us of our Savior's love and presence, goodness, mercy and grace in our lives.

Recently we received an article written by a friend of ours, Dr. Archibald Hart. He writes so eloquently on the experience of hope, what happens when we have it and when we lose it.

When We Lose Hope

"You must never give up hope. No matter how bad the situation is or how despairing your circumstances are, you must never NEVER give up hope. Never, never, never. Never give up hope for an ailing partner. Never give up hope for your children. Never give up hope for yourself. Why? Because if you give up on hope, you give up on life itself. If hope dies, you die. As a friend of mine once said, "As long as you keep hope alive, hope will keep you alive."

Why Hope When Circumstances are Hopeless?

The answer is simple-because we were created for hope. Our bones were bred for hope. Our lungs can't breathe, our hearts won't beat and our spirits can't thrive without it. God placed us in a world over which we have little control. And as if to compensate for this helplessness, He placed in our souls the capacity to hope-to hope for better times,

to dream of better places, to pray for better outcomes, to seek better ways through life. Hope is more than optimism. Optimism is what we generate. Hope is God-given, a powerful, spiritual and psychological means for transcending the circumstances.

Hebrews 6:19 tells us that Christian Hope is a "sure and steadfast anchor for the soul." But this hoping come only as a gift of grace and is powerfully linked to the promises of God. In fact , they are inseparable. Because you believe God's promises you can hope in the future. Without this future, there is nothing to hope in.

There is only fear and fear that leads us to a very dark place.

Praises!

- Made it through round 2 of chemo treatments. I am thankful for my son Nathan who took me one day and friends the next. So far so good on the blood counts.
- The second day treatment knocks me out with flu-like symptoms. I will need discern how to take better care of myself when that happens.

I am so unbelievably thankful for the outpouring of love and prayers. We are being sustained!

Walking In My Humanity

Sunday, June 26, 2005

Thoughts on Chemo

For those of you that have walked this route or with someone you will resonate! I had my second round of chemo last Friday the 17th and Saturday the 18th. My dear, oldest son Nathan went with me on Friday. It was a significant day because the last time I was in the office was for Gary's treatments two years ago. Didn't know if I would start blubbering, but being with Nathan was fun. He was positive, thought the chemo room was cheery and he thought my nurse was very professional and caring with me. It was the first time I had to have the port poked and I did okay. He cheered me on and then for two hours just chatted with me. Didn't leave my side until he figured we needed some crackers to eat. We ended our day by going to Taco Bell, his favorite.

On the second day of chemo, two dear girlfriends went with me. This chemo takes longer. I am there about three hours. First thing that happened that was kind of funny is the nurse opened up the line and sort of let the Zovran run into me pretty quickly. This is an anti-nausea medication. I looked at Wendy and Nancy and asked them if I looked funny. They laughed and said no and then I said they looked really funny to me! I guess letting Zovran run too fast can loop some people up pretty good. I could barely focus on these two. I suppose it is something like having a few margaritas. That went away and then I got the real stuff.

Oxaliplatin causes some unusual types of things for people. It gives you a sensitivity to cold so you can't drink icy drinks or touch ice cubes or frozen things without feeling like your throat is closing up or your fingers or going to fall off. That lasts about five days after. I, of course, forget all the time. It also gave me some pretty good flu-like symptoms, fever, sweating, chills and a little nausea. I was pretty wiped this week until Friday. That thing of just wanting to lay down.

Then came the fun part. I was doing my hair on Saturday for church and had to pull out the trash can to keep throwing away my hair that was coming out in the brush. They said my hair would only thin. Now, I would kind of like to know of what their definition of "thin" is!

It is Sunday I still have some hair! I did not feel really great this week but what I know is that the chemo was working it's deal in my body and I know that is what I am praying for and many of you. I take comfort in that.

I saw my oncologist on Friday. Even though many of my counts are down he felt they would not go any lower. Gary decided to get bronchitis this week and Matt got strep my white count is 2.2 and I am still going. My doctor told me to go get in that lake and have a great time! (We were on our way to the lake for the afternoon.)

Thoughts on Emotions

I had a few of those this week. I cried a lot. Gary would ask me what that was about and it was hard to put into words until I read in Henri Nouwen this morning. I am not really crying out of loss or fear although sometimes it feels a little like that, but Henri writes in his chapter on suffering "that the tears of grief and the tears of joy shouldn't be too far apart". I had so many precious moments this week and precious moments bring on the tears. Sometimes when you are loving something so much (hence the joy) there is a grief that it can't simply last forever and there is an awareness of a finality to it all.

Thoughts on Friends

Not enough space for this one. This week was power-packed with the love of friends. Friends who have herbal tea with you and pray, friends that send the most incredible words of encouragement via email and cards, friends who come to stay for a week and do all the things that you have been hoping to do for years and she gets them done in a week and has time to love on you too, friends who take you boating. Boating is one of my greatest loves, rates right up there with riding horses.

I love my slalom ski. I have had it since I was 15. I have a dear friend that shares my love of getting up on that ski and she took me Friday. I popped right of the water and went as long as I thought my body should, which means I cut it short even though I wanted to

keep going. I sang and let the wind blow in my face and enjoyed every single moment and of course cried. It was a wonderful day.

Friends who write your name on their bathroom mirror in red lipstick to pray for you each day! Friend who tell you that you look pretty even though you know you look like you just walk out of the concentration camp, and the list goes on. I will never ever question being loved and I will have learned from each one of you how to love better.

Walking and Hearing From God

Scripture is near and dear to my heart write now and I am finding that to be one of the most impacting avenues of walking this journey and hearing from my Savior. I am also reading "Hear and Now" again by Nouwen. He begins his book by talking about what it means to walk in the present and let me assure you that is the only way to exist. We were created to live in the present.

He says, "We must learn to live each day, each hour, yes, each minute as a new beginning, as a unique opportunity to make everything new. "To live in the present, we must believe deeply that what is most important is the here and the now. We are constantly distracted by things that have happened in the past or that might happen in the future.

Listen to this, "Prayer is the discipline of the moment." To pray is to listen attentively to the One who addresses us here and how. When we dare to trust that we are never alone but that God is always with us, always cares for us, and always speaks to us, then we can gradually detach ourselves from the voices that make us guilty or anxious and thus allow ourselves to dwell in the present moment.

I also heard a great quote in church on Saturday night, "Fear is unbelief on caffeine!" If I am living in the present it is hard for that fear to kick in. I heard several wonderful stories of people surviving hard cancers this week and I heard some stories of people that have not survived. What do you do with all of this? You walk the moment, you hug harder than you usually do, you look into the eyes of people where ever you go and you ask God to make you present to them. You trust. One of the hardest endeavored of humankind is to trust. To really trust that God is at work in my life in the way that he so chooses, in this here and for now.

Prayer and Praises

- Praise for friends.
- Praise my counts will allow me my 3rd treatments coming up on the 1st and 2nd.
- Praise my parents are coming again!
- Praise for friends and family.

- Praise for the gorgeous weather. I love the sun and warmth and even the humidity.
- Praise, praise, praise for the continued email, guestbook encouragement - I am humbly overwhelmed.
- Praise that I know God is at work.

Requests

- That I don't get any of these infections running around my house that my family members have contracted.
- That all continues with our plans to attend our July 15th wedding.
- Continued prayers for weight gain. (I would really rather my skirt stay up at the wedding rather than falling down.)
- Continued prayers for chemo killing cancer.
- Prayers for safety as Andrew comes home on the 30th from Ireland.

Life in the "Right Now"

Sunday, July 3, 2005

My Worship Song for the Week by Casting Crowns

(I love the words to this song and play it over and over again)

Who am I, that the Lord of all the earth
 Would care to know my name
 Would care to feel my hurt
 Who am I, that the Bright and Morning Star
 Would choose to light the way
 For my ever-wandering heart

Not because of who I am
 Not because of what you You've done'
 Not because of what I've done
 But because of who you are

I am a flower quickly fading
 Here today and gone tomorrow
 A wave tossed in the ocean
 A vapor in the wind
 Still You hear me when I'm calling
 Lord, You catch me when I'm falling
 And you've told me who I am
 I am Yours, I am Yours

Who am I, that the eyes that see my sin
Would look on me with love and watch me rise again
Who am I, that the voice that calmed the sea
Would call out through the rain
And calm the storm in me

I am Yours
Whom shall I fear
Whom shall I fear
“Cause I am Yours
I am Yours

On Living

I will never forget the morning I awoke this week dreaming and then remembering the dream so vividly. I was in a church just about ready to give a message. (That right there is very memorable since I really don't do that sort of thing!) The words of John 3:16 were coming out of my mouth. Most of us know it well, “For God so loved the world he gave His only begotten Son, so that everyone who believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life.” The message that I was dreaming that I was about to give is that God also sent his Son that we might have life right “now”, in our very present of our ordinary day, not just in eternity and that most of us need to ask what that means to us today. We have the gift of life.

A friend asked the question this week what is the difference of walking life with cancer or without it. I wonder if the question is more are we walking in a way that says we are “alive”, alive because we have God's only begotten Son walking with us, breathing through us and able to make each day deeply better than survival. Living that way transcends every experience of the day, cancer, lists, deadlines, demands, limitations, things that often suck the living life right out of us.

I went on to read in Henri Nouwen that same morning (funny how God when He is working ties things together so neatly if we are watching) and he writes we must keep our eyes fixed on the prize. What is the prize? It is the divine life, the eternal life, the life with and in God and that wondering what it will be like after I die is only a distraction from the clear goal that is reachable now, right where I am, because eternal life is life in and with God, and God is where I am here and now.

I, as I continue to walk this cancer experience, am thankful for what God continues to show me about Himself, about what matters and what doesn't and that I have an opportunity for experiencing life here and now as well as in eternity.

On Family

I thought about my family very frequently this week. Andrew came home from 3 weeks in Ireland, full of life and stories and Godly experiences plus he had just a whole heck of a lot of fun. Isn't that great --"fun". Fun that did not involve, the evils that Satan would convince him are fun but just good clean, godly fun with people from a different culture and the JBU community. Doesn't get much better than that.

We said goodbye to Nathan and Amy after my chemo treatment on Friday as they would be making their way to Florida and preparation for their wedding. Lots of tears, but prayers of joy. My heart cannot wait for this wedding! I miss them both.

My dear parents arrived yesterday, July 2nd, to spend the 4th with us and to help out this weekend after chemo. My mom is the best Mom in the world. I am 46 and she is still all Mom to her daughters. Her name from the grandchildren is Mimi. She is paying for a house cleaner for me to come once a month during my 6 months of chemo and that is what moms do, especially ones whose own homes could win the Good Housekeeping Award of the Year for Cleanliness. I love having her around and I know that my cancer is hard on her heart. This is when distance is not a friend. I have 2 sisters one of them a physician (Chris) as I have mentioned before. She is good to me and keeps up on both my physical and emotional walk. My little sister (Barb) is so tender, as is my dad, and in their quiet ways I am sure that have no idea why this is happening to me.

Gary's sister Marsha is very much a sister to me as well and as I walk my road I have come a little bit closer to understanding her own journey of living life with pain. She has been such a model of someone who lives the gift of life to the fullest.

All my family is very protective of me, wanting nothing to hurt me or make me sad. I see this especially with Matt and Gary. They are my protectors. They watch out for me, trying hard to keep me safe.

I can't imagine walking this cancer without family or without my Jesus.

Great Quotes This Week

"Wow that old lady can sure ski!" –7-year-old James Pollard
(Absolute favorite quote of the week and the one that kept me laughing and living!)

"The human body experiences a powerful gravitational pull in the direction of hope. That is why a patient's hope is a physician's secret weapon." –Norman Cousins

"I am not afraid of a storm for I am learning to sail my ship." –Louisa May Alcott

"That which does not destroy me makes me stronger." –Friedrich Nietzsche

“The beginning is always today.” –Mary Wollstonecraft

“Never think that God’s delays are God’s denials.” –Comte Buffon

“Those who live are those who fight.” – Victor Hugo

(The above six came from “The Book of My Healing by Peggy Schmidt listed in my booklist.)

A quote from Lance Armstrong when discussing what cancer taught him, “What it teaches is this: Pain is temporary. Quitting lasts forever.”

One of my favorite scriptures this week a friend sent is Luke 11:9, "Keep on asking and we can ask boldly. I have been going boldly to the Lord and have been asking."

Praises

- Pretty good week physically.
- Had many good times with friends and family.
- Praise that this website is being sent on to cancer groups in churches and organizations and to specific people. That blesses my soul.
- Praise for another opportunity to ski.
- Praise for my work days that went well.
- Praise for Andrew’s homecoming.
- Praise for the joy of lived moments.
- Praise for the precious books, CD’s, and scripture that came my way this week.
- Praise for the worship music that is now I my mini iPod!
- Praise that I will be leaving on Sunday for Florida.
- Praise and thank you for all of you that keep me in your prayers-again I am humbled and overwhelmed. I know your prayers have gotten me through this chemo this time in much better shape.

Prayer Requests

- My counts have to be checked this Friday before I get to go to Florida. Prayer for good report.
- That I have wisdom as to what I can do this week and what I should not do. I pushed too hard last Tuesday and broke into a pretty good fever. Learned from it!
- That I continue to listen to God bring others to my heart and mind to pray for.
- That I remember to smile often, and laugh. I am looking forward to reading the “She Who Laughs, Lasts book!”
- That my family stays healthy!

- This one is important to me: That skipping a chemo treatment will not have an ill effect on my body. I look forward to my chemo treatments because I know they are a significant part of my healing.

Thank you once again for your care, your love, your support, your encouragement, your hope, your honesty, your scriptures and your involvement in my life. You are teaching me much about who Christ is.

Becoming Real

Saturday, July 9, 2005

This Journal entry is dedicated to Catherine Arnsperger, Nancy Hardin, and Sonia Guillory.

These are 3 courageous women who have and are fighting battles of loss, sadness and living each day trying to discern reality.

Reality

I thought much about “reality” this week. You see, at heart I am a contemplative. That is a very fancy way of saying I think a lot. Sometimes thinking is helpful and sometimes it isn’t because contemplatives have a tendency to go down funky roads of depression and then they have to get back on the right path again. When things are not “normal” feeling in life one can question “reality.” Sometimes real is good and sometimes real does not feel good. In the children’s book “The Velveteen Rabbit” the bunny goes through hardships, and rejection and bumps and scrapes in order to become real. The Velveteen Rabbit is not your “normal” stuffed animal.

I dropped a dear friend of mine off at the airport this week. I watched her beautiful smiling face, her spring in her step. I thought of her life she was going to, a loving husband, and daughter soon to be married, her life is very different from mine right now. I thought about how healthy she looked and how fun it was to have her visit for one precious day. I knew that she was real and our time was real. I then began to drive down the road to home and noticed and enjoyed the sunny day, and the green fields and trees and I knew that the day was “real.” I then let my thoughts turn for moments to “me” and my cancer and then things began to feel “unreal.” Loss, death, hurts, illness are all examples of what causes us to question reality and we long for something that feels normal and known and good. The tears began to drip down my cheeks. I know that the Velveteen Rabbit had his moments, too, on his way to real. I picked that book back up and for now he is my hero. He didn’t give up. He wanted to be real more than normal and he fought to be so.

My reality is what I am living and who the heck knows what normal is. I know I can't think about it long, or entertain the thoughts that everyone else has normal and what I have is reality. This past Friday after 3 counseling sessions I was scheduled to run up to Highlands Oncology in Rogers for a blood draw to check my levels before leaving for Florida and the wedding. I never go to this clinic. I always go to Fayetteville as it is closer to Siloam. The Fayetteville clinic is where all of my blood work is done and my treatments take place, but because I was already at the church seeing clients I was closer to Rogers. I had about a 45-minute slot before I had to be back in Siloam Springs. I walked in, sat down, and then was called to get the draw. I came back out to wait for the results. A beautiful young woman spoke to me and said, "You are the one with the website." I said, "Yes! How did you know?" and she explained her connection. I knew of her cancer and her battle of it coming back. I looked at her with tears in my eyes and told her to hang on, and to believe, and she said some precious things to me and we hugged. I left wondering what God was up to as He so evidently had us meet. I don't exactly know that answer but I know it was "real." I am praying for you Sonia.

I came home from church tonight. It was more than fabulous and I am thankful I felt well enough to go. (It was fun waking this morning knowing from the very first moments of opening my eyes that I was going to feel better today.) It was pure joy hearing the book of James expressed from memorization. The scripture washed over my soul and nurtured my heart. I love my church and I am glad I can take my Velveteen Rabbit self there for love and encouragement. It is good reality.

Tomorrow we climb into our car to drive to Florida (staying very clear of the Panhandle) for our son's wedding. WE ARE EXCITED. I won't write for a couple of weeks as we do some vacationing there as well. Again, I thank each and every one of you for your prayers for health in order to make this trip. I know it will be a gift in my summer reality.

Praises

- Made it through another week of chemo and while a little more difficult, I still had good moments.
- Met Sonia.
- Thankful for my family.
- Thankful for my church.
- My blood draws actually a little better than last time!
- I'm thankful for the wedding.

Requests

- Continued prayer for healing.
- That I would have wisdom of when to rest this week and what is restful.

- Continued prayers for my digestive system. I could use more “normal” experiences with this part of my body.
- To get weight back on again. I was going up before chemo but the affects of chemo bring it back down again.
- That I would listen to God as he brings others to my mind and heart to pray for.
- Made it through another week of chemo and while a little more difficult, I still had good moments.
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The Wedding & Thoughts on God's Glory Monday, August 1, 2005

In my process of the last few weeks there is a theme that keeps coming back to me and that theme is "The Glory of God." When praying with Randy and Holly Phillips over Memorial Day weekend while at Nathan's graduation, they prayed that if God so chose to heal my body on this earth He would be doing it for His "glory." I want to ponder those thoughts a bit more but first shall we talk about the infamous wedding...

The Wedding of Nathan Jackson Oliver and Amy Brooke Merrell (July 15th, 2005)

I will never forget.....

Sunday: When climbing into the car on the morning of Sunday the 10th of July, I will never forget how freeing it was to drive away from the house and then from Siloam and then from Arkansas and to enjoy the wonder of new country, looking out the window while my two males (Gary and Andrew) slept. I even treated myself to a cup of coffee. Dale Schlafer said it well, while I do have pancreatic cancer and coffee is not the best for it, God is not going to let me die over one little cup of coffee! It was so good to see the countryside, the pine trees lining the interstate and to enjoy not flying for once.

Monday: We arrived in West Palm Florida the next day at the home of Amy's parents to fun and festivities and chaos and wedding plans were in full bloom. So good to hug Nathan and Amy. Plans seemed to be going well and it was a joy to sit and talk with those that had arrived about the joys of the week and what would be happening.

I took Nathan and couple of his friends for dinner.

The next item on the agenda was purchasing my shoes. Pretty important agenda. No shoes or jewelry. What was this mother of the groom to do? No time for buying shoes while at home so off to the nearest gorgeous mall-a real mall! I found some shoes that were on sale at Bloomingdale's and I call them my princess shoes as they came complete with jewels.

Tuesday: The next day we devoted to getting Marsha, Matt and Miss Amanda Crandall from the airport and settled into their hotel. At that point the whirlwind kicked in.

Wednesday: On Wednesday Matt had planned a wonderful bachelor's party involving a deep-sea fishing trip. The trip began with Matt giving a devotional on the deck and handing out bracelets that said "Live for Him" to remind each guy to pray for Nathan and Amy in their first month of marriage as they looked at the bracelet. On to fishing. I think Dad Gary caught the most fish. The guys brought their entire fish home to grill up at the Merrell home and couldn't begin to cook it all or eat it all. They caught tons of Yellow Fin tuna. Most of us would pay \$28.00 for a piece of that in the restaurant. I am proud of Matt for his love for his brother and for the way he brought "Glory to God" that day.

I attended a lovely luncheon that same day hosted by Amy. What good food and good fun we ladies had as we sat out on the deck looking onto the intercoastal waters. Gary and I finished the evening with a delightful dinner out with Rick and Lynn Merrell, laughing, and enjoying God's goodness in bringing out children together.

Thursday: This was my morning to hit the Sailfish Marina and decorate for the rehearsal dinner. Thanks to Marsha Oliver and Amanda Crandall, we conquered finding the place and decorating the tables, complete with tea lights, flowers bowls and name cards.

This day was a very exciting day as all of my extended family from Nebraska would be arriving and we would be moving into our beautiful Mediterranean/European home that we had rented for the rest of the time there. I will never forget walking into that house complete with lovely pool, just over the bridge from Palm Bridge and within walking distance of City place shopping center. I loved when my family arrived and how much they loved it. My Mom and Dad, 2 sisters and their husbands and 3 kids as well as the 4 of us stayed there. We even had Nathan that rehearsal night. What a treat! Well no rest for the weary, we dawned our rehearsal dinner clothes and headed for the croquet club. Our dear friends the Carmichaels also got in that afternoon and arrived at the rehearsal as well. The rehearsal went well and we were off to the dinner.

The Rehearsal Dinner: I will never forget what a very special night this was. We had excellent food, fun and laughter. We overlooked the intercostal waters and it was a gorgeous evening. We ended the evening showing a DVD that dear friends of Rick and Lynn's had done for Nathan and Amy. It was awesome with a great ending as I am sure

their marriage will be! Rick and Lynn and Gary and I read our vows to Nathan and Amy. We promised to be there for them, to be on the side of the marriage and to not interfere among other precious things. The magic night ended and tomorrow would come the wedding.

Friday (The Wedding): This was great day because I did not get out of my swimming suit until 3:30! We had some good time with Nathan this day before he had to leave. Our family loved being in the home and we enjoyed every minute. Time to go to the wedding. Gary and I arrived. I had my hair fixed with the girls and he began to dress with the men only to find he had no pants in his bag! That was a little stressful as he went traveling for about a half hour to find pants but my husband will not be defeated. He found some and was appropriately dressed.

Flowers were in place, candles lit, people placed on the lawn and the first song "You are Beautiful" and old Keith Green song was sung by our dear Chip Carmichael and accompanied by McKenzie Carmichael.

I will never, ever forget when Amy stepped out onto the veranda and the steps. Truly she was the most beautiful bride I had ever seen and watching Nathan's face was a moment in which God said this is "good" and I have created this for "My Glory." The wedding continued lead by our dear friend Dale Schlafer. Letters were read to the parents that Nathan and Amy had written. I did cry at that one as it was such a surprise. They said their vows, they washed each other's feet as a symbol of servanthood and they kissed each other and were presented as Mr. and Mrs. Nathan Oliver. I sat in awe the entire time. I didn't even cry much because I was in awe. In awe that I was there, in awe of two people starting their lives together and the sense of it being so right, in awe of the breeze blowing to cool us off, in awe of Brain Kemp as he sang and played his guitar with a voice so clear and so holy, in awe of God and I knew that Glory was brought to him on this evening of July 15th 2005.

The evening continued inside the Croquet Club, with good food, and chatting and soon we would dance and dance we did. Nathan danced with Amy, I danced with Nathan to "Somewhere Over the Rainbow," and Amy danced with her Dad and Gary. The rest of the night dancing was the theme! I love to dance and I will never forget dancing with my husband cheek to cheek, being held tight and giving thanks to my Lord that I could have that dance on the night of July 15th, 2005.

The gorgeous cake was cut and we sent Nathan and Amy off with sparklers! It was hard to sleep that night as the memories kept rolling through my mind and heart. Sweet, sweet memories etched on my heart for a lifetime.

Saturday/Sunday: Our festivities with family continued at the house we rented complete

with a party with the Carmichaels, Marsha and Rick and Lynn on Saturday night. I don't think there was one night anyone got to bed before midnight! What lovely times.

Sunday, Gary and I picked up Nathan and Amy from their Boca Raton Hotel and took them to their cruise ship. That again was utter joy. The couple a little tired, but ready for the real honeymoon to start. Good to hug them, pray with them and send them off in God's hands and pray for no hurricane waters! They spent their time in St. Martin, St. Thomas, Puerto Rico, and the Bahamas. What joy!

Monday: We enjoyed an ocean day with my family and packed to come home.

Tuesday: All my family left on planes and once again we packed our car with a trip to the Schlafers and then home by Thursday night all the while enjoying every ounce of scenery. It was good to have a drive to let the emotions adjust to being away and coming home again to "reality." Lord you were good, Lord you are good.

On God's Glory

Earlier, I had written on having hope using material from Dr. Arch Hart. I believe that in order to have hope, one needs to understand that everything we do, say, behave, pray about, exist for, is for God's Glory. Only at that point do we understand what our hope exists in. Hope glorifies God. When we do not understand this, we do not have a place to put our hope. We cannot hope in ourselves, or even for ourselves. That helps me every moment I breathe because somehow when it becomes about God and not about me, there is a power that I could not ever muster up on my own. In this glorification of God even going back to chemo after time out is about bringing glory to God as I walk through it in His name, in His power. At the end, may it bring Glory to God.

Isn't that what the cross was and is all about? The Glory of God the Father? I want to end this journal entry with the song that I have been playing over and over in the past 2 weeks (thanks Zack Koons for helping me with my iPod).

Mighty Is the Power Of the Cross by Chris Tomlin

What can take a dying man and
Raise him up to life again?
What can heal a wounded soul?
What can make us white as snow?
What can fill the emptiness?
What can mend our brokenness?
Brokenness

Mighty, awesome, wonderful, is the holy Cross
Where the Lamb laid down His life
To lift us from the fall
Mighty is the power of the Cross

What restores our faith in God?
What reveals the Father's love?
What can lead the wayward home?
What can melt a heart of stone?
What can free the guilty ones?
What can save and overcome?
Overcome

It's a miracle to me
It's still a mystery
It's a miracle to me
The power of God
For those who believe
Mighty, awesome, wonderful, is the holy Cross
Where the Lamb laid down His life
To lift us from the fall
Mighty is the power of the Cross

Praises:

- Lovely drive to Florida and back.
- Felt relatively good.
- Put on 8 pounds over the course of the 2 weeks.
- Beautiful glorifying wedding.
- My family from Nebraska and the time I had with them.
- My dear friends.
- My husband.
- My children.
- My God in heaven who love me and is still bending down to hear me.
- The prayer pager that goes off over and over again and overwhelms my heart with encouragement.

Requests:

- Chemo round coming up 5th and 6th. Thank you for your prayers! I still feel some pretty good effects for about 6 days afterward.
- At some point can keep weight on.
- Will be speaking at event in Phoenix, on Thursday the 14th. Need the power of God to do that! REALLY want to glorify God in the keynote seminar as we talk on marriage. Rest of time will be resting at the resort.
- Leave Resort in Phoenix for MD Anderson and appointments the 15th and see the doctor on the 16th. Will have CT scan, blood draws, chest x-ray, etc!
- That I will keep enjoying my days, every single moment. I have loved this summer and feel I have not missed much as I have looked for the blessings.

To God Be the glory in your week and in your life!

Laguna Beach September 2005

"I command you-be strong and courageous! Do not be afraid or discouraged. For the Lord your God is with you wherever you go." Joshua 1:9 NLT

I returned home last week from Laguna Beach. Oh, what a glorious, refreshing, beautiful time. The ladies were so giving they gave me the bedroom with the beautiful view out the window of the ocean. Each morning we would arise and go straight to the partially covered deck with our coffee and bagels and down comforters to chat, read, smell and watch the ocean. Two mornings we saw dolphins playing down in the cove. Each evening we spent more time on the deck with about 25 candles lit and chatted some more.

The sun shone brightly each day but the breeze kept the temperature just right, about 75-80. The sky was blue, so blue. We did a little shopping but never until the afternoon when our deck time was over and we had eaten lunch. I completed a book, journaled and rested. This was truly a God given gift in the midst of life. Here is the [website](#) if you want to see pictures! We stayed in the 2-bedroom cottage.

I have thought much about "gifts" this week. I believe these thoughts are with me for a couple of reasons, because so many gifts have come my way and because I finished reading *The Life of the Beloved* by Nouwen. Nouwen says this about giving, "We become beautiful people when we give whatever we can give: a smile, a handshake, a kiss, an embrace, a word of love, a present, a part of our life...all of our life. I woke up one morning to find mums and pumpkins all over my front porch. Two lovely people decided to decorate my porch for Fall! That doesn't even get done at my house when I am well!

A container of tea, an email, a hug, a look of love, a soft word, honest compassion, a meal brought, a phone call with concern and of course a prayer pager that goes off every 5 minutes or so. I like, as well, the thought from Nouwen that says, "the real gifts we give come from who we are rather than what we give". That thought exhorts me. I am accountable to that thought, that truth. I pray more and more that I am a broken person that is offering sweet gifts of who God is making me to be. That is hard in the midst of such incredible weakness.

I began this update with a scripture on "courage". In church, once again the message had to be just for me! Mark talked about our understanding and experience with God as Sovereign, our Trust in God and our Courage. These 3 areas affect us personally, our circle of influence and globally. I sat there on Saturday night and felt no trouble with my sovereign God or that I could trust Him but the courage thing is hard! Courage is defined as "mental or moral strength to venture, persevere, and withstand danger, fear and difficulty." Then I thought again, "In order to be courageous I have to believe that my sovereign God is with me, I have to trust that and out of that experience He gives us courage."

It took courage to come home from Laguna Beach and the beautiful safe and cozy little cottage. I wanted to stay there under my down comforter and breathe the salty air and forget about cancer for a very long time. It took courage to go back to chemo last week. I thank God for the gift of those that join me in that venture. It took courage to get up every day after chemo knowing that not feeling well was probably pretty likely. Some days I had more courage than others and on the very days that I lacked courage those came to me and gave a gift, the gift of themselves. I thank God for this gift and for His promise that He will continue to go with me on this journey never leaving my side, giving me the courage I need and the gifts of the Body of Christ.

I have listened to this song by Natalie Grant over and over again when driving in the car. A friend just sent me the gift of the words in an email. It speaks of God's ability to hold us when we lack courage and as we are "held" we are strong.

This is what it means to be held.
How it feels when the sacred is torn from your life
And you survive.
This is what it is to be loved.
And to know that the promise was
When everything fell
We'd be held.

Praises:

- A lovely trip to California.

- The beauty of each day.
- Flowers and pumpkins and crunchy leaves.
- Great books that speak Gods truth (finished reading “Captivating” by John and Stasi Eldredge).
- The love of friends that keep me going.
- God’s truth in His Word.

Prayer Requests:

- I leave the 28th for Nashville and the World Conference of the American Association of Christian Counselors. I speak the 29th at a workshop with Gary and again on the 30th with Erin Smalley on Friendship. Please pray for the energy I need and that God would be glorified. This is the last of the Fall speaking. I praise God that there have been no cancellations and each time He was sovereign, I could trust Him and he gave me courage.
- Courage to go back to chemo on Monday the 3rd.
- That I would continue to focus on God’s word, His truth and hide it deeply in my heart and allow it to be my guide through each day.
- Continued prayer for the killing of the tumor.

You Gotta Keep Dancin'

September 2005

I pulled out the little book *You Gotta Keep Dancin'* in the past 2 weeks. A challenging little book that has been around for years. Many of you know the story of Tim Hansel who would never be the same after falling during a climbing expedition. He survived the fall but has lived his life with severe physical pain.

My favorite quote from the book says this: “Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves,

liked locked rooms and like books that are now written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.” - Maria Ranier Rilke

I finished with my first journal book this morning that I have been keeping since May 17th, so it has been almost exactly 4 months since I began this process. I liked starting a

new journal. I wish I was onto writing about things that were exclusive of cancer, but I am thankful to write. As I write this update today it is hard to put into words my place in this journey but I think it goes like this: *you gotta keep dancin', you gotta keep runnin', you gotta keep smiling, you gotta keep believin', you gotta keep going, you gotta keep lovin', you gotta keep getting up each day, you gotta keep going to chemo and on and on.*

When I was in high school I loved sports and went out for everything regardless of whether I was really good or not. Volleyball was my thing but I ran track because I was competitive and had the heart to keep at it. I loved doge ball too but that says something about the violent side of me so we won't go there! By the way I never lost once at dodge ball! I was not that great at track but I ran it. I went to practice every day starting in February. I ran the hurdles because my dad did. I always wanted to be like my dad! I thought he was the best and still do. One day the coach asked me to consider running the mile. That is an entirely different type of running than the short races. It requires endurance and pace and all those things I had not really practiced. I agreed to it because he thought I could do it. When someone believes in me I will go to great lengths to please! So, I ran the mile in the next meet. It went pretty well and I began to enjoy running long distance.

I feel I am in one of those long-distance races right now in my journey. For those of you that run you know the place where it is hard to keep going but what are your choices? Run off to the side, no, stop, no, start walking, no. These are not options. The place in the mile that happens is about 1.5 to 2 laps in knowing there are 2 full laps to go. Really, I don't know how many laps I have yet to go. I could be in a marathon. I just know it feels like that place where it gets hard.

I have cheerleaders though, people standing on the lines and they keep me going. I came home from Bible Study last night. My community group is a lifeline to me. I love these people. I love their hearts, their commitment to God, to their ministry, to their kids, their love and support for whoever is hurting that week we meet. This year we are simply reading scripture every Wednesday night. We have read in Psalms, Jesus talking to his disciples before he was to die on the cross in John 14, 15 and 16 and we started reading the gospel of Mark last night. The scripture is nurturing all of our hearts and we walk away with truth in the midst of life where the evil one bombards us with darkness and lies. Truth keeps me going in the race and sustains me when I look at the laps I have remaining to run. I climbed into bed last night and curled up and felt my legs to see if any fat had accumulated yet, nope! Still pretty bony, so I pulled on my ear phones and listened once again to a praise song and worshiped in my heart to these words:

You are my Shield, my Strength, my Portion, my Deliverer, my Shelter, Strong Tower, my Very Present Help in time of need.

Beautiful, beautiful arrangement. More truth. I listened to it over and over again and then I fell asleep with peace in the midst of a race that I actually cannot even see the finish line let alone know what lap I am on. So, I will not question expecting an answer but I will keep dancin'.

Praises:

- Great trip to Nebraska to see my family-huge blessing!
- Completely normal blood work when I went to chemo on the 5th and 6th. Looks like my immune system doesn't know that chemo is trying to destroy it.
- Marriage retreat in Florida on Marco Island went so well Sept. 9th and 10th. God sustained both of us and gave us a sweet group of couples and a gorgeous ocean to play in.
- Sons doing well. Newlyweds are having a blast in Denver!
- The Center is doing well and off to a great start with new staff and fresh vision

Prayer Requests:

- To maintain running this race
- For our sons (Nathan, Matt and Andrew) that worry about both Gary and me
- I still like the thought of complete tumor reduction and elimination. That does happen! (In other words, complete healing!)
- Still want some fat on my body. I will take it anywhere but right now, let me confess it is hard to sit!
- I think we can all keep praying for cancer cures.
- Prayer for a girl get-away this weekend to Laguna Beach, for refreshment and soul restoration and lots of laughter.

Passion

October 2005

"All who claim me as their God will come, for I have made them for my Glory. It was I who created them." Isaiah 43:7

"Satisfy us in the morning with your unfailing love, so we may sing for joy to the end of our lives." Psalm 90:14

It is just hours away before we get on a plane to fly to Houston with the next 2 days full of tests, results and a doctor consultation. I started this journal entry today with these pieces of scripture from John Piper's *Don't Waste Your Life*. He says the opposite of a wasted life is to live life by a single God exalting, soul-satisfying passion.

Passion is a great word, even more so when we live it out, and live it out according to how God created for us to live. I sat in church last night once again to hear Truth speak to me. Tom Addington spoke out of John teaching on the concept of "Jesus as the light of the world." When we walk "with" Jesus in the light we will never, ever be in the dark. He explained further that to walk with Jesus means something very intimate and close. It means, "to follow the same road in union with Jesus Christ, in my mind, heart, with my whole life. Jesus says, that whoever chooses to do so with him, will never walk in darkness. Then it came! When we are out of union on this road of life we are walking in darkness and walking in darkness brings us fear, anxiety and confusion. I know from my own life that getting out of union with Jesus on the road is usually subtle at first and then it goes crazy and can get very dark, very fast.

I want to be passionate in my life. First, I want to be the person that grabs on tight to Jesus and walks in union with Him, heart to heart. As I get on that airplane today I want to walk up the steps and sit in my seat with him and if I need to lay my head on his shoulders, understand that he invites me to do so. I know he will, if I let him, lay on that CT scan table tomorrow with me. (I wish He would take the barium enema for me!) And I know that wrapping my hand in His, He will sit with me as I hear my results on Tuesday morning.

To be passionate is to know the love of the Father and to choose him in all of our circumstances because He chose us with perfect passionate love on a cross.

How Deep The Father's Love For Us (Hymn)

How deep the Father's love for us,
How vast beyond all measure,
That He should give His only Son
To make a wretch His treasure How great the pain of searing loss,
The Father turns His face away.
As wounds which mar the Chosen One,
Bring many sons to glory.
Behold the man upon the cross,
My sin upon His shoulders.
Ashamed I hear my mocking voice,
Call out among the scoffers. It was my sin that held him there,
Until it was accomplished.
His dying breath has brought me life,

I know that it is finished.
I will not boast in anything,
no gifts, no power, no wisdom.
But I will boast in Jesus Christ,
His death and resurrection. Why should I gain from his reward?
I cannot give an answer.
But this I know with all my heart,
His wounds have paid my ransom.

I feel compelled to humbly thank the many prayer warriors, so many of you exceedingly, abundantly beyond what I could have asked for or foreseen for your prayers, your love and your passion for Jesus. You have lifted me up as you pray at night, in the day and whenever you are called. You have witnessed to me a Jesus I could not have known had I not walked this journey in the past few months and I thank you for that. I thank you that you are people walking down the road in union with our Lord. Your insistence upon walking in the light keeps me in the light. I love you for that.

Would you continue to hold me up and pray my passion continues for Jesus? Pray for my heart to connect tightly with his and that my body will walk in perfect union down the road on my journey, his journey for me.

Praises:

- My blood counts remain normal!
- I have been walking.
- I have been maintaining a little more weight
- The joy of the Fall days lifts my spirits!
- I am sleeping very well.
- Scripture remains dear to my heart.
- I continue to enjoy life! (family, friends, my job and my kitties)

Requests:

- Walk in union down the road with Jesus.
- Keep passionate.
- Great test results that say the cancer is being defeated!
- For my dear precious family members as they wait for my results.
- A continued prayer that I have is that new cancer treatments will be released every day for all types of cancer.

Cry Out to Him

October 2005

"In the day of my trouble I will call upon You, for You will answer me." Psalm 86:7

It is the very wee hours of the morning. I woke up at 3:30 and decided to get up at 4:00. I laid there and thought this through. I have been very fatigued due to the chemo especially as the day goes on. I am going to be tired anyway so why not get up while I am excited about eating honeycombs (these are not a cancer killing food item but I have all day to drink carrot juice and eat broccoli) and accomplish something!

During our married life my getting up early has been my husband's favorite thing about me (not)! Actually, we are a typical couple with opposite sleep schedules. He prefers to go to bed at 12:00 and I prefer to go to bed at 9:00 and get up very early. Neither one of us likes the alone time hours we spend in bed in between away from each other so we have learned to compromise bed time except on occasion like this morning. I figure when I am not there that is prime time for him to role onto his right side and snore as much as he wants since I don't let him do that when I am next to him!

I have been thinking about what I want to write about in this journal entry update. Chemo was better this time than last but I generally feel pretty wiped out and am wanting to stretch out on my couch more and more. I think I need to some couch pullers in my life! That could be a new ministry. Pulling the cancer patient off the couch and keeping then going and involved!

AACC was absolutely incredible in terms of time spent with friends there, the speaking both with Gary on Thursday and Erin Smalley on Friday and just generally fun! I enjoyed attending workshops and enjoyed good health. My prayer was answered for good health and just at the most crucial time. I arrived on Wednesday evening. Gary greeted me outside the Opryland Hotel as the shuttle dropped me off. It was sooo good to see him. We ate dinner together and he went on to the plenary session while I headed to the room to unpack, get those jammies on and make my 9:00 bedtime! I also had a few notes to look at for our 8:45 session in the morning. Just like each week, I suddenly felt better sitting on my bed! It is such an incredible blessing. I had energy and knew that I had made my turn-around for the week and just in time!

I will never forget this conference, the people in our life, that we ate lunch and dinner with and ran into, that are so committed to pray for us and for me from around the

country. I was completely overwhelmed with God's love, comfort and by people's prayers. Prayer: it is a phenomenal experience, gift, command, privilege, etc. This prayer pager I wear gives me hope, a sense that I am loved and I am greatly encouraged that people are talking to Jesus. That is what it is ultimately about, a conversation with God and a belief that he hears us. So simple yet so powerful.

I know some of what people pray for me for as they share with me but not all. I know that when we pray it takes faith to believe that God hears and the whole prayer for the healing thing can be a tough prayer to pray and keep praying and have faith that God will answer with what we are asking for. There, I have now said it! It is out on the table.

I go back to MD Anderson in 2 weeks, on the 24th for tests and the 25th to see the Doctor. I have no idea what is going on inside of me regarding the tumor and cancer cells. I have had many emails, some talking about lost loved ones to cancer and some with incredible stories concerning pancreatic cancer. One just recently that had a tumor similar to mine that they decided to operate on even though it involved the artery. Two surgeons at MD took on this operation with success. That's quite a story.

As I continue this journey I still have to keep my heart and my eyes focused on God's love for me, his care for me, and his sovereignty, but I have learned some things from scripture. I have learned that I can really bother Him with my pleas and I can tell Him of my desires and that I can "cry out to Him", wail if I want to. I can claim scriptures such as these:

"I cried out to you, O Lord, I begged the Lord for mercy, saying, What will you gain if I die, If I sink down into the grave? Can my dust praise you from the grave? Can it tell the world of your faithfulness: Hear me, Lord, and have mercy on me. Help me, O Lord" Psalm 30:8-10.

I have prayed that I would be "unlike" the man at the pool that "argues" with Jesus about getting up and walking and being healed. If Jesus says to me, "Stand up, and pick up your mat, and walk and be healed," (John 5:8) there will be no arguing from this girl. I will carry my mat with me for the rest of my life.

"You didn't choose me. I chose you. I anointed you to go and produce fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask for, using my name" John 15:16.

"Hear my prayer, O Lord, And let my cry come to you. Do not hide Your face from me in the day of my trouble; Incline Your ear to me; In the day that I call, answer me speedily" Psalm 102:1-2.

"Come with great power O God and rescue me. Defend me with your might. O God listen to my prayer, pay attention to my plea" Psalm 54:1.

"But God is my helper. The Lord is the one who keeps me alive!" Psalm 54:4.

These are but some of the prayers and scriptures I pray and focus my heart upon as well as prayers of thanksgiving for who the Lord is my life and how he remains at work to mold me, to change me and to use me until my last breath whenever that will be. Until that time whether it is soon, or in many years, I thank you for your prayers. I have been wearing my prayer pager this very early morning and somewhere in this world I am being paged and prayed for as I begin my day and that in itself is a miracle that only one who walks with Christ can know.

Love to all of you.

Praises:

- A wonderful conference 2 weeks ago, every moment blessed!
- Continued ability to work and to see clients and to love being used by God.
- My church and the body of Christ that loves me well.
- A blessed time in my family, the newlyweds are happy, Andrew is having a good year and Matt is doing well at JBU.
- The Fall continues to be so, so beautiful. I am loving my pumpkins and mums on my front porch. I was inspired to re-paint my front door. It makes for a nice walk up to the Oliver's house!
- Great coffee times with friends in the last 2 weeks and 2 people who have signed up for window washing!

Prayer Requests:

- Strength in my spirit to go back to MD in 2 weeks.
- Good test results and a great plan for continued treatment for this cancer.
- That I would remain in good health with good blood counts.
- Strength to get my walks in (very important for the body).
- Continued courage to face each day and to look for the blessing in each day.

November 2005

Living and Dying

"God is looking for believers who believe for a change."

-Beth Moore from *Believing God*, pg. 233.

As I write this update today, once again I am humbled by anyone that takes the time to read these entries and even more so when God chooses to use these words for His glory, His good and His honor.

I wrote last week about a trip to MD Anderson Cancer Center in Houston and our second update concerning the cancer treatment I am receiving. What we thought was going to be a couple of days turned into an entire week of being away. I DID RECEIVE GOOD NEWS! What I want to write about in this journal is the journey of the week. I, at times, return to my Journal of Hope and reread how God has been at work in my life. This week was one of those signature weeks of experiencing pain, sorrow, joy, and an extra measure of the presence of God. Will you walk through this week with me?

Sunday: Gary and I packed and prepared for our trip. We had a leisurely day as our standby out of Tulsa was not until 8:30 that night. What a great day of puttering around our home and spending time with the guys! We left, dropping Andrew off at dear Wendy Soderquist's house, knowing he would be in great hands for a couple of days. Her kids functionally have been Andrew's surrogate siblings!

We arrived in time for a Starbucks then off to the airport. We left later than 8:30 but Gary and I do the airport thing well. It has become a way of bonding! I am always up for food these days so we ate buffalo wings and chatted and enjoyed being together. We arrived in Houston greeted by our friend Ehab Hanna and a bundle of beautiful cream roses (they were for me!). We left for their lovely home where Sylvie had an array of exotic cheeses, French bread, grapes and a luscious bottle of red wine. I let them enjoy the wine! Water for this girl with cancer! We sat around their coffee table in their hearth room eating and chatting and laughing until midnight. We went to bed way too late but with joyful hearts after fun, laughter, good conversation and prayer with our friends, the Hannas.

Monday: Monday morning came too early for my taste and the first thing I noticed getting out of bed was a distinct pain where my pancreas is. Never felt that one before. The pain ebbed and flowed all day. I had my blood work done and then began drinking the barium chalk for my CT scan at 2:00. Being tired and fighting the pain I sat with my eyes closed most of the afternoon and fought the thoughts of the pain being caused by a

growing tumor that was about to be discovered. I did not get into the scan room until 6:00. I put on what looks like prison garb and was poked again for my IV. I had the chest x-ray, and then laid down on the scan table. The scan table is where I need Jesus the most in my process of cancer. It is hard to view the scan table as my friend after all, that is where it all began. Soon the scan was over and off the prison garb came and I walked out at 7:00 pm. We tried to go to dinner but I was in pain and sick enough that I requested to go home and get into bed. Gary made me oatmeal and I dropped off to sleep.

Reflections on the Day: This was the most difficult day of the week. I fought physical pain, and physical pain has a way of drawing one into themselves. What I am most thankful for are these things: I am thankful for my dear, most precious loving husband that rubbed my neck often and tried to soothe my pain. I am very, very thankful for the songs of praise that I kept singing in my mind, the scriptures that I have learned in the last few months that I could recite over and over again, the truths that people have spoken to me, (one such word that a dear lady from Costa Rica had shared with me concerning her breast cancer that she fought was that I was to never doubt Jesus and the possibility of healing even when I experienced pain), that I had just learned what it means to “walk in union with Christ down the road” for it was a hard and rocky road that day, for Tony Houston from Tennessee, that told us of his successful cancer story, for the loving phone calls I received that afternoon from dear friends, encouraging my heart with their voices, for my oatmeal and my cozy bed.

Tuesday: When I awoke today I had slept for about 10 hours and the pain had subsided a little. We left for MD to meet with the doctor and hear the results. Being rested felt soooo good, being with my husband felt even better, and hanging onto Jesus was the ultimate.

We were called back almost immediately. What a blessing to forego the waiting game. I had to gown up again and answer questions. Debbie, the doctor's assistant, came in glowing. She was happy with my weight, the chest x-ray, and the tumor had shrunk a little. She felt the node in my neck and that was down. Also, the marker for pancreatic cancer had dropped another 200 points. What we found is my liver was completely backed up with bile from the gallbladder and a malfunctioning stint. The stint drains the gallbladder to the stomach as often times pancreatic cancer places pressure on the gallbladder. Evidently I was going to get a new stint this week. A permanent one made of titanium and that would happen on Thursday.

The doctor felt I could make another couple of months of this chemo treatment and then “perhaps” we would look at radiation. The “r” word was not mentioned back in June, so we knew this was good news for my treatment. I was poked again for more blood work; we ate lunch and called family and friends. Back home to the Hanna's, we celebrated little Camille's 3rd birthday. I will never forget helping Sylvie and Camille open up her new “Dora the Explorer” Doll house and setting up the pieces. I dreamed of dollhouses

and granddaughters with each little piece I opened and assembled and played with. My favorite piece was the dining table that with a push of a button turned into a birthday party table complete with cake!

Wednesday: This was a free day. Gary and I spent some time at the beautiful Galleria Mall, and a walk around Highland Village. We had PF Changs and sat outside enjoying the breeze at Starbucks. We talked of our Holiday time together with a trip for Thanksgiving to Denver and Christmas in Omaha. We planned our celebration of our 25th wedding anniversary that will happen on the 27th of December. We thanked the Lord over and over again that He continues to encourage us with good physical results. I was tired again this day and felt some pain but still found joy in the beauty of the day and the safety of my life-mate.

Thursday: Off to the treatment Center. I loved that the nurse called me back by saying "Carrie O." They didn't call out anyone else's name like that. Isn't that funny? It felt like she knew me! I was prepped which means they gownned me up again and poked me with an IV and then I was taken "somewhere." It felt like the deep dark chasm of MD Anderson! Did we go through a wardrobe somewhere? Glad Gary got to go with me. Our nurse was a chatty one! She could tell we had faith. Thought I was a bit too cheery to not have some faith under that cheer! It was fun to share with her about Jesus. Soon the intern came and Gary left and I was laid stomach down on a very hard table. A mouth guard was attached around my head and I was instructed they would insert that when I went to sleep and before the tube went down my throat. I told them they might want some back up because the first time I had this procedure done it took 3 nurses to hold me down because evidently I put up a little bit of a struggle even while drugged. They felt they could handle me! The doctor (Dr. Lee, oh one that needed a bit more warmth) came and the drugs started which felt good to me considering all the "gag me" stuff that was about to take place. This procedure involves sticking a tube down my throat into my stomach area to lodge the stint between the gallbladder and liver. I guess there was not much of a fight this time because very soon I was taken back to recovery. The doctor came with the report and yes my old stint was completely blocked, sludge they called it. No wonder I felt yucky, I was sludge impacted! I liked hearing that no other disease was seen with the scope! Good news.

On this day we reveled in the presence of God.

We checked on flights out but none available so we enjoyed another evening with Ehab and Sylvie. The girls went to bed early and we adults played with silly things on the computer, ate some food and once again prayed before bed.

Friday: Ehab arrived at 6:15 to take us to the airport. We hugged goodbye and off we flew for home. We walked into our home at 11:30 in the morning exhausted but with a sense of God's precious love. We hugged and went about our day.

Every now and then I like to listen to a secular song. It's true! And I drink wine too when I am not battling cancer. The song "100 years" by Five for Fighting says some things about life. 100 years can go by fast. The band begins with age 15, like that is the magic age to be! Our son Andrew is 15 until November 7th. He is the "magic" age. Let me pick up the song at age 45, I cannot lie about my age!

I'm 45 for a moment, the sea is high

And I am heading into a crisis, chasing the years of my life

15.... there's still time for you

Time to buy and time to lose yourself

Within a morning star

Every day's a new day

15...there's still time for you

Time to buy and time to choose

15...there's never a wish better than this

When you only got a hundred years to live

I think a lot about living and dying. Good thoughts mostly. I don't necessarily want to be 15 but at 15 you pretty much think you are going to live forever. I don't know if I will make it to 100, I am going for tomorrow so the best part of this song is "Every day's a new day" and God gave that to me this past week. Every day was a new day, a different day, a day to follow him and see where he leads. I'll take a hundred years if He chooses that for me but for now I will take today and look forward to tomorrow.

This was just one week in my journey of cancer. A year ago in October I began to feel the pain that caused me to pursue physicians to find out what was wrong with me. My journey will continue and I will keep writing and learning, praying and enjoying moments that will turn into memories.

Praises:

All of our prayer requests were answered. A tumor that is shrinking, markers down, no spreading.

For the friendship of the Hannas and their graciousness to us when we visit Houston.

For the prayers of many.

For the hand of Jesus.

Praise for the “window washers” that came on Saturday. I love you Sue and Janey!

Praise for only 4 more chemo episodes to go!

Praise and thanks for the many meals that keep coming on chemo days.

Prayer Requests:

Continued tumor shrinkage and response to present treatment.

For wisdom on next steps of cancer treatment. We are receiving suggestions for other avenues.

To pursue for treatment frequently and we need great wisdom as to what the next step will be.

Continued health and strength for Gary.

Please pray hard and deep for our sons, Amy, and girlfriend Amanda as they walk this journey. Their hearts really struggle at times and Satan is hard at work to try to discourage them.

For a blessed Thanksgiving trip to Denver. No snow storms. I think I shall really have a breakdown if I can't get to Denver!!!!

November 2005

Relationships

"And as we live in God, our love grows more perfect. So we will not be afraid on the day of judgment, but we can face Him with confidence because we are like Christ here in this world. Such love has no fear because perfect love casts out all fear. We love each other as a result of His loving us first." 1 John 4:17-18 NLT "There are friends that destroy each other, but a real friend sticks closer than a brother." Proverbs 18:24 NLT

Relationships

"It must have been wonderful to spend time with Christ, with Somebody who liked you, loved you, believed in you, and sought a closeness foreign to skin-bound man. A person would feel significant in His presence. After all, those who knew Christ personally went on to accomplish amazing feats, proving unwavering devotion. It must have been thrilling to look into the eyes of God and have Him look back and communicate that human beings, down to the individual, are of immense worth and beauty and worthy of intimacy with each other and the Godhead. Such an understanding fueled a lifetime of joy and emotional health among the disciples that neither crowds of people jeering insults, nor prison, nor torture, nor exclusion could undo. They were faithful to the end, even their own deaths."

Donald Miller, *Searching For God (Knows What)*

I have written about relationships in almost every journal entry on some level but as I write this entry I have to go deeper, go further, go where Christ has been working in my life in the last 2 weeks.

While I would say I have walked closely with Jesus most of my adult years the verse that talks about Him saying, be gone from me for I never knew you, has definitely gotten my attention in the past. It has been a motivator for me, but perhaps more out of fear that He could say those words to me if I didn't know him enough, or if I missed something about knowing Him. I don't feel that way anymore. Is that because of the cancer journey? Perhaps. What I know abundantly, deeply, profoundly more than I used to know is the love and heart of the Father and the Son. I know this through the Word, through worship and especially through the love of others in my life. The last 2 weeks has been filled up full with love of people and dear friends. Chemo was very hard this last round. The stint they put in me has to expand over a period of time and that the thing would hurt as I would feel it expand in me. I am getting ready to go again today and I wonder how chemo will be. During the last round I called my mom and asked her if she would come for one of my last remaining treatments. She told me I could call anytime and I have not done that. I knew now that I needed her for one of these last rounds and I knew she would

come. She is, without any doubt, the best mom for me, even at my age of 45. She will come and cook, do laundry and fold it perfectly, iron like all women ironed back in the 50's, and she will be tender and loving and take care of me. She will know what I need without me figuring it out first. I love my mom. She will come with my dad and he will putter around the house and worry about me and for that I love him. They will come the Sunday we return from Thanksgiving for my chemo on Monday the 28th. I can't imagine a better time to need them, leaving my beloved Nathan and Amy and dear friends in Denver to come back home to chemo. On Saturday (5th) after the last chemo (31st, 1st) I decorated for Andrew's 16th birthday and had 3 hours to spare before the party. I headed for my favorite place to sit and have a latte, Arasaga's. The breeze of the very warm day was gently coming in the door and I sat in the big chair, sipped my latte and talked with friends on the phone. That day as I drove home I had one of my moments of tears and crying out to God for healing. I had been pretty silent in the past week due to being sick. When I returned home for some reason I opened my email to find an email from Carol. Carol in her long and loving email expressed that she had not in her many years of walking with Christ truly prayed for healing for anyone but she felt deeply compelled to do that for me. The tears streamed again as I knew God was talking to me through Carol about His love for me and that He had heard my crying out. In that moment I knew Jesus. I received a card from a sorority sister. She sends me a card very consistently and they are usually very silly cards with very serious words. The Omaha D.G.'s want to see me if we come to Omaha for Christmas. Jesus thank you for relationships. Every Monday afternoon I meet with my cell group friends for prayer. On this Monday the 7th we sat out on the deck and enjoyed yet another gorgeous Fall of 2005 day. My tender friends looked at me and asked the question, as they do so often, "how are you". Tears welling up, I couldn't put into words how I was or when they asked, what I needed. Being tenacious they kept at the process and the outcome was that I was to call anytime to say anything, especially if I needed prayer and that they would all be at my house on Sunday afternoon to help me decorate for Christmas. While only November 14th it is Christmas at the Oliver's! They brought cookies, decorated, helped put away all the Christmas boxes and then vacuumed. In that very moment I knew Jesus. This past week I headed for Branson with Erin Smalley to complete our chapter outline for our book due April 1st. Okay, now I know that produces trembling and fear that we have a book contract due April 1st, I have cancer, she has been through a major move here to Siloam, we really don't know each other that well, yet we are writing a book together due April 1st. I have to tell you I don't have fear about this one because I know who is going to write it! It won't be me! Truly the Holy Spirit will be doing the typing so He had better get busy. These days in Branson were days that I cannot put into words. Jesus manifested big time. I had energy, we wrote and wrote and wrote, we agreed on everything. We not only outlined the chapters but we plugged in quite a bit of information under each chapter to use when we write them. Erin blessed me with her positive, uplifting, never ending encouragement.

Erin genuinely loves people and it shows. She was Jesus to me and in those moments I knew Jesus. This coming Tuesday the 22nd we climb in our car with Matt and Andrew, suitcases, and Christmas presents and we head to Colorado for Thanksgiving. There is a song from Dave Koz, A Smooth Jazz Christmas, that is entitled "Get Here." That's what I want to do - get there! I will probably drive my males nuts as I crack the whip to get to Colorado!! We will stay with Nathan and Amy, to have precious time with them. I am also looking forward to the time with my dear, dear Colorado friends, friends I have walked with for years. We will meet at Starbucks, we will cook together, eat together, hug and pray together. I will be making memories and taking lots and lots of pictures. I know in these moments coming up at this Thanksgiving in the year of 2005, I will know Jesus. I am thankful I know Jesus and have come to know him more deeply through my earthly relationships. When I meet Him face to face there is no doubt that He will say to me, "Come to me little one for I know you well and we will embrace and perhaps, just maybe, we shall even dance together." Then I pray to you, O Lord. I say, "You are my place of refuge. You are all I really want in life" Psalm 142:5. Praises:

- God knows my heart and answers my small prayers with a big voice.
- The stint has settled in and it causes no more pain.
- Had some energy again these last few days before chemo round.
- For friends, such beautiful life-giving friends.
- For my husband and family.
- For my mom and dad and their love for me.
- For my email encouragers.
- For this continued beautiful Fall.
- For the Holiday season of Thanksgiving and Celebration of Christ's birth.
- For those that believe that God can heal.

Prayer Requests:

- An all-encompassing prayer for those who hit this website with illness, cancer, trials and that God will meet them big in their hearts and lives.
- Four more rounds of chemo, including the one today. That these rounds will kick the tumor hard!
- Wisdom for upcoming decisions as to "what next" concerning treatment unless of course I am healed!

- Prayer for the book project. I have the goal of completing the preface, introduction and at least one chapter before Christmas or by first week of Jan. That is a big prayer considering how I felt last chemo round.
- Good weather traveling to and from Denver (to 22nd and 23rd, from on the 27th).

December 2005

Merry Christmas & Blessings of Peace

Thanksgiving: Colossians 3:15; “Dedicate yourself to Thankfulness.” We are very thankful for a wonderful trip to Denver for Thanksgiving. We had warm and sunny weather every day until we came home which allowed me to be out as much as possible. I won’t forget walking into Nathan and Amy’s lovely Seminary apartment, seeing all their things from the wedding as well as the Christmas tree they bought the year before at 6:00 am on December 26th in Grand Island Nebraska to get it at half price! It was beautiful! They had taken a strand of garland and hung it on a big shelf in their dining area, attached lights and hung all of Nathan’s Santa ornaments he had been collecting since he was little. That was especially fun for Gary and me as we had bought many of those for him over the years. We celebrated Christmas with Nathan, Amy, Matt and Andrew Thanksgiving morning and then we were off to the Carmichaels' for a Thanksgiving experience of a lifetime. The cooking was exquisite, the table fit for kings and queens, but most memorable was our sharing of thankfulness after we ate. Going around the table we shared our hearts and many, many tears. Treasured, treasured words of love, sorrow grief and joy. We spent 2 hours at that table. A most blessed 2 hours. We then packed up the troops and went for dessert at the home of the Tallants. Once again we laughed and shared and enjoyed good lifelong friends.

My Starbucks friend time was energy giving and very precious. Julie Nelson prayed at the end. I won’t forget her dear prayer. A precious memory from the Thanksgiving trip was a lunch spent with Amy. Just us girls at California Café, one of my favorite restaurants inside Park Meadows Mall. I love my new daughter, her beauty inside and out, her honesty and love for the Lord blesses me from head to toe.

Leaving on Sunday was difficult but joyful as we left filled up full with our family memories. Thank you Lord-we are very thankful.

Chemo Week: We came home on that Sunday to my parents already here waiting for us and to help with my chemo week. Each day that week I noticed them, their love for each other and their love for me. Truly I made it through that week due to my Mom and Dad. Gary was out of town and their presence and love upheld my heart to make it through.

My worst night was Thursday because I had overdone the day but generally I did better than previous weeks, I believe because my Mom and Dad came. They said they are on call for me! I am not sure they know what they have committed themselves too! And yet perhaps they do know. I love them deeply.

Recent Reading: I just finished a book entitled *The Importance of Being Foolish, How to think like Jesus* by Brennan Manning the author of *The Ragamuffin Gospel*. This has been a deeply challenging book to read especially during the Christmas season. We think of Jesus as the baby Jesus at Christmas, but Manning goes straight to the heart of the matter. The book's theme is our ability as humans to deceive ourselves, even to the point of our perspective of who Jesus is and His role in our life. To best illustrate what God has spoken to my heart is to add here a few of the powerful quotes and words used by Manning.

"The Lord said he wished me to be a fool, the like of which was never seen before," said Francis of Assisi. A gentle revolution will come through the little cadre of Christian fools who are willing to overthrow the established order by rearranging their lives around the mind of Christ. Their quest is transparency through truthfulness, and their lifestyles will be shaped by the gospel of Jesus Christ. (pg.175)

Self-deception is the enemy of wholeness because it prevents us from seeing ourselves as we really are. It covers up our lack of growth in the Spirit of the truthful One and keeps us from coming to terms with our real personalities. (pg. 5)

To have the mind of Christ Jesus, to think His thoughts, share His ideals, dream His dreams, throb with His desires, replace our natural responses to persons and situations with the concern of Jesus, and make the mind-set of Christ so completely our own that "the life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me," (Gal. 2:20), is not the secret or the shortcut to transparency. It is transparency. Often our preoccupation with the three most basic human desires, pleasure security and power, is the cloak that covers transparency. The endless struggle for enough money, good feelings, and prestige yields a rich harvest of worry, frustration, suspicion, anger, jealousy, anxiety, fear and resentment. (pg. 38)

Here is the essence of perfect sincerity in conduct, to care for nothing but God's judgment on our actions, not to vary our attitude to suit the company we are in, not to hold one opinion when alone and adopt in conversation, but to speak and act as in the sight of God who can read our inmost thoughts. (pg. 47)

A Powerful Ending to the Book.....

"When we are hungry for God, we move and act, become alive and responsive; when we are not, we are only playing spiritual games. God is of no importance unless He is of

supreme importance,” said Abraham Heschel. An intense inner desire to learn to think like Jesus is already the sign of God’s presence. The rest is the operation and activity of the Holy Spirit. I suppose most of us are in the same position as the Greeks who approached Philip and said, “We would like to see Jesus” (John 12:21). The only question is: “How badly?”

As I travel this journey of cancer, some who would call terminal, I have had the choice to throw myself into the arms of Jesus or to run the other way, overtaken by fear, anxiety, perhaps anger at the idea that a loving God could allow such a disease in my life. I cannot, with all my strength in my voice and breath in my body say how deeply grateful I am for the understanding that I must throw myself into the arms of Jesus and when I do that I become accountable in ways I never understood as seriously before this illness. My sin is real every day to me and I cannot carry it long before I take to Him. I give Him my tears because I know that He is my loving father that knows my pain anyway. I thank Him, thank Him, thank Him, for His presence, His word and the truth of His word that I am continuing to discover how that is to be lived out each day and like a normal human sometimes I fail. Transparency is not a complete uncovering with no boundaries of who we are but rather it is agreeing with Jesus about who we are. We are people who fail, who are weak, who need Jesus and are made in God’s image a little lower than the angels. Every day I embrace this truth, I embrace my Jesus.

This Christmas Season: I will go for a second to last round of chemotherapy on Monday the 12th and Tuesday the 13th. A dear friend from Denver, Barb Tallant, will arrive on Wednesday to be at my side for this round, a complete surprise to me! Barb knew Gary first way back when and has become a part of both of our lives. I love Barb because she is real, honest and she loves to laugh. I will enjoy being with her more than I can say.

On Christmas Eve Day we will load our car and drive to Omaha to my sister Chris’s home there to be with our Nebraska family. Gary and I will also take treasured moments to celebrate our 25th wedding anniversary at a restaurant, V. Mertz, in the Old Market spot in Omaha. I took him on date to this place before we were married at the recommendation of Dana Way Meyer. This place is so cool, very cosmo! Can’t wait to stare across the table at my life mate! Mushy huh? We will come home on the 28th and put away the Christmas decorations and will fly to MDA on Sunday the first.

A Significant Visit to MD Anderson: On Monday the 2nd I will have all re-testing done to look at “hopefully”, “prayerfully” a lack of the disease. If all goes well with the tests the next step will be radiation of the tumor. Radiation was not an option in the beginning due to the metastasis but now the doctor is looking at the option.

We ask for your prayers for this next step. Here is the great news! I have felt so well this past week. Better than I have since August. It has been a gift from the Lord and I believe an outcome of the prayers of many.

Final Note to My “Pager Pals”: Please, please know that every time my pager goes off I notice it and it vitally encourages my heart. I often touch the pager and thank God for His Spirit that prompts someone to pray, I pray for you and I am reminded when the pager goes off to pray for others. There are often times when this goes off every few minutes. This is an amazing wonder of the Body of Christ. Thank you, thank you.

In Summary: This is one long journal entry! If you have made it to this point then you are a better human being than I am! I will not write again until after MDA so have a Blessed, Merry, Peaceful, Magical and Miraculous Christmas celebration. I have loved every moment this Christmas season, the shopping, the lights, the tree, the decorations, church, the Christmas cards etc. I hope these things for you as well.

Praises:

- Wonderful thanksgiving with safe travel to and from
- My parents visit
- My husband’s love
- My family of sons and daughter that reach out with their love and prayers
- Beautiful Christmas season
- The Body of Christ
- Feeling better this past week
- My ability to continue with God’s grace and the power of prayer to work
- Knowing Jesus more and more and wanting and desiring that in my life

Requests:

- Upcoming chemo week that I can remain positive and joyful. Last time I was there many people had been coming for chemo for years and that is hard
- I would love to feel this well during our trip to Nebraska and for my anniversary dinner
- Continued prayer for healing of the disease
- Wisdom as we consult with the Physician on Jan 3rd

- Continued prayer for our sons and Amy, that they would be protected from fear, and doubt. That they would be coming to know Jesus more deeply as well
- That Gary can continue to be upheld by God's love and grace and strength as He walks His journey with me.

January 2006

NEVER Give Up Hope

Christmas and 25th Wedding Anniversary: Oh what a joy-filled Christmas we experienced spent with Marsha, Gary's sister here, on the 18th and with the Webster side of the family in Omaha. We ate, we laughed, we shopped and truly enjoyed one another's company. The highlights for me were staying in my sister Chris's home with all of my family on Christmas evening. Shopping with my sister Barb the next day and actually sitting outside for coffee when Chris arrived considering it had been oh so cold! The day after I gathered with 9 other Delta Gammas for lunch and had a complete blast. What I felt walking away from that lunch time was that it was an honor to have gone to school with these women and 26 years later experience them as successful, loving, thriving people that seemed to delight in reuniting. That is JOY! I love you all!

That evening of the 27th Gary and I went out on a magical and romantic 25th wedding anniversary dinner. When we arrived we were greeted and escorted to our table to find a vase of cream roses (the flower of the Delta Gamma sorority) given to us by 3 of the D.G.'s and a bottle of champagne in a bucket, a gift from my sister Chris. The waiter was such a great sport taking many pictures of us and then we ate to our hearts content. Thank you Lord for my husband of 25 years! I gave him a scuba diving trip and he gave me diamond earrings. I know I got the best deal! I will not forget Christmas 2005.

Trip to Houston: Once again we packed our little bags on Dec. 31st and left the next morning at 7:00 am to arrive in Houston at noon and promptly were picked up by our dear friend Ehab Hanna. He always greets me with flowers! We arrived at their warm and familiar home. We ate a lovely brunch dear and most creative Sylvie had prepared and sat and chatted for 2 hours then went on a walk in one of the loveliest parks we have been to, complete with fountains, waterways, flowers and trees. It was almost 80 degrees in Houston! Gary and I basked in the warmth. Home that evening and to bed.

The next morning, on the 2nd, Ehab drove us to MD Anderson where I would go through the battery of tests once again. I was poked for blood work, drank 3 glasses of cold berry flavored chalk and was scooted onto the CT scan table. I did not have one moment of fear this testing time. Fear is my thorn, it is my weakness, it is my darkness, it is what has prevented me from joy and intimacy with the Father and others so much of my life, so for

this time to not experience it was glorious, amazing and truly, truly a total answer to the prayers of many. We left and spent the evening at a lovely boardwalk down the coast and ate great seafood. It was beautiful looking out over the gulf at boats returning in from the adventures of the day and to forget about cancer for precious and sweet moments.

Meeting With the Physician-Jan 3rd: Dr. Abruzzese came in and sat down to discuss our next move. We knew that we would be looking at a turn in treatment. We thought it might be radiation. Here is what I would like my readers to know and understand. I have a serious cancer disease. Because of the metastasis and location of the tumor in the pancreas I am in a statistic that has a very low survival rate if any. Okay that is grim, I know, so let's turn to the good news! The doctor discussed with us the positive test results. The blood cancer marker down another 100 points, now at 180. Normal is 45 and I started at 2000. This means there is no spreading of the cancer. Also, the tumor is beginning to take on a different definition within the core. That is what happens before it starts to really shrink. Radiation of the pancreas can be pretty hard on the body and he felt I am doing well on chemo, especially because of the metastasis, so he wants to continue that route switching out one chemo and adding another drug called Avastin. Avastin works to cut off the blood supply to tumors. I will be going every other week like I have been but only one day rather than two days. I can get both drugs in one day. When I told Andrew, our 16 year old this, he reminded me that instead of going 12 times in 3 months I would only be going 6 times! He really helped me with my perspective. The chemo I am going off from is the one that a person can only be on a certain amount of time and I had reached that limit which is okay with me!

I was able to talk with the doctor this time, concerning the tumor, a little more frankly. The tumor is on an artery and a vein. We talked about some of the surgeries I had heard about. He let me know that there have been cases where they go in and peel away as much of the cancer as they can but patients do not usually recover very well. Sooooo, that was hard. He did remind me that I have not fallen with in the statistics of this disease. Most people would have had spreading by this point. He called me an outlier (not to be confused with outlaw)! Yep, that's me and have always been kind of head strong. A couple of my Delta Gamma friends reminded me that I was a determined person! We left the office that day and made the many phone calls to family and friends. I called my sister Chris, the pathologist and she was elated over the change in the tumor! I love that about her! In fact she was looking under the microscope when I called her!

We left the hospital and went out for an awesome dinner with Sylvie and Ehab. They blessed us with the most incredible and beautiful gifts. Sylvie had knitted me the coolest scarf, so cool and just as much fun because she made it and they gave us a handmade, beautifully painted vase, a work of art actually. I can't wait to find the right place in the house for this. They also let us know that they would be highly offended if I do come for

radiation and did not stay with them. I was overwhelmed with their kindness, love and grace.

We did discover after arriving home that my insurance company will not be paying for the new treatment of the use of Avastin. Once again God has not left me or forsaken me. My doctor at MD will provide the treatment and get it to me one way or another so I will fly out on the 17th early in the morning using free Southwest passes from Gary's cousin to Houston, get blood work see the doctor and get treatment then fly home on Wed. and will do this every other week for the next 3 months. Dear friends are already offering to provide help with getting to Tulsa where I will be flying out of and the Hanna's are taking care of me on the other end! Lord, You are so good!

The Year 2006: It is a new year and I find myself this moment sitting in my office looking out the window and contemplating that very fact. A new year, a fresh beginning, a time to look forward to the events ahead. Then I think what does that mean? What does that mean for me? I know what thing it doesn't mean, trying to lose weight! I picked up several magazines in the airports flying home from Houston this past week and each January issue is all about losing weight and exercising. Believe me not one headline read, gain 10 pounds in two weeks. I don't think there is one program out there designed to help gain weight, like weight gainers, or food that actually advertises eat this it is full of carbs and trans fat!

So what will this year bring if it is not about losing 20 pounds by Valentine's day? In many ways, for me, it is staying the course, continuing the journey, and remembering what I wrote in the second journal entry concerning hope.

A Quote by Dr. Archibald Hart: "You must never give up hope. No matter how bad the situation is or how despairing your circumstances are, you must never NEVER give up hope. Never, never, never. Never give up hope for an ailing partner. Never give up hope for your children. Never give up hope for yourself. Why? Because if you give up on hope, you give up on life itself. If hope dies, you die. As a friend of mine once said, "As long as you keep hope alive, hope will keep you alive."

We were created for hope. Our bones were bred for hope. Our lungs can't breathe, our hearts won't beat and our spirits can't thrive without it. God placed us in a world over which we have little control. And as if to compensate for this helplessness, He placed in our souls the capacity to hope-to hope for better times, to dream of better places, to pray for better outcomes, to seek better ways through life. Hope is more than optimism. Optimism is what we generate. Hope is God given, a powerful, spiritual and psychological means for transcending the circumstances.

Hebrews 6:19 tells us that Christian Hope is a "sure and steadfast anchor for the soul." But this hoping come only as a gift of grace and is powerfully linked to the promises of

God. In fact, they are inseparable. Because you believe God's promises you can hope in the future. Without this future, there is nothing to hope in. There is only fear and fear that leads us to a very dark place.”

A dear friend asked how I was doing with the news of my trip. The way I put it is exactly what is talked about above. I have absolutely no worldly control-none! I do have heavenly hope and that is much more powerful than any worldly power or control.

As I look at the New Year, “hope” is still my truth and gift of mercy from the Lord that I hold very tightly to. Hope comes from faith and strong faith always brings great glory to God. Each day this defines my meaning and I pray that in this new fresh year of 2006 that even more faith, and hope with bring my Holy Father great glory. I hope that my actions, my words, my secret thoughts, who I spend time with, my prayers and my worship will be a sweet aroma unto him. I pray that when the tears fall down my cheeks that I will not stay too long within my sad thoughts and that I can keep turning my thoughts to the many, many good gifts my Father continues to give me. I am looking forward to what is coming in this next year. I even pray for a year of jubilee, of laughter, rejoicing and dancing! I have hope for even this.

Happy New Year!

Be the fire in my Heart Be the wind in my sails Be the reason that I live Jesus, Jesus

Praises:

- Truly blessed Christmas with friends and family
- Magical 25 years of marriage celebration
- Prayer pager that goes off “all” the time!
- Answered prayer concerning my fear and the cancer
- That God understands my heart and when it needs encouragement and Strength
- A continued feeling of God’s presence
- My Church, Fellowship Bible
- My Care at MD Anderson

Prayer Requests:

- Strength to do these trips to Houston
- Crying out with me for this tumor to “melt” away, to completely die.

- Gary and I have marriage enrichments coming up across the country. The dates are: Jan 27th-29th in Oregon, Feb. 10th-12th in California, Feb. 24-26 Indiana, Mar. 17-19 Minnesota, Mar. 24th AACC
- Please pray that I can do this with the energy I need. I LOVE speaking with my husband and “look” forward to this in 2006.
- I have started writing on the “Friendship book” that Erin Smalley and I are doing. I enjoyed every moment of writing and have completed one chapter. I have 5 more to go. Our deadline is April 1st. I believe God has us writing this book so please pray with us over this book and the writing of it. That every word brings him glory and changes the face of women’s friendships.
- Continue prayer for all of my family members as they walk this journey as well. For their faith in God, for their emotions and for Hope!

What a Week

It seems that things don’t always go just the way you think they will. The fascinating fact about this truth is that when they don’t, many of us still get surprised, stressed out, or just plain scared. I was able to produce all of those experiences this past week upon my trip to MD Anderson.

As I expressed in the last journal entry I will now be taking a trip every 2 weeks to Houston to receive treatment. My first trip to Houston was last Tuesday the 17th. I chose to leave on the 7:00 am flight out of Tulsa in order to have one more night in my own bed before going. Well, almost one full night! Woke up at 3:30 am and left by 4:45 am to make the drive and the flight. I will say the company was pretty good (thanks Wendy)! We drank coffee and had some delightful girl chat. Arrived in Houston at 8:30 am to once again be whisked off to the hospital with Ehab Hanna. God you are so good to give me my MDA personal escort service. I did the drill, went for blood work and headed for the clinic to see the Dr. It was a crazy day at MDA. Blood work didn’t come back for a while so we ate lunch and came back to the clinic. Ehab was off for his afternoon patients. Debbie, the P.A. let me know right away there was a problem with my liver enzymes. Now here’s the deal, I signed up to come there, get treatment and go home. That was big enough to do on my own. I did not sign up for complications and did not see any coming since we were just there 2 weeks prior. She said I probably had a stent problem again. I looked into her big brown eyes and tried to discern if there was something else she was concerned about or she wasn’t telling me. She looked at me and said this happens all the time and I would need to have it fixed this week. I still did not trust her!

She sent me to treatment and said she would call with the details of my surgery. Surgery? Without my mate? Now what's up with that? Tears came down the cheeks as I tried to find the treatment center. It took me a few moments because they do treatment in so many places and this was different than the previous 2 times. I found it and called Gary to let him know I was going to be staying. I was called back to my room right away so did not get to talk with him much. Treatment there is done in little rooms with beds and TV's so if no one is with you, you are alone, baby. I soon found my cell phone would not work in that little room either, so felt a little trapped. I turned on the Australian open and used the rhythmic drill of the ball going back and forth to help me take a little nap. It wasn't long enough, the nap that is, so I tried to fill the time with eating saltines. I had not really prepared by bringing the projects I usually bring.

The treatment process took all afternoon and I finally was released at almost 6:00 pm. I could not get out of there fast enough to get my cell phone back in order. Yep, 11 messages. I was to have surgery on Thursday at 12:00 pm, nothing to eat after midnight. I needed to go to pre-op on Wednesday. They were going to use anesthesia this time rather than "relaxing" drugs. Okay, "now" I was sure they were going to go in there and look for things and they were not telling me about. I went through the next 10 messages and made calls. Both Ehab and Sylvie were trying to find me. Ehab came to get me and we started home as I was telling him the events of the day and that surgery was going to require anesthesia. He offered to call the doctor and ask some questions as to why. I jumped at that offer. If I am going to have exploratory surgery I want to know. Dr. Lee called Ehab right back. Ehab started smiling. I was a little annoyed with the jovial interaction between the two of them, didn't they know I was about to find out on Thursday that cancer was everywhere? Evidently, Dr. Lee requested an anesthesiologist this time, as opposed to what was done in October, because I wake up and cause problems for everyone and he would feel better if I was under the care of an anesthesiologist that could keep me asleep! Okay, well so I am spunky and this is not about exploratory surgery. I was so relieved but a bit embarrassed and humbled by my fear and lack of faith and complete human response to the events of the day.

By now, during dinner, I am exhausted. I still enjoyed the beautiful pork tenderloin and gorgeous salad and sweet company of Sylvie, GiGi and Camille. Soon I was off to my bed. I woke that night at 3:00 am and was so sick. My head was pounding, I knew I had a pretty good fever and I ached from head to toe. I laid there and wondered what to do. I had to get down the stairs to get the Gatorade I saw earlier in the fridge, some water and Tylenol. I finally rolled over, practically crawled down the steps and found that luscious Gatorade. Back up the stairs, ever so slowly, into bed and...Carrie don't spill the Gatorade on the white comforter. I didn't and drank every drop. I did, however drop my bottle of Tylenol and it rolled far under the king size bed. Okay roll out again, can't get under the bed, so have to pull the king size bed away from the wall to get the Tylenol.

Soon I was tucked back in and feel with all of the events of getting myself what I needed I was exhausted again and could go back to sleep. Woke at 9:00 am still sick, but this time I called Sylvie on her cell and she brought me more Gatorade. Thank God for cell phones!

I finally felt better later that morning and was able to make it to pre-op. I arrived at 11:00 am but did not get in until 2:30 pm. They gave out pagers though so I was able to go sit in this beautiful atrium area and drink a Starbucks iced mocha and eat a sandwich. While I sat there and thought about how I wanted to be home and that I felt alone, I saw this beautiful young woman in a wheel chair, blonde hair, fair skin, blue eyes. Probably young 20's. She must have been a patient in the hospital. She was with many family members for an "outing" to the atrium, hooked up to many bags. When I saw her face I knew she was barely there, perhaps due to the drugs or a brain tumor or something but oh how I prayed for her and suddenly my little episode in the middle of the night and rolling Tylenol bottles seemed so small in comparison. Tears welled up and I prayed for her family members.

My Wednesday ended with Amy Smalley finding me and joining me in pre-op! We then caught a bite to eat and she drove me to the Hannas. I lay on their couch all that evening, feeling my prayer pager and dozed. Finally time for bed. I was not supposed to eat or drink after midnight but ate peanut butter at 3:00 am and did drink juice and a little coffee at 6:00 pm. I love having a little control of my own!

Sylvie took me to surgery, while she was parking the car, a dear woman from the Smalley's church in the Woodlands joined me, Jan de Chambrier. Oh what pure delight Jan is. Jan had cancer 16 years ago and has been through it in terms of surgeries and fears and walking through her own cancer journey. I loved her from first sight. She sat with me and prayed with me. Sylvie came back and things started rolling. The way to describe what God did for me this afternoon of surgery is he "lightened things up." The people involved with my care were truly funny people and it was male nurse day for me. Time for surgery and before I knew it I was back out and talking with everyone. I guess they didn't have time for exploratory surgery today! The stent was need of a good cleaning. I went back to the Hanna's, packed my bags and caught the 8:00 pm flight out of Houston to Tulsa that evening. I did not feel that great but, oh, I wanted to be home with my family and God gave me that gift.

This was not the week I had planned on. Looking back it was what God planned. He planned that I would be there when the stent needed replacing, that I would spend time with Amy and Jan and the Hanna's, that I would pray for the pretty blonde young woman, that I would learn just a little bit more about trusting Him and His love for me and that I would laugh. After this week going back is not such a big deal and go back on Monday evening the 30th I will.

I end this journal entry with a song I love by Superchick (I kind have always wanted to be a superchick). I know you know it but the words are incredible and they cause me to pause and ask myself, "Do I really understand what this heaven and earth and God thing is all about?" Do I really get it? And if I do what difference does it make in all that I do and say and how I make choices to live each day. The last verse is a direct challenge to all of us to "live the life we were supposed to take up".

There's a cross on the side of the road
Where a mother lost a son
How could she know that the morning he left
Would be their last time she'd trade with him for a little more time
So she could say she loved him one more time
And hold him tight
But with life we never know
When we're coming up to the end of the road
So what do we do then?
With tragedy around the bend?

Chorus

We live we love
We forgive and never give up
Cuz the days we are given are gifts from above
Today we remember to live and to love
We live we love
We forgive and never give up
Cuz the days we are given are gifts from above
Today we remember to live and to love
There is a man who waits for the tests
To see if the cancer has spread yet
And now he asks, "So why did I wait to live till it was time to die?"

If I could have the time back how I'd live
Life is such a gift So how does the story end?
Well this is your story and it all depends
So don't let it become true
Get out and do what we are meant to do
We live we love
We forgive and never give up
Cuz the days we are given are gifts from above
Today we remember to live and to love
We live we love
We forgive and never give up
Cuz the days we are given are gifts from above
Today we remember to live and to love
Waking up to another dark morning
People are mourning
The weather in life outside is storming
But what would it take for the clouds to break
For us to realize each day is a gift somehow, someway
So get our heads up out of the darkness
And spark this new mindset and start to live life cuz it ain't gone yet
And tragedy is a reminder to take off the blinders
And wake up and live the life we're supposed to take up
Moving forward with all our heads up cuz life is worth living

Chorus

We live we love
We forgive and never give up
Cuz the days we are given are gifts from above

Today we remember to live and to love
We live we love We forgive and never give up
Cuz the days we are given are gifts from above
Today we remember to live and to love

Praises:

- God you are with me always
- God you answer my prayers
- God you give me good gifts
- God you love me through people
- God you will never leave me nor forsake me
- God you are my shield, my strength, my portion, my deliverer, strong tower, my shelter, my very present help in time of need
- God you fight the battle and you ask me to be still

Prayer Requests:

- Complete healing of the tumor
- Discernment as to arrivals and departures out of Houston in correspondence to my health.
- For our speaking engagements: Jan 27th 29th in Oregon, Feb. 10th-12th in California, Feb. 24-26 Indiana, Mar. 17-19 Minnesota, Mar. 24th AACC in Myrtle Beach
- Strength and Courage to continue flights to Houston and whatever God brings by way!
- Health, good white and red blood counts.
- Continued strong walk with the Lord and protection from Satan's strategies for evil.

February 2006

He Will Carry You

Sweet Ministry: On the weekend of January 26th-29th we had the great joy of returning to Oregon to Mountain View Church to speak at their annual marriage retreat. We had the gift of speaking at the very first retreat in 2002. We met Craig and Tonya Zeise several years before at a conference in Joplin and spent dear time with them talking about marriage ministry. Craig and Tonya have built a great ministry including this annual retreat where 70 couples are now attending. Oregon was beautiful! Wet and green, a little chilly but beautiful. The retreat was held outside of Portland on the coast in the little town of Seaside. How charming, how restful how lovely the people were to be with. We had wonderful dinners out and could not have had more fun speaking to these delightful people. We enjoyed looking out at the majestic ocean and lighting the fireplace. Saturday, Gary and I walked through the little shops and found a very cool coffee shop and book store. I sat in a pink and white striped rocking chair looking at books while he found a magic shop. Among the hundreds of things my husband does is magic! Things like making bunnies multiply in his hand and finding coins behind people's ears. I always say there was a little magic going on when I consented to marrying this man! Tonya was diagnosed with breast cancer in August. I think this was my first experience spending a great deal of time with a fellow cancer fighter, and what a fighter she is. She even offered me her wig if I wanted to wear it. Of course it would have changed my look, her hair is brown and shorter than mine but what the heck! I let her keep her hair and made due with mine! I was so encouraged by her sense of humor, her positive spirit and her love for life. I think she was particularly sparky because of a trip to Maui she was going on after the retreat on Monday. I asked to go in her suitcase but no room of course!

We thanked God for how great I felt all weekend and for the joy of speaking together once again. I think our last conference was in September in Florida. This week we will be traveling on Thursday the 9th to Carlsbad California to do our next Marriage conference. Once again we will be returning to a unique church where we have made dear friends. Jeff and Robin Rienke head this one up. Last year was their first attempt and with 150 couples responding. We are so excited to see what God will do this year, especially as we get our new material finalized! We adore California and will be staying at a hotel that looks out onto the ocean. Doesn't get much better than that! We are hoping to catch up with some friends that will be in the area that we met at a Promise Keepers event, Tom and Nancy as well as Charlie and Suzi Bradshaw from Oceanside. Can't wait to experience sweet friendship this week and am praying for good health for both of us. I am so thankful that in the midst of cancer God allows me to do these speaking events and gives me the strength when I need it. It makes my heart beat with life.

Trip to MDA: Right after returning home from Oregon on Sunday evening I packed on Monday and left for Houston to receive the second treatment of Gemzar and Avastin. My dear sister-in-law Marsha and Sarah Bach drove me to Tulsa. We had a great time chatting. I mentioned this cute creamer and sugar set I had seen at Starbucks in Oregon and those two little sneaks went right out after dropping me off at the airport to buy them for me. It is amazing what a little gift like that can do to lift the spirits!

This trip went much better than last trip! No sickness, rolling Tylenol bottles or surgeries. My nurse that took care of the treatment on Tuesday morning was a believer so we had fun talking about Beth Moore bible studies and walking with the Lord. I thanked God for her. She was great and the treatment went so smooth. Once again I had such fun with Sylvie, Ehab, Gigi and Camille. Camille is 3 years old and she is still trying to figure out the semantics of the English language. She often calls me Miss Gary. Really she prefers Gary, both the girls do. It doesn't hurt my feelings as I always knew he would have been a great dad to daughters! Both Camille and Gigi are fascinated with my prayer pager and they hear it every time it goes off even if I don't. Camille loves for me to turn it off so she can turn it back on and feel it vibrate. She could do this 50 times in a row if I would let her! I am getting to know Houston quite well. I took Gigi to school, ran some errands and stopped at Starbucks for Sylvie. Sometimes I just can't believe how God has taken me to this place and blessed me in the midst of cancer. I love these people and if it took cancer for me to know them than it was worth it.

A Twist in the Journey: On Wednesday morning, the day after treatment, Sylvie took me to the airport and I flew from Houston to Phoenix. My parents live in Mesa in the winter months so they were able to pick me up from the airport. I was just like a little kid that morning waking up so early because I was excited to see "Mimi" and "Papa". I love them so much and know that this cancer has been particularly hard on them. That thing about being a parent with a sick child is true . . . there is nothing like it. My mom is not one to cry often, but I hear her hold back the tears every time she talks with me on the phone. It was great to see them! They are so funny. My dad took off for the car with one of my bags and Mom stayed with me to get my other bag. Of course we went the opposite direction to the car and had to turn around and walk back completely the other way. They don't carry cell phones so no way of contacting each other. I chuckle at their interaction after one of these events. Of course it was my dad's fault for leaving! I wanted to go to a Hallmark store to buy Valentines so we went to a mall near their place. Mom and I had a grand time looking at cards and being together while dad waited, something he does so well.

Had a great dinner at their little place that evening and met several of their friends and talked with Don and Inez, friends of theirs I grew up with! I was very, very tired so I went to my hotel room and went to bed at 8:30.

Envita Center: The next morning my parents took me to Scottsdale to visit a holistic center that treats cancer as well as other diseases with I.V. supplements, T-cell boosting, oxygenation of the blood and many other things. During the course of this cancer journey I've received numerous thoughtful recommendations for a wide variety of health supplements and places like this to go to. What intrigued us about this one? This suggestion came to me from a dear prayer warrior I met while at a conference in Phoenix in August. She has a mutual friend that has been going to this center for breast cancer. Sue Ann promptly sent me information about the center and about a man that has pancreatic cancer with metastasis in his liver. He has been going for chemo and attending this center for treatment. Both of their stories are pretty miraculous. After praying, both Gary and I felt that I had nothing to lose by going for a consultation at the center so on Thursday Feb. 2nd I made my visit. The first thing the doctor said when he walked in to meet me was "you don't look like a person that has what you have". A part of that is encouraging but another part reinforces the reality of what I am facing . . . a kind of cancer that in most cases is terminal!

The morning consisted of talking through their treatment options, looking at my red and white blood cells and their suggestions for treatment. It was very helpful but oh I was exhausted when I left. I crawled into my parents car and we headed for the airport so I could catch the 2:00 flight back to Tulsa. Tears again. Oh Lord what would you have me do? My parents are so supportive and their love was overwhelming for me. Tears still well up when I think of them.

Calling All Prayer Warriors: As I write this journal entry today, Gary and I would ask for your deep and consistent prayers concerning this treatment center. If I pursue this I would also continue my essential chemotherapy treatments in Houston. This represents a huge commitment on several levels. If we feel led to pursue this additional treatment option it would mean my living in Phoenix for a couple of months. Since our health insurance doesn't cover this kind of treatment it would also involve a significant financial commitment. I did schedule a tentative appointment to begin treatment on the 21st of February but we are not yet at a place where we feel the clear leading of the Lord. What we have experienced with the Lord since the diagnosis has been His clear and evident hand of leading and we feel that will not change in this event. Thank you for your prayers. We need a lot of wisdom and discernment.

Cancer Dedication: I end this journal entry today with a dedication to the many people that I have been praying for with cancer that have come into my life since my diagnosis. This dedication goes out to: Sonia, Tonya, Nadine, Rosalee, Audrey, Shedd, Nancy Hardin, Wade, Jane's Mom, Sue Ann, Larry, Mark's uncle, Dick Rezzonico, Jake, the precious young blonde woman I saw at MDA, Jan, my Mom, my sister Chris, my brother-in-law Mike, and my husband Gary who are all survivors. I know there have been

more but these are the ones coming to mind right now. Remember, you are not alone! I love this song by Mark Schulz. I have changed the words a little from “He will Carry Me” to “He will Carry You”. Be blessed dear ones as you fight, as you learn more about the great healer who loves you deeply, who has vast mercy and grace for you each day and who wants you to experience His “sovereign joy” in the midst of the struggle.

I call, You hear me
I've lost it all
And it's more than I can bear
I feel so empty
Your strong, I'm weary
I'm holding on
But I feel like giving in
But still You're with me
(Pre-chorus and Chorus)
And even though I'm walking
Through the valley of the shadow
I will hold tight to the hand of Him
Who's love will comfort me
And when my hope is gone
And I've been wounded in the battle
He is all the strength that I will ever need
He will carry You
I know I'm broken
But You alone
Can mend this heart of mine
You're always with me
And even though I'm walking
Through the valley of the shadow

I will hold tight to the hand of Him
Who's love will comfort me
And when my hope is gone
And I've been wounded in the battle
He is all the strength that you will ever need
He will carry you He will carry you

(Bridge)

And even though I feel so lonely
Like I have never been before
You never said it would be easy
But You said You'd see me through the storm

And even though I'm walking
Through the valley of the shadow
I will hold tight to the hand of Him
Who's love will comfort me
And when my hope is gone
And I've been wounded in the battle
He is all the strength that I will ever need

He will carry you

He will carry you

He will carry you

Praises:

- Good health
- Good Houston trip
- The prayer pager that goes off constantly
- Notes from dear precious people
- My Family

- My dear husband
- God's truth in his word
- God's mercy, love and grace
- God's wisdom
- Jesus my savior, lover of my soul and friend
- Speaking in Oregon went so well

Prayer Requests:

- Wisdom on God's leading concerning Envita Center
- Writing of the book-deadline April 1st
- Complete healing of the tumor and cancer in my body
- Protection from Satan's strategies to discourage, and depress and defeat
- For our speaking engagements: Feb. 10th-12th in California, Feb. 24-26 Indiana, Mar. 17-19 Minnesota, Mar. 24th AACC in Myrtle Beach

Bends in the Road

"God is always present. We are the ones that need to show up." -Rob Bell, Velvet Elvis

Scottsdale Envita Center Update: In the last journal entry I talked about going to the Envita holistic treatment center. In the short time I have been on their oral supplements I have experienced much better health. We are closer to making the decision for me to go but have moved the dates back to leaving the 5th of March and starting treatments that week. We are still thinking and praying through the financial commitment. My MD Anderson doctor was quite impressed with my improved health and wanted to know more about the supplements I am taking! I would be there for 2 months to get 30 treatments all while going to Houston in between. Oh, dear! One day at a time!

Latest Reading: Just finished reading the book *A Bend in the Road* by David Jeremiah and really enjoyed hearing his story of walking through cancer. The book offers great spiritual wisdom and insight into who God is in the midst of crisis and how he changes us as we walk the crisis journey. Jeremiah records several personal stories of people and their experience of "showing up in the presence of God" during these times.

As I finished this book I did some thinking about “bends in our road.” Does our road we walk come with twists and turns? Are there bends? Does it really matter how we look at this? I decided it does, for these reasons.

Scripture talks about walking the “straight” path, that He will make our paths straight and that we are not to look to the left or right leaning on our own understanding. Cancer has not been a bend in my path. That is to say that the bends, the twists, are where I go when I choose to listen to fear, to depression, to hopelessness, to temptation to give up, to what the world offers, etc.

God is very capable of keeping us straight but we have to “show up” from our ventures to the left and right or from the dark forest we have run into for a while, convinced it will bring us pleasure and numb our pain. I find great comfort in knowing that God has straight paths for us and that when the things come in our life that threaten to knock us off this path or distract us from the path He will be there to gently guide us back.

All we have to do is turn our eyes to His face and look straight ahead to meet His eyes. In walking that path there is peace and calm and perfect alignment, no twists and turns just two walking together in union.

Walking With Jesus: I was thinking of my life path on Valentine's Day sitting on my bed getting treatment in Houston. I was listening to a song by Chris Rice on my iPod and thought I would carve out what God has done and is doing walking through the verses of this song:

Weak and wounded sinner,

lost and left to die.

O raise your head for love is passing by.

Come to Jesus,

Come to Jesus,

Come to Jesus and Live

I came to know Jesus as a student at the University of Nebraska. I will never forget the experience of understanding for the first time what Jesus did for me on the cross and that I “could” walk with Him for the rest of my life. It transformed my heart instantly. I wanted, desired, craved His love and His word and fellowship with other believers. I craved “true” life.

Now your burden's lifted and carried far away,

And precious blood has washed away the stain so

Sing to Jesus,

Sing to Jesus,

Sing to Jesus and Live

I could not get enough of his ability to heal my heart, my wrong choices. I still love singing to Him today when I feel His forgiveness and his grace.

And like a newborn baby don't be afraid to crawl

And remember when you walk sometimes we fall...so

Fall to Jesus,

Fall to Jesus,

Fall to Jesus and Live

Just the fact that we are humans living on earth and are in relationships means that we will fall and fall I have. I have made so many mistakes as a wife, a mother and friend. I have disappointed Jesus countless times but love that I can "fall" into His arms or at His feet. As long as I am human and on this earth I will continue to fall but hope to fall into him more and more.

Sometimes the way is lonely and steep and filled with pain.

So if your sky is dark and pours the rain then

Cry to Jesus,

Cry to Jesus,

Cry to Jesus and Live

Yes, crying is a major experience of my life. Cannot think of a day in the last year that at least my eyes have not welled up with tears. Since the cancer, crying almost always brings me Jesus in ways I had not experienced before this cancer.

And when the love spills over and the music fills the night.

And when you can't contain your joy inside, then

Dance to Jesus,

Dance to Jesus,

Dance to Jesus and Live

I “LOVE” to dance! So many dancing times in my life. Christmas mornings as a little girl, my college days, moments with good friends, my wedding day, the birth of each child, the wedding of Nathan and Amy, etc. As I write this journal entry I have had a “dancing” week! Oh so much to dance and rejoice over! I am getting fat! I have gone from 100 pounds to between 112 and 115! My digestive system is working better. My energy is up and I am walking and lifting weights for the first time since June.

I am dancing over friendship and love and family and the love and healing grace of my Jesus. Dancing, dancing, dancing! I do feel alive!

And with your final heartbeat, kiss the world goodbye.

Then go in peace and laugh on Glory’s side and

Fly to Jesus,

Fly to Jesus,

Fly to Jesus and Live

Hearing this verse could be scary, especially having a disease that screams this experience is not far off. But look at these words! They are power packed with joy, and hope and fun and goodness and all that eternity has to offer with Jesus. Ever planned your funeral? I had done this even before this disease so I know if I have done it, and I am not that unique, you have too! My funeral whether it is next week or in 40 years will be filled with joy and singing and some laughter and a whole lot of hope. Imagine it for a few moments and let yourself feel sweet eternal life.

Each chorus of this lovely song calls us to Jesus and in that experience we find “life.” I read this quote by Rick Warren this past week and find the truth of it profoundly, "God wants us to practice on earth what we will do forever in eternity. We were made by God, and for God, and until we figure that out, life isn't going to make sense."

I continue to be thankful that with each day life makes more sense and that in Jesus I live.

Praises:

- Precious, intimate and fun ministry at Northcoast Calvary Church in Carlsbad California. Oh, thank you God for each wonderful moment we had with dear friends there.
- In spite of chemotherapy I had a very happy Valentine’s Day with Jan for Lunch and those crazy fun Hannas for dinner!
- Greatly improved health.

- So grateful for those who pray for me, for God's love and healing hand, for options like supplements and good doctors and chemo that are helping my body.
- Our sons and daughter are doing well.
- I am thankful for so much that there is not enough room to put it all here. I am thankful for dancing.
- Feeling good after chemo treatments.

Prayer Requests:

- Upcoming marriage enrichment event in Indiana Feb. 24th-26
- For final decision on the Envita center in Scottsdale
- Satan's continual strategies to discourage the Olivers! Little things, big things you name it!
- For Gary and Andrew as they navigate life without the woman figure in the home if I go to Scottsdale. (Maybe they will have more fun!)

March 2006

Wings to Fly

Perspective: Proverbs 3:5-6, "Trust in the Lord with a your heart; do not depend on your own understanding. Seek His will in all you do, and He will direct your path."

Phil. 4:6-9, "Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank Him for all he has done. If you do this, you will experience God's peace, which is far more wonderful than the human mind can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus. Fix your thoughts on what is true and honorable and right. Think about things that are pure and lovely and admirable. Think about things that are excellent and worth of praise."

Dedication: This journal entry is dedicated to Sylvie Hanna. I met Sylvie 9 months ago and what pure delight, joy and a gift it is to know her. She is French Canadian, funny, completely artsy and a great mother and wife. She is a friend. She has encouraged me with her love for the Lord and her willingness to face the battleground of life straight on, even when it is ever so hard and most importantly, that the battle can be won. You see, Sylvie has "perspective", holy perspective that only comes from the Lord and we cannot win in the battles of life without it. One meaning of perspective is to "aid the vision." And vision is what one needs when they are getting ready to go on the adventure that I am going on.

Packing For Scottsdale: I returned home from MD Anderson on Tuesday after treatment and have been making lists and going through the week like a crazy woman. I have found that leaving can be like nesting before giving birth. One can start telling themselves that all the things that have not gotten done in the last year should suddenly get done! I don't know why this is because I am sure I will be coming back and these things will be waiting to be done just like always! I even put the Easter tree up! Did that Tuesday night! I am looking forward to seeing the little critter when I get home, still sitting on the buffet. It will bring a smile to my face.

I have never packed to be away for 2 1/2 months. As I began this packing process the first things that went into my suitcase were: the Velveteen Rabbit that Marilyn gave me for Christmas that is to remind me of my grandchildren that I will someday to share him with, framed pictures of my family and friends, Nathan and Amy's wedding photo album they gave me at Christmas, earrings from Gary, the "Expect a Miracle" plaque that has been sitting on a stand on my dresser since I returned home from Kansas City and the grim news that was expressed to me there in May, "Be Still and Know That I Am God" stand from Matt and Amanda, encouragement cards from people, Bible, journal and iPod. The next thing that went in was my swimsuit and sunscreen. I guess these were the most important and prominent needs! I have been filling in the gaps today with a few more things! Actually I may need to get a U-Haul before it's all over.

During this packing process, I have been thinking about vision and perspective. It seems that perspective is even more crucial now in this battle of fighting cancer. The diagnosis is 10 months old. I am tempted to look too close at this diagnosis, the survival rate, the thought that the tumor will have to do something different someday and what will that be? As I have been thinking these thoughts and looking through the magnifying glass, I am reminded of Sylvie and a song I know she loves called "Wings to Fly." The words of this song teach us, that with wings to fly, we can get "above" our circumstances and get perspective of the vision of our life. Sometimes we have to put down our magnifying glass, spread our wings and fly over the situation to see more clearly. I need to do that as I am in the last few hours of packing to leave my home, my family and my close friends for Scottsdale. On one hand I am feeling lonely and fearful of the unknown and living in a place where I am not used to. My life seems to be one adaptation process after another. Then I am reminded to spread my wings and fly over this new adventure and see it from a different and holy perspective.

God is taking me to this place for healing, to meet with people that have emailed me to get together and to live with Margaret Reed, family friend of the Oliver's, now in her 80's. Margaret says she has no needs but she is looking forward to the "fellowship" as I live with her. Sweet fellowship with Margaret. There will be warmth and sun there, two experiences I crave! With the numbness in my hands and feet I cannot get enough of

warmth. There will be walks, many walks, listening to my iPod and worshiping the Lord for His care for my heart. And then there will be all the things that He has not yet revealed to me that He will do while I am there that I will look back on with wonder and awe of this mighty and personal God that works all things together for his good and for His purpose and for His glory.

Wings to Fly, God wants to give us wings. When I have his wings I have His comfort, His peace, His patience, His perspective and vision. When I fly above the situation I remember I simply cannot get caught in Satan's traps, that there are no dangers and terrors that will overtake me, evil cannot touch me. All I have to do is call on Him and He answers my call. His angels hold me in their hands. These are His promises and once again recited from Psalm 91.

I leave tomorrow (March 5th) bright and early with my traveling mate, Erin Smalley. Erin grew up in Phoenix and her dear mother was diagnosed with metastatic lung cancer recently. She is traveling out with me to be with her mom during treatments this coming week. We will probably cry a little, certainly will laugh a little, work on our book, hopefully more than a little and we will wear our wings in order to keep our perspective so even a road trip to Phoenix in the midst of a whole lot of cancer can become something good!

Saying Goodbye: We met as a cell group on Wednesday night as we do every week but his night was special. We sat outside on Jane and Steve's deck and listened to the sounds of the evening, enjoyed the burning candles and the stars in the sky. I love these people for they are people who love God and that is a gift that comes back to me every week we meet. Thank you Jane and Steve, Bob, Lonnie and Rick and Wendy. You can never know of the needs that you have met in me this year in my greatest time of need.

Goodbye Dear Mate. We have had tears and will have tears but we will laugh as well and we will celebrate God's goodness in the next 10 weeks and we will hug hard when we see each other in between no matter if it is once or several times.

Goodbye Andrew. You don't have to be strong. Isn't that great to know? Remember to fly when you need to and God will meet you there.

Goodbye Matt and Amanda, I love you both. You are precious and you love me well with your notes and cards and gifts and words. Remember there is no fear in love.

Goodbye Miss Marsha: You are my sister and so precious to me. In your own pain and difficult circumstances you still manage to love well. You definitely have wings to fly above your hardships.

I end this journal entry with the words of this song. One of the greatest things about this song is the music, very jazzy, but we will have to settle for few of the words.

Wings to Fly (Carol Welsman)

Look Around, it's a brand new day

Nothing much to celebrate

You push and shove to higher ground, while someone else is falling down

In this land of strong and free

You for you, and me for me

So hard to shake this attitude

It's all so true

If you had wings to fly Away, Up high

You'd look down from the sky

And "change your mind"

This old man he plays one, he plays nick- knack on his drum

He does not laugh or reminisce

'Cause he says he's much too old for this

He works so hard every night and day

Says he never got his way

If someone gave him half the chance

He'd Understand

If he had wings to fly Away, Up high

He'd look down from the sky

And "change his mind"

There's one thing we often miss

To live is not to just exist

If I had wings to fly

I'd look down from the sky

And "change my mind"

Perspective? I have to ask myself do I have it? Do I have Holy Vision? Spreading my wings and flying to get “above” the battles and circumstances of cancer means I can change my mind, change it to the mind of Christ. The dark, gray colors of sad and lonely and scared can become different, even beautiful as sad, lonely and scared change to joy, peace and strength. These are the beautiful yellows and pinks of perspective available to each and every one of us as we fly above that which we fear in the moment and “change our mind”.

Praises:

There is not enough room to express the praise for God’s provision for this trip. Flights, financial help, meals offered for Gary and Andrew, etc. His hands hold us well.

- Supportive JBU community
- The many, many email stories that have come through the website in the last week of people that have had last stage cancer and lived
- Praise for how good I continue to feel
- Praise for getting to spend time with my parents in Phoenix
- Praise for the many other friends in Phoenix that I can’t wait to see!
- Praise that God continues to faithfully sustain me

Prayer Requests:

- Safe and protected travel for Erin and me March 5th and 6th
- Strength and courage to be away
- That I tolerate the Envita Center treatments well. Most people say they feel better after treatments.
- Prayer for the upcoming CT scan on March 13th and doctor visit on the 14th
- Continued prayer for death of the tumor and no spreading
- For Gary and Andrew back home

He is the Strength-Giver

“For I will restore you to good health and I will heal all your wounds” Jeremiah 30:17.

Backing Up: *March 5th and 6th*—Erin Smalley and I had a wonderful and warm trip out to Phoenix on the 5th and 6th arriving at around noon on Monday just in time to visit her mother while during a chemo treatment. We both thought her mom looked great! After a little grocery shopping and buying of a blender I arrived at Margaret’s in the afternoon, delighted to find her beautiful home so easily. It was so good to see her and to chat and catch up. My bedroom is huge with patio doors that look out on the back yard. I unpacked and set up all my pictures and homey things and was off to bed early that night anticipating my first Envita treatment the next morning. I left in the morning, enjoying the warmth and the blue sky of Scottsdale. It only took about 15 to 20 minutes to get to the center. Soon I was hooked up and they took some of my blood first and processed it with oxygen and ozone and then put it back in. My next treatment was a great big bag of I.V. Vitamin C. My last treatment is an I.V. antioxidant, different from any one that is taken orally. I was done! My dear dad met me (Mom had the flu) and we went to eat! After Dad left I found a free internet coffee place right by the restaurant off Scottsdale Blvd. that would become my new hangout and writing place. I thanked the Lord that day for the many blessings: great treatment and kind people at Envita, intercessory prayer for patients every other Thursday evening, for my time with my Dad, for the coffee house, for the beauty of Scottsdale, for Margaret, for Erin being here all week as I get used to my surroundings, for a Whole Foods organic grocery store just down the street from Margaret’s, for a Starbuck’s just down the street from Margaret’s, and for continued hope and faith and love. I had so much fun going to a party with my Dad on Wednesday evening (Mom still had the flu!) with longtime friends Don and Inez Rohrichs. We drove up to Carefree to be entertained by Chick and Donna Moyer in their beautiful winter home! These people are dear to me and my family. I grew up with their 4 sons and daughter in Wood River Nebraska. We sat outside on their patio with a blazing fire going and chatted over appetizers and then we were hosted to a lovely dinner in downtown Carefree. God you are so good to give me such good gifts.

MD Anderson (March 13 and 14th)—On Sunday the 12th my folks picked me up around 12:00 and I would be off to another update in Houston. I would be meeting Gary at Bush airport. I arrived around 6:00 pm and he was very delayed due to bad weather in Arkansas but I didn’t mind because I was going to see my “beloved”! I waited for 3 hours in the airport for him, getting more excited with each moment and thankful that he even got out that evening. (We continue to thank the de Chambriers for their continental buddy passes!). Finally he arrived! So good to see him. We celebrated by stopping by a Denny’s on our way to the Hanna’s house. I was craving pancakes and he has his usual “Grand

Slam”. It was good for me to go back to Denny’s because back in May of 2005, while we sat at a Denny’s, we received the call from my doctor to come into his office so he could talk with us about the results of the CT scan I had then. Basically I would learn of the cancer. Denny’s has been a reminder of crisis and tragedy since so going back almost a year later to eat pancakes was a personal victory!

On Monday we woke to cooing doves outside and a warm humid Houston morning. I had my CT scan and chest x-ray and bloodwork. We ate out at a very fun pizza place that evening and then crawled into bed. The Hanna’s were gone for spring break and the house seemed very empty without them!

Tuesday morning we saw Dr. Abruzzese. He told us first that the tumor appears to be dying, becoming more ill-defined. My blood work pretty good and then the proverbial “but” they saw what looks like a shadow on your vertebrae. We will need to do a MRI next time you come. He said if it is cancerous it is “easily” treatable with 10 treatments of radiation. He also said that pancreatic cancer does not usually go this route but he has had a couple of patients where this has happened.

Okay! How do we look at this? Gary and I walked away so thankful that once again despite my 4% survival rate I appear to be winning the battle against this tumor. It seems that the evil one would like to continue to discourage me with things like cancer on the spine I have been claiming ever since this visit the verse Jeremiah 30:17 and would ask you to do so as well. I believe God is healing me!

Wooddale Church (March 17th and 18th)—I joined my husband and son Andrew on Friday March 17th, just 2 days after saying goodbye to Gary and getting the shadow on the spine news. When Andrew saw me (just after 2 weeks) he was thrilled! He was so overjoyed to see that I looked so good! He said, “Mom you look so normal!. That delighted my soul and heart for me and for him!. Gary and Andrew had toured Bethel College that day and Andrew loved it Gary and I wrapped up our marriage speaking at Wooddale church Friday evening and Saturday morning. Once again God showed up in a precious and tangible and meaningful way. We loved our time there with these dear people.

Our trip to Minneapolis ended with an “of course”, a trip to the “Mall of America”. I said goodbye to my two guys on Sunday, but the good news is I would see Andrew on Monday the 20th when he would arrive with Wendy Soderquist and his good friend Christian and then Gary to arrive on Wednesday.

Spring break (March 20th – 26th)—Wow! Did I feel just like a kid on Christmas morning waking up today knowing that Wendy Soderquist, her son Christian and Andrew would be arriving for the week. I went to the airport to be at the gate to greet them. Hugs and tears and joy! We grabbed their bags and headed for the keys to their condo and what

a lovely place they had! We ate at P.F Chang's at Kierland Shopping area and laughed a lot! Then a little grocery shopping and then it was bedtime.

The next few days were filled with treasured, treasured moments. A trip to the botanical gardens, lots of Starbuck's, a sleepover at the condo for me, shopping for the boys, good food and movies. Wednesday Andrew and I picked up Gary at the airport and headed for my mom and dad's in Mesa. Wendy and Christian had mother son time! Next day Gary took Andrew and Christian on a pretty vertical hike on Camelback mountain while I finished treatment up and headed for some pool time with Wendy. It was finally warm enough in Phoenix to break out the suit and sunscreen. That night would be a night to remember. We cleaned up and all went to Kierland to eat. The boys chose their restaurant we adults had a delightful culinary experience at a restaurant called The Greenhouse. Very Cosmo! Oh what fun for all of us! We hugged Wendy, Christian and Andrew goodbye as they would be leaving the next morning on a 7:30 flight. Cried but happy in our hearts.

Gary and I had a great 2 days left together, talking, enjoying sun, walking, and eating,. Thank you Lord for your kindness and goodness. Not sure when I will see Gary again during this Phoenix treatment schedule. We are praying I can go home between all these treatments for my birthday weekend falling on April 22nd.

Back to MDA—I leave this Monday the 27th for Houston. I will have chemo on Tuesday then will face one of the fears of my lifetime, the dreaded MRI! I do not like being put into tubes! The Lord keeps me in His hands constantly asking me to turn to him with my trust. I will trust in Him. I will trust that He is healing me, loving me and taking care of me even in the midst of this upcoming week. The Hanna's will be dear friends to me and Jan de Chambrier will sit with me during chemo and we will learn of the continued journey God has for me.

It has been 3 weeks now since I left Siloam. Sometimes I am amazed by how good I feel and the thought of cancer seems unreal until I sit in a chair with some chemical being pumped into me. It is at that point I choose to believe that feeling good and looking better is the "more" real. A friend gave me a card today that says, "Your strength may surprise you." I am surprised by so much, most of which is the truth of who our God is. *He is the strength giver* but we have to accept it from Him. I accept.

Praises:

- Safe and fun trip out with Erin. It snowed great amounts in Flagstaff after we arrived in Phoenix!
- My home here with Margaret
- My location is perfect for the places I have to go, the airport and the treatment.

- For continued prayer and financial help
- For friends willing to fly across the country to visit and bring family
- For what looks like a dying tumor
- For the hand of God on me no matter what
- For the Envita treatments
- For cards, emails, phone calls and guestbook entries that encourage my heart
- For beautiful flowers sent
- For the beauty of Phoenix this time of year.
- For my precious mom and dad
- For my husband and my sons and daughter
- For God's Word
- For the book I read by Dodie Osteen on her journey of overcoming cancer
- Clear sense that I am not alone
- Praise for a sense of how God is using this journey in my life for His purpose

Prayer Requests:

- For Andrew as he lives in a world in high school with a mom that has a hard disease really for the second year of his life. Specifically that this becomes more and more an opportunity for him to seek Jesus
- For no cancer on the spine or anywhere else for that matter.
- For my ability to get in that MRI tube.
- For the ability to continue to pay the bills.
- For "all" cancer cells to be eliminated in my body.
- For strength on the lonely nights after long days to get under the covers and believe that God is holding me tight. For Gary to feel the same.

UPDATE 4/1/06: *I have the MRI of March 28th experience and results and did not want to write an entire new Entry yet!*

March 28th MD Anderson—Chemotherapy was scheduled at 11:00 and I got in right on time. My last experience on March 14th was a very difficult day. I was scheduled at 3:00 and waited for an hour and half to get in and then they had great trouble with my port access that day. I was poked twice in the port, had to have an I.V. team come in and had an I.V. for a time. We left that evening at 8:30, blah, blah, blah...

On this date of March 28th, I went right in at 11:00 and had not one problem with the port. I kept reading scripture throughout my chemo time and enjoyed worship and started an official prayer list. My prayers for people have been “Holy Spirit” led and that has worked pretty good but today I felt very impressed to pray by my list again. Pretty soon I was done and my friend Jan de Chambrier was there to pick me up. I continue to marvel at how God provides such friends in my life! We took a trip to Starbuck's. I was blessed to see her look at me and say I had improved in my health in just the 2 weeks since last we had been together. It was a look of marvel and that blessed my heart and soul.

March 28th MRI—My MRI was this same day at 6:30 in the evening. I had many people tell me of their MRI experiences to help me prepare for this. I, as a child, had several experiences where I was in places that felt like risks to me. Got into my aunt's drugs at age of 3 and had my stomach pumped, had my tonsils out at 4 and remember the doctor telling the nurses to hold my hands and feet down and he came at me with the ether pad (he had not had talking to small children before surgery 101.) I got caught in an elevator by myself at age 3. At age 10 several of us were in a raft jumping off into the lake. I jumped off and came up under the boat. They kept moving the boat to find me so I could not get out from under the boat, but finally did. These are my childhood experiences that have set me up for claustrophobia. An MRI machine is a round cylinder, with about 4-8 inches of space between your face and the top, that you go into on a very small table that they tell you not to make one move while being tested. Your head is stabilized by 2 bars on either side. Before the test, the people I talked to told me their tests were 45 minutes. When I arrived I was told mine would be an hour and half and could I keep still that long? I said what are my options?!

The Good News! My I.V. was put in and off I went with Ehab who would be in the room with me and my good natured male tech “Witney”. Together we were a team! I got on the table and earplugs were inserted into my ears as the test is extremely loud and noisy. Into the tube I went. At this time I was tired from the day and felt that it was now time to trust the Lord he had me there and he would hold me through it. The noise began. I found the noise to be rhythmic and it helped me to keep my thoughts on task. I prayed a lot over my prayer list I had made that day, I quoted the scriptures God gave me in the last 2 weeks and as always Ex. 14-14, Was a base verse for me, “I will fight the battle for you, all you have to do is be still”! And still I was! I sang worship songs in my head. When the test was done I asked if I had won any awards for laying perfectly still for 1 and half hours.

My reward was getting to go back to the Hanna's house. I do thank the Lord for his very present help in time of need and while this would be no big deal for many people it was for me and an experience that required falling, once again, into the arms of Jesus and laying there allowing him to comfort me. Thank you to those of you that prayed for me. I did not have one panic moment upon being in that tube.

March 31st MRI Test Results—I had not heard from the doctor after the MRI so called MD Anderson today. My doctor was gone so I talked with the P.A. First we discussed the good news. There is cancer on my back but it had not spread to surrounding tissue and appeared to be very treatable. It is located in the middle of my back. She was so good in her ability to discuss this with me and answer my questions. I was with my Mom going shopping. We pulled over in a parking lot and cried to together. She took my hand and said that this was just a bump and we would get through it! I love my mom so much. I called Gary and we began to discuss the next step. I will stay in Phoenix this next week, April 1-8th, and head to Houston on the 9th. I will have 4 more Envita treatments and my dear friend will visit this week. On Monday the 10th I will begin the radiation set-up process and will start radiation on the 13th or 14th. And have 10 treatments. Not sure when I can return to Phoenix. I have 30 treatments in all here and will have completed 15 after this week.

Please pray for our family as we navigate this next journey step God has us on. My body says, "*I can't do one more thing*" but my mind and heart says, "*Yes you can, Carrie, because God has allowed this.*"

April 2006

Who Our Father Truly Is

He Has Risen, Indeed!

Saturday April 15th:

You Lord are my Father, You have made me and formed me. In Love You have predestined me to be adopted as Your child. Lord, You have said "I will be a Father to you and you shall be My child. You know what I need before I ask You.

As a father has compassion on his children, so You have compassion on me. I am not afraid, for it has pleased my Father to give me the kingdom and no one can snatch me out of my Father's hand. I did not receive the spirit that makes me a slave again to fear, but I have received the Spirit of Sonship and by Him I cry, "Abba, Father".

Great and marvelous are Your deeds, Lord God Almighty. Just and true are Your ways, King of the Ages. Who will not fear You, O Lord, and bring glory to Your name? For You alone are holy. I trust in You, O Lord, I say "You are my God"

Because I have made the Lord, Who is my refuge, Even the Most High, my dwelling place. No evil shall befall me, Nor shall any plague come near my dwelling; For He shall give His angels charge over me, To keep me in all my ways.

For you have been my refuge, A Strong tower against the foe. I long to dwell in Your tent forever And take refuge in the shelter of Your wings. I lift up my eyes to the hills, Where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, The Maker of heaven and earth. The Lord watches over me, The Lord is my shade at my right hand.

I love thinking about who our Father truly is. Think about it, just for moment. He is our Abba, our Daddy and His love for us is far greater than anything we could ever imagine or experience or try to conjure up here on this earth. This reality is my deepest learning process of my journey.

I am sitting here in the presence of Deb, Keith and daughter Leslie Alexander in "The Woodlands" Texas, a suburb of Houston at a big Tuscan type dining room table listening to wonderful worship music in the background while the table is being set for dinner. Just behind me through the windows I hear a waterfall, surrounded by beautiful flowers, shrubbery, palm trees, pines and a pool. It is glorious! I continue to be amazed by my Father's love and goodness to me through the body of Christ.

Tomorrow I will go with the Alexander's to "The Woodlands Church" Easter service held outside at a Pavilion. I will hear the duo "Watermark" and rejoice in celebrating our Risen Lord!

I am at the end of my first week here in Houston to go through radiation for the lesion found on my spine. I arrived last Sunday the 9th and have gone through quite a week of hopeful news, of emotions, of physical adjustment, of exhaustion, of fun and laughter and loneliness. You name it, I have experienced it. It is good to be quiet this evening with the Alexander's at the Italian table, to eat and enjoy a few moments of what seems normal.

My week began with an appointment with the radiologist oncologist and his team. In that meeting with this fine physician he asked many questions, knew my chart well and the end I was overwhelmed with now knowing more why God has me here. Because the lesion on my back is right behind the pancreas he decided to radiate the pancreas too. In addition to the pancreas the lymph node that was positive at the time of the diagnosis is being radiated as well. This is not a usual protocol but I am not a protocol patient and this doctor is definitely thinking outside of the box. I was so thankful for him and for his belief in the killing of cancer in my body, not just managing it. Radiation is a delicate

matter and I trust this team. It is so unbelievably professional, organized, precise and dedicated. After my first treatment a millimeter change was made.

As the week went on I found that my port is going to have to be replaced so will have to deal with more appointments and a surgery while here. Every day this past week was packed with medical “stuff.” The treasure in the week was a visit from precious Lonnie Ostrander. I picked her up on Wednesday between MD appointments and she moved right into being such a great friend and companion. She drove (she is quite the freeway driver and gently knew how to ignore me when I tried to direct her) when I needed it, carried my bag when I needed her to, got coffee, shopped and ate with me. In the picture Lonnie is on my left and Sylvie Hanna is on my right. I am the one with the radiation “artwork on my neck” and short hair! It was so good to have someone from home see this world down here that I live at times. We laughed because we never got lost when driving in the big city of Houston (4th largest city in the nation) but constantly got lost driving in the suburb of The Woodlands!

I started radiation on Thursday (13th). It was very odd laying on that table. Some tears managed to roll out the sides of my eyes as I worked to fight the thoughts of “battling” cancer. The techs taking care of me were wonderful, very reassuring. While I am receiving these treatments I am off chemotherapy but am taking a chemotherapy pill. By Friday I was already experiencing some discomfort from the radiation and the drug. I am off both for the weekend but know that there may be more side effects ahead in the week to come.

Again, as I sit here in this beautiful home of precious Christians, I am reminded of God’s deep love for his created even in the midst of symptoms, pain, discomfort, and such. I still know and trust that I am loved. I look forward to Gary coming on Wednesday of this week. I know it will be just the right time for him to be with me and that God knew that in advance. My birthday is the 21st and we shall celebrate this past year of life with grateful hearts and anticipation for the next year. I am almost finished with the book I am writing with Erin Smalley. It will be sent the 28th. Gary and are still planning speaking engagements. I am thankful people are not giving up, because God is not done with me yet!

I hope to go back to Phoenix around the 27th or 28th to resume the treatments there. Two radiation treatments down and 8 to go!

April 16th, Easter Morning: The pavilion was packed with 15,000 people and I kept pinching myself with thankfulness that I “got” to be one of these 15,000 attending this morning. What an incredible joy filled Easter morning celebration. The sky was blue and breeze warm, pine trees flowing in the background. I will leave you with the words from a beautiful song by Watermark.

Your face is beautiful
And Your eyes are like stars
Your gentle hands have healing
They're inside the scars
Your loving arms they draw me near
And your smile it brings me peace
Draw me closer oh my Lord
Draw me closer Lord to thee

(chorus)

Captivate us, Lord Jesus
Set our eyes on You
Devastate us with Your presence
Falling down
And rushing river draws us nearer
Holy fountain consume us with
You Captivate us Lord Jesus with You
Your voice is powerful
And your words are radiant bright
In Your breath and shadow
I will come close and abide
You whisper love and live divine
And Your fellowship is free
Draw me closer O my Lord
Draw me closer to thee
Let everything be lost in the shadows
Of the light of Your face
Let every chain be broken from me

As I'm bound by your grace
For your yoke is easy.
Your burden is light
You're full of wisdom , power and might
And every eye will be on You
(chorus)
Captivate us, Lord Jesus
Set our eyes on You
Devastate us with Your presence
Falling down
And rushing river draws us nearer
Holy fountain consume us with You
Captivate us Lord Jesus with You

Psalm 68:19, "Praise the Lord God our savior, For each day he carries us in his arms."

Praises:

- I love my home in Phoenix with dear Margaret.
- Praise God for a wonderful trip from Cheryl Carmichael to Phoenix just before I came to Houston.
- Praise God for the provision of a home, a car and many other needs met here through The Woodlands Church in Houston.
- Continue to praise God for my Doctors here in Houston and their care.
- Praise God that He is taking care of my dear family members-each one. I cannot express how much I miss them.
- Praise God for reveling to me more of why I was to come to Houston on this cancer journey.

Requests:

- That cancer is being killed.

- Continue to pray for my son Andrew, our 16 year old who has been without a healthy mother for a long time.
- Prayer for Gary as he navigates life without his wife.
- Direct prayer against difficult side effects of the chemo drug and radiation Dates April 17th-April 27th.
- My veins are kind of wearing out. Need prayer for that.
- For the port surgery to fall at just the right time in the midst of the radiation and everything else!
- That I don't lose weight during this process.
- Continue to be "captivated" by the Lord Jesus Christ.

May 2006

"Grown-Up" Friends

Leaving Houston - April 28th:

Something brought you to my mind today
 I thought about the funny ways you make me laugh
 And yet I feel like it's okay to cry with you
 Something about just being with you
 When I leave I feel like I've been near God
 And that's the way it ought to be...

CHORUS:

'Cause you've been more than a friend to me
 You fight off my enemies
 'Cause you've spoken the Truth over my life
 And you'll never know what it means to me
 Just to know you've been on your knees for me
 Oh, you have blessed my life
 More than you'll ever know,

More than you'll ever know.
You had faith, when I had none
You prayed God would bring me a brand new song
When I didn't think I could find the strength to sing
And all the while I'm hoping that I'll
Do the kind of praying for you that you've done for me
And that's the way it ought to be...
You have carried me
You have taken upon a burden that wasn't your own
And may the blessing return to you
A hundredfold,
A hundredfold.

CHORUS:

'Cause you've been more than a friend to me
You fight off my enemies
'Cause you've spoken the Truth over my life
And you'll never know what it means to me
Just to know you've been on your knees for me
Oh, you have blessed my life
More than you'll ever know,
More than you'll ever know.

(More Than You'll Ever Know, by Watermark)

Reflections: I discovered this song a few years back while working out on the stair stepper listening to a Wow worship CD and was intrigued by the words then. I recently bought Watermark's CD and there was that song again. It is about friendship. It is about what godly friendship is. The chorus says it all, really. You have been there for me, you fight off my enemies, you have spoken the truth over my life. As I left Houston and the full-orbed experience there I gave great thought to this song by Watermark. God continues to bless me with friends such as what is described in this song. Godly, truth-

speaking friends. Those I met in Houston were these types of friends. The Alexanders, the de Chambriers, the Grants and the Hannas. I have, while writing the book on friendship with Erin, met a great challenge in understanding what God had in mind when He created “friend.” I believe the chorus from this song by Watermark pretty much sums it up. Our last chapter of our book on Friendship emphasizes the power and purpose of the “grown-up” friend. This type of person speaks truth over our lives. This friend fights off the enemy for us, this friend spends time on their knees praying and this friend has faith. I am so thankful for truth and those bold enough to speak it and live it. I am so thankful for those, who in prayer fight off the enemy. I think we live in a culture that is afraid of the truth, hides from the truth, runs from the truth or simply does not acknowledge truth. Turning more and more to scripture while on this journey I see the value and the urgency to embrace truth, God’s truth. Embracing truth has held me up in the darkest of moments.

While in Houston with 3 more days of radiation and the port surgery to go, I had a melt down on a beautiful Sunday afternoon. I was sitting at my computer trying to get my fuzzy mind to think so I could complete a half of a chapter and clean up the bibliography. Gary had stayed an extra day with me than he originally planned and it had been a pretty good day but all of sudden I had those dark feelings of “I can’t write this book, I can’t do this radiation, I can’t do any of this anymore.” And the weeping came. He held me and wept with me and then he spoke the truth. I *can* do all things through our Lord Jesus Christ who *only* strengthens me, he will uphold me in times of trouble, He does have good for me and not harm. His mercy is new for me this day, He has not left me or forsaken me, and on and on. The truth washed over me like waves of refreshing water. We had to pack Gary up and get him to the airport. The truth is this was sad and it was hard and we cried again as we said goodbye but turning to God’s word became sustenance to my weary bones. I went back to the Alexander’s house, which was now empty since they had left for Israel the day before, and I sat down at that big table and worked on the book and thanked God for His love and for my husband and for friends. I was not alone.

The truth is God continued to uphold me through this time away and radiation. He answered my prayers concerning side effects. I had a few, but not too bad. He answered my prayer concerning the port. I had the surgery while in Houston and it went very well. Out with the old cracked one and in with a brand new one, implanted by a surgeon that only puts in ports! The truth is that God is who he says he is and he does what he says he does. So often we function as if he doesn’t exist! I want so much to believe more and more the words He gives us, His truth, His promises and to be a person that lives and breathes truth.

Back In Phoenix: My days here began with sleep and lots of it, whenever I could. My body was so out of whack sleep-wise! Catching up with Margaret has been a blessing and getting back to the treatments at Envita encourages me in this battle. I sat next to a young woman, (maybe early 20's), one day that was here from Denver, Littleton actually. Her treatments were similar to mine which usually means cancer. I was tired and my veins hurt but I wanted to know her heart and asked a few questions. She seemed tired too. I don't know her situation but am praying to see her again.

In the days to come I will see people I have not been able to see yet, let my mind dwell on "good" things and I will look forward to someday going home! I dream of it, I picture it, I see Andrew and Matt and Amanda, I picture life with my husband, hanging out in the evenings or bugging him when he is on the computer (that is his favorite) and sitting with my kitties. While I have been away I hear all my flowers have been planted and paid for complements of Marsha, Matt and Amanda. A surprise to both Gary and me. It is so much easier on the heart and the soul when we let our mind dwell on good things. When I arrived back in Phoenix from Houston I was exhausted. I sat out on a little bench waiting for a shuttle to take me to Margaret's and the wait was unusually long that evening and I began to feel very sorry for my little self, sitting on that bench in Sky Harbor Airport and then before the tears came I began to quote all the scripture and truth that I know with my fuzzy memory. My heart lifted, the tears stopped and I managed to smile. I felt much better. Soon I was planted on a shuttle and heading to my Phoenix home. For this I am thankful and I see even in the hard times there is abundance.

Psalms 65:11, "You crown the year with a bountiful harvest, even the hard pathways overflow with abundance."

Praises:

- 3 weeks in Houston greatly blessed with hope, with new and old friends, with sweet times of prayer, with God's presence
- I have a new port! Oh, the things that rock my world these days!
- I had the best birthday of my life! I now have \$80.00 in Starbucks cards! I need a friend to come join me to spend this credit!
- Sweet, sweet time with Gary in Houston.
- Lots of radiated cancer!
- Andrew seems to be doing well.

Prayer Requests:

(Jer. 30:17 I will restore you to health and heal all of your wounds)

- Healing, healing, healing of my body.
- For the young woman I talked with from Littleton and that I would see her again.
- That truth will continue to be what I keep my mind upon.
- Continued healing from radiation. Kind of weakened me.
- That nothing gets in the way of my trip home for Memorial Day weekend! May 25th!
- For a strong finish for Andrew's end of the year at school.

Grateful: Another Year of Life

Reflections (May 15): Looking around my room here in Phoenix I see reminders of a year, and a journey that will probably mark my life here on this earth as the greatest adventure, battle, growth experience, witness of God's hand and love and mercy, heart to heart connection with the Body of Christ, emotions of all sorts, and more. I see my "Expect a Miracle" stand, my Velveteen Rabbit, my stacks of cards, just collected since arriving in Phoenix, photos of family and their very intimate letters they have written me and many items that people have given to me to remind me of God's love and protection over me. You see, May 17th marks the anniversary of the diagnosis of this cancer. For those that know me I am not a person that anticipates or ruminates on "sad" anniversaries. I love birthdays, wedding anniversaries, and anniversaries of celebrations. For those loved ones that have died I am more likely to think of them not on their day of death but rather on their day of birth and think about them and miss them then. So how do I look at this year anniversary of walking through cancer? Certainly it was a very traumatic day and I do remember it well. I remember arriving at the hospital, the "extra" time the techs took that morning during the CT scan and the radiologist telling me my doctor would be calling me soon. I remember sitting at breakfast with Gary getting the call from my doctor's office asking me to come in at noon to talk with him. I remember sitting in his office as he came in with the CT scan and seeing the large pancreatic tumor and listening to what his suggestions were for me. That day we called some friends and we talked with family and we cried and made decisions about what we would do next. I knew cancer from my mother's breast cancer experience and my sister Chris's breast cancer experience and Gary's 4 times of dealing with cancer. I remember shortly after Gary and I were married we visited a dear lady in the hospital dying of pancreatic cancer. I remember being very scared of that cancer, knowing very little about it and now 25 years later I was told a tumor was growing in my pancreas.

In this anniversary week we walked through finding out that the tumor was inoperable and that I had a positive lymph node in my neck. All of these experiences could add up to trauma, tragedy and crisis. Certainly in my experience of being a human I felt these things but what I know to be true and what I celebrate with this year anniversary is that there was a moment where I came face to face with my Lord Jesus Christ and we talked about my choices and really there were only two. One choice would be to succumb to the trauma and tragedy of it all and sink into a deep dark angry depressed state and perhaps give up and give in to the statistics of the cancer that was growing in my body. The other choice, and I remember it well, was to “choose” to cling tightly to Jesus and to “live” desperately needing Him 24 hours a day and trusting that He would be there for me just as His scriptures have promised for thousands of years. Scriptures that I would have said I believed but didn’t always function like I believed them. Psalm 91 became my Psalm to trust in and believe to be true. The Lord is my shelter, He will protect me from the dangers of the day and the terrors of the night, He keeps me on a straight path, I can stomp on the serpents that seek to attack me, He places me in the hands of the angels to hold me, He promises me a “long life” and salvation. This Psalm has sustained me over and over again throughout this year.

So what does this anniversary feel like as I walk through it this week? I celebrate this year anniversary, not necessarily the diagnosis, but I celebrate a year of life, perhaps more living than I have ever lived, I celebrate relationships, my family, my friends and those that I pray for and uphold me in prayer. I celebrate scripture and truth and healing and holiness. I celebrate finding Jesus to be all that He says He is and trusting Him to strengthen me in my loneliest of moments and to believe that His love is really all I ever need, even while living on this earth. I celebrate the working out of “His purpose, in His kingdom through this cancer experience”. I am in awe of what He has done and am deeply humbled. This anniversary is a “marker” of God’s tremendous love. I look forward to another year of my life on this earth. I do not look that far ahead for He has taught me to live in the “here and now”. It is in the here and now that we were designed to live. It is in this here and now that He will supply all my needs, every single one of them and it is in the here and now that we experience the fullness of who our Lord is.

Prayer, Mercy and Grace: Praying. It is an honor, a privilege, and gift and a lifestyle. I have learned so much about what it feels like to be prayed for and to be motivated to pray over. In the past year I have collected many, many stories of praying people and special prayers for me. Just carrying my prayer pager is a major kick! What has touched me deeply are the prayers of young children. Little Ellie in Colorado that prays for that “Arkansas girl” to get better, the CD I have of the children of Kelly and Lisa praying for me and recently the prayer of 6 year-old GiGi Hanna, (the one in the hat next to little sister Camille) Listen to this, GiGi prayed, “*O God I pray that that tumor will say, 'I don't like this body I am living in' and that the tumor will spread its wings and just fly*

away to tumor land and stay there." Ya got to love that one! Many are praying that this cancer will hate living in my body!

God's mercy and grace have been sustainers to my heart. "Who am I" that He should be so gentle and loving and soft with my heart. He gives me good gifts, constantly! Oh if we only take the time to look we would see how he loves blessing us with precious, meaningful, tangible gifts. He is the greatest of gift givers.

You see, I am thankful for this anniversary. Thankful for so much I could never put it all down in one little journal entry. I celebrate life, love, laughter, goodness, healthy moments, new friends, old friends, my family. May 17th is not a day of trauma but rather it has become a day to remember, a day to mark understanding the experience of "hope and healing." I am grateful.

Praises:

- My MD Anderson doctors, Deb Seigler and Dr. Abruzzese you are loved
- My port works! Oh my gosh, what joy!
- Great Mother's Day with my Mom and Dad here in Phoenix
- Good times catching up with some Phoenix people before I leave
- My sons and husband are doing well
- Thankful for God's word that continues to sustain me and speaks to me and holds my heart
- Going home on the 24th for a visit and not coming back to Phoenix until the 30th-can't wait!

Prayer Requests:

- Fly to Houston on the 21st and have all update testing on the 22nd and will see Dr. Abruzzese on the 23rd. A lot of cancer can die between now and then! Let's pray that it does!
- Prayer to stay strong in these last days in Phoenix
- I desire to be more open to sharing the Lord with unbelievers. That is has not always been my strong area. Pray that I don't walk away from any opportunity to proclaim Jesus.
- Prayer for every moment at home to be precious, strengthening and that when I leave it will be joy not grief.

- Gary and Andrew leave that weekend while I am there (28th) for Ireland. Gary will be gone until the 13th of June and Andrew gone until the 20th of July! Pray for their safety and ministry to be strong.

Update (May 23rd): The test results of the CT scan and chest x-ray taken here in Houston at MD Anderson were very positive! All organs continue to be clear, the tumor has not changed and appears to continue dying, the blood cancer marker came down 100 points after spiking after the radiation treatments, which is a normal response for a blood marker. I will be continuing on my chemotherapy every other week here at MD Anderson. The doctor is very encouraged and so am I! Thank you, Lord.

June 2006

Home from Phoenix

Phoenix: I left home on March 5th with Erin Smalley to travel to the a city where people love to visit in the Spring, looking very forward to the treatments I would be receiving there at the Envita Center. We had great travel and even though I would be receiving 30 treatments traveling every other week to Houston for chemotherapy I knew with the Lord upholding me I could do this! It would be the first of May before I knew it and I would be returning back home.

My first week of adjustment went well. I loved Margaret from the beginning, her location was perfect, I shopped at Whole Foods (my favorite organic store) found a free wireless coffee house, visited my parents, and looked forward to the visits from friends and family that would be happening over the course of the next few weeks. The next week, while in Houston, I would be told that a lesion had been found on my back and that a follow up MRI would be necessary. I would soon discover that this lesion was cancer and that I would need to spend about 3 weeks in Houston receiving radiation. I would not be going back home again until June 10th.

This trip to Phoenix has been, without a shadow of a doubt, one of the most challenging experiences of my life. After all, not even the “Survivor” people are gone as long as I was gone! And towards the end, when the weather started heating to 113 degrees I felt like I was just surviving! As I write this update journal entry I have taken this space to reflect on my time in this city, with the people that God brought into my life and the continued truths he is teaching me about himself.

Funny Stories: In the first couple of days while driving to the Envita Center, little did I know that I would be shot not once but twice by a radar camera and receive two consecutive speeding tickets. They of course went to Arkansas first so I got the first one and paid it and then received a second one thinking a mistake had been made. But no! In order to deal with this one I went to driving school 2 nights in a row after returning from

radiation in Houston. I now drive very slow for the first time in my life. I do value having a driver's license and am afraid I could lose it if I don't behave. I really don't like those camera radar tickets, no chance of talking an officer out of the ticket! I had gotten pretty good at that over the years!

I returned home from treatment one day and Margaret announced that apparently one of us had died. I received several bouquets of flowers so it looked like a room full of sympathy flowers. I said that it must have been both of us since we were talking and that we were now in heaven!

This is not really "funny" but it was an event that happened while I was there. Margaret had an episode that took her to the hospital for a couple of days and my friend Cheryl Carmichael was visiting. We were staying at a local hotel. We took a trip back to Margaret's home to pick something up and found that a robbery had taken place. My iPod, a computer printer, a birthday gift from my Mom, my Walmart pink coat and Walmart white sweatshirt jacket was stolen, along with several cleaning supplies. Margaret's broom and electric broom were taken and a jewel box and telephone were taken. It was a very odd robbery. I had my computer, camera, diamond earrings and cell phone with me. They took an old cell phone that I had just switched out. Margaret had such a great response. "These things happen," she said! I really miss my iPod. It was my birthday gift last year and was loaded with great songs. It was a mini-iPod, aqua color and they don't make them anymore. Bummer. I was thankful for all the things they did leave and was reminded of God's protection. At the last minute I decided to grab the computer that had my book on it (not backed up). For that I am grateful.

Many friends visited and I had a great time with each one. There seemed to be a "movie theme" with my friends. I saw the movie "Failure to Launch" back in February but Wendy, Cheryl and Barb had not seen it so each time someone visited that silly movie was watched and I didn't care cause I was just happy to have my friends come! The last flight home from Houston to Phoenix I took played that silly movie. I read a book instead!

After radiation I grew a pretty big blood clot in my neck and was immediately put on a daily shot of blood thinner. I managed to find people to give me shots but after Barb Tallant's visit we knew that there would be a couple of days where I would need to give it to myself so we sat on the couch the morning of her leaving and I psyched up to shoot myself up. I grabbed some skin on my thigh and took off the needle cover. I was all ready to go until I took the cover off and looked at that needle and just started laughing and sat there for what seemed like an eternity before I said I don't think I can do it today! She laughed, especially when I let go and we saw my fingernail marks I had left in the skin! She gave me the shot and wouldn't you know it I have managed to find someone ever

since to give me that shot. I have 10 more to go. We shall see. I kind of want to meet the challenge.

People in Phoenix: God knew I needed Margaret Reed. What a delightful, 86 year old woman. Every chat we had I enjoyed. Margaret is fairly housebound but truly an amazing woman with a nature that is quite tough (I would never “say” stubborn) I learned much from her sweet spirit, dear smile and laugh and our talks we had. God knew that I needed Margaret and the tears flowed the morning I left. We prayed, hugged and said I love you. She has become very precious to me.

I was very thankful for the people at the Envita center, for their care and love. I did not get to see all the people I wanted to see while there. After radiation I was tired and fatigued and often did not feel that great. I saw people that picked me up from the airport or dropped something by but for the most part I spent my time at Margaret’s staying out of the heat and resting up. I am thankful for all of you that live there for your intention to spend time together and even though I did not get to do as much as my heart wanted I love you and thank God for your encouragement.

I am thankful for the visits friends made while I was a way for 3 full months. My heart is touched forever for each one of you as you sacrificed time and money to be by my side. Just when I thought I could not make it, a friend was on their way. In the last week I decided to bring Matt out to drive back with me. I needed his big strong help to load my car and to do most of the driving. Gary was in Ireland with Andrew, so Matt flew in on the 7th. I was so excited that morning I could not sleep. I picked him up and he packed up the car. We had a lovely last day with Margaret and on June 8th, after an Envita treatment we started for home driving 9 hours the first day and making it home on the 9th at 7:00. **Home:** While I had been home for a visit on Memorial Day weekend, spending time with all of my family including Nathan and Amy, driving up the driveway was pure, sweet joy. Gary and Andrew would not be home yet and Nathan and Amy had gone back to Denver but this was my home. A home with memories, a home where God lived, a town that has loved me and supported me through one of the darkest, most difficult and challenging times of my life. It is good to be home.

At the same time there is always a battle, isn’t there? The Word speaks of this truth. Satan is prowling around seeking the next person he wants to devour. As Matt and I drove home many of my thoughts turned to this cancer battle. I am tired of the battle, not waving a white flag but more like running a race where the laps in between are the hardest to run. I have run a 10K and found the middle to last miles are so hard. You have to work on the thoughts “am I going to make it.” I told Wendy last night after church that I have struggled with wondering if people are tired of this cancer like me. Will they still be there? These are the thoughts that Satan plants. “You are alone, you won’t make it, your God will let you down, what do you really have to live for anyway?” Church was

water for my thirsty spirit last night. We worshiped and praised and I listened to truth and Satan's whispering lies went away.

I am home. A great gift from God. I am going to my beloved Maui in a week with Gary to rest and listen to the ocean and to get to know my husband again! I do have much to live for. God is still working out His purpose. As we worshiped last night we sang a Dennis Jernigan song that is my favorite. The first time I heard this song my dear friend Chip Carmichael sang it in church back in Denver many years ago and he sang it with such deep passion and love. I will never forget it. I continue to need to "sit with you dear Father, and I need you to hold me".

He does hold me and I am blessed.

If I Could Just Sit with You

When I cannot feel, when my wounds don't heal

Lord I humbly kneel, hidden in You Lord,

You are my life so I don't mind to die

Just as long as I am hidden in You

If I could just sit with You a while, if You could just hold me

Nothing could touch me though I'm wounded, though I die

If I could just sit with You a while, I need You to hold me

Moment by moment, 'till forever passes by

When I know I've sinned when I should have been

Crying out my God and hidden in you Lord

I need you now, more than I know how

So I humbly bow, hidden in you

If I could just sit with You a while, if You could just hold me

Nothing could touch me though I'm wounded, though I die

If I could just sit with You a while,

I need You to hold me

Moment by moment, 'till forever passes by

If I could just sit with You a while, I need You to hold me

Moment by moment, 'till forever passes by

Moment by moment, 'till forever passes by

Praises:

- For yet another clear CT scan a couple of weeks ago
- For God's provision in Phoenix
- For the prayer pager that continues to go off several times a day. It amazes my heart
- For Margaret Reed and her love for the Lord
- For my home and my family, my town and my friends
- For my loving church Fellowship Bible Church of Northwest Arkansas
- For the beauty of Northwest Arkansas
- For my ability to enjoy life, yard work, going out with friends, my job
- For God's promises, His truth and His intimate love

Prayer Request:

- Gary's safe arrival back from Ireland on the 13th
- Andrew's continued ministry in Ireland and his safe arrival back on July 20th
- I am feeling like my stint is backing up again. I need wisdom in how to deal with this before Maui!
- For sweet precious rest and enjoyment in Maui for both Gary and me
- For my thoughts to remain focused on truth and my heart to believe God's love for me

July 2006

Aloha!

“But I will keep on hoping for you to help me; I will praise you more and more. I will tell everyone about your saving power, for I am overwhelmed by how much you have done for me. I will praise your mighty deeds, O Sovereign Lord, I will tell everyone that you alone are just and good” Psalm 71:14,15,16.

Aloha! from Maui, “The Valley Isle”: We have been here in our beloved Maui since June 19th. Today is July 4th and we are packing to go home. Oh what a glorious time of rest we have had. Our first few days were spent at the Wailea Marriott. It was a great start of looking out our ocean view room and laying down on the very fluffy bed whenever it called out to us and it called often! With the 5 hour time change I found myself up that first morning slipping down to the outdoor lobby to read and drink coffee, to wait for the sunrise, to look at the ocean and to hear the birds sing. These are some of my most favorite ways to start a day! My sleepy husband was soon down to join me. He said he couldn't lay there without me. Now, from this comment I knew this was going to be a great start to our time together! While at the Marriott I don't even think we got in our car once! Wailea's shops are right on the property with lovely restaurants so we took advantage of just hanging at the pool and eating and viewing the ocean. We took a walk each day along the ocean walk.

Next we moved to our condo at Maui Kamaole. We had stayed on the property before but found a privately owned unit that was just lovely. We didn't know it had an ocean view! What a beautiful gift! This property is just on the edge of Kihei and Wailea so one feels like you get the advantages of both.

Everyday has been perfect! We have let them fall as they may and have made few plans. Most plans have come over coffee in the morning with the exception of a day trip we took up to Kaanapali. We took another trip to that area but made the decision to do so when we got up! That day we snorkeled at Honolua bay, one of the most gorgeous snorkeling spots on the island. Even if you did not get in the water you would have enjoyed beauty. We have taken our sand chairs down to Ulua Bay several times to sit, play in the water, to snorkel and to watch the sunset or sit in the shade and read. Gary has been reading the biography of Nelson Mandela and I have whipped through now 3 Christian novels, something I rarely read! I even read Francine Rivers for the first time. It was the sweetest little story of a grandmother that reunites with her granddaughter and they work on restoring the English garden in her grandmothers backyard, reflective of the other relationships in this grandmothers life that needed restoring. Leota's Garden. I will never forget it.

We have walked, and prayed and listened to Hawaiian music on Gary's iPod hooked into speakers. We have sunned and napped and enjoyed every sight, smell and taste that we can. The Hali'imali General Store in the sugar cane fields has become our favorite restaurant on the Island. Second to this is Le'Lanis on the beach at Kaanapali. The food is okay but the best is the view of the ocean and the people watching! We enjoyed church both Sundays on Maui in Kihei at Calvary Chapel. The church was open to the air, with a coffee bar, wonderful worship and a young pastor with a gift for teaching and leading. What a blessing!

After much pleading I convinced Gary to go ahead and go scuba diving. I would have gone but felt that it might not be good for the stent or the port. With all that pressure under water wouldn't want those things to blow up or something! For those of you that know Gary you know that he would be diving each day if money and time allowed. He loves it! Our time here has truly been all about being very together after such a difficult and lonely spring of being a part. We thought we could handle a few moments away from each other. He decided to try a new dive company, instead of pro-divers he went with Mike Severns Diving. He had a great time and saw more fish than perhaps on any other dive.

Today we pack up our bag and our memories of a perfect trip together. At times we laughed when we discovered we were thinking the exact same things. That rarely happens to the two of us being so different in our personalities! God has been gracious and kind and merciful.

Upon our return to Siloam Springs we are thankful for God's good gift to us! We are looking forward to being home. I will truly be home now. Gary has some travel and I will be taking the trips to MDA but I will be home. Doing my job, doing some cooking, working in the yard, catching up with friends and family. Again Andrew returns home on the 20th of July. Won't have enough hugs for that boy!

I return to MDA on Sunday the 9th and will have updated testing on the 10th with Dr.'s visit on the 11th. You know we treasure your prayers more than can be expressed. Since the radiation I have not quite been the same. I have a backache I battle and some digestion distress and decreased appetite. The very intriguing part about my health is that God continues to protect me from other illnesses. Gary came home from Ireland with the worst cold and bronchitis. I didn't even get a sniffle. I have not had the flu or a cold since this cancer diagnosis. Jer. 30:17 is still my beloved verse. "I will restore your health and heal all of your wounds." The good news is when I get up every day I think, "will this be the day Lord? Will today be Jer. 30:17 for me?" While in Maui Gary bought a very special gift for me, a "beach mat" and my mat is my symbol for Mark 2 where Jesus tells the paralyzed man to get up and take his mat and walk, to go home because he is healed. The best part of this story are the "friends" that brought this man to Jesus to be healed.

They “believed” so strongly in Jesus’ ability to heal that they lowered their friend from above the home down to Jesus.

Your prayers sustain me and your prayers lower me to or lift me up to Jesus when I need the support because I cannot walk on my own. Thank you for that gift, thank you.

Praises:

- Gary’s very productive time in Ireland.
- Unbelievable vacation in Maui as a couple and God’s provision for this trip.
- Andrew’s continued travels in Ireland.
- For the prayers of many, and for the wonderful stories that have been sent my way of people surviving cancer that was not to be survived.
- Did not have to mess with stent before Maui.
- For our ministry at the Center and for our great team as we look at fall approaching.

Prayer Requests:

- In spite of aches and pains good results at MDA on the 9-10th and the ability to once again make that trip.
- Continued ability to walk this journey with faith and trust in a God who loves us.
- A very blessed rest of the summer, enjoyment of friends and family.
- Back to gaining weight back.
- Better evenings again. I really struggle in the evenings with my health.

The Next 8 Weeks

8 Weeks: A very precious person sent me a book entitled *Everyday Strength, A Cancer Patients Guide to Spiritual Survival*, written by Randy Becton. This little book was a book she read often during her battle with cancer many years ago. I have turned to this book in the past few weeks frequently. Here are a couple of examples of prayers he has written and printed in the book:

Father, You’re the giver of days. Grant mercy and extension for me. Again I ask-Lord, may it be? I know your power. Stop this cancer, If you with your purposes For my life, Will to make that your pleasure. Father, May my mind fathom more of your depth of Love for me, So that my life may I these trying days demonstrate the gratitude of redemption. Father, In my darkest days I asked you to come close, To give me your presence. Your

ear for my trouble. O, loving Father, You came. How beautiful! If the world would hear me I'd shout triumphantly, He came close to Me! Father, May I approach each day with fresh understanding of your will and renewed determination to walk with you by faith.

We had a few days home from Maui and then it was off to Houston once again for me on Sunday the 9th. I returned home from MD Anderson on Wednesday the 12th after 2 days of complete testing and visiting with the physician. On Monday I had the whole battery of tests, Ct Scan of abdomen, chest and 90 minute MRI of the spine. It was a cloudy very warm day in Houston! After the testing I had a lovely lunch with Sylvie, Ehab and GiGi Hanna and then back to their home to rest after all of the testing. The testing was once again "done". Sometimes I let myself dream of days when I was not being run through tubes to have my insides inspected but then I don't spend too much time thinking on those thoughts of what "it used to be like". That evening the Hanna's had obligations and I had a date with the couch and flipping a few channels. I "LOVE" those times of flipping. They are few and are far between but they are great for the moments we desire them!

A little fear kept creeping in on and off that evening. What will they have found this time? I wish I didn't have those thoughts but being the human I am they come. The next morning I drove to MDA and would meet Jan de Chambrier there, my friend who supports me through the Dr.'s visits when Gary cannot join me. She is my prayer warrior, my dear friend that laughs with me and trusts the Lord with me. We were called back right away. Thought Dr. Abruzzese was out of town and I would be seeing Debbie his PA but here he came walking in and we started talking about results. The tumor still sitting in the pancreas not changing much, the spine looks good! My blood work is good, no growth in the liver or area organs. A new development that we talked about is "fluid in the abdomen". Being pretty literate when it comes to cancer I knew this could be a sign of spreading cancer. The thing is, there were no tumors located anywhere so he is treating it with diuretics. It could be continued malfunctioning of the pancreas or from the radiation. What we all know is that even if it is spreading of cancer the treatment would not be different.

Here is the GRAND news of that visit. We switched my chemotherapies. I will be taking Tarceva, a daily pill and getting Gemsar every other week at Highlands Oncology through IV just like from the beginning, meaning I can do these therapies here at home in Northwest Arkansas. I am home, I am home, I am home! Did I mention I am home? No more flying to Houston until it is time for updates in 8 weeks. I have been so overjoyed by this I came home on Wednesday and started in on projects that I have been leaving around for 3 months. I painted my pantry and reorganized it, played in the yard, wrote letters, paid bills, went to the office, got my writing organized to pick back up on, etc. and then I dropped on Friday! Even got a little sick, imagine that! The Tarceva's main

side effect is a rash on the face and back. For some people it is extreme and others more like acne. It shows up at around 10 days of taking it. I have come to like having my hair back so will take the rash.

So how is my heart? How do I continue this walk, this journey, this battle, this life, this crisis? Last week we studied at church that there will be crisis and tragedy on this earth. We can expect it. I was not feeling well last night (Friday) and was tempted to cry and have those feelings of giving up. I turned on the T.V. and there was Joel Osteen. Whatever your view of him is, last night his gentle spirit, kind words, and truth ministered to my heart. He, as with his mother that beat liver cancer, exhorted us to speak truth to ourselves, to our bodies. My God does love me, my God won't abandon me, my God is restoring me, my God cares for my healing and on and on. I then pulled out Beth Moore and listened to some of her teaching. I had a very good night after hearing all that truth. I woke this morning renewed and refreshed.

In addition to this web journal I keep a personal journal. I think I am on my 3rd or 4th one since the cancer. I started my new journal this week and have entitled the beginning "8 weeks". In my heart and spirit I sense these next 8 weeks are so significant in the defeat of this disease. I am on the new chemo drug, researched to be effective against pancreatic cancer in conjunction with the Gemsar. I am home and getting a fresh perspective on my walk with the Lord and his love for me. I am looking forward to some quiet weekends but I am also looking forward to cooking for friends every now and then. My son Andrew arrives home on the 20th and we are counting the moments! I love driving in Northwest Arkansas, the beauty is astonishing right now. It is hot but there has been rain so all is very green. I am excited to finish the book completely. I am excited to spend time with family and friends and have already done much of that in the last few days.

Yes, 8 weeks until the updates. We will return to Houston on the 11th of September. I know I have mentioned this before when writing in this journal but last summer after the initial diagnosis a dear prayer warrior who had overcome breast cancer challenged me to take my mind completely off any symptoms I have as much as possible. That focusing in on pain would defeat me. I have taken that very seriously and see that symptoms cause doubt and it is hard to move a mustard seed with doubt let alone a mountain.

In the next 3 weeks, we travel to Nebraska to see my family, lead a group of pastors and their wives at a leadership retreat in California, go to the Kansas City apartment, be a part of a dear friend's wedding and enjoy all that summer has to offer.

Thank you once again for reading this website, for joining me in my journey. Please know that my heart is to speak truth and to be used by God to have that truth encourage others. This gives me meaning and hope. Thank you for your stories you send my way of

people surviving un-survivable cancer. Joel Osteen said we can wake up each day and say, “Lord someone has to survive, that someone could be me!”

Father, In my darkest days I asked you to come close, to give me your presence, your ear for my trouble. O, Loving Father, You came. How beautiful! If the world would hear me I’d shout triumphantly: He came close to Me!

Praises:

- Dreamy memories of Maui.
- That Gary is the best husband for me.
- Being home.
- Living in Northwest Arkansas.
- How serving and loving is the JBU community.
- That cancer is not completely spread throughout my body.
- That there are still different treatment options available to fight this disease.
- That God brings people into my life to encourage, counsel and serve as well.
- That there are really good and healthy moments.

Prayer Requests:

- I need to write a new chapter and contribute to a half chapter of Erin’s and my book by the 24th of July. All rewrites will need to be submitted by Sept. 23rd. I pray for God’s words and for some fun in these chapters as well! We are very excited about the book. It is due to come out next Spring.
- Keep mind and heart and spirit off of symptoms.
- Keep speaking truth, reading truth, listening to truth.
- Support and encourage my husband in his own weariness.
- Prayers that direct towards these significant 8 weeks and the defeat of the cancer.
- Enjoyment of “every” moment on this earth.

August 2006

An Airport Angel

Anchor yourself in the fact that God loves you. Take time each day to yourself, "I'm a forgiven person," calming your heart from guilt and memories of past mistakes.

Ask him for recovery and trust that he hears you gladly. Trust your future to God and hope in him for all time to come.

Remember the Christian hope is based on relationship with God as his son or daughter. Choose today to reaffirm that you are his.

Remember the miracle is in the hope, rather than in the healing. Remembering when you feel spiritually weakest, then you are strong for you rely on his strength rather than yours.

The above entitled: "Stay Spiritually Strong" (From Everyday Strength: A Cancer Patient's Guide by Randy Becton)

Today a miracle happened. An angel came to me. Truthfully this was a "real" person but she was an angel to me. Gary, Andrew and I have been here at the Plaza in Kansas City since we arrived yesterday (Friday August 11th). We were sitting at "Latte Land" outdoors around 7:30 pm enjoying coffee, the people, reading and chatting when a dear woman came around to my side of the rail and leaned down and said, "Carrie?" I said "Yes?" She said, "I am Kim and you came to my dorm room on the day of the Delta Gamma selection of my freshman year at UNL to give me my invitation to become a DG and I have been reading your website faithfully and have been praying for you." I, of course, starting crying as she said hello to Andrew calling him by name and to Gary knowing them from the website and asked Andrew how his Ireland trip had gone. She was a block and a half down the street when she turned to her family and said I really think that was Carrie Oliver back there. She was here from Nebraska. Her 17 year old daughter said, Mom you need to go back and see, so she did and she was my angel. She blessed me with her smile, her encouragement, her energy and her belief that I was going to live. She said, "You will be that 4%, Carrie."

Why was this woman my angel on this Saturday in August of 2006? The last 2 weeks could be summed up as probably the most difficult I have experienced since this disease. I have struggled with some serious spiritual warfare. The enemy has thrown in all out there. Through relationships, through my health and that dang fear that I have struggled with all of my life. It crept back in this past week. I have been so faithful in overcoming fear but like most humans, and yes, it's true, I am a weak little human being, I have failed in the fear area lately.

Gary and I had a completely blessed time in California the 10th-12th with Charlie and Suzi Bradshaw at North coast church. We spoke to couples on Saturday. It was a gorgeous day there and we so enjoyed staying with the Bradshaw's. Suzi, you make me smile, enrich my life and are a good friend! On Sunday Gary gave his message on Joy and it was just what I needed as well and then we rushed off to the airport to catch our flight for home. We made it to Dallas but due to weather and a plane delay did not crawl into bed that night until 1:30 am. I had terrible chills when I went to bed. The next evening I road with Lonnie to a JBU cabinet dinner at Beaver Lake. Gary stayed for the meeting time to be held the next day. Upon coming home I had the chills again and crawled into bed. Soon I called Matt and Amanda in and asked Matt to get the thermometer. I had a 105.6 temp. I had them check their temps to make sure this was accurate and they were normal. I was still thinking clearly, no hallucinations, but knew this was pretty serious stuff so got a hold of Gary and he came home all the way from Beaver Lake. I called my prayer intercessors and precious friends the de Chambrier's and my fever did break finally 3 hours later after prayer, wash cloths, meds and a cool shower. I slept. The next day I consulted my MDA doctors and saw the people I work with here in Arkansas. My blood work all looked good and my white count was the best it has been and I did not have a fever at the office. I continued to run a fever in the evenings until Thursday night it started to end and I don't have it now. It was such a blessing that the fever went away because Carol Hansen, a longtime friend of Gary's and mine and her son's girlfriend stayed the night with us on their way to Houston for a wedding. We had such fun together!

The hard thing about fear is that no person can make it better for you. Only you can get it under control and that means a lot of going to the word and truth of God and going to God himself. I have been talking to him a great deal. The very wonderful news is that he is faithful and this morning I was feeling much less fearful. The scriptures that I go to often are "do not lean on your own understanding" (Prov), "cast all your anxiety on him" (Phil), "do not be afraid of the dangers by day or the terrors at night" (Ps. 91), and so many more. The Word is my friend when the strength of others cannot supply. I am constantly in this learning process and know that peace on earth is one hard thing to accomplish but is oh so sweet when experienced.

Aside from all of this?! I am so blessed and happy and thrilled to be home again. I have had some people for dinner, had a great time with family and played in my yard with my flowers. During the past few weeks Cheryl Carmichael visited and we terrorized TJ Max and Hobby Lobby. I am still decorating on that little guest room (Nathan's old room). I have made it into the "seaside cottage room"! I have enjoyed getting together with friends, been at work at JBU and have taken on a few more clients on Wednesdays. On Monday (the 14th) I will set up the laptop in the dining room and will begin the re-writes on the book that are due Sept. 15th, but my goal is to complete them in the next 2 weeks

before we go to my folks in Nebraska for Labor day. Oh, how good it is to be alive, to feel the hugs of those who love you, even in your weakness, to belong to a church that blesses the socks off you every time you go and brings you closer to the Lord, to actually go to 2 new Starbucks in Northwest Arkansas. I heard 2 more are going in. Good things do come to those who are patient!

We have such a wonderful Creator, Savior, Father, Abba Daddy, Healer, Provider, etc. I have been reminded of these truths about God in the past couple of weeks and for my continued need for him. A dear woman gave me this scripture in the past week found in Isaiah 41:13 but let me back it up to verse 10.

Vs. 10 "Don't be afraid for I am with you. Do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you. I will help you. I will uphold you with my victorious right hand."

Vs. 13 "I am holding you by your right hand, I, the Lord your God. And I say to you, Do not be afraid, I am here to help you."

We have tomorrow here in Kansas City and may wander down to Town Center and then will see the movie "Prairie Home Companion" and then we will go home to Siloam on Monday. Next week the JBU freshmen orientation will begin and then Andrew will start back at high school on the 21st as well as Matt and Amanda at JBU. For me? I will walk each day one day at a time enjoying the memory of my "angel" that came to hug me today and will be reminded that God is constantly at work in our lives and sometimes we don't even have to work that hard to find him! He just sends us an angel to manifest his deep and intimate and present love. Thank you Lord.

Praises:

- Great time at home with my family, Matt and Amanda, Andrew Gary and Marsha.
- I love my cats.
- I am thankful for all that has transpired with the Friendship book, all that I have learned about myself and my own friendship shortcomings and am thankful for the editor Kim.
- I praise God for those who keep praying for our family and that God gives me people to pray fervently for.
- I thank God for those I work with at JBU at the Center and I thank God for my Wednesdays at my church and the people there that I interact with and the clients God has given to me to work with.
- I am grateful, so grateful for feeling better again. Aside from fatigue, the fever is gone and my appetite is good.

- I am thankful for how God is at work in the lives of all of my family members. It blesses my heart to see them loving the Lord and trying to please him with right choices.

Prayer Requests:

- I envision a melted, disintegrated tumor. Will you envision that as well with me? I envision and pray for complete unlocking of the fighter cells to identify the cancer cells and kill them everywhere they may be lurking in my body. I pray this all takes place before that next update on Sept. 11th.
- Prayer for courage for my family members to keep in this battle with me. To believe and to not allow fear to overcome them.
- For protection from the enemy. He knows my weak areas. I do not like conflict that is not resolved or problems in relationships and I am struggling with keeping my eyes off symptoms I might be having. Again, many prayer warriors have said we must not look at symptoms when going through disease for focusing in on symptoms can be defeating.

September 2006

Alone in the Hands of God is Not Really Alone

In the wee hours of the morning is the time I get my best work done and when I have my most fun thoughts. My story for the week. Chemo on the 29th of August really hit me on that Thursday afterward. Just in time to visit my family in Nebraska. I literally had a difficult time even getting off the couch and pushed myself to do so. I wanted to play games and go on walks and talk more but I fought every moment to do so. I did go to lunch, shopped a little, even played a golf game. Don't know where the energy came from to move my little body. I still loved every moment, every single moment with my Nebraska family and with Nathan and Amy. Yes, for you criers out there who can relate, I cried all the way home on Monday! Erin Smalley reminded me that for those of us that cry it is a sign that we are alive!

Tuesday evening I crawled into bed and told Gary I did not think I could make my friend Wendy's wedding this weekend (Sept. 10th) and we went to sleep. At 2:30 in the morning I got up for a minute then back in bed and like magic I knew I felt 180 degrees in the other direction of feeling better. I was so energized by that feeling I got up, did laundry, wrote bills and notes and went to Walmart to pick up a few things. I came home and made brownies then took a nap on the couch until 7:00. Got up and saw 5 clients and had cell group that night. I think anyone that has gone through long term chemo or illness

and has moments of feeling good can relate to “manic” episodes! I still feel pretty good as I write on this early Friday morning.

This is a short journal entry to let my fellow readers, friends and prayer warriors know that Gary and I travel to Houston this Monday (11th) for the blood work, CT scan, and chest CT that will once again tell us what this cancer is doing in my body. I see my doctor on Tuesday the 12th. Oh, how I have wrestled and battled and cried out to my Lord Jesus Christ. I will not let Him have rest from me! He knows me well. I am still letting Him know that this earth will have a big loss if I head to heaven! I mean who will be shopping at Wal-Mart at 3:30 in the morning? That is important business!

I have been touched, blessed, and challenged by the words of Beth Moore this week in her Bible study on CD called “Reaping the Harvest.” She talks of the fact that as long as we can breathe on this earth we have purpose, and we have the opportunity to sow seed and reap a harvest. She ends her study passionately talking of walking through difficulty and it is at this time in our life that we are really completely alone as nobody can do it for us but our Lord Jesus Christ. *Alone in the hands of God and that is not really alone.* I love Beth Moore and her ability to bring your heart right to the heart of Jesus. That is a bottom line like no other.

So, here I go, to celebrate first this weekend and the joyous occasion of a friend getting married and then off to Houston where God has given Gary and I dear precious friends and the body of Christ to minister to us and I pray we will sow seeds as well.

Praises:

- Oh, how I am encouraged by the prayer pager that vibrates constantly. Thank you.
- Thank you dear ones that keep the notes and emails coming. You humble me.
- For the gorgeous Northwest Arkansas weather.
- For moments of energy and the ability to see clients, work outside and be with friends.
- For the body of Christ.
- For the privilege of praying for others.
- For my family, every single one of them.
- For the completion of the book-may it reap a great harvest, turning hearts to God in new and fresh ways.

Prayer Requests:

- Safe travel and that all of our liquids will make it!

- For my dear sons at home that watch their Mom go off and are left behind to wonder if she will come home filled with cancer.
- For completely healed cancer and restored body. One prayer warrior is praying for 40 more years. Many of the pancreatic emailers that I have heard from over the past year have gone to be with the Lord. It seems there are two options, die or be healed with this disease. How about that for reality.
- For strength, courage, trust, faith, and a deep sense of God's truth and God in that truth.

On Not Giving Up

Not Giving Up: For some reason this phrase has been with me the entire past week. I have been thinking about what type of person I am when it comes to "giving up" and how I have dealt with situations in the past which offered me the choice of "giving up". Have you ever thought about "giving up"? Have you given up on something? We can experience "giving up" in such a wide variety of scenarios. Might be a relationship, might be a job, a class, a pursuit of a dream, on life, a race, on God, on self, on hope, on heaven, and yes even in illness. Movies and things I have read and even songs have come to mind that deal with "giving up". One of Gary's and my favorite movies on a marriage that seems to have no hope but makes it because they both get to the place of being able to see the world from others eyes. At the end the wife goes off on a huge verbal outpouring of why this relationship should stay together when just 24 hours earlier she was going to end it. One of her phrases was, "And you don't just give up". "Just give up," um? I am pretty sure Lance Armstrong in his book, "It's Not About the Bike" experiences some give up moments but rallies again. I have the Arch Hart quote from an earlier journal entry. He talks of never, ever "giving up" on hope. The song I used from Superchick "We Live" has the phrase, "*We live, we love, We forgive and never give up, 'cuz the days we are given are gifts from above.*"

These are just a few examples of "Not giving up." I see it in my work with clients at the counseling office. There are those that are downcast and hopeless and they give up and then there are those that are willing to stick it out, persevere, even for a lifetime. They don't "give up."

I think about this whole thing because, yes in illness, on the days of weariness, a bad digestive system, fatigue because of anemia, not being able to play tennis, run, or walk the 4 miles I used to walk, having to say no to some social events, looking at the scale and not seeing any progress with pounds, noticing the hair is thinning again, missing friends, wanting to be someone else that does not have cancer (as someone said to me, unzip my body and climb into another) a small thought of waving the white flag sounds okay.

Then I think, well what does that mean? Renouncing all that I believe, no, not getting up in the morning, no, discontinuing chemotherapy, no, and I realize that is a most unhelpful thought. So what have I done with this in the past? I don't think I've given up much in my life time. There have been times when the fear prevented me from trying. I think playing golf a couple of weeks ago was a demonstration of not giving up. I gave up on the first hole to restructure my mind and get set again and tell my body it was going to do this and then I enjoyed the silly game. I don't think I ever quit a race in track or quit a class in school, and I certainly will not quit on my husband as different from me as he is! I won't quit on my kids, I believe in them and they need to be believed in but what does it mean to not give up in the midst of illness.

I know people do. And let me say that giving up is different than feeling led to let go of treatment and die with dignity. I think there are 2 keys here when it comes to giving up. First each day is a gift from God and He promises to walk with us in that day so why give up if he is carrying us anyway and secondly we are called to persevere. I don't think it is denial to want to live and to believe that God has life for us. I still believe He is sovereign and He will have His way with me but I am not "giving up" on what I believe is His hand on my life, every moment of it, even the hard and difficult and "the want to give up" thoughts times. So after thinking about the not giving up verses, I choose to not give up.

I will greet each day, even after cranky moments and the feelings that nobody should have to be on chemo this long, with perseverance and a belief that God will give me grace and strength to "not give up" and in this process there are seeds sown, there is potential increasingly deeper intimacy with him and there is the reviving nutrients of his word. I Tim 6:11 talks about the Godly life that is one of perseverance as well as faith, love and gentleness. Isn't that interesting? To not give up will require perseverance, faith love and gentleness. A dear friend of mine gave me one of those little biblical name cards a couple of weeks ago. It says "Carrie" and underneath my name is the word "Strong". Yep I knew that and strong willed is what I have been in the past but now I know that "not giving up" and strength really is coupled with precious attributes as a humble gentleness, faith and love mixed with courage. It takes courage to keep going. It takes courage to fight the battle and you have to have a sense of what you are fighting for. I know what I am fighting for. I am fighting to be a witness, to sow seeds, to reap a harvest, to hold my grandchildren, to protect my children from grief and sorrow, to live with my mate, to run again and to praise God from the depths of my heart for a long, long time. I can't give up, too much to fight for.

I am a woman that in her humanness is very afraid, is sick, is weak and has no courage or strength. In my Lord Jesus Christ I am a woman whose name means "Strong", I have faith, a sense of what I am fighting for and I have his arms to carry me. I also have the

body of Christ who has not “Given Up On Me”! Oh thank you from every corner of my heart. No matter what there will be a battle that is won.

MD Anderson Updates From trip to Houston on September 11th: During my trip to MD this time I had not one moment of fear. My CT scan was that Monday evening and I found myself goofing around with the technicians. Went to sleep that night and went with Gary to see my physician the next morning. With each time we go my odds and percentages go up in terms of spreading cancer. I had a great deal of abdominal fluid in May. That is almost always a sign of spreading cancer. That fluid was not existent on the scan this time. Dr. Sam Hassenbush, head of neurosurgery, fighting his own brain cancer and Christian said this was “divine intervention”. My cancer marker had gone back down again 100 points. Why am I on chemo still? Because I have cancer running around trying to attach and get another tumor going. They are watching my right lung as it has had some activity that has been there since the beginning of the diagnosis. The pancreas probably has a dead tumor but cancer does not like to give up easily and did you know that our healthy cells cannot identify cancer cells? There is a prayer request. That my healthy fighter cells will wake up and smell the cancer and go for it!

In the life of a pancreatic cancer patient this is still hopeful news. I desperately need pounds and I need to get the anemia thing under control but all in all the battle is still being fought. No white flag here!

Praises:

- For Matt and Amanda’s engagement! Will be married end of next summer.
- So thankful for the gift of MD Anderson and my physicians there.
- Thankful for Houston friends and prayer warriors.
- Praise God for the Loveliness of this Arkansas Fall.
- For my sweet, peaceful home and my cats!
- For test results that continue to say I am not falling within the bell curve of pancreatic cancer patients.
- For God’s intervention this week to help me contemplate “Giving Up”
- For my family, and my dear friends and prayer warriors.
- For the prayer pager that is of great comfort and encouragement to me, always.
- For all that I do enjoy, social times, family outings, family and friend get-togethers in the next 3 months.

Prayer Requests:

- Strength, courage and focus for the battle.
- Wisdom of doctors.
- Breakthrough to something that will help me absorb better to gain weight and keep nutrients in me.
- Elimination of any lung activity like the abdominal fluid. In fact still going for that day of complete restoration and healing. Jer. 30:17, "I will restore your health and heal all of your wounds."
- That I feel good when I see my family and friends for the upcoming visits.
- That I will not even entertain such thoughts as "giving up."
- Always for the hearts of my children and my husband.
- Next updates at MD Anderson will be in December that nothing would bring me there earlier.
- Continued ability to tolerate the chemotherapy. Every other week I.V. and my daily chemo pill.

October 2006

Memories

"Tell everyone about the amazing things He does." Psalms 96:3 "He turns deserts into pools of water, the dry land into flowing springs." Psalms 107:35

Look at the photo below and see what you notice. Are you likely to notice the people and their expressions, the color of their hair, their smiles and expressions and do you wonder what they are thinking? Do you see the sunlight coming through the trees and green of the leaves and the pattern of the leaves on the ground mixed with wood and other colors of the parts of the forest? Do you see the background of the forest, the trees growing up and some that have fallen? Looking at this photo makes me think of a quote that came from a little book called, "*Can you hear what is not being said?*" (Trust Franklin Covey Pub.) There are no words attached to this photo and yet so much is being said.

I notice many beautiful aspects about this photo, the colors, the people, the moment it was taken, the time of year (September 30, 2006) the forest, etc. but so much more than all of this is that this photo is a representation of a "memory". It is a picture never to be

forgotten because I have it here to remind me of this JBU Fall break with dear friends and family. It is a memory of a time I will never be able to recreate but can think back on and feel delight and joy.

I cannot adequately put into words what I have experienced regarding “memories” since the cancer diagnosis. I don’t think that my experience with memories is original and do wonder if some of you have experienced the same phenomenon. I have memories and they are vivid and random. Usually my memories are triggered by something such as a backdrop, a movie, people interacting, smells, etc. and I am immediately taken back to a specific time of my life that I remember in detailed experience. I can’t make these memories happen they just happen with the triggers. I have thought of childhood experiences, playing in the tall grasses making playhouses with rooms, climbing my favorite box elder tree, riding my horse and the smell of him when I took the saddle off after a long hard run, riding with my Dad on the feed wagon and many Sundays spent water skiing and playing in the lake with friends and family.

I have vivid memories of my college days living in the Delta Gamma house and often choosing the very end rooms looking out the corner windows at “R” street daydreaming about what would happen next, class, a Nebraska football game, a sorority function.

I have thought of precious times with the boys and Gary, especially our times in Colorado. Just living in our house there, sitting on the couch in the evenings reading stories to the boys. Other memories have come too, certain camping trips and moments on those trips, smelling the smells of the mountains and remembering the beauty of the changing Aspen trees. Sometimes I remember moments with friends, a birthday celebration or simply just sitting in their kitchen or living room chatting. I remember trudging into Starbucks through the snow for a cup of coffee with a friend, feeling cozy once inside. A vivid memory I have of the first few weeks after our move to Colorado. It was snowing on a Saturday and I went craft shopping with 2 friends. No one was bothered about driving in the snow and it was beautiful as it stuck to the pine trees. We ended our shopping with lunch at warm and wonderful Marie Calendars. That memory has never left me.

Most of my memories just pop into my head and they are of things I have not thought of in a long time and they feel like I am right there. The faces of the people I am with, the background, the time month and time of year and how old I was. There is a show on T.V. that always reminds of when I attended Denver Seminary. I didn’t watch the show then but many of the people I knew at Seminary did, so it makes me think of these people and that time of my life.

Why do I talk of memories? When Life becomes something you value, every breathing moment because you are not suffering or have died, memories are the links from our past

to our present and we also understand they are the links from our present to our future so I work hard now to “make memories”. While I had just had chemotherapy before going to the Buffalo River and Ponca City with our Bible Study friends I would not have missed the trip for anything because I knew I would be making memories. The food we ate, watching the kids have great fun, the smell of the cabin fire, the laughter and silliness, the beauty of the hike that I actually made even though my legs felt like spaghetti. It is all a memory and one that I feel and experience as I look at this photo.

I made a recent memory with my son Andrew. We went on a mother-son date to the beautiful new outdoor Promenade Mall in Northwest Arkansas. We chose to eat at P.F. Chang's, sharing our favorite steamed dumplings appetizer. Andrew is my youngest son, soon to be 17. He has changed with how he deals with me since the cancer. He no longer is embarrassed to put his arm around me and he hugs me every day more than once and tells me he loves me. I think he is making memories. We sat at the table over dinner that evening and we talked very candidly about what it means to have passion for Jesus, how to make good choices, dating, my concern for him, his concern for me, and if I should die how will he survive.

We left the restaurant got coffee and laughed and shopped and enjoyed being together. He told me I looked cool that evening. That is quite a complement and you better believe I will “remember” what I had on so I can be cool more often! It was a “Perfect Memory.”

Watching a video on creativity in the past 2 weeks I learned a new way to approach life. There are different lenses to see life with. When I believe I can change the lenses and gain a new perspective, a different way of seeing something I find this links directly to hope and peace and freedom. I am thankful that I have a variety of lenses in my life through God's word and as I change the lenses this cancer becomes different, less looming, more hopeful and definitely not as defeating.

Making memories allows us to use our lenses in creative ways and when we look back on how our hearts are full and enriched. This Fall has been a great memory maker for me. My life has been full of people, and color of God's creation all around me, enjoying silly tasks like washing windows, cooking, having company. I am looking forward to the memory makers ahead. Matt and Amanda's engagement party today, The Webster women annual Christmas shopping trip in Omaha, my trip with Amy to Kansas City, Thanksgiving with the Ostrandens and the Schlafers and all the precious little moments in between. Jesus you are wonderful to have created the ability to “remember” precious and wonderful and vivid moments. I thank you for that blessed gift. I love the joy of the memory triggers and what you bring into my mind dear Jesus. It is almost like sweet dreams but I am conscious! I can't wait to make more of these sweet conscious dreams called “memories.”

Praises:

- Continued ability to walk through each day with some productivity.
- Less sickness.
- Good times with friends and Family.
- Enjoying Bible Study group as we read Brennan Manning.
- Enjoying Church.
- Many prayers answered.
- Still loving and am so encouraged by my prayer pager.
- Good things at JBU.
- Life is good!

Prayer Request:

- I pray for a cure for cancer, would you too? I am prompted more to do this when I receive the many emails from people going through this disease or have lost a loved one.
- Continued full defeat of this cancer battle of mine.
- Yes, I am still skinny! Still going for the 10 pounds I lost last Spring after radiation. For lunch yesterday I had a 3 piece Kentucky fried chicken dinner with an extra order of slaw and potatoes. Where does that stuff go? Not to mention the combination Mexican food plate I had last night and everything in between all day. I DO EAT!
- Energy for the Holiday season. To be able to get the Christmas shopping completed. Last year God answered this prayer so beautifully and I know He will this year. I actually have a little less energy but trust I will get what I need for this blessing. Christmas shopping is now a blessing for me. It is a memory maker!

November 2006

The Teacup Story

“May you experience the Love of Christ, though it is so great you will never understand it. Then you will be filled with the fullness of power that comes from God.” (Eph. 3:19)

“It is good to proclaim your unfailing love in the morning.” (Ps. 92:2)

“Your unfailing love is better to me than life itself” (Ps. 63:3)

On Love: I was thinking about the whole idea of love this week. I don't know why exactly. Perhaps it comes from decorating for Christmas and thinking of the wonderful, fun and delightful get-togethers that are coming up. Time with my family, friends visiting, dinners and parties. Perhaps I was thinking of something I love, like my silly black Xterra that has way too many miles on it and gets terrible gas mileage but I love driving it. Could be that movie I watched on Friday night on relationships and loving and the theme song of the movie by the Beach Boys, “God only knows what I'd Be Without You”! I love that movie and I love that song! Or maybe it was a thought about my new cheap silver round and fun earrings or the latte I loved drinking the other day when I was so tired from putting lights on the tree or the fact that I love my family, my home and my cats!

Yes, I have been thinking about love. Gary and I are going to finally write that marriage book we've been meaning to write for years and it will have aspects of what it means to love your mate. I think I have been contemplating love because love ultimately was God's whole idea. He first loved us, He sent His only son to die on a cross for us because our sin required a redemptive Savior. God loves us, he says so over and over in his precious word and most of us believe His word to be truth.

But, you know what? We demonstrate that we question His love constantly by our actions, our lack of faith or outright belief that when bad things happen He could not possibly love us. I have never said to God that He couldn't possibly love me because He allowed this cancer and Gary's cancer 4 times, but some days my behavior is not that of someone who has a sense that they are loved deeply by God. With this cancer journey I hate that behavior more and more. I desire to walk as a person would walk who knows they are loved deeply by the Lord and it shows in what I say and how I live, every moment not just when I feel like it. Oh, my that is hard at times though, isn't it? I notice it is better on my “feel pretty good days”. What I know to be true as I continue this journey is that when I don't “feel” his love I have to pull out his word and read it over and over again and His love for me begins to sink back into my heart and I can go on.

A while back someone sent me a story of a little teacup. Lyndi it might have been you...or Catherine, it could have been you...but I ran across this little story once again in a

book by Emilie Barnes. The illustration is a demonstration of God's love for us and in that love He will allow very difficult things to happen to us. He knows that we, each one of us, need to need Him. Unfortunately for many of us, pain and suffering is the place we most need him and the place where change is most likely to take place.

Here's the story:

A man and his wife were shopping in a little store together when they both turned to see a beautifully painted little teacup. They remarked at its beauty and at that very moment the teacup spoke in plain language, "thank you but I have not always been this way" and the teacup began to tell it's story.

I was not always this beautiful. I started out as an ugly, soggy lump of clay. But one day a man with dirty, wet hands started slinging me around, pounding me on the worktable, knocking the breath out of me. I didn't like this procedure one little bit. It hurt, and it made me angry. "Stop"! I cried. But the man with the wet hands simply said, "Not yet!" "Finally the pounding stopped, and I breathed a sigh of relief. I thought my ordeal was over. But it had just begun.

"The next thing I knew, I was being stuffed into a mold-packed so tightly I couldn't see straight. "Stop! Stop!" I cried until I was squeezed too tight to utter a sound. Parts of me oozed out of the mold, and he scraped those away. "If I could have talked, I would have screamed. "But the man seemed to know what I was thinking. He just looked down with a patient expression on his face and told me, "Not yet". Finally the pressing and scraping stopped. But the next experience was far worse. I was plunged into the dark, and then the temperature began to rise. The air grew hotter and hotter, until I was in agony. I still couldn't talk, but inside I was yelling, "Get me out of here! And strangely, through those thick furnace walls, I seemed to hear someone say, "Not yet'.

Just when I was sure I was going to be completely incinerated, the oven began to cool. Eventually the man took me out of the furnace and released me from the confining mold. I relaxed. I even looked around and enjoyed my new form. I was firmer. I had shape. This was better. But then came the short lady in the smock. She pulled out tiny brushes and began to daub paint all over me. The fumes made me feel sick and the brush tickled. "I don't like that", I cried. "I've had enough. Please stop. "Not yet, said the short lady with a smile. "Finally she finished. She picked up her brushes and moved on. But just when I thought I was finally free, the first man picked me up again and put me back into that awful furnace. This time was worse than before because I wasn't protected by the mold.

Again and again I screamed, Stop! And each time the man answered through the door of the furnace, "Not Yet! Finally the oven cooled once more and the man came to open the

door. By that time I was almost done in. I barely noticed when I was picked up and put down and packed in a box and jounced and jolted some more. When I finally came to, a pretty lady was picking me up out of my box and placing me on this shelf, next this mirror. And when I looked at myself in the mirror, I was amazed. No longer was I ugly, soggy and dirty. I was shiny and clean and I was beautiful—unbelievably beautiful. Could this be me? I cried for joy. It was then, said the teacup, that I realized there was a purpose in all that pain. You see, it took all that suffering to make me truly beautiful.

Before cancer I don't think I would have read that story and readily signed up for pain and suffering, like "bring it on, God"! Nope, none of us, if we are brutally honest really grasp God's incredible love that allows us to suffer. When we do encounter pain it is at that point we meet his incredible love, his grace and mercy in ways that sustain us and keep us breathing even at the points we feel we can't anymore. That is deep, deep love. That is a love that I look for almost every day walking my life now. I have to. It is my oxygen and without it I cannot live. Funny I thought I was really living before! I don't believe we have to live in this horrible state of pain forever. Look at that teacup! She is standing in the hutch looking beautiful and experiencing great joy. Suffering is a crossroad for we humans, I suppose. It is a place where we choose to be loved in deeper ways or we choose to fight with anger, depression or just plain sinful behavior.

I am thankful for the whole concept of love. I don't really want to sign up for any more furnace experiences or I don't really want to die but I know I can't live without the Father's love however He chooses to demonstrate that love for me. I am glad that his promises are true and that ultimately I can trust my Lord for everything this world has to offer me both wonderful and difficult.

As I sit here at the computer in Gary's office I notice a little wall hanging that He has quoting Gen. 18:14 "Is anything too hard for the Lord? He is all powerful, powerful enough to keep loving me through each day of walking cancer and he shows me more and more that really, even though I have cancer, each day is not all about that. This realization comes from my loving and most present God. A God who smiles at my joy and delight and love for lattes and earrings, cats and my family!

Praises:

- Christmas shopping is almost all done! Yippee!
- Can't wait to write this book with Gary!
- Really have had good health.
- So thankful I tolerate the chemo relatively well. So thankful!

- Great time with my Amy in Kansas City and am looking forward to next year taking both Amy and Miss Amanda on the annual Mother-in-law/Daughter-in-law trip!
- Such great family times lately.
- I continue a year and half later to be so encouraged by people's faithful "love", the letters, the emails, the gifts, the financial help, the website entries, the prayers. I am overwhelmed by how God has demonstrated His love through all of you. Completely overwhelmed.

Prayer Requests:

- Please pray for upcoming holiday family time and traveling. We have friends coming for Thanksgiving and my Nebraska crew coming for Christmas. The last time the Nebraskans came for Christmas it snowed a foot the day they traveled. Unheard of here!
- For continued "courage" to go to chemo every other week.
- Healing, healing, healing!
- That God would continue to use this website for His glory and for his purpose. The stories that come to me are amazing. Only God would allow someone to "stumble" onto this site by mistake a year ago. This person kept reading. Just recently a family member was diagnosed with cancer. She revealed herself to me as of lately and that she feels finding this site by mistake has prepared her for this cancer.
- For the December 11th trip to MD Anderson for CT Scans.
- For a continued sense of God's deep, deep love for me in this cancer journey and for anyone else you might know that has pain and suffering.

December 2006

To Journey

"Even though I'm walking through the valley of the shadow—He will carry me" -Mark Shultz and the 23rd Psalm

It's a "journey" this life we are walking and living. Do you think of your life as a journey? Since the diagnosis I have had several prayer warriors say to me that they truly

believe that I would experience healing but that I would walk a “journey” before that would take place. I have been thinking about the experience of “journey” as time continues to pass and I keep walking.

To journey means to pass from one place to another. I like the word journey and am interested in thinking more about the meaning. When I think of journey and the passing of one place to another I think of the experiences, the people and relationships involved in the process. Each and every one of us are moving from one experience to another, from one season to another, from the finite life we lead on earth to an eternal life after we die.

Recently, Gary and I had the experience in our marriage “journey” of going to a gala. I think it was the very first time in our 26 years of marriage that I got to dress up in a beautiful ball gown and Gary wore a tux and for one evening we played prince and princess. During one evening we passed from the everyday life we lead of being married, being parents, working at our jobs to a magical, fanciful night of dress-up. The gala was a part of our life’s journey. Some would say that going to a gala does not bring great significance to one’s life and I would say you have never been a little girl that dreamed once of being a princess!

In this journey of cancer and walking through the valley of the shadow God has been kind and gracious with me in the pain and sorrow, the difficulty of chemo, radiation, weight loss, sadness and more reality than I care to experience. Just when I am tempted to think it is too much He gives me good gifts that bring my heart joy. You see, I have passed from the life I knew before cancer to this present life that has been full of surprises that only God could allow and give to bring joy in the midst of sorrow. In this new place God continues to delight my heart with the love of old friends and the love of new friends, He gives me power when I am so weak, He has given me a sense of my surroundings that fill my soul with a love for life that makes me weep, and He gives me a gala night with my prince.

I think it was last year when Jane shared a perspective on Psalm 23 in my prayer group. A perspective I am holding onto is that walking through the valley of the shadow can mean exactly that: walking “through”. Walking through implies coming out on the other side. Even better is that it is a journey that God promises his strength, His presence, His blessings, and His unfailing love. My favorite part of the journey in the 23rd Psalm is that God promises His guidance to stay on right paths, Why? So that His name would be honored. Oh I continue to desire to honor His name.

Last week I was a princess going to a gala. This week on Sunday, December 10th I travel with my prince to MD Anderson in Houston to continue my journey of the experience of cancer. I will walk the halls where nobody will be wearing ball gowns but rather some

will be in wheel chairs, some hooked up to pumps or pulling several bags of chemicals that are constantly pouring into their veins, some coming for the first time with a new diagnosis with fear for the future and some hope that this place of treatment will be their cure and some that have come out of the valley of the shadow to the other side and only at MD for follow-up on their remission.

I love my gala memory. I will think of myself in that ball gown by my prince, as I pass through the scanner and I will smile. I will think of God's good gifts to me because He loves me and knows my heart and what brings me delight, joy and strength as I walk my journey, as I precede through the valley with a hope that the dark will turn light soon and I will be able to see the other side.

Praises:

- Fun Thanksgiving time with friends and Family.
- Good strength and a great hemoglobin count last chemo treatment!
- We praise God for our time coming up in Houston with friends there in the Woodlands and the chance to attend a prayer and healing service as well as our dear friends the Hannas to celebrate some Christmas moments with them.
- Wonderful experiences of prayer times with friends.
- So thankful for the continued ministry of the website. I am deeply humbled by how God chooses to use this website.

Prayer Requests:

- Safe and healing time in Houston. I have been praying lately for "signs" of healing.
- For our sons while we are away in Houston. For their fears and anxieties as they wait for test results.
- For continued cures found for cancer.
- For strength to meet the delight and demands of the celebration of Christmas this season.

QUICK UPDATE: DECEMBER 15th, 2006—I returned home from MD Anderson on Wednesday evening and came home with good news once again concerning this disease. Pancreatic cancer is a time bomb that is apt to go off at different places in the body and that is why the survival rate is low. I have not had any more growths since the back lesion found last January. I do have some spots on my lungs that the doctors have been watching and the lesion on my back protrudes but they feel both have not grown or

changed that would indicate cancer. I continue to feel "good" and have done well on the twice a month I.V. chemo and the everyday chemo pill. I will continue with this protocol.

I would ask that you continue to pray that all of these areas completely reverse and disappear. If you have read the Lance Armstrong book "It's not about the Bike" you will see that this was his experience with the cancer he had. He didn't even have the Lord! The tumor sits in my pancreas just taking up space and is probably dead as I have mentioned before. As time goes on we will discuss ways of dealing with that.

For now? I feel very good and am looking forward to Christmas and I thank you for your continued prayers and would ask that you would continue to pray with even more fervor. For those of you that have shared your own needs I pray often for you as well. What a great gift it is to support one another in the body of Christ.

Christmas Blessings to You!

January 2007

Happy New Year and Welcome 2007!

Christmas 2006: What a joy to sit here on this Saturday afternoon at my kitchen table while the rain drops gently outside and to think on such very fond memories of Christmas with family. God answered our prayers abundantly! Amy and Nathan arrived Tuesday the 19th just in time before the snow kept everyone in Denver. We played, we ate, we opened up gifts on Thursday and had our family picture taken on Friday the 22nd. Can't wait to get those photos back and up on the website. We enjoyed lunch in Rogers and hit the movies that afternoon.

My Mom and Dad, 2 sisters, nephews and nieces arrived on Saturday. That evening we had 16 people including Gary's sister Marsha, lots of food and our traditional white elephant ornament exchange. We fought and laughed over the ornaments as we played the game. On Sunday morning the 24th we ate egg dishes and opened up "more" gifts. So fun to be able to keep the Webster tradition of opening gifts in the morning. That afternoon we enjoyed one another's company, playing games, going on walks and fretting over the prime rib roast afraid of getting it too rare or too done. Knew it came out right when my Dad, the cattle farmer, said it was one of the best cuts of meat he had! Christmas dinner was perfect!

Monday, Christmas day we slept in, ate leftovers and went into the movies. It was so nice to have this day before everyone was to leave to just play and enjoy each other's company. That night we played games and stayed up late. Mom and Dad, my sister Barb and her family left early on Tuesday. Went back to bed and got up to enjoy the rest of the

morning. My sister Chris left around 10:00 for Omaha. Nathan and Amy packed. We went to lunch as a family then walked around the Promenade mall and all too soon it was time to take them to the airport. A few last games of cards with them and then kissed and hugged them goodbye at security. Oh, how sweet times go so fast. Would you not agree? I will not forget too soon the laughter, the fun, how well my family gets along and enjoys one another's company. I love them so.

As Wednesday came around and I awoke slowly remembering that everyone was gone and that I would be going to treatment today I knew that my life as I know it had begun again. In the next 2 weeks I will slowly put away Christmas decorations, Gary and I will work on chapters for our new book and I will go back to work and continue to battle cancer and continue to deepen my desire to bring purpose and glory to God in the midst of the battle.

Since Christmas I have had some time to think through what God is doing in my life and the passing of 2006 into 2007.

On Healing: "It is unnatural for a Christian to not have an appetite for the impossible."
(Quote From The Supernatural Power of the Transformed Mind by Bill Johnson)

Ever since the diagnosis of this disease I have been listening to the Lord, reading His word and incorporating His truth into my life. One challenge I believe we all face is our theology of God's work in our life concerning "healing". From the beginning of the diagnosis I have been prayed over for healing and people continue to pray for healing for my body, complete and total healing of the disease. Many prayer intercessors have said from the beginning that I would be going on a journey and that healing would not be immediate but that I would experience healing. Much of my reading, secular books included, encourage people with disease to not focus on the symptoms but to keep looking beyond symptoms to the "possibility" of the impossible. All have said that "fear" is crippling, is disease producing, and accomplishes nothing.

I love the stories from the Bible where people simply came to Jesus with faith that a look from Him, a touch of His robe, a few soft words would relieve them of their pain or restore their health. These stories are with me every day. I have learned that God "hates" disease as He hates sin. He does not strike us with disease and is grieved over our pain and sorrow. I have learned that fighting disease and seeking healing is a battle between dark and light and the mind is constantly being pulled in the direction of the earth as opposed towards heaven. I have come to love the Lord's prayer, "Thy Kingdom come thy will be done on "Earth as it is in Heaven". We can have heaven on this earth and heaven on this earth is a part of God's will as it is manifested through his power.

There are camps of people that function that if God wants it done he will do it and if not it won't happen. And that's that. I steer pretty clear of this thinking. When we approach

healing and how God works in this black and white manor we put him in a box and diminish the complexity of all that God is. We make Him 2 dimensional. While God is a God of absolutes He is not concrete or 2 dimensional, He is one trillion dimensional and more, I just don't know what comes after trillion! When we approach God with this "box theology" it would seem that there is no need to pray, to study His Word and proclaim or to intercede for others if God is just going to do what He is going to do. Studying hope, the battle of the mind, my own sinful pride and fear, learning to pray and cry out to god for myself and for others are all things that I have grown in during this disease as I discover more about God and healing.

Dodie Osteen exhorts people in her book Healed of Cancer to immerse in God's word and that God's word is what saved her life. This woman was determined to stay alive for a few more years on this earth. This was a passion of hers and she believed this is what God had for her. Because she believed so deeply in healing she was transformed. She became a rock. Whether she had lived or not, her story helped me to become a rock. Believing and hoping that God is at work healing me keeps me on my knees, it keeps me in his word, it keeps me confessing sin, it keeps me attentive to the hearts and needs of others and accountable for every thought or behavior.

What If? So by now some of you might be thinking and have thought, so what if you die Carrie? What if healing does not take place in your body now during this time on this earth.. It happens. It happened to my husband, or my brother, my friend, my mother, etc. It happened to people that believed like you. What does that all mean in the theology of "healing?" At the risk of sounding like a non-intelligent, non-theologian, my challenge, is that really the question? Each day we are called to live a life that reflects the word of God and his character. Here is what that encompasses. We are to pray for one another, we are to study scripture and live it out. We are to confess our sins, as many of them as we can identify and then repent and change. Oh, we are to deepen in our ability to love the Lord and those He has gently and lovingly placed in our lives to love. We are to only live in the day he has given to us, Matt. 6:31-34.

We must be aware of fervently cultivating belief and hope that God loves us in the midst of joy, happiness sorrow and pain. In the here and now of the day we are to be very aware of the spiritual battle that wages. Satan is fighting for our thoughts, totally invested in defeating our minds as well as our hearts and finally to separate us from the love and truth of who God is. That is why he exists, to separate us from God. If I get stuck in the "what if" I risk becoming separated from God.

I have received so many stories on this website both of people who have died of cancer and those who have miraculously lived. A story was sent yesterday of a man who fought metastatic melanoma for 11 years and was on his death bed but then was healed! This is just one story. I watched a precious, God loving, ministry impacting man die of cancer a

few years ago. I don't have a box for that but I do believe that his heart was connected to the heart of God and in that truth there is healing.

I truly don't have nicely compartmentalized answers for the "what if" to this issue of healing of this cancer. What I continue to have though is growth, is meaning, is purpose, is belief, is strength, ministry, sound mind, brave heart, love for people, fervent prayers, a thirst for the miraculous and impossible, courage, etc. etc. I can tell you that these things would not be penetrating my life as they are if I did not believe in the healing hand of God. I have enjoyed reading *The Supernatural Power of a Transformed Mind* by Bill Johnson, *Authority to Heal* by Ken Blue, *Christ the Healer* by F.F. Bosworth and Dodie Osteen's story of her cancer healing. Though I don't believe in these *books*, I believe in the *hope* the authors give as they have grappled with God's word and sought to communicate truth regarding healing. This is the beauty of the Body of Christ.

When I do begin to question, I begin to get fearful. I despise the feelings of fear. It is almost a crippling experience. As I go back over what I have written I am strengthened and the fears subside. I laid in bed the other night and while reading I looked up and noticed once again a plaque that sits on my dresser. It simply says, "Expect a Miracle". This plaque came from Gary's office at JBU where it was sitting on top of his bookshelf. In the first few days of the diagnosis I was sitting with some people in his office and looked up to that plaque, grabbed it and brought it home. Last night it occurred to me that "expect" is different than believe. To believe means to "accept trustfully". To expect means we go looking for what we believe in. We look forward to a coming occurrence. I went to sleep thinking on this "expectancy" in a way I truly have not thought of in the year and half of the cancer. I know there are many stories in the bible of people who "expected" things to be forthcoming. Many stories of people who did not "expect."

I have a renewed "expectancy." I found the words of that plaque going through my mind all night long. "Expect a miracle, expect a miracle, expect a miracle." Oh, thank you God that even when my tummy hurts or the scale continues to laugh at me with the numbers, or that the anemia flares back up I can still "expect". "Expectancy" is unwavering.

In this New Year of 2007 I will "Expect a Miracle". Thank you for expecting that miracle with me.

Praises:

- So thankful for the God we serve and love and experience.
- Such a lovely Christmas with family with everyone's travels safe.
- Continued good health, no colds, or flu (Amazing!).
- The power of the prayer pager.

- Praise for the many prayer warriors that prayed over me during the holidays!
- Praise for the book Gary and I are working on. I am sending 2 chapters today to the editor.
- Praise for an upcoming trip to see family and friends in Denver for safety and for health and energy while there.

Prayer Requests:

- Protection from creeping in fearful thoughts. The battle between dark and light wages strong at times.
- Expect a Miracle with me!
- Continued energy to take on life! Writing, teaching class at JBU, counseling.
- Continued prayer for my dear family members as they battle this cancer with me.
- Specific prayer for cancer cells to be defeated leaving my body normal, with normal digestive tract.
- Prayer that I can stay very present enjoying the day that God has given me. That is a prayer for all of us!
- That I might be sensitive to the needs of others. Giving to others is always a healing balm.

February 2007

Embracing Life

A single day in your courts is better than a thousand anywhere else! Ps. 84:10

One week ago, January 13th I was packing for my trip to Denver. A long awaited trip! A trip that preceded with much anticipation. I had not been to Denver since Thanksgiving '05 and I wanted and needed to be with friends and my dear Nathan and Amy, to see the mountains once again and breath the mountain air, drive by the buildings and streets that were known and to notice all the changes that had taken place in a growing city in just one year. I had been planning this trip all Fall. On this day I sit here in this cozy Starbucks on the Country Club Plaza in Kansas City reflecting on my time during that week visiting in Denver. I will sit here and have fun writing the memories down and “embracing life” as I go.

As I begin to write I look around and take in the “people” here in this popular coffee shop on a Saturday morning listening to a French singer playing in the background. It is

completely full and bustling with chatting, computers, newspaper readers, espresso grinding and people enjoying life on their Saturday morning after another week of life. I wonder if they feel the delight of “Embracing Life?” Are they thinking of the joys of week? There are many smiles and much laughing. I think for many they are!

I arrived in Denver on that Saturday the 13th, a little later than planned due to weather but none-the-less safe and sound and oh so happy! Nathan and Amy were there to greet me as I came up the escalator and we grabbed my bags and headed to their seminary apartment. One of Nathan’s favorite “Mom” things are the caramel brownies I make and we “had” to get the ingredients in order to make them before we were to go to the Carmichaels' for dinner. What makes for a memory? Anything really that brings us joy and delight, even making brownies. We stopped and picked up the ingredients and went home to make them then off for a fun-filled evening eating with Cheryl, Chip daughters and Scott Kelsey’s, (oldest daughter) fiancée. What joy, what fun, what warmth and happiness and truly a perfect start to a precious week.

With each day I was able to experience much of my favorite things to do in the city where I used to live. On Sunday we began the day by celebrating Amy’s birthday, having her open her gifts. It was great fun to watch Amy open her presents and to share her joy. We then brunched at Gary’s and my favorite French restaurant. Of course it was snowing (Denver is getting the most snow it has in many years) as we drove downtown just adding to the beauty of this city. The mountains in the background, the quiet of the streets, offered a peace and a beauty good for my heart. We ate good food, chatted and chatted.

The afternoon was a dear memory of being in the apartment hanging out. Then Nathan and Amy went on their birthday date together and I went off to the Carmichaels' for the next few days to enjoy my friend whom I’ve known since we met at age 19. That was a LONG time ago and much has transpired in our lives and the friendship to connect our hearts. I love her so! It was good to be in their home as well. Warm sits by the fire, chats about kids, Jesus, work, a little shopping, a trip to the mountains on Tuesday with Kathy. What a gorgeous day! It was a day that demonstrates why people choose to live in this state. Crispy blue sky, snow-capped mountains, very still air and a landscape that seemed more like a painted backdrop than real.

We arrived in Breckenridge. For once this little town had not one ounce of tourism to the flavor but felt like a mountain town where people live out their lives because they do not want to exist in the city. We lunched at a restaurant looking out on a ski slope. The Tuesday after a Holiday meant that we saw very few skiers. It was beautiful. We shopped at one of our favorite Breckenridge gift and decorator shops and then had coffee and tea at the most fun little local place called The Crown. No Starbucks today! The coffee shop held such charm with overstuffed chairs and couches, a fireplace, good treats and a quiet

and peace. We left after an hour or so to make our trip back down the mountain. Another treasured memory with dear friends.

On Wednesday, Cheryl went to work and I spent another day making a memory with my friend Barb Tallant. Barb has loved me deeply as I walk this cancer, visiting me often with her servant heart. We had a great time visiting the new coffee shop at Cherry Hills Community Church. Anyone reading this and visiting Denver in the future and you love coffee shops this is the place to go! Bring your computer and you are set. It has a lovely patio overlooking the mountains so sitting on that patio in the spring and summer will be the best! After coffee we did the real girl thing. Off to Nordstrom's to have our make-up done! Too much fun! That evening Barb dropped me off at Nathan and Amy's and we had a delightful dinner, just laughing and talking and being together. A memory was created!

Thursday Nathan and I hung out together, shopping for some wedding gifts they needed to get, lunching with Kathy and Cheryl and having coffee with dear Lynn Trathen. Dinner at the Tallant's that evening. Our Friday was one of my favorite days. Nathan and I met Amy at Savio House where she works and then went to the Denver Aquarium. Oh such fun! The otters were kicking up a storm, we played with a horseshoe crab and fed the stingrays. We laughed and made a memory. That night Nathan and I ate way too much pizza and paid for it the next day but it is a memory! Saturday, one week after I arrived we shopped a little and attended an engagement party for Kelsey Carmichael and fiancé Scott. I got to catch up with many people from my church days at Mission Hills when we lived in Littleton. What true precious delight. We 3 then went to Nathan and Amy's church they attend on Saturday nights. So ready for this and we loved our time in church. Home to watch a movie.

My last day in Denver was to be spent with Nathan and Amy at the Broadmoor Hotel in Colorado Springs at their famous brunch and one of the traditions that Gary's Mom established when she would visit by taking us there. But like many days in Denver this year, we woke up to snow and lots of it so we switched our plans and brunched at Yia Yia's, a place we used to go to for breakfast when we lived in the city. The food was excellent and it was delightful to look out at the snow rather than be driving in it to Colorado Springs.

I entitled this journal "Embracing Life." Dear Kathy Stafford gave me the gift of a little angel that when you turn her over she has the inscription "embracing life" on the bottom. I came home with that angel—she is placed gently in my cabinet that sits on my bathroom counter. She is beautiful, with flowers in her hair and a peace on her face.

To embrace life is to treasure the moments like each one that God gave to me during my visit to Denver. To embrace life means that walking what seems like tragedy can still

offer good gifts of delight, of an awareness of the ability to enjoy, to smile, to laugh and experience connected hearts in friends and family. Hearing the phrase “Embracing Life” leads to me to envision wrapping my arms around the day that is given to me. Today I wrap my arms around the moments of waking up, sipping coffee and reading the scriptures and then praying with my husband. I take my arms and wrap them around the joy of sitting in the soft cozy chair in Starbucks and to relish the gift of the time- share apartment that brings us to Kansas City every 6 weeks. Even after chemotherapy on Tuesday I can embrace the experience of driving to Kansas City and enjoy the good feeling moments I do have.

I want to encourage myself and my readers to never underestimate the wonder and the magic and miracle of embracing life even when it gets hard, or discouraging. Wrap yourself around your life, the good parts of it, the God-given parts of it. What I have found is that when we choose to do this the parts that are hard seem less difficult and seem to melt away with the goodness of what we embrace.

Embrace your life today and make sweet memories as you do so.

Praises:

- Good trip to Denver
- Blessed at work and at counseling
- Erin’s and my book coming out the 1st of March (Yeah) Here is a God story: A friend of mine in Houston has a cousin that has been praying fervently for me and I have prayed for her. She just took a publicist job with Tyndale. The very first book they gave her to read was the “Friendship” book! God you are so precious in the way you connect the body!
- Fairly good health. More energy. Better after chemo.
- Good start to the book Gary and I are writing. Due April 1st.
- Family doing well.
- A prayer pager that continues to vibrate. I cannot possibly put into words the comfort, the joy, the encouragement, awe this brings to me.
- Continued thankfulness for the dedication of people to stay fervently involved in this journey with me.

Prayer Requests:

- Speaking at North Coast Calvary Church the 23rd of Feb.

- Updates at MD Anderson will be Feb. 26th-28th. Still fighting the distended stomach.
- New word for 2007 is "Restoration." Mine and other's belief is strong that I have healing, now. would pray for restored body. Weight gain, restored digestive tract, etc.
- Prayers for our book to be written to bring Glory to God and be helpful to couples.
- Protection over the enemy's strategy to cause fear.
- Continued prayer for our family to walk this illness and to believe that God still loves us! The boys still struggle with this at times.
- Pray with me for big cure for all cancers!

Expectation

"It is unnatural for a Christian to not have an appetite for the impossible...A renewed mind sees the way God sees." *The Supernatural Power of the Transformed Mind* by Bill Johnson

Omaha Trip: On the 15th of February I climbed into my car and drove to Omaha to spend precious days and moments with my sister Chris. On many levels, Chris is one of my greatest heroes. I think quite possibly it is natural from the beginning of one's childhood when one is blessed with a sibling that comes before you do that sibling lands on a pedestal. I always looked to her for how to do life and I still do. My sister is wise and she is long-suffering. She has traveled her journey of life with grace and a willingness to grow and for that I am touched by her existence. To my little sister Barb I hope I am the hero to you that Chris is to both of us.

In January my brother-in-law, Chris's husband lost his battle for life. I was unable to attend the funeral and made this trip special to be with her in the quiet moments of "just the two of us." Omaha was COLD, so we snuggled in our jammies most evenings and watched movies. We did manage to capture some moments of girl time getting facials, coffee and eating very good food. This is and will continue to be a memorable trip for me. I relished hearing Chris talk of Jim, her husband, hearing her pride as a mother of son Steven and her openness in sharing tears as she grieves a most unfortunate loss. My dear sister Chris and mother have traveled the journey of breast cancer as well and they have survived many years and are examples to me as I now walk through a cancer disease. I

thank God for this trip, for the ability to physically make it on my own both to and from and for the richness the trip has given my heart.

Call From Nadine: Another hero that God has allowed me to meet and has graced my life is little miss Nadine Means. I recently received a phone call from her while getting my haircut and oh my, how fun to hear from this hero! Nadine was first diagnosed with colon cancer in 1999. It re-occurred in 2003 and again in 2005 the year of my diagnosis. I met Nadine through some friends we made at a Promise Keepers marriage event. Nancy and Tom's son is married to Beth who is the daughter of Nadine! Nadine has been on chemotherapy for quite some time now and she has taken her circumstances and turned them into something good for the kingdom and for God's great glory. She created the idea of "Comfort Bags." These are little bags that contain books, and items of comfort that are given out to patients in the oncology treatment room. Nadine did this on her own at first and now she has a non-profit status for the Comfort Bags! This past fall I was feeling cranky about going to chemo. When I get cranky I eventually try to go to God and consult with him on an attitude and behavior change. I have several boxes of comfort bags and items to go in them waiting for me to fill and take to my oncology office. I have yet to do it! When Nadine called she let me know that she would be visiting Arkansas in the Spring (she lives in California) and if I had not completed this project she would personally come and help me! Yeah for my hero Nadine! I asked her how things were going and enthusiastically she stated that the tumor by her heart was shrinking and the lesions in her liver were stable. She was thrilled and I was encouraged by her sweet, precious spirit and positive outlook. She is in the process of beginning a newsletter that will be made available in a couple of weeks or so. I love this woman.

Surprise Endings: When I drive I do a lot of thinking. Often I will keep the music off and just listen to my thoughts. On my drive home from Omaha I began to think about "endings". Tried not to think about mine! Really I was thinking about some of the movies I watched with my sister, thinking about cancer, thinking about the stories where just when you think you know the end it turns out so much differently. The little guy wins, there is victory over darkness, the woman and man find each other despite what seems like the "real" circumstances. I thought of my beloved Star Wars movies. Oh my gosh at the end of each one of those movies there is this little band of warriors fighting for the sake of good against the darkest form of evil. The little band of light always pulls it out. One of my favorite movies is "Hoosiers". A small Indiana town finds itself the owner of a has been coach with big ideas. This coach believes in himself and in the players and takes his team to State where a small, unheard of team chalks up a win at the end of the game against a bigger, frequently successful high school. In the movie "Sense and Sensibility from the novel written by Jane Austin, Miss Dashwood has given up all hope for the love of her life, Mr. Farris to be her husband because she understands him to have married. But surprise of surprises Mr. Farris arrives at the home of Miss Dashwood to

find her sitting in her parlor patiently waiting to engage in a conversation with him on his new life and marriage. In this conversation he finally figures out what her belief system is and assures her that it is not he that has married but his brother Robert. Miss Dashwood cannot contain herself in this surprise ending as she weeps uncontrollably and realizes her deepest desire is going to come true!

Surprise endings—are they not fun? They give us great joy and somewhere inside they produce a feeling like no other. We feel good, we feel hope, we feel somehow it is worth all the time and effort we have given to the reading of the book, the watching of the movie or the praying we have done.

California: As I reflect back on these events of the last couple of weeks I began writing about what has been taking place on a plane ride to California sitting here next to Gary and am feeling ever so grateful that I can do just that! I had chemo on Tuesday the 20th and not such great nights but on the night of the 22nd and 23rd Gary and I will speak to 300 people each time on the value of growing a marriage, keeping passion alive. We have had the honor and the privilege of returning to North Coast Calvary church in Carlsbad California for several years in a row. Many in this church have walked my journey with me with their love and prayers. I am grateful to make the trip and do ministry and God will give me what I need. He has never failed me yet! Saturday brings a day of rest and fun and the enjoyment of California before Houston! Yippee!

To Houston: Yep, it is that time once again where Gary and I will hop on the plane on Sunday after this California trip and we will fly to Houston. I will have a full blood panel, a CT of the chest and Abdomen on Monday 26th and then go over the results on Tuesday the 27th. The joys of Houston are the friends we have made there. We cannot wait to see them! The realities of Houston always mean a sit in the doctor's office with him eventually walking in to give me the news on "my insides". How about that! Sometimes I feel like Miss Dashwood, with the experience that my deepest desire cannot come true and sometimes I feel like that little Indiana team that just needs to get that basket through for the winning point. I always know that God will not forsake me. The office is filled with the presence of God. My friend Jan usually joins us and we pray right up until the entry of the doctor. I often wonder what it feels like to him when he walks in on us! Gary's Dad was known for some funny things that he would say. He had a wonderful sense of dry humor and he would often say "It is not over yet until the fat lady sings." Well not sure what that means. Sounds like there is some history there from another decade that I don't understand. Some opera lingo I guess. I do know that that fat lady has not sung yet and that is good! In fact maybe I will get to "be" the fat lady! For now I will take skinny and still kicking. I am still waiting for that miracle, that surprise that leaves us breathless with wonder and joy and sometime weeping. It is something I am expecting.

Just like Anna that believed that Jesus would come, He would be born and that He was God she waited expectantly telling everyone about Him. I wait with expectation! **Praises:**

- Great ministry in California
- Gary and I are having a productive time writing our book
- Enjoyed the strength to make my trip to Omaha
- Continued joy in sharing the website with so many and having the opportunity to encourage
- Still experiencing good health aside from cancer, no flu, colds or other such annoyances!
- Thankful that I have not missed one chemo treatment and see this as a fighter against cancer.
- Thankful for the J BU community and beyond that prays for the Olivers. We are humbled
- Looking forward to upcoming trips and speaking events.

Prayer Requests:

- A resolve for the distended stomach and rising white count. Perhaps they both will be totally gone by the testing on Monday! Things like this have disappeared when I go for testing!
- Continued to deeply walk with Christ, clinging to him every moment, entrenched in the word staying strong in the power of a transformed mind.
- Wisdom and discernment around the ability to make good decisions.
- A continued deepened oneness between Gary and me.
- Continued protection over the hearts of our children.

March 2007

The Book!

"Jesus, Lover of My Soul-It's All About You" by Paul Oakley It's all about you, Jesus And all this is for you, for your glory and your fame It's not about me, as if you should do things by way You alone are God and I surrender to your ways

I recently received our completed, published book *Grown-up Girlfriends!* If you have been keeping up with this journal you know the story of the book project. Erin Smalley and I began talking about this book at least 6 to 7 years ago when she called me from a grocery store parking lot to ask me if I would join her on a book writing project on friendship. I said "sure, that would be a great idea" and we talked about a lot about it from then on but nothing really transpired. Finally she had the opportunity to take a proposal to a publisher and they came back with an interest. In January of 2005, before the cancer diagnosis and Erin's own mother's cancer diagnosis, we signed a book contract with Tyndale/Focus and an April 1st deadline of 2006. Of course the story goes I was diagnosed with cancer in May 2005 and began to be treated for this disease. Erin made a major move to Siloam Springs from Branson Missouri that summer of 2005. We talked and talked about the book and began putting it together in outline form Fall 2005. Major writing started to take place.

I headed to Phoenix in March 2006 with Erin. She, to see her mother and me to receive the Envita holistic treatments. She went back home and I was now left to make a temporary home in Phoenix. We knew we were pretty dependent on the Lord for the writing of this book and that it would take faith to get it done but we did not know the extent of that Faith! Her mom was pretty sick and a lesion was found on my back during that period. I went to Houston from Phoenix for 3 weeks to have radiation. As I went to Phoenix I packed my computer and my suitcase of references and continued the writing process while undergoing daily radiation. I then returned to Phoenix and to my friend Margaret's home to finish my Envita treatments. Erin kept up with her very ill Mother, continued her move transition to Siloam and wrote a book. The first writes of that book were turned in on time. I think we extended the due date by one month but met the date. I returned home to Siloam on June 10th.

I love this book. It is sitting on my coffee table as a reminder of what God can do when he wants something done in spite of who he is working in and through! The song at the beginning of this journal entry just about sums it up. "It's all about you Jesus. My way would have looked very differently. Some of the great news about this story is that many, many days writing this little book brought me closer to the Lord and gave me purpose in the midst of what seems like a purposeless disease. I sat down and read our book from start to finish and I wept. I wept because it is precious, it is Godly, it a symbol of God's love for Erin and me and for others. Thank you Lord. Thank you for what you do when we surrender. I will never, ever forget the totality of this sweetness of this writing project.

6 Weeks: I think this is a title of a movie but my 6 weeks will look a lot different than the movie! Upon my last visit to MD Anderson in Houston my physician decided to take me off chemo for 6 weeks to allow my body to rest and with hopes of clearing up some complications from chemo. He felt the cancer was under control enough to allow this

decision. I cannot express how overjoyed I was leaving his office that day. I would stay on chemo forever if it kept me living and breathing and able to be with my family and to do ministry. I have tolerated chemo well enough to be able to say this. I realize others with cancer have not had as positive experience as I have and I am thankful for how little the chemo really does affect me or how little I give notice to it. Truly one forgets what it was like to walk life “before” a tragedy or crisis hits. We forget but there are reminders.

So where to begin in my 6 weeks? I have been greatly reminded of what looks like and feels like limitations in the last week. I wanted to start back into my exercise. Walking and lifting weights. Wow my legs are weak. My upper thighs were a pretty strong part of my body but lifting the weights did not come easy last week. One thing I know there is always the next week and with time we do grow stronger. I tried to lift the wheel barrow over something in the garage but found it very difficult. Thought I might have a little temper tantrum in the midst of it but I figured out another way to get it out of the corner without lifting it over the lawn mower and having a tantrum. I still felt a little mad about the whole thing. I then began to wonder if I would have been able to lift it even in my strong days. I then decided this conversation with myself was not that helpful and decided to get on with the yard work I set out to do.

I planted 12 pots of pansies and spread 17 bags of mulch, trimmed several bushes and removed leaves. I thought I would be a lot more achy but not too bad. I did move more slowly than I usually do but here are some benefits to moving slowly! I was much more methodical so I did not lose my scissors and trimmers under something while working like I usually do and I am sure moving slowly kept me from pulling a muscle or something. See there are always the positives! I love yard work and missed out on it last year due to being gone. Oh how thankful I am to play in the dirt. Remember I grew up with my Farmer dad. In these 6 weeks I desire to catch up on some more reading on walking with Jesus. I plan to read Phillip Yancey’s book on Prayer., subtitle “Does it Make any Difference”. Of course I know the answer to that! I will be traveling to Florida with Gary for Spring Break while Andrew is gone to visit friends, enjoy the warmth of Florida and very importantly finish our book we are writing. Another book deadline! What will God do this time!

In 6 weeks I want to continue cooking for others, give and love and serve as God shows me how I can. I bought a new recipe notebook and I want to throw out the old recipes in my life and fill this folder with new ones, fabulous Food Network recipes! Yeah! I want to please the Lord even when I feel alone and wonder if he is still there. I put our little Easter tree up last week. Gary’s Mom gave us all the little fun things to hang on the tree when she was alive so I always think of her as I assemble. I bought an apple blossom tree a couple of years ago for these Easter items so now when I hang them and look at the blossoms on the tree I think of life. I think of Jesus and his life as he arose that day on

Easter and once again I have hope. I have to have hope, it is like oxygen to me. Can't live without it. In 6 weeks I will get on a plane and I will fly to Houston on Easter Sunday. I will get my testing on Monday and meet with my doctor on Tuesday. Oh, wow, is that significant. I will go to church that morning on Easter before I leave and I will rejoice for my year and for a Savior that is constant. Last Easter I sat outside in a beautiful pavilion in The Woodlands Texas, a suburb of Houston and celebrated Easter morning with the friends I was staying with, listening to the singing Duo Watermark. It was glorious, truly awesome. Easter is a wonder, isn't it? There are few words to explain that Christ would die for us. But then the wonder of wonder's He rose from the grave to walk with us in sweet wonderful fellowship.

These are not my 6 weeks and it is not about me. I have already had to surrender many times over (as the song above says). My stomach has been worse since returning from Houston. The fluid does not seem to be draining. I am sad, I am disappointed and frustrated. I have no clothes that fit. My 0's don't fit over the stomach. We joke that I look like an anorexic pregnant lady. I want that fixed. I can't think of anything along the way that has been more frustrating than this predicament. Nausea, diarrhea, radiation, you name it does not rate up there with this protruding stomach. It gets down right uncomfortable and the thing is I need to eat but it makes me not want to eat. Not enough room! I surrender God. I surrender. I also keep trusting, and hoping and believing and know that Easter is coming. I have said it before that a precious intercessor was praying over me early on after the diagnosis in 2005 and she prayed that I would not focus in on symptoms and be frightened by them. I have never forgotten that prayer. She too had walked through cancer. I go to bed at night I check every morning to see if this stomach has gone down because I believe that it will. Please believe with me. The cancer cannot have me. It just can't and yet I surrender to my God, to what He is doing in my life.

In these 6 weeks I will watch my pansies grow, will finish a book with Gary, I will wait expectantly for a continued working of the Lord's hand, I will surrender, I will enjoy friendship, will walk and lift and breathe. I will go to church on Easter and I will rejoice because it is a year later from when I sat in the Pavilion in the Woodlands and I will continue to expectantly wait on the Lord for the miracle I am asking him for. **Praises:**

- I praise the Lord for the good gift of the relief from chemo for this time.
- I am thankful for Spring, and for being home this Spring to enjoy it.
- I give praise to God that He guides and directs and requires our surrender.
- The book with Gary is going well and can't wait for the trip to Florida! What joy!
- Continued praise for the community of Christ that lifts me up in prayer, in calls, in notes, in time together. I am humbled and am encouraged to try to return the love.

- I am thankful for God’s word. His word truly is the foundation of which I plant my heart and am learning more about that every day.
- I continue to be thankful for how God uses this website. The stories continue to be numerous.

Prayer Requests:

- That I might stay committed to health. Eating well, taking the good supplements I have and that these things truly are making a difference even though my body does not absorb well.
- Oh that this disease would be fought to its death.
- Prayers that I would not focus on what I “can’t” do but what I “can” do. There is always something I can do for the kingdom every day!
- For the significance and the symbolic nature of these 6 weeks and the ending of the 6 weeks at Easter. There is life, freedom, healing, joy, hope, forgiveness, so much that Easter symbolizes. I desire to keep my heart and mind focused on these things.
- For the many others fighting disease, crisis, tragedy. I have specific people I pray for on my list and also do a general prayer for people I don’t even know undergoing difficulties.
- That Gary and I make our April 1st deadline on our book. We know this book is important and that God will use it.

April 2007

Live the Glimpse

Catching A Glimpse: While watching the movie “Family Man” the other evening I began to think about what it means to “catch a glimpse”. I have watched this movie many times but I have missed the interaction between Nicolas Cages character and the man that is sort of some type of angel or something that grabs Jack (Cage) in the beginning of the movie on Christmas Eve. Jack encounters this man, this angel in a convenience store. Jack seems to have saved the store from this man’s rage. (Must not be an angel!) As they walk outside and talk this man challenges Jack concerning his life. Jack says he has it all. Life is perfect. The man laughs and says “we’ll see. He takes Jacks car and Jack goes home and goes to bed to have a horrible nightmare that as the night goes on, in his sleep turns into a dream with time.

He dreams that he married his college sweetheart, Kate and they have 2 kids, live in Jersey and Jack works for Kate's father-in-law in his tire business. This at first is a nightmare because currently Jack is a very successful, very rich businessman on Wall street, the president of his company. This dream taking place in Jersey is a nightmare, no penthouse. His life consists of diapers, a few odd clothes, weird friends. At the end of the dream though he become attached to this nightmare and he comes to love this simple and very relational life. He loves Kate and the kids. He loves his house in Jersey and he even comes to love selling tires. He has caught a glimpse of "what it could be like." A little bit of heaven and that his current penthouse life is not exactly heaven.

The movie ends with the angel type person bringing Jack back awake from his dream to his current penthouse life. Jack realizes he has to find Kate so he pursues her in New York before she heads to Paris. She agrees to have coffee with him and a new hope for this "dream come true" comes alive for Jack. We don't know the future but we know he has been changed by "the glimpse."

What Does this Mean For Me? I began to look at my own life in terms of "a glimpse." Is God giving me a glimpse of some sort? What is real that I can live right now and what is it He has for me in Heaven with Him. How much Heaven can we really have on earth? Wow! What a question. I know God has been showing me Heaven with Him. I do believe that much of what He is showing me is something we can already have with Him but for so many of us we are too involved in other things in our lives to catch this glimpse, let alone live the glimpse of living "Heaven on earth". In my glimpse I have been driven to go to God. I cannot exist without Him. This past week was another example of this as I arrived home from MD Anderson on April 10th. Coming home the rain and the cold felt awful. Coming home felt sad and lonely. The fluid on my stomach seemed overwhelming. I felt closed in. This was not a penthouse dream. It was more of an earthly yucky feeling and perspective. In spite of my feelings I did keep going, keeping commitments, attending dinners with the JBU board of trustees, talking about the Friendship Book with some ladies with Erin, presenting with Gary, going out on Saturday with Erin to spend the day as our husbands were gone. By Sunday morning though my heart felt low and lonely and I could not get the "glimpse of Heaven" that I know in my heart that God wants me to experience.

I called 3 prayer warriors that are close to me. Each prayer warrior had something precious to give. Each prayer warrior gave me a glimpse of who God is in the midst of my experience and on Sunday I began to live the glimpse of Heaven again right here on this earth. I was reminded of the fact that there is no fear in God's perfect love, that God does have a future and plan for me and a hope, God loves healing His children, Loves it! That at the last moment when Abraham was about to sacrifice His son, God stops him and says I see you are obedient. Abraham saw the "ram in the thicket" that would be the

sacrifice not His beloved son. Jesus of course is our Ram. He died in place for us. One prayer warrior reminded me that Eve knew no fear before the Fall. She only knew of God's perfect love for her. Oh, the glimpse of feeling, experiencing the perfect love of God without any fear what so ever.

I went to bed Sunday evening and slept so soundly, so deeply I cannot remember much about the night. When I awoke in the morning my stomach was half the size as it was the day before and it still is much smaller. On Monday I saw my Oncologist here in Northwest Arkansas and felt compelled to share with him once again my belief of prayer's power in healing disease. I shared that I know that people die even when they believe in healing but I also know that I am still here when I should not be with the data of this disease.

Oh how I have been given a glimpse of walking with my Lord on this earth. A glimpse of experiencing His perfect love, of feeling no fear, of the miracle of His presence. So, is it a glimpse? Or is it possibly how He ultimately wants and desires for us to live? I think it is not a glimpse. It is the Heaven on earth He wants for us. Oh the power of this, oh the love of this, oh the transformation of this experience. Have you thought about how you have lived Heaven today? If you did how did you do that? If you don't think you are what might be different about your life if you did live Heaven on this earth?. I know that God's power, God's healing hand, His presence, His leading, His playfulness and joy, His wisdom and discernment, His intimacy and more, are all the experiences of what it feels like, looks like to live Heaven on earth.

Walking this cancer has thrown me into catching this glimpse. Somewhat like Jack. He really did not have a choice about his nightmare turned dream. At the end of that glimpse he wanted more of that life. I hope I want more of the life that involves living Heaven on earth. I want to be so peaceful I can fall asleep with no problem, that I think of others first, that I am very well aware of my dear Lord's hand holding mine and His power to help me to be an overcomer.

Live the Glimpse: Some of you are like me. You have been thrown into the opportunity to catching a glimpse but you know Satan would convince us that unless we walk tragedy Heaven is not something I can experience and if it takes trauma then maybe I don't want it! I have to say I am like Jack. My nightmare really has turned dream. Even when it is hard I would rather live this closeness to Jesus, this closeness to Heaven.

In healing I pray to keep living Heaven. That will be the challenge. In my reading of people that have gone through hard times and have lived the glimpse and have come out on the other side of the difficulty many have exhorted to keep Heaven going on this earth in your life. It can be done. It cannot be done if we crowd it out with the urgency of the triviality of the day and that is precisely what the evil one wants us to do. He wants to

connive us all back into living the sub-par life that we experience when we don't pursue Heaven on earth.

Won't you live the glimpse with me! Live Heaven on earth. If you don't know what that means then go looking for it. Read the Lord's prayer. "Your will that will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Amen.

Praises:

- Praise for a cancer that is not spreading and taking over my body. This is what pancreatic cancer does and it is not following that type of course in my body.
- Praise for our times in Houston that are so precious with our friends there and for our health care.
- Praise for the prayer warriors in our lives-so many more than 3!
- Praise for a decreased stomach!
- Praise for my health care here in Northwest Arkansas. Dear doctor and nurses and people at Highlands Oncology.
- Praise for the promise of Spring and Summer, graduations, weddings, family camps, fun and joy!
- Praise that Andrew made National Honor Society. Yeah Andrew!
- Praise for the hand of God on our Center at JBU and for the hand of God on JBU. It continues to be a great and most blessed place to work and have ministry.
- Praise for God's miracles! Truly my stomach going down was a miracle and direct encouragement from Him to my heart.

Prayer Requests:

- Prayer for continued courage and strength and endurance with a joyful and happy heart, Oh how want that, I want to smile and bring joy to others. Yes I truly want that!
- Prayer that I might continue to share my faith with those that do not understand faith in Christ as a part of this process
- Believe with me that God has already healed my body but is in the process of restoration Jer. 30:17, "For I will restore your health and heal all your wounds."
- My next MD appointment will be in June. I will be going back on chemo in the next couple of weeks but am not all discouraged about this! I was just delighted I got a break! So many cancers these days are treated as chronic and people stay on

treatment for quite some time. I want more than that though so ultimately I look forward to a complete healing with no more chemo, etc.!

I thank you, I thank you I thank you. You who catch me in the store, at church, on the street and you say you read my site and pray for me. Those that email me and say you read my site and you pray for me. To you who send me cards and say you read my site and you pray for me. To you that make me weep when you send some of your wealth to help us with our financial needs. You all humble me, honor me, bless me. I love you, the Body of Christ and you bring to me Heaven on this Earth!

May 2007

An Unexpected Loss

Dear Friends,

I am writing this journal entry at the request of the Oliver Family to share with you that their second son, Matt, unexpectedly died very early this morning while hunting.

There are many details that are still unknown and questions still unanswered. Gary and Carrie will, however, share more information in the future.

The funeral arrangements are being handled by Stockdale Funeral Services in Rogers, Arkansas. There will be a funeral sometime this coming week. Please check either this site or the Stockdale Funeral Services site for more information in the next few days.

Please pray specifically for Gary and Carrie as parents, Matt's brothers Nathan and Andrew, Nathan's wife Amy, and Matt's fiancée Amanda. Amanda and Matt were to be married this coming August.

The family is in shock and they are quite numb. The details of bringing in family from out of town and preparing for an unexpected funeral are at the forefront right now. Pray for peace, travel safety, clarity, wisdom, and God's unfailing comfort. There will be more information coming soon.

Catherine Arnsperger Site Administrator

MAY 7th Update: Matt's funeral services will be on Wednesday, May 9th at 2:00 PM at Fellowship Bible Church in Lowell, AR in the main sanctuary. A "Celebration Reception" will be held at First Baptist Church in Siloam Springs, AR at 6:00 PM.

June 2007

A Memorial for Matt

Matt's Memorial Service: The Memorial Service on May 9th will be one of those days in time we wish would we would have never had to experience and yet a day where we will never forget the hand of God on all of our families lives, hearts, bodies and souls. We gave our son to the Lord that day to be held in His loving arms while we are left to figure out life here on this earth without him. I will talk more of that day, when I can, but for now it was a blessing and the most difficult day of my life.

We now are walking on the other side of the service, of a death several weeks from the event with holes in our hearts still battling cancer, working at jobs and Andrew finishing up school. Those initial days can be hell on earth that drive us straight to heaven. If we had not sought all that the heavenlies have to offer we would not have made it. We would have given up on life, on love, on relationships, on God, on each other and sunken deep into darkness. We are still in the light, even though we hurt.

The exhaustion on our bodies took a toll. My dear Mom came back the next week for a few days and kept me company and helped me to get some much needed rest. On Memorial Day Gary, Andrew and I traveled to Omaha to attend my nephew's high school graduation. Amy and Nathan came as well and it was a glorious time but we continued our grief. I went home to Grand Island with my folks for a few more days of rest while Andrew finished up school and Gary went back to work and then back to reality on June 3rd for me. Gary and I had some decisions to make. Would we fly to Charlotte on the 5th and give the keynote introductory talk for AMFM? Would we go to Branson on the 7th to spend a week there with Andrew and minister to couples in the mornings and enjoy the delights of Kanakuk family camp? With prayer we felt God say He would carry us through both of these events and that indeed we would bless and be blessed. Truly this is what we experienced.

Our flight to Charlotte was so meaningful to both of us as we were served by the owner of the private jet and felt a kindred Christian spirit with him. That Tuesday night we spoke to about 400 people about authentic, intimate, real relationships. Much of what we talked about was our Matt and walking through his life with him and his death, showing his video. It was both painful and a blessing and we felt God hold us tight. We returned home the next day to get ready for Branson.

I am sitting here in my bed on the last night of our time here in Branson and it is hard to put into words the glorious time we have had. It has been a joy to have Andrew here, to walk the week with him and the couples and families that God brought this week were full of life, of love for the Lord, of love for us and we know without a shadow of a doubt we were to be here to share about marriage, difficulties and the power of the Lord.

Gary, Andrew and his friend scaled the ropes course, jumped off bluffs into Table Rock lake and I won the miniature golf game between us - go Mom! We have talked with people, shared, prayed, cried but laughed as well. Thank you Lord for this gift, this pearl in the summer of dark moments.

Tomorrow we return home. We will take with us fond memories, sweet joy and encouragement. We have been given a spot for next year's camp to come and speak once again and we are already looking forward to the opportunity!

The Secret of Confinement: As one of our devotionals at the office we read through as a staff the book *The Secrets of the Secret Place* by Bob Sorge. At the end of the book Sorge talks of the secret place of Confinement. He uses the example of John on the island of Patmos and the emotional experience many have while in this type of place. Emotions such as: hopelessness, despair, uselessness, loneliness, vulnerability, abandonment, lack of understanding, rejection and so on. Yet in this secret place Sorge offers the reader the hope that it is in this place that God is closer to us than we often realize. Psalm 91:15, I will be with you in trouble. In Psalm 18 David talks about being in the darkness and God reaching down to “rescue”, to draw him out of the deep dark waters. In confinement we can have the experience of “renewed affections for God’s goodness and His glory.” I know that I feel very confined at times. There are very few things right now that I can do that I used to be able to do. The list is long and then added to the list is now the inability to hold and hug my son. In confinement we can focus in on or feel the immobility, Sorge says, or we can experience the glorious intimacy of being held so firmly in the Lord's arms. I have to go with the arms of the Lord's. In the first few days after Matt’s death about all I could do spiritually was to repeat Jesus I know that you love me, Jesus I know that you love me, Jesus I know that you love me and I would say to Him and Jesus I love you for you still have not left me or forsaken me. Sometimes all of this being said in agonizing, gut wrenching weeping.

Not sure how long the confined experience will last but am learning in the arms of Jesus there is safety, there is intimacy and there is something that this world can never offer.

The Secret of Waiting: Lastly, in this journal entry I would share another one of Sorge's secret places called, the “secret place of waiting”. We wait. We wait for our hearts to hurt less, we wait to feel some strength again, we wait for this cancer that we believe is being healed to manifest the healing and that the miracle will be completed with whole restoration and we wait for God to continue to show us how He desires to fulfill His purposes through us here on this earth.

Waiting is hard, it is tedious and it is something the enemy uses to discourage us because he wants to wear us down and out as we wait. The enemy cannot have us, will not have us. We are in the arms of Jesus, we are confined to His love and his safety. We pray that

whatever this day brings for you that you will experience this love and safety as well. Oh, we hope that for you. One does not have to go through cancer and the death of a child to feel in confinement. Be at peace in His arms and allow your heart to beat softly and slowly as you experience the love of Jesus in fresh deep ways.

A Gift: About a week and a half after the memorial service Nathan and Amy made the decision to move to Arkansas from Denver and delay their Florida move for a time. They felt the leading of God to bring them here to be close to us in their grieving process, to have time with Andrew in his senior year and with Gary and me. I cannot begin to express the huge, deep joy this is giving our hearts! It is a dream come true. They will load their truck and arrive July 1st. We know that God has great jobs for them and great blessings.

Trip To MD Anderson and Houston: On Father's day Gary and I will travel to Houston to update with my doctor. We ask you to please, please, please be on your knees. With Matt's death, my body has worn down. I go often to have fluid drained from my abdomen and am even more thin. I have claimed Ex. 14:13-14 even more fervently, "Moses said don't be afraid to the people, just stand there and let the Lord rescue you. He will fight the battle and you won't have to lift a finger". We need your uplifting prayers of healing more than ever - we need the body of Christ.

Thank you for your love, your deep love and continued involvement in our families lives. The 24 hour prayer for our family - unbelievable and what a gift to our hearts and souls. The cards, the emails, the prayers, the donations for Matt's memorial, the calls, the flowers, the meals, and the list does not end.

Truly you are Jesus to us.

Praises:

- The body of Christ
- For Hope
- For the love of Christ
- For family
- For Eternity and that Matt knew Jesus as his savior
- For Hope
- For the Word of God

Needed Prayer:

- Healed of this cancer-totally restored with strength and vitality

- Protection from the enemy
- Sleep and rest for our bodies
- That we will continue to hold tight to the Lord and to allow ourselves to be held tightly

July 2007

Carrie is Home with Jesus

"For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing" 2 Timothy 4:6-8.

Dear Family and Friends of the Olivers:

On Monday afternoon, July 2, after a gallant fight for life, Carrie Oliver went into the presence of the Lord at home, with no pain, surrounded by her family.

In lieu of flowers, for those of you who wish to give a memorial gift, the family would be pleased for Carrie's life to be honored by gifts to the following:

The Carrie Oliver Memorial Fund

c/o Center for Healthy Relationships at JBU

2000 W. University St.

Siloam Springs, AR 72761

or

The Carrie Oliver Memorial Fund

c/o Fellowship Bible Church

1051 W. Pleasant Grove Road

Rogers, AR 72758

The distribution of these gifts to both funds will be given to various ministries of the family's choosing, at a later date.

Thank you for praying for Carrie and her family throughout her journey Home. Please continue to uplift Gary, Andrew, Nathan and Amy and the rest of Carrie's family in prayer to our Heavenly Father for comfort, peace and strength.

Sincerely,

Jan Phillips

Executive Assistant to Gary J. Oliver, PhD

JULY 3 UPDATE: The celebration memorial service for Carrie Oliver will be on Friday, July 6 at 12:30 p.m. at Fellowship Bible Church in Rogers. Following the service the family will greet guests during a reception at the church.

Anyone wishing to share a few words about Carrie's impact on their life will have a chance to do so during the service with a time of public testimonies on open microphones.

There will also be an open visitation on Thursday, July 5 from 9:00 a.m. - 11:00 a.m. at Stockdale Funeral Services in Rogers. You may also view her online obituary and leave the family condolence messages on the Stockdale Funeral Services website.

In lieu of flowers, for those of you who wish to give a memorial gift the family would be pleased for Carrie's life to be honored by gifts to John Brown University or The Carrie Oliver Memorial Fund (information in the previous journal entry).

Please call me if I can be of further help.

Blessings,

Jan

Loving the Olivers

Dear Family and Friends of the Olivers: After speaking with the Oliver family this morning, I wanted to pass on a few new updates at their request:

- The family is now ready for phone calls and visits in the weeks ahead will be welcome. The support of those who loved Carrie is greatly welcome and they look forward to hearing from you.
- Carrie was very clear that she wanted her memorial service to be a celebration and asked that people be encouraged to wear something “colorful and sporty” and **NOT WEAR BLACK**. Please feel free to dress in a way that would celebrate her love of life and would feel festive and hopeful.

- A second memorial service has been scheduled in Wood River, Nebraska on Tuesday July 10, 2007. It will be located at the Wood River United Methodist Church and is scheduled for 2:00 p.m.

I've been asked if there were specific ways that those who loved Carrie could show that love to her family. Here are some ideas that others going through loss have found helpful in dealing with their grief:

- Meals are always welcome, especially to a daughter-in-law cooking for a house full of men. Jan Phillips, Gary's assistant, is organizing a meal schedule if you wish to love them in this way.
- Not a cook but love to minister with food? Consider a gift card to a local restaurant (anywhere in Northwest Arkansas is great). You will never have to worry if they will like your grandmother's favorite casserole. You can mail those to the address below or give them to them in person.
- The written word has such an impact on a family of communicators! Please consider writing the family to reflect on what Carrie meant to you, did for you, impacted you, or how Gary and Carrie as a couple influenced your life. The family will cherish every memory of their beloved Carrie and her lasting impact on the lives of others. Your written word can be read and reread for years to come. You can send notes via this website or via her online obituary at Stockdale Funeral Services. You may also mail letters to this address:

The Oliver Family c/o The Center for Healthy Relationships at JBU 2000 W. University St. Siloam Springs, AR 72761

- Prefer to show your love with plain old hard work? The family may have need of people to help with some basic work around the house. It can be so overwhelming to think about weeds or dirty dishes when grief is so fresh and life feels so raw. The family would love this kind of ministry. Contact Jan Phillips if you are interested.
- Like to just hang out and do something fun in the process? I'm sure that in the weeks and months ahead the family would welcome invitations to go to out for a meal like breakfast, come to a BBQ, ride on a boat, go for a walk, go to a movie... If you can think of anything that sounds like fun and could be a break from the weariness and loneliness of missing Carrie and Matt, invite them to come! And if they are up for it at the time, they will be thrilled to join you.

Again, the family is so encouraged by the love and support that they feel from you, those who loved Carrie. Don't hesitate to share that love you had for her with her lonely family. It is one way they feel God's love, through the Body of Christ. They need you!

On behalf of the Oliver Family,
Catherine Arnsperger Site Administrator

A Husband Remembers

An Update From Gary: It's been a couple of weeks since our precious Carrie victoriously went to be with the Lord. In some ways these past two weeks have been a blur but we have been bathed in the love and support of family and friends. In fact we've experienced an amazing outpouring of love, affection, grief, sadness, and gratitude for a life well-lived, a life investing in serving the Lord, her family and others.

On Friday, July 6th there was a wonderful memorial celebration for Carrie at our home church, Fellowship Bible Church of Northwest Arkansas. Some of our friends there put together an 11-minute video tribute to Carrie's life, which you can view elsewhere on this website.

On Tuesday morning, July 10th, the family held a closed graveside service for Carrie and Matt and then in the afternoon there was a memorial celebration for Carrie's extended family and friends from Nebraska and some surrounding states. Again, it was a precious time of remembrance and celebration of a precious wife, mother, daughter, sister, teacher, mentor and friend, a time of sorrow and joy.

Since Carrie's home-going, I've had many people ask me what our plans are for Carrie's web site and especially her "Journal of Hope" and if we would be willing to continue to share more about Carrie's life as well as what God is doing in our lives. After praying about it we've decided that, at least for now, we will continue to post updates on the ongoing impact of Carrie's life, some details of Carrie's final victorious week, what God is teaching us and some personal notes people have written regarding Carrie's impact on their lives.

Carrie's last entry on her "Journal of Hope" was on June 13th, 2007 and as you know her greatest hope was that whatever the outcome of her battle with cancer that her life and our lives would be a reflection of God of a good, kind, loving and faithful God. In that entry she talked about her last ministry opportunities in Charlotte for the AMFM National Conference and K-Kauai at Kanakuk and was anticipating our visit to M.D. Anderson. Her last words were, **"Not sure how long the confined experience will last but am learning in the arms of Jesus there is safety, there is intimacy and there is something that this world can never offer..."**

Thank you for your love, your deep love and continued involvement in our families lives. The 24 hour prayer for our family—unbelievable and what a gift to our hearts and souls. The cards, the emails, the prayers, the donations for Matt’s memorial, the calls, the flowers, the meals, and the list does not end. Truly you are Jesus to us.

Those of you who were able to attend one of Carrie’s memorial services noticed that the family and many others didn’t dress in the customary dark colors. I had never dressed as casual or colorful for a funeral service as I did for Carrie’s.

But then it wasn’t just a “funeral” service but rather a memorial celebration of a rich life that was lived with faith, hope and anticipation up to Carrie’s last breath. My beloved Carrie was resplendently clear she wanted the service to be a memorial celebration. She wanted people to wear bright & happy colors to reflect the joy of a good God and a good life and to celebrate God’s goodness through praise and worship. With our family of faith at Fellowship Bible Church that’s exactly what it was.

Gary's Memorial Message: Many people have asked me to put in writing what I said at the memorial service so here it is.

After being single for many years, when I told my California friends that I was finally engaged they wanted to know about this woman who had captured my heart. In all honesty I talked about her love for the Lord, her love for people, how smart she was (she graduated from UNL in 3½ years with a double major and a 3.97 GPA), her great personality and that she was also athletic and attractive.

When they saw Carrie’s picture they said, “Right Oliver, you were attracted to her because of her love for the Lord and her great personality...uh huh.” But those of you who knew Carrie know what I’m talking about...she was a pretty face and a whole lot more.

With her brains and beauty and amazing discipline Carrie could have had the pick of the litter, she could have done anything with life. She could have married someone who could have given her a lot more me but somehow, in an obviously weak moment, she said yes to me.

Carrie loved the Lord.

Carrie wanted to serve her Lord, she wanted her life to make a difference.

Carrie loved being a wife.

Carrie loved being a mother to her 3 sons and she loved her precious Amy.

Carrie loved her Mom & Dad & sisters & their families.

Carrie loved her friends and she was unbelievably loyal.

Carrie loved what God had called us to do at The Center for Healthy Relationships and our amazing CHR family.

Carrie loved being a part of John Brown University, she loved teaching students and she so loved being a part of Fellowship Bible Church.

Carrie loved people, she was passionate about relationships.

Carrie wanted to make a difference in people's lives, in marriages and in families.

Two years ago Carrie began a heroic battle with metastatic pancreatic cancer. With the heart of a lioness she faced a prognosis of 3-6 months to live with an unbelievable tenacity and a sovereign joy. Few know how painful, discouraging and difficult these last 6 months were for her and yet how she faced them with faith, grace, class, courage and firm hope.

Carrie and I didn't understand why I had all of my cancers, why she was allowed to have cancer...why Matt was allowed to die...

But Carrie was clear that the purpose of our life as a couple and her life as an individual was to somehow manifest the difference that Jesus can make in a life and marriage and family, to somehow demonstrate that circumstances don't determine ultimate reality (even when those circumstances include a deadly diagnosis) and to somehow show that God is not just a promise maker but also a promise keeper.

Carrie decided that her diagnosis didn't change the goodness, grace and mercy of her Lord and didn't change her ability to choose to live however many days she had to the fullest in loving, being loved and serving...in being faithful...

In the last two years of her life Carrie co-authored two books. She wrote *Grown-up Girlfriends* with Erin Smalley and we had just finished *Mad About Us: Moving From Anger to Intimacy with your Spouse* which will be published by Bethany House and come out this fall. She counseled, consulted, spoke, taught, mentored and thrived on encouraging others with her love for the Lord.

Carrie's death is a great loss, but it is far from a tragedy. From the very beginning Carrie knew that God could heal her one of two ways...either through taking away the cancer or by taking her to Heaven. We were never in denial about the reality of her disease and the fact of a 5-year survival rate of 4%. We had many conversations about the "what ifs" and the quality of life issues, but those conversations were always in the light of the reality of a good, loving and gracious God.

In fact, the morning of the day Carrie went to be with the Lord we laid in bed, talked and prayed together before I put her in the wheelchair for the trip out to the couch in the living room which had become her bed during the day. She knew she was getting very

weak but was clear that she was far from giving up. As I held her hand she said, “Honey, as long as I have breath, as long as I can choose and as long as we’re side-by-side our lives are going to count for Jesus and if it’s my time to go God will have to come and get me“ and that’s exactly what happened. Just a few hours after that conversation with an incredibly weak body but a still powerful and strong spirit Carrie went from her home in our living room to her home with her heavenly Father “in the twinkling of an eye.” She literally went from the hands of her family in her earthly home into the arms of her Father in her heavenly home.

Within minutes of Carrie joining her heavenly Father, I was reminded of Job 1:21, “Naked I came from my mother’s womb and naked I will depart. The Lord gives and the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.” By God’s grace that’s where we are still at.

In the past two weeks I’ve had a number of people say, “How can you be so strong?” Well, the reality is that I’m not. We’re not. What may look like strength is nothing more than a painful acknowledgement of our fragility, weakness and inadequacy and our choosing to continue to turn to the source of Carrie’s strength and our strength—our Lord Jesus Christ.

Some might say that God didn’t answer our prayers, but that’s not true. God didn’t heal Carrie by removing her cancer but God did give Carrie 18 precious months more than her original prognosis. He did allow her last two years to be characterized by warm family times, deeper and richer relationships, a highly impactful ministry and He did “heal” her by taking her to her heavenly home.

The past two months have been the two most tumultuous months in my life and the life of our family. Many friends sent gifts for the memorial funds for Matt. Carrie and I wanted to send a personal note of thanks to each person or ministry who had made a contribution to Matt’s fund, but I know it’s possible that in the avalanche of cards and notes and messages we may have missed someone and if that someone is you please do forgive us and accept this note as our sincere gratitude for encouraging us and honoring the life of our son Matt.

Finally, on behalf of all of us we want to express our deep gratitude and profound thanks to dear Catherine who has made the ministry of this web site possible and for the extra work involved in making the videos available and to Marsha and Debbie at Fellowship Bible Church for all of the time they spent putting the pictures together for Carrie’s video. It was a precious and a healing gift to our family.

Praises:

- A life well lived
- A longer life than had been predicted
- All who prayed for Carrie
- All who phoned into the prayer pager
- All who came to the memorial services
- Caring, praying, supporting and encouraging friends

Prayer Requests:

- Strength, courage, perspective and discernment
- That God might help us redefine who we are as a family
- That God might be glorified in all that we say and do

September 2007**On Healing and Lament**

Today is September 2nd and its been two months since my beloved Carrie entered into the presence of the Lord she loved, lived for and served for most of her life. As I woke up the morning of July 2nd and reached over to touch Carrie I had no idea that would be the last morning I'd ever be able to wake up, reach over and touch my wife again. As we laid in bed and chatted and prayed together I had no idea that would be the last of thousands of mornings we had started the day together by talking and praying together. As I helped her get ready to go from our bedroom to lay on the couch in the living room I had no idea that in some ways I was preparing her to leave what had been her earthly home for the past ten years to enter the home that her Heavenly Father had been preparing for her from before the foundation of the world. A moment of unspeakable pain for our family was the beginning of unspeakable and indescribable joy for Carrie as she joined our beloved Matty.

While it's only been two months that Carrie has been gone from us it seems like it's been a lifetime. A lot has happened since my last update and it some ways it still seems like a blur. Over the weekend of August 4th, the day of what would have been Matt and Amanda's wedding, our friends at Kanakuk invited us to spend a few days on the lake and let us use a boat for water skiing and tubing. That kind gift allowed us to have our

first brief escape from the 24/7 reminders of Matty and Carrie and enjoy a bit of refreshment.

On August 11- 19 we had an amazing opportunity to spend some time in Hawaii. A thoughtful friend surprised us with four tickets so we were able to go to Maui for an unexpected time of healing and a bit of recovery. I didn't realize how exhausted and weary we all were but I did know that one of our most important tasks was to begin to put the pieces of our splintered family together and redefine "family" without the physical presence of Carrie and Matt. We needed to begin to write some new memories and God allowed us to do just that.

We had a wonderful time in Hawaii. Given the fact of some very happy memories of our family vacation there many years ago as well of precious memories of several times just Carrie and I were there together it was both painful and joyful. We were reminded of happier times when our family was complete and reminded of God's grace and goodness in giving us this new time. We were able to establish some new memories as we begin to forge a new family identity with precious memories of a wife and mom and son and brother who will always be a part of our lives but who are no longer with us. We drove to Hana, snorkeled in Honolua bay, went scuba diving, took a helicopter ride, played some tennis, collected "sea glass" for Amy and spent a lot of time on the beach throwing the Frisbee and just enjoying being together.

On several mornings while the kids slept in I went to Ulua beach where Carrie and I used to go, sat where we used to sit, walked up to the patio at the Marriott and sat in one of the rocking chairs, listened to the birds, smelled the ocean, enjoyed the palm trees, read the Bible and quoted verses I had memorized, wept, laughed and thanked God over and over and over again for precious memories that time may dim but can never erase, and for a profound sense of His presence in my aloneness and with our family.

We came back to Andrew starting his senior year of high school, Nathan starting his new job at CHR, Amy starting a part-time job at Ozark Guidance and developing her private practice and me jumping into a very full plate at JBU. It's such a great gift to have Andrew and Nathan and Amy together for this critical first year. In future updates I'll talk more about the kids and they have some things they'd like to share.

I'm grateful for those who continue to call and write and ask how we're doing. When I'm asked that question I try to be honest and will usually reply with "adequate" or "okay" which, given what we've been through, means we have a lot to be thankful for. There is no easy way through this valley. I still find myself weeping several times a day. We "see" Matt and Carrie many times a day and they are never very far away—and yet we will never see them again until we join them in heaven. That's our new reality.

It's interesting how after you lose a loved one you in some ways get to know them in ways you didn't know them while they were still here. The cards and letters and emails have helped me see Carrie through a new set of eyes. The boys have discovered aspects of their mom they weren't aware of. I didn't realize (nor did she) of how God was using Carrie in these last two years and the lives she had impacted. While at times we were trying to just survive God was at work doing what He does so well.

Thank you, thank you, thank you for the ongoing expressions of love and concern. In some ways I feel like we're still treading water and am so far behind. Before leaving for Hawaii we were able to finish all of the thank-you notes for Matt and we're only half-way through opening the cards for Carrie. If you sent something for Carrie's memorial please know of our gratitude and know that we will respond. I am reading every single card and am grateful for each one. Thanks to those who have posted on Carrie's website notes of what Carrie meant to you or some of the ways God used Carrie to encourage you in your walk with the Lord. This isn't about glorifying Carrie (she wouldn't like that) but IS about how God can take an ordinary person who is sold out for Him and do amazing things through that life. As God brings things to your mind please send a personal note via this website. That is an encouragement to our family and a ministry to those who still come to this website searching for some hope.

Thanks for what you've taught us about love and support and encouragement. The Psalms of lament have meant a lot more to me these past months. In *A Sacred Sorrow*, musician and author Michael Card has given me some refreshing perspectives on dealing with grief and loss. He writes that,

"His [Jesus] life reveals that those who are truly intimate with the Father know they can pour out any hurt, disappointment, temptation, or even anger with which they struggle. Jesus' own life is an invitation to enter through the door of lament. One warning: After we pass through that door, nothing can ever remain the same...Lament and despair are polar opposites. Lament is the deepest, most costly demonstration of belief in God. Despair is the ultimate manifestation of the total denial that He exists...Our failure to lament also cuts us off from each other. If you and I are to know one another in a deep way, we must not only share our hurts, anger, and disappointments with each other (which we often do), we must also lament them together before the God who hears and is moved by our tears. Only then does our sharing become truly redemptive in character. The degree to which I am willing to enter into the suffering of another person reveals the level of my commitment and love for them. If I am not interested in your hurts, I am not really interested in you . . . Your true friends will be willing to sit with you in silence not for a week, but for as long as it takes. Your real friends will encourage you to keep talking to, crying out to, and arguing with God."

I now better understand why in the past I've seen so many people pull away from friends and family who'd lost a spouse or a child. The thought that "I" could lose a spouse or a child, that it could actually happen to me is unbearable. Then there is the whole thing of "What do I say?" Thanks to those of you who haven't pulled away, who haven't been silent, who have reminded us that we're not alone and who continue to share wonderful stories of Carrie and Matt that bring smiles to our faces.

I've had some people ask if my view of prayer has changed since I've lost a son and a wife in less than two months. The reality is that I believe in prayer and God's power to heal more than ever. I understand God far less than I thought I did but I love Him far more and am more convinced than ever of His faithfulness, goodness, mercy and grace.

What Carrie experienced and understood about God's faithfulness, goodness, mercy and grace so overwhelmed what she didn't understand that she was able to stare into the face of the impossible and the unbelievable with a strength and a confidence and a faith like I have never seen. She showed us how to live and how to die as a person of faith. One person wrote that it was evident "Carrie ran this race not just to survive but to be 'more than a conqueror!'" That's how she lived and that's how she died.

Thanks for reading this, thanks for caring and thanks for your prayers. I'll continue to post updates at least once a month as long as it seems like someone is reading them and my next update will include something from one of the kids. Please do continue to pray for us.

Praises:

- The love and encouragement of friends
- A time of refreshment and healing in Maui
- A great start to the new school year for Andrew
- Great jobs for Nathan and Amy
- Friends who continue to reach out

Prayer Requests:

- Strength to make it through each day
- A divine perspective
- That God might be glorified in all that we do
- The ability to grieve well and rejoice well

October 2007

Shadows in the Light

As I write this update it is October 2nd, the three month anniversary of Carrie's home going, and I'm sitting on a plane on my way home from a five-day visit to Southern California. The first three days were spent with my good friend [Norm Wright](#) whose beloved wife Joyce went to be with the Lord on September 15. My last conversation with Joyce was the day before she went into a coma and after praying together on the phone she said, "I've always appreciated that you pray with me." Joyce was a prayer warrior. I have close to 30 years of memories with Norm and Joyce and some of my most precious memories of Joyce were her tender heart, sweet voice, peaceful spirit and her love for the Lord. Norm and I laughed, cried, flew kites, shot his bow and arrow (I hit the target twice), fished (27 bass and 8 Bluegill), walked, talked, prayed and were silent—it's good to have friends.

On my drive from the airport in Burbank up to Bakersfield I drove on a stretch of highway nicknamed the "Grapevine" and I was reminded that over 30 years ago, when I was riding in a friend's car on that same highway going to a Campus Life leaders retreat at Hume Lake, we were run off the road into oncoming traffic coming down the mountains and our car came to rest with the front end of the car lodged underneath a semi-trailer. Somehow we walked away without a scratch. I was reminded how I could have (and from what the CHP officer said should have) died in that crash but it obviously wasn't God's time. I was reminded of the sovereignty of God and a quote that Dale Schlafer shared with me after Matty's death: "The LORD may not have planned that this should overtake me, but HE has certainly permitted it. Therefore, though it were an attack of an enemy, by the time it reaches me it has the Lord's permission, therefore all is well. He has promised to make it work together with all of life's experiences for good."

On Sunday, Andrew and his friend Christian flew into town and on Monday we visited Azusa Pacific University then enjoyed a refreshing afternoon with our friends Mike and Sharon May, Catherine Webber and Dave and Jan Stoop. On Monday morning we visited Biola University. Going back to Biola brought back fond memories of my own years at both Biola and Talbot as well as family times taking Nathan there and especially our last family time there attending Nathan's graduation. I "saw" both Carrie and Matt numerous times and shed both tears and smiles. God has been helping me turn my grief into gratitude and I had many opportunities to do just that.

Since my last update I celebrated my birthday by taking Nathan and Andrew to New York where we had some amazing father/son time that included going to a New York Yankees game, seeing "Les Miserables," visiting the Museum of Modern Art (that was Andrew's idea and we loved it so much we spent about three hours there), Times Square,

Coney Island (the original Nathan's Hot Dog stand was a big hit), Ground Zero, Wall Street, the Empire State Building and of course Central Park and we discovered the amazing Neptune Diner, a famous 24-hour diner at our subway stop in Queens. It was a wonderful blessing.

I continue to be asked how all of us are doing and I'm grateful that people continue to care, to pray and to ask. The most honest answer is that, all things considered, we're doing okay. The memories and reminders are constant and with the pain of the losses come the gratitude of what we did have and what we were able to share.

Andrew is having a great time utilizing his significant creative skills as yearbook editor, working at Quiznos and is starting to get excited about where he will be going after graduation. Nathan is doing great in his new job developing premarital preparation and marriage enrichment curriculum including training manuals and leaders notes. He is also being trained to train leaders for both programs. Amy's private practice continues to grow and she is also working part-time at a local mental health center. Recently she did an exceptional job speaking with Erin Smalley to over 300 women at the AACC World Conference on the topic of Erin and Carrie's book, *Grown-Up Girlfriends* which, by the way, is now in its second printing.

As for me, at times I feel like a small cork floating on the surface of a big ocean in the middle of a powerful storm. I look into the mirror and recognize my face but the massive hole in my heart remains, the heartache is relentless and my physical and emotional stamina has the ups and downs of a roller coaster. I'm still so close to the losses (October 2nd marked only 3 months since Carrie's home going) and the emotional and psychological ambushes are still so powerful and frequent and, from what I know about helping others deal with grief and loss, will be for a while. I'm so grateful for Andrew, Nathan and Amy, and faithful friends who let us know that they haven't forgotten and continue to be concerned and to pray.

We are slowly going through Matt's stuff (he was a collector and a saver of any and everything) and we only have the emotional energy to do so much at a time. I still receive emails from people who were touched by his smile, his love for people and his love for life. It's hard to reconcile his bright green eyes, his smiling face, his amazing sense of humor with his struggles with discouragement and depression and, whether by intention or by accident, the fact of his death by a self-inflicted gunshot wound. We love Matt deeply, miss him enormously and thank God for every single one of his 23 years with us.

I'm learning in ways I've never fully understood before that one can only swim upstream or tread water for so long and at times it feels like sooner or later I am going to drown. The years of diagnosis, surgeries, setbacks, chemo treatments, medication adjustments,

negotiations with medical and health insurance providers, bad news, good news, and battles for survival and massive losses have seemed relentless.

It feels like a constant series of body blows and by God's grace there has always been the desire if not the strength to get back up one more time, to keep on keeping on, to keep moving from grief to gratitude, to choose to believe that somehow God is still at work and then see Him without exception be faithful to His promises such as those in Isaiah 43: 1-3: "But now, O Israel, the Lord who created you says: 'Do not be afraid, for I have ransomed you I have called you by name; you are mine. When you go through deep waters and great trouble, I will be with you. When you go through rivers of difficulty, you will not drown!

When you walk through the fire of oppression, you will not be burned up; the flames will not consume you. For I am the Lord, your God.'"

A friend recently sent me a poem that you might find helpful in your own journey.

Shadows in the Light

The sunlight streams through my window.

It warms my skin but also brings comfort to my spirit.

It is never changing, always there.

At night the moon reminds me that the light has not gone
it will return in time, I must be patient.

As the moon comes and goes through the sky,

So does my life go on.

That life is never changing.

It continues through time.

I have had joy as bright as the sun.

I have had sorrow as dark as the new moon.

Yet the cycle continues.

At times in the dark of night.

When the moon is not in the sky.

I look into the flame of a candle.

In its light I see hope.

They are with me still those shadows of the past.
I hear their laughter, I see their smiles,
But I long for the comfort of their embrace.
As the cycle of sun and moon continues.
So does my life, it continues.
I am not ready to join the shadows yet.
The sunlight streams through my window.
I lie in its warmth and dream of them.
Even in the light their shadows are around me.
I think of where my life is now.
The changes that have been wrought in me.
I still hear their laughter,
Still see their smiles,
And I know they are near me.
(from Love Lost: Love Found by Robert Lavery)

Praises:

- Thanks for the wonderful birthday cards, gifts, emails and phone calls.
- Thanks for the donations that continue to come in for Carrie's memorial funds at John Brown University and Fellowship Bible Church. Our family will be sitting down soon to prayerfully consider how to best "invest" these gifts in ways that will honor the life and legacy of Carrie for many years to come.
- Thanks to those who continue to bring meals and offer help.
- Thanks to God for our wonderful team at The Center for Healthy Relationships and at John Brown University. Our JBU family continues to provide love, support, concern and encouragement.
- Thanks for the prayers, emails and phone calls.
- Thanks for those who continue to leave messages of encouragement on this website.

Prayer Requests:

- Pray that God will give us strength, wisdom and a special sense of His presence as we move into what will be a series of “firsts” without our beloved Carrie and Matt.
- November 7th will be Andrew’s 18th birthday
- December 27th would have been our 27th wedding anniversary
- Pray for strength as we continue to slowly sort through Matt and Carrie's books and letters and pictures and clothes.
- Pray that God helps us grieve and mourn and lament the loss of Carrie and Matt while at the same time redefining who we are as individuals and as a family and living these next chapters of our lives in ways that glorify the Lord and are a living legacy to them.

November 2007

Mad about Us

I have to start by saying, once again, thank-you, thank-you and thank-you to all of our friends who continue to think of us, pray for us and send us reminders that we’ve not been forgotten. Dealing with the death of a son/brother and a wife/mother within two months is something that is inconceivable and at times feels unbearable. I’ve been told by “experts” in dealing with grief and loss that the most difficult time is often after the third month and we’ve found this to be true. I cannot even imagine trying to walk this pathway without the love and prayers and support of family and friends. Thank you!

Great News for the Oliver Family: This is the four-month anniversary of Carrie’s home going and it’s been an amazing day. Around noon I walked into Nathan’s office which is down the hall from my office at JBU. Amy was in the office with him and they both had big smiles on their faces. “Do you want to see the first pictures of your *grandbaby*?” they asked with pure delight. That’s right dear friends, our precious Amy is pregnant and the first Oliver grandchild is expected to arrive around May 22. They had just returned from a visit to the doctor’s office and had the very first pictures of the exceptionally good looking baby. Although he/she is only eleven weeks old you can already tell this will be a bright, sensitive and good looking child who will love Jesus with all their heart. I laughed and I cried and we thanked God for his unique sense of timing that on this four-month anniversary of Carries death we were looking at God’s great gift of new life.

Andrew is especially excited about being an uncle. In fact, I first head this “good news of great joy” when Nathan, Amy and Andrew walked into my office with an early birthday card that said “Happy Birthday Grandpa.” As I opened the card the word “Grandpa” finally reached my frontal lobes, I looked up and all three were beaming. Of course I

started crying (I'm really getting pretty good at that—practice makes perfect) and hugged all of them saying “I'm really happy. I'm really happy.” Andrew will make an amazing uncle.

Minutes after Carrie died I spoke over her a passage in Job 1:21 that God brought to my mind: “Naked I came from my mother's womb and naked I will depart. The Lord gives and the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.” As I looked at these pictures and saw the smiles on my kids' faces (and visualized the smile I knew was on my precious Carrie's face) I thought of that verse and that while sometimes the Lord takes away the Lord also gives and, when you step back and take a look at things, he gives a whole lot more than he allows the evil one to take away. He is indeed a good and gracious God.

At the same time, I must say that it's much easier to bless his name during the times of giving. This event was especially meaningful since a few days ago as I was reading through Carrie's bible I came across Psalm 20:4, “May he grant your heart's desire and fulfill all your plans” and next to that verse Carrie had written “being a grandparent.” I'm sad my grandkids will never know their grandma Carrie, see her face, her bright green eyes and her smile, feel her touch, enjoy her smell, hear her voice and her unique laugh but I'm glad that they will know about her legacy through our family, through our friends, through her speaking and writing and will know that up to her last breath Jesus was Lord of her life.

Mad About Us: Moving from Anger to Intimacy with Your Spouse: Early this month I received the first copies of the book the Carrie and I had been working on for over six months, and spent 26 years researching. This is a book that due to Carrie's illness almost didn't get written but she was tenacious about the importance of the message of the book and finished her last chapter about a week before she died. I still remember the pleased look on her face as she announced that she had finished her last chapter.

Mad About Us is a book about intimacy. I know, it sounds like a book about anger. We talk about anger but the bottom-line theme of the book is how to cultivate a deep, rich, rewarding and intimate marriage. Every couple gets married with the dream of having a rich, rewarding, mutually satisfying and intimate marriage but there are few who ever really experience it—and in this book we deal with the reasons why most couples quickly move from “mad about each other” to just being “mad at each other” and a proven pathway to an intimate marriage where we are truly madly in love and *Mad About Us!*

Mad About Us is published by Bethany House. Given it is the most personal book I've ever co-written and that it was the last book my beloved wife Carrie will write with me...it is a very special book. I hope you'll take a look at it, buy it, read it and recommend it to your friends. While we wrote the book together those of you who knew

Carrie will immediately recognize the chapter she primarily wrote. You'll recognize her distinct "voice" and warm way of communicating.

Norm Wright on Grief and Loss: On October 31st my good friend Norm Wright led an all-day workshop here for the NWA Healthy Marriages initiative that was sponsored by CHR (The Center for Healthy Relationships). Close to 200 people attended. If you read my update from last month you know that Norm's precious wife Joyce went to be with the Lord on September 15, just about 21/2 months after Carrie's home going. As with me, Norm's loss of his beloved bride is still very fresh in his heart and mind. We talk and pray and laugh and weep together several times a week. His sense of humor is as bad as mine so we are able to tolerate each other's attempts at humor. We've discovered that in our shared sadness, grief and mourning there is also joy and encouragement from the many reminders of God's grace and goodness we enjoyed through our shared lives with our beloved wives.

How could Norm lead an all-day worship on grief and loss so soon after the death of his wife? It wasn't easy to do but the answer is easy. It's because his God and my God (and I hope your God) is not just a promise maker but also a promise keeper. Because everything that Joyce and Carrie believed is true. Because heart-breaking circumstances don't determine ultimate reality. Because we haven't "lost" our wives—you've only lost something when you don't know where it is, and we know where Joyce and Carrie are. Because we know that someday we will once again be united with our wives and with our sons (both of whom were named Matthew).

Two Trees: Well, last week there were two lovely Sugar Maple trees planted in the quad at JBU (right in front of my office window) courtesy of my precious staff here at the Center. One tree is to honor Carrie and the other tree is to honor Matt. This week, both trees are flaunting their bright red fall colors and they are magnificent, especially when the sun hits them. Our wonderful JBU grounds crew will be planting some of Carrie's favorite colorful pansies around each tree.

Okay, why am I writing about two trees in this update? Well, perhaps you or someone you may know may have gone through a significant loss and you are wondering what you can do to honor that person. I hadn't thought of it but I've discovered that something living like a tree is a great idea. It's something that represents life and health and growth and it is something that will be a source of beauty that will be enjoyed for many years to come. Every time I look at the trees I'm reminded of my precious Carrie and Matt AND my thoughtful team here at CHR. I'm also reminded of the fact that there are seasons to life and that every winter, no matter how long and hard and dark and cold it might, is followed by a spring and a summer. The Olivers are looking forward to the spring and the summer and perhaps news of Nathan and Amy's baby, Andrew's nephew/niece and my first grandchild is just the first sign of spring.

Praises:

- For the blessing of Baby Oliver and the promise of new life.
- That our family can be together this first year after the loss of Carrie and Matt.
- That we are all still getting along and actually really enjoying each other.
- For the astonishing ongoing support of precious friends who haven't stopped writing, calling and praying.
- Thanks to Bethany House for believing in our message and publishing *Mad About Us*. They have been so wonderful to work with and consistently encouraging.
- That Nathan is enjoying his work at The Center for Healthy Relationships and according to his boss (Greg) is doing a great job.
- For an almost tangible sense of God's presence and for never giving us more than we can handle (although I think He's called it a bit closer than I'd like).
- For the people who continue to visit this web site and continue to be touched by Carrie's amazing story of grace and faith and hope.
- For the ability to laugh.

Prayer Requests:

- That Amy will get over her first trimester morning sickness and get back to her spunky self.
- That God will continue to prepare Nathan and Amy's hearts as new parents, for me and Andrew in our roles as an uncle and grandpa and for the wonderful Merrill family in West Palm Beach as they open their hearts and lives to a new grandchild.
- That God will give us the grace we need to navigate a lot of "firsts" in the months ahead: Andrew's first birthday, our first Thanksgiving, our first Christmas, our first wedding anniversary (December 27) and our first New Year's.
- That we move through the dense and at times dark forest of grief and loss in ways that honor the Lord and the legacy of Carrie and Matt.
- That we never forget to "in all things give thanks" as we have much for which to be thankful.

December 2007

Our "New Normal"

Carrie & Matt: “But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.’” (Luke 2:10-11)

Good news! Great joy! The “good news of great joy” from the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ provides the Oliver family with great comfort and even slivers of joy as we move into our first Christmas season living with the stark and often painful reality of the absence of a precious wife, mother, son and brother.

I never fully realized the degree to which special days, especially the Christmas season, are made possible by loving wives and mothers who often sacrificially expend great effort in making important times into special times. I never fully realized how much time and thought and effort and hard work Carrie put into making our home a warm, wonderful, safe, secure and happy place especially during the Christmas season. I’m glad for all of the times that I joined Carrie in decorating our home and now I wish I had been even more involved.

I thank God that the grief from the loss of Carrie and Matt is accompanied by gratitude for the gazillion precious memories of Christmases past, of celebrations with family and friends, of warm and happy celebrations. I never realized how many “little” things I would continue to miss or how I could be blindsided by emotions. I never knew that it could be painful watching other couples hold hands or exchange that special glance with each other. I have joy for them and at the same time an ache and longing that doesn’t magically disappear and from what many who have walked this road before me say won’t disappear for a while. That’s okay.

I’ve also discovered something new for me to celebrate. I’ve realized that this will be Carrie and Matt’s first Christmas in heaven, in the presence of the little babe born in a manger who grew to become the man who would die and rise again so that me and Andrew and Nathan and Amy and all who receive him as Savior and Lord could have the blessed hope of an eternity in heaven and of one day being reunited with those we love. Wow! That’s an amazing thought.

Since last month's letter we spent what turned out to be a wonderful Thanksgiving at Carrie’s parents' home in Grand Island, Nebraska. Our dear friends Chip and Cheryl and their family were visiting Cheryl’s family in Grand Island so we had some great time with them. We even went bowling together and if you are having a hard time finding something to smile and laugh about just go bowling with some friends who haven’t been

bowling in a long time and don't take themselves too seriously. Our family has laughed that hard in a long time.

It was good to be with Carrie's family and begin some new traditions. In addition to losing Carrie and Matt, Carrie's sister Chris's husband died earlier this year so our extended family celebrated this Thanksgiving without three beloved family members who were with us last year. We are all having to discover a new normal. Carrie was such an integral part of organizing these special family events and everyone was so aware of her absence. Matt's huge smile, his love for life and infectious sense of humor can never be replaced and the memory of that precious big boy will never be dimmed.

We also visited the cemetery in Wood River and saw for the first time the black granite headstone with the name Oliver on it. It's a rather remarkable experience to look at a headstone and see the names of your wife and your son, their dates of birth and the day they died and then to see your own name with only the date of birth. It's a painful yet powerful reminder of how short this life really is and of how valuable every day and every relationship is. I went out there once or twice each day we were there to think, to pray, to weep, to rejoice and to praise the Lord for his mercy, goodness and grace.

Family Update: On November 7th we celebrated Andrew's 18th birthday, a significant milestone. Thanks to all of you who called and emailed Andrew to let him know you were thinking and praying for him. That meant a lot and was a concrete reminder to him that people haven't forgotten and that we aren't alone. I had prayed long and hard for this first birthday without a mom and brother and God answered our prayers. My dear sister Marsha joined us in preparing a special meal that Andrew had requested and it turned out to be a good day. Marsha is an amazing cook so whenever she fixes something it is always good. Andrew is studying for his ACT examinations, applying to four colleges and it looks like we have one or two more campus visits to make. I'm so very proud of Andrew and, all things considered, he is doing well. He has a wonderful future ahead of him.

Nathan and Amy continue to do well. Amy made it through her first trimester and it wasn't a fun time for her but she is doing much better and the baby seems to be doing well. We don't know if it's going to be a boy or a girl but we know it is going to be precious child conceived in love, made in the image of God who will be much loved, cared for a prayed for by family and friends. Nathan continues to do great at his job at CHR and has been put in charge developing the Marriage Champions program for our grant project. Amy is enjoying her school counseling and her growing private practice.

As for me, it's been five months since Carrie died and I feel like I'm still digging out and catching up. God is so good in allowing me to be a part of The Center for Relationship Enrichment at JBU, to work with some incredible men and women and to be able to be a

small part of strengthening marriage's and families in our community and across the nation, to be able to speak, teach, preach, consult, write articles and books all designed to help others in their relationships. Relational wealth is a precious commodity that even a MasterCard can't buy and I thank God for it.

Thanks for all of you who ask how I'm doing. Thanks for those to write to say you don't know what to say except that you are thinking of us and praying for us. Thanks for your calls, notes, emails, for just being present, for not trying to fix me, for your continued offers of help, for accepting me where I'm at in my journey and for not making me feel like I'm weirder than I really am.

It's impossible to describe the ups and downs, highs and lows of the past months. The wife of my dear friend Norm Wright died this past September and we talk several times a week. He recently wrote, "It's a process of relearning my world in every way. It's learning to live "without" as well as live with the array of uncontrolled emotions, which can be set off by the most surprising thing or by nothing at all. But I know this is normal and will continue for months and years. I vacillate between a deep longing and gratitude for all the years and experiences we were blessed to have together."

That expresses well this chapter of my life, especially the way I can be blindsided by an emotional tsunami for no rational reason at all. It's like being on an emotional roller coaster going from a high of genuine joy and gratitude for a great love to a low of piercing psychological and emotional pain and an actual physical ache that comes from being at the bottom of a huge cavern of emptiness. The good news is that I always bounce back up and that the ultimate reality continues to be that it only hurts so much because it was so good...and not everybody who grieves can say that and I thank God for that.

Mad About Us: I'm encouraged that our book on enjoying a more intimate marriage, *Mad About Us*, is doing well. I've heard from several who are using the discussion guide in the back as the basis for their small group meetings. I'm hearing from couples who bought the book for help in dealing with their conflicts and anger and discovered that the book is really about having a more safe, secure, trusting and intimate marriage. *Mad About Us* was so very important to Carrie as she and I put into it a lot of the tough lessons we had learned in over 26 years of our own marriage and of doing marriage counseling. Those lessons allowed our marriage to be strong enough to not only survive the last three difficult and painful years but actually to continue to grow in the midst of it. Thanks to those of you who have purchased and read it and are recommending it to others.

Christmas: Speaking of Christmas, if you don't get a Christmas card from the Olivers please don't feel bad since virtually no one else will be getting one either. If you do get a card from the Olivers you probably know somebody else name Oliver. Please consider

this your “virtual” card. Please know that you are loved, valued, appreciated and thought of. I hope that next year I’ll be in a place to send cards...we’ll see.

Christmas can be a time of great joy but it can also be a very painful and lonely time for those who have lost a loved one or are in the midst of a difficult season of life. If you are one of the many who read this who didn’t know Carrie or any of our family and have a loved one who is going through a difficult season and/or diagnosis or if you are the one in a middle difficult, painful and confusing time I want to encourage you this Christmas to join me in counting your blessings not the least of which is the hope that we have in Christ. About a year ago my precious Carrie wrote the following words:

“We were created for hope. Our bones were bred for hope. Our lungs can't breathe, our hearts won't beat and our spirits can't thrive without it. God placed us in a world over which we have little control. And as if to compensate for this helplessness, He placed in our souls the capacity to hope-to hope for better times, to dream of better places, to pray for better outcomes, to seek better ways through life. Hope is more than optimism. Optimism is what we generate. Hope is God given, a powerful, spiritual and psychological means for transcending the circumstances.

Hebrews 6:19 tells us that Christian Hope is a "sure and steadfast anchor for the soul." But this hoping come only as a gift of grace and is powerfully linked to the promises of God. In fact, they are inseparable. Because you believe God's promises you can hope in the future. Without this future, there is nothing to hope in. There is only fear and fear that leads us to a very dark place.”

The fact that Carrie is now with our Lord actually makes those words *more true* rather than less. Carrie didn’t allow the harsh reality of her cancer to determine her ultimate reality. She knew that God would heal her one way or another and that either way she would be a winner. She knew her reality was determined by what Christ did on the cross and by her decision to accept him as her Savior and Lord. This website and what I continue to write are living proof of the reality of that faith and my prayer for you is that this Christmas you will experience and enjoy the reality of the risen Christ in your own marriage and family.

Thanks and Praise:

- Andrew’s 18th birthday celebration
- A wonderful Thanksgiving with family
- Our CRE team and JBU family
- Precious and faithful friends
- The power of prayer

- The fact that God is a promise-maker and a promise-keeper
- A clear sense of God's presence in the midst of the storm

Prayer:

- Our ability to both celebrate and grieve in the difficult weeks ahead
- Nathan, Amy and our baby Oliver/Merrell
- Andrew's college decisions and his last semester of high school
- Amanda (Matt's fiancée) and the Crandall family

January 2008

A Year in Review

A New Year with New Hope and New Opportunities: Phew! I'm glad that 2007 is finally over. What a relief. At some points it felt like it would never end but by God's grace this is a new year with new hope and new opportunities to live a life that is grateful for the past, anticipating a rich future and seizing every opportunity to nourish, cherish, serve and encourage others in the present.

A Look Back At 2007: On one hand, 2007 was not even close to a good year. On the other hand, last year saw my son Matt and my beloved wife Carrie's entry into heaven. There were some good things in 2007 that I refuse to allow the pain of the losses to erase. I had four months with Matt and in those last four months we had some of our best, deepest and most loving conversations ever. That's one of many gifts I won't allow to be tarnished by his death. I had six months to walk with Carrie and help her fight for life. We spoke at several marriage enrichment conferences, wrote several articles for Marriage Partnership and HomeLife magazines, finished our new book *Mad About Us* published by Bethany Press and attended our nephew Steven's high school graduation in Omaha. She spent a wonderful week with her parents in Grand Island. She spend many hours talking to, corresponding with, praying for and enjoying time with some of her precious friends and family. There was a lot of love and joy that was shared.

Surviving and Celebrating the Holidays: This was the most interesting Christmas season I've ever had and by God's grace it turned out much better than it could have. Yes it was difficult. It was painful. It was surreal. It brought us face-to-face with the reality of our losses. There were several obviously empty seats in our home and at our celebrations. There were smiles we didn't see and laughter we didn't hear and hugs we couldn't give and didn't receive. But there were also memories of the lives that had occupied those seats and the knowledge that they were experiencing their first Christmas with the one

who started the whole thing and those memories brought a unique sweetness to the season.

Shortly after Thanksgiving we dove into the downstairs closet which holds most of our massive collection of Christmas decorations. Carrie was all about celebrating special days including birthdays and anniversaries but Christmas was the biggest and best of all. We knew it would never be the same but there were some traditions that we wanted to, well, that we really had to continue. There was no way we could decorate like Carrie did but Amy inspired us to give it our best shot. She kept us on track and as usual did an amazing job. It was nice to see some garland on the fireplace mantle and the stair railings, some wreaths, our collection of Santa's throughout the house and our Christmas plates. It was nice to hear the Christmas music softly playing in the background. It was nice to have the comfort of some "normal" in the midst of what was clearly abnormal.

For many years now we've rotated where we spend Christmas between our home, Carrie's folks in Grand Island and Carrie's sister Chris' home in Omaha. This was our year to be with Chris and her son Steve in Omaha. We decided to do the Webster celebration a few days after Christmas day so we could all be together. A week before Christmas Nathan and Amy drove up to Kansas City for a flight to West Palm Beach to spend Christmas with the Merrill family and would return the day after Christmas and then drive up to meet us in Omaha.

On Christmas Eve day Andrew and I took my sister Marsha for a wonderful dinner together. I knew beyond the shadow of a doubt that this first Christmas it would be way too hard for me to wake up in our home without Carrie and Matt so Andrew and I drove up to Kansas City to spend two nights before going up to meet everyone in Omaha. On Christmas Eve we went to a wonderful service at Colonial Presbyterian Church and then had a great dinner together at the Classic Cup restaurant on the Plaza.

On Christmas morning Andrew and I read the Christmas story and opened one present each and then went off to find a place to eat. On Christmas day that was much easier said than done. We finally found a Denny's restaurant in the industrial section of town next to the rail yards. We both laughed about the fact that this would probably be the first and last Christmas meal we would celebrate at a Denny's. We saw some folks there who probably hadn't had much of a Christmas, who probably didn't have much family, and were reminded of how much we had to be thankful for. Once again God was teaching me the importance of moving from grief to gratitude. Andrew and I love movies so later in the day we took in two, yes two movies. On the 26th we shopped a bit then drove up to Omaha and later that evening Nathan and Amy arrived safely from their flight from Florida and drive up from Kansas City.

I knew the next day would be an exceptionally difficult one and in some ways I had dreaded its arrival more than any other. Not only would December 27 have been our 27th wedding anniversary but some of our courtship and early years of marriage involved spending many happy times in Omaha. By God's grace the day went well. The weariness in my body and the ache in my heart told me that I'd need some alone time so as not to be a downer on everyone else. I was able to get away by myself for a while and drove to some of the places we had been to together. Precious memories of young love, laughter, passion and joy. I was able to face the emptiness and sadness and unload a couple gallons of tears as well as smile and laugh and praise God for his goodness, grace and mercy. The grief, the stark sense of loss and aloneness was more real than things I could see and touch but so was the opportunity for gratitude. As it turned out Steve was going to be an escort (Stag) at the debutante ball for the Omaha Symphony that night and we (me, Andrew, Nathan and Amy) had been invited to attend so that night we got in our tuxedos and joined Chris and Steve for a wonderful formal night of celebration. It turned out to be a happy anniversary celebration defined not by what I no longer had but by what God had allowed me to enjoy.

In the middle of the afternoon I happened to check my emails and discovered this one from a good friend:

"He said, 'Will you love me in 20 years as you love me now?' and she said, 'Oh yes, and even more if it's possible.'" Somehow, I could see the above dialogue happening b/w you and Carrie. But even better were her loving and gracious (and surprising!) words to you on that Saturday night church service several years ago. The ones played at her memorial. Those words are now forever etched in my memory. What a blessing it was to hear her words (and her voice) on the day of her memorial. I listened to her speech again today because today is your anniversary. Today, for you, it is "love-forever day." (here is where you picture me singing "I'm gonna love you, forever and ever, forever and ever, AMEN in my best Randy Travis voice:-)

My prayers are with you today. I pray that the Bridegroom fills your heart and mind with splendid memories of your "beautiful bride." I will not soon forget when I heard you call Carrie that a few years ago. Also, as you said so eloquently at Carrie's memorial service, your beloved and beautiful bride, in a weak moment, succumbed to your pressure to marry you. So here's a reminder that you "out-punted your coverage."

Today, I celebrate you, Carrie, your marriage, and all that God did (and continues to do) in, with, and through it!!!

It felt good that someone else had remembered our anniversary and for me to be reminded that life is not measured by what we have lost but by who and what and how we loved. That's still true. I've got to remember that.

On the 28th we had a wonderful time opening presents and doing the always rowdy ornament exchange (our family has a lot of fun together) then enjoyed an amazing Christmas dinner—much better than the one at Denny's. While there were several empty seats at our celebration there was still celebration. On the 29th we drove back home and on the 30th we celebrated the Oliver Christmas with Marsha where we opened the majority of our gifts and enjoyed a great meal together. We're redefining, we're in process and we're still a family.

People say holidays can be the hardest for those who have experienced major losses and I think they are right. However, by God's grace and some determination on our part we didn't just survive the holidays, we enjoyed them in a way I never thought possible. We celebrated the past, the lives of Matt and Carrie, and the wonderful gift of our Lord Jesus Christ that allows us to celebrate the fact that they are at home with their Lord and that we can look forward to the present with the knowledge that the God who was faithful then will continue to be faithful now in whatever days remain.

The Beat Goes On: As I look back on 2007 one of the many things I'm thankful is the power of prayer—the prayers of me and my family and the prayers of others for us. THANKS to those of you who continue to faithfully uphold our family in your prayers and who continue to send us little reminders of your support. You can't imagine how much that means to us. I better understand now why Jesus encouraged persistence in prayer. It's because he understood the power of enduring faith. I'm convinced that the most powerful commodity in the Christian life is a genuine faith that not only preserves but even grows stronger through the darkness and pain and refuses to relax its hold on God and refuses to doubt in the dark what you learned to trust in the light. "My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing." (James 1:2-4) Sometimes the process stinks but the product is always well worth it.

I appreciate it when friends continue to ask how we're doing. Since the events of May 5th and July 2nd we've been picking up a lot of pieces, making discoveries, packing up possessions and trying to decide what to keep and what not to keep and consistently trying to redefine the Oliver family. The grief is still there and at times it is almost overwhelming in its unanticipated intensity. I continue to be weary much of the time and experience a physical ache that transcends description and at the same time I look forward with eager anticipation to the adventures God has in store for us in 2008, especially the arrival of my little granddaughter—yes, it is going to be a girl. How wonderful! How unbelievable!

Nathan and Amy are doing well and Amy continues to feel better. One of the ways we can tell is that she is becoming more aggressive in the games that we play (Hearts,

Aggravation, Sequence, etc.) and she's winning more often. That's a sure sign of improvement. Andrew is excited to find out where he will be going to school in the fall. He's been accepted at all four schools he applied to and now we're waiting to see what the options for scholarships and other aid will be. It's amazing to ponder the fact that in just a few short months Andrew will be leaving home for the next big chapter in his life. It will be the best chapter yet!

When someone asks "How's it going?" we usually think about what's happened to us and if good things happen to have happened to us we say "Great!" but if bad things have happened to us we say "Not so good." Maybe a more helpful focus isn't on what's happened to us but how we've chosen to respond. I must admit that it would be weird to have someone ask "How are you responding?" but Carrie taught me in ways I'll never forget that it's our response to what happens to us that matters. Since Carrie received her diagnosis of metastatic pancreatic cancer there weren't a lot of great things that happened to her. In fact most of the news she received was bad news that would involve more treatments, more discomfort and much more pain. Yet the last two years of our life together were filled with goodness, grace, new friends, new opportunities and sovereign joy. I can't control how it goes but with God's help I can control how I choose to respond.

I've also realized that while the dealing (with the grief) and healing will continue this is a new year with new challenges and opportunities ahead. I've worked with so many people over the years who allowed what they had lost to define them and I refuse to let that happen. Our losses impact us, they affect us, they change us but they don't have to define us. How we deal with our losses can make us bitter or make us better.

Someone once said that a ship in the harbor is safe but that's not what ships were made for. In life we can choose to play it safe and stay in the comfort zone of what we've known or we can take some risks and move out of the harbor into the sometimes more dangerous but ultimately more rewarding waters of the "growth" zone. One thing I know for sure is that there's no comfort in the growth zone and no growth in the comfort zone. That may mean taking some risks. I hope that in 2008 you'll seize every opportunity to trust the Lord, deepen your prayer life, love like you've never loved before and take a few risks.

Thanks and Praise:

- The birth of our Lord Jesus Christ
- Many reasons to celebrate life
- A good Christmas season with family and friends
- A future and a hope

- Precious and faithful friends
- Our CRE team and JBU family
- The power of prayer
- A continuing sense of God's presence in the midst of the storm

Prayer:

- Nathan, Amy and our baby Oliver/Merrell
- Andrew's college decisions and his last semester of high school
- Our continuing journey in redefining ourselves and our family
- The courage to take some risks
- Strength to make it through each day
- A divine perspective
- The ability to grieve well and rejoice well
- That God might be glorified in all that we do

February 2008

A Grace Disguised

"If I give the impression I think myself heroic, perfect, or strong, then I give the wrong impression. My experience has only confirmed in my mind how hard it is to face loss and how long it takes to grow from it. But it has also reminded me how meaningful and wonderful life can be, even and especially in suffering...My suffering is as puzzling and horrible to me now as it was the day it happened...catastrophic loss leaves the landscape of one's life changed forever." (James Sittser)

Wow, he says that so very well. Especially the part about how long it takes to grow from it. It's amazing how some things get easier and some things get harder all at the same time. All in all, the Oliver family has so much to be thankful for and we continue to experience a very real sense of God's presence, goodness and grace in the midst of this unexpected and unwanted adventure. If you are reading this and you or someone you know is struggling with a life-threatening disease or if you have lost a loved-one and am having a hard time just keeping your head above water read on, I think you'll find some solid encouragement and hope.

One of the many joys of my life are the invitations I continue to receive to do marriage enrichment conferences, even as far ahead as 2010. I thank God for the continuing opportunities to be a part of strengthening marriages across the country and even in different parts of the world. Having enjoyed a great marriage for close to 27 years I know what the real deal looks like and that great marriages are possible. For some reason marriage enrichment has been a part of my DNA since the beginning of my ministry. My M.A. and Ph.D. research was on marriage enrichment when the movement was still in its infancy. During the late seventies my mentor and good friend Norm Wright gave me the opportunity to travel nationally leading conferences and training new generations of leaders in marriage enrichment programs. After Carrie and I were married I did conferences on my own until the kids got a bit older and Carrie felt confident enough to join me. Once she realized that not only did she have a gift for speaking but that she had God's favor as she spoke our marriage ministry went to a whole new level.

Many have commented that they learned as much from watching us interact with each other and how we looked at the each other while they were speaking as they did from our content. I always assumed that they also valued our content but there was something about seeing it in action that had an even greater impact...I hope that's what they meant. If you are married never forget how important the little loving glances or a gentle touch of the hand can be in communicating love, honor and affection to your beloved. In any event, I still enjoy doing marriage enrichment conferences and in some ways in light of my losses they are even more important and fulfilling than ever.

At the same time I'm so aware that I'm doing them alone. I'm aware of the places where Carrie would jump in and move into her sections or the times when she would unexpectedly jump in and share an important point I'd skipped over or a humorous anecdote that would even better illustrate what we were talking about. I was involved in providing marriage enrichment before I met Carrie and probably will continue to be for many years to come. But now it's very different. I guess the bottom line is that with what I've experienced my passion for healthy friendships, marriage and family relationships has never been stronger.

I was driving on my way back to the Austin airport after leading a marriage enrichment workshop for a wonderful group of young married students from Baylor when a song came on the radio. Have you ever heard a song where some of the lines seemed to capture and put into words what you were going through? Well, that's what happened to me.

“Oh what I would do to have the kind of faith it takes to climb out of this boat I'm in onto the crashing waves. To step out of my comfort zone into the realm of the unknown where Jesus is and He's holding out His hand.” I was trying to catch an earlier flight home and avoid some bad weather in Dallas so I wasn't able to pull over and write the words down but I remembered enough of the song to track it down. Come to find out it was from one of Carrie's favorite albums by Casting Crowns. I've included all of the words to the song at the end of this update. They are worth reading and the CD is worth buying.

These past months I've felt like I wasn't merely invited to step out of the boat but was rather rudely kicked out of the boat onto crashing waves that have come from many different directions. There is an unsettling disorientation and disequilibrium that comes from years of dealing with various crises and losses and then having a son and wife die within two months. Regardless of how strong your faith is or how amazing your support system is (and we've had an amazing group of friends who continue to support and encourage us) it forces you to go back to the basics . . .

I was recently rereading *A Grace Disguised* by James Sittser and came across the following words that so very well express much of what our family is experiencing:

If we face loss squarely and respond to it wisely, we will actually become healthier people, even as we draw closer to physical death. We will find our souls healed, as they can only be healed through suffering. (p. 18)

Still, I feel compelled to say at the outset, however inadequate my words, that what has happened to me has pressed me to the limit. I have come face-to-face with the darker side of life and with the weakness of my own human nature. As vulnerable as I feel most of the time, I can hardly call myself a conqueror. If I give the impression I think myself heroic, perfect, or strong, then I give the wrong impression. My experience has only confirmed in my mind how hard it is to face loss and how long it takes to grow from it. But it has also

reminded me how meaningful and wonderful life can be, even and especially in suffering...My suffering is as puzzling and horrible to me now as it was the day it happened. (p. 19)

Catastrophic loss wreaks destruction like a massive flood. It is unrelenting, unforgiving, and uncontrolled, brutally erosive to body, mind and spirit. Sometimes loss does its damage instantly, as if it were a flood resulting from a broken dam that releases a great torrent of water, sweeping away everything in its path. Sometimes loss does its damage gradually, as if it were a flood resulting from unceasing rain that causes rivers and lakes to swell until they spill over their banks, engulfing, saturating, and destroying whatever the water touches. In either case, catastrophic loss leaves the landscape of one's life changed forever. (p. 24)

Deep sorrow often has the effect of stripping life of pretense, vanity, and waste. It forces us to ask basic questions about what is most important in life. Suffering can lead to a simpler life, less cluttered with non-essentials. It is wonderfully clarifying. That is why many people who suffer sudden and severe loss often become different people. They spend more time with their children or spouses, express more affection and appreciation to their friends, show more concern for other wounded people, give more time to a worthy cause, or enjoy more of the ordinariness of life. (p. 74)

I'm very clear about the fact that I'm becoming a different person. I hope and pray that some of my pretense, vanity and pride are being stripped away and that I'm becoming more sensitive, tender, kind and compassionate, a bit more spontaneous and a lot more fun. I sure have seen our family pull together. In previous updates I've talked about the sense God give me of needing to help redefine not only myself but our family and that's exactly what has been happening. We're facing the ongoing realities of our losses and forging new memories and traditions that incorporate the impact of Carrie and Matt in a new future with new memories and new relationships.

Andrew continues to do well and has been accepted by every university he has applied to so far. We made a quick visit to Seattle Pacific University where we were also able to spend time with his cousin Steve. He'll be going to visit George Fox University this month and then will have all his visits completed and wait to hear about the scholarships each school will (hopefully) offer. He is enjoying all of the creative work involved in being yearbook editor and looking forward to another new chapter in his life.

Nathan and Amy are also doing great. We thank the Lord for the good check-ups Amy continues to receive from her doctor and it looks like little baby Oliver is doing well. She is kicking up a storm every now and they and they are beginning to think about all of the "stuff" that comes with having a new baby. Nathan has just finished writing both participant and leader curriculum under our Center's Healthy Marriage federal grant for

our pre-marital preparation and marriage enrichment programs. We will be training hundreds of “Marriage Champions” across Northwest Arkansas and Nathan is in charge of this program.

Thanks for visiting the site, thanks for reading and thanks for your continuing prayers. If you have any special memories of Carrie or thoughts you’d like to share with our family you can do via this website.

Thanks and Praise:

- A healthy pregnancy for Amy
- How well the kids are doing
- Precious friends who haven’t forgotten
- The power of prayer
- The ability to grieve and laugh
- Many reasons to celebrate life
- Our CRE team and JBU family

Prayer Requests

- Nathan, Amy and our Oliver/Merrell baby
- Andrew’s college decisions and his last semester of high school
- The courage to take some risks
- Our continuing journey in redefining ourselves and our family
- That God might be glorified in all that we do

Voice of Truth

Oh what I would do to have
The kind of faith it takes
To climb out of this boat
I'm in Onto the crashing waves
To step out of my comfort zone
Into the realm of the unknown where Jesus is
And He's holding out His hand

But the waves are calling out my name
And they laugh at me
Reminding me of all the times
I've tried before and failed
The waves they keep on telling me
Time and time again. 'Boy, you'll never win!'
'You'll never win!'

Chorus:

But the voice of truth tells me a different story
The voice of truth says, 'Do not be afraid!'
The voice of truth says, 'This is for My glory'
Out of all the voices calling out to me
I will choose to listen and believe the voice of truth
Oh what I would do to have
The kind of strength it takes to stand before a giant
With just a sling and a stone
Surrounded by the sound of a thousand warriors
Shaking in their armor
Wishing they'd have had the strength to stand
But the giant's calling out my name
And he laughs at me
Reminding me of all the times
I've tried before and failed
The giant keeps on telling me
Time and time again. 'Boy you'll never win!'
'You'll never win!'
But the stone was just the right size

To put the giant on the ground
And the waves they don't seem so high
From on top of them lookin' down
I will soar with the wings of eagles
When I stop and listen to the sound of Jesus
Singing over me
I will choose to listen and believe the voice of truth
Casting Crowns - Voice Of Truth From the album Casting Crowns

March 2008

Sovereign Joy

Wow. February was quite a month. It started with a wonderful dive trip with some precious friends, great family time, a painful yet rewarding birthday celebration and continued growth and progress along the pathway of this unanticipated, unwanted yet strangely rewarding adventure.

Scuba Diving in Belize: Shortly after Carrie's death I received a call from some good friends who said that at some point "down the road" they knew that I might need some relaxation and refreshment and could benefit from a scuba diving trip and they asked me to pick a place and they'd take me and one of their sons wherever I wanted to go. Well, in the beginning of February Gary, Norma, Greg and I went on a wonderful, relaxing and refreshing dive trip to a little (very little) island in Glover's Reef off the coast of Belize. What a gorgeous country and beautiful islands. It was calm, peaceful, refreshing and relaxing.

In addition to some wonderful diving and a lot of laughter and other attempts at humor I had some rich and enriching conversations with some long-time friends who have loved and prayed for my family and who wanted to know more about Carrie and Matt, what God was doing in the lives of me and our family and I was able to catch up on what God is doing in their lives. We talked about the adventures of growing older, the joys of walking with the Lord and the wonders of our Lord's goodness, mercy and grace.

Baby Shopping in Kansas City: Actually, we weren't baby shopping but shopping for baby stuff. For several years we've had this little retreat we've been able to go to on the Country Club Plaza in Kansas City and Nathan and Amy went up with me where we spent the most of a Saturday looking for baby stuff. It was a kick! I was amazed at how

much I enjoyed it. Yes, I was very aware of us being there without my beloved Carrie (she was so looking forward to being a grandmother) but we were also aware of her joy at our joy of being able to prepare for this little one to enter our lives. Amy is feeling so much better (and once again beating us at board games) and Nathan is really stepping into his role as a prospective daddy. They are going to be great parents and between me and Amy's mom and dad (Rick and Lynn) this little girl will have all the love she needs and more stuff than she can enjoy. I can't believe all of the cool things there are for a baby and for the first time I can shop for a baby girl. What a blessing! I'm starting to understand why some grandparents can become so obnoxious about their grandkids and mine isn't even here yet.

Valentine's Day: I wasn't sure what to expect on this very special day. This was the 1st time in 28 years I didn't get Carrie several Valentine's Day cards. Usually, I'd get her at least 3-4 and send some before and then always give her one or two the day of along with some flowers and both a serious and silly and/or borderline inappropriate gift. I still remember the very first Valentine's Day we shared together when we were seriously dating. In some ways it really does seem like it was yesterday. I made it through Valentine's Day feeling sad, aware of being alone with no "lover" to send cards to or surprise with flowers or hiding red licorice in her underwear drawer etc., no cards to open from my beloved wife, and at the same time with a very FULL heart and gratitude for having been loved and having been able to love in ways that most people never experience. In 27 years of marriage I never had any reason to wonder about her faithfulness or love for me nor did she have to worry about mine for her. I refuse to let my ache and sadness over what I've lost rob me of the enormous joy of what I had and through precious memories what I still have. On the night of the 14th Greg and I spoke for a CHR-sponsored Valentine's Day Banquet at the Embassy Suites in Rogers and over 250 couples attended. I've discovered that when you've loved well and been loved well and enjoyed a great marriage it's actually a joy to talk to others about the joys of a committed love in the context of a healthy marriage.

February 23rd--Matt's 24th Birthday: I knew that this would be a difficult day but was surprised that the emotional clouds began to gather early in the week. I became aware of a greater than usual weariness and lethargy and a pall of heaviness over me, not really a depression but a growing sense of sadness and immediately realized that it was probably because that at some level in my heart and mind I was aware that this would be another one of those firsts, my first February 23rd in many years that I wouldn't be able to hug and kiss and celebrate my son Matt's birthday and that Carrie wouldn't be here to celebrate this day with me. By God's grace Andrew, Nathan and Amy were here and we were able to remember and pray together. I watched the video we shared at Matt's celebration service, wept a lot, pulled out some of the cards he had sent me and wept some more, and then recalled some of the many very funny and even hysterical memories

of Matt's amazing sense of humor and found myself smiling and laughing and once again thanking God for what was and not just what was no longer. It's amazing how what we choose to focus on can have such a powerful effect on what and how we feel. As a psychologist I've know that for years but I'm experiencing in first-hand in a whole new way. Learning how to turn my grief into gratefulness and gratitude has been one of the greatest blessings God has given me.

Matt's Prayer: The day Matt died Nathan and I went over to his room just to feel and experience his presence among his things. We were still in shock but just being there and laying on his bed and touching his stuff and smelling his aroma was somehow comforting. When I went into his bathroom I found a prayer taped to his bathroom mirror. I could tell he had read it many times before he taped it to his mirror. It had been highlighted and certain things had been underlined several times. Here is that prayer and I've put the things that Matty highlighted in bold.

A Prayer of Commitment

Lord, I choose to give myself to You, whatever the cost may be. Take every aspect of my life and use me for Your Kingdom to glorify Your name.

I'm not here on earth to do my own thing, or seek my own fulfillment or my own glory.

I'm not here to indulge my desires, to increase my possessions, to impress people, to be popular, to prove I'm somebody important, or to promote myself.

I'm not here to be relevant or successful by human standards.

I'm here to please you.

The desire of my heart is to discover what it means to delight in you. I want to have my heart captivated and my mind entranced by the superlative beauty and incomparable sweetness of who You are. I understand that delighting in You alone will dislodge sin from my heart. So help me to learn more fully how to enjoy You, love You, worship You, serve You and be exuberant in my love for you.

I'll do anything you want me to do, go anywhere You want me to go and say anything that You want me to say.

Father, there isn't any gift that you have for me that I don't want. If you want to use me in any way that I'm not used to, I yield myself to that.

Today, I re-dedicate myself to you.

I love You, my God, and I choose to live and serve in Your way.

I trust You, Lord, to do that which I cannot do myself.

Teach me, guide me, and empower me and reveal yourself through me.

In Jesus' Name, Amen

Nathan on Matt: Shortly after Matt's death Nathan began to keep a journal about his brother, their relationship and the process of living life without his oldest and best friend. Here are some things that Nathan shared with me from his journal:

"Many months have passed since we sat in Matt's room together after he died. I still miss him desperately, and weep for his loss. Usually it is a song that brings the tears, or time spent going through his things. A part of my grief has been learning to accept that some things will never be answered or make sense. I learned that we must draw close to family and work hard to not be pulled apart by hurt. I can't just get over it and move on. That doesn't work. I have to feel it and experience it often and do my best to remember him well.

I have learned that grief is hard, slow, and you can only avoid it for so long before it hits you when you aren't expecting it. For some reason any time I want to have a good cry over Matt or think deeply about him, all I have to do is listen to "Fix You" or "The Scientist" by Coldplay. The music brings me into his world. It brings me back to that week, and it feels good to weep over him. I hope I always can.

For now, I treasure what he left behind. I watch old family videos and am reminded of what life made me forget these past years, the closeness of a brother. I see how we did everything together, how he followed me, and wanted to be like me. I see tenderness and innocence. A deep connection that breaks me. I forgot about that over time. I was too focused on myself, my friends, my life. Matt never forgot that, and now neither will I. I will teach it to my children and break in myself the pattern of self-centered living.

This journey is not over and there are many birthdays, Christmas gatherings, births, deaths, visits to where Matt died, videos, pictures and things to go through without my brother. But I know I can do it and I know Matt would expect nothing less. So I feed off the strength he had and what he left behind. I thank God for another day, and continue to carry with me the heart of my brother Matthew and the anticipation of seeing him in the presence of God."

Norm Wright on Matt: Norm has been a long-time (I don't want to say old out of respect to him) friend of our family and here is what he had us share at Matt's memorial service:

"In all of our lives there will be a few special people who enriched us by their presence. Matt Oliver was one of them. His infectious smile and enthusiastic filled voice filled the lives of those around him. I still hear his voice, "Hey Norm, thanks for calling," or "Thanks for the book," or "I caught my biggest fish today, Norm." When he worked in

my booth at the AACC conference he was like a beacon that brought a smile to the face of every participant.

Matt added something special to my life that is very special for he, along with his brothers, Nathan and Andrew, filled the hole in my life of not knowing what it was like to raise a normal boy. I have images of Matt in my mind that will always be there from our meals together, tramping a stream, hooking trout at Lake Arrowhead or bringing in bass at Tejon Lake.

Matt, while we don't have your presence with us we have your impact upon our life and memories, many, many memories. You touched and shaped us more by who you were than by what you did in your short life. We wish you were here but we will learn to hold on to the memories you gave us. We miss you now but someday, we too, who know and love Jesus will see you again."

Sovereign Joy: Some of you have heard my message on "[Sovereign Joy](#)" which in some ways has become my life message that has come out of these 3-4 "winter" years of the Olivers' journey through illness, discouragement, darkness and death. This month I was able to share this message with my dear family at John Brown University and in the process of preparing to speak I realized that I'm more convinced, more confident, more clear than ever that circumstances don't determine reality, that God doesn't give us more than we can handle (though he does seem to call it awfully close at times), that power is perfected in weakness and that when we are weak he shows up in powerful ways (II Corinthians 12), that friendship is more powerful than words can say, that prayer does change things, that as God's son's and daughter's we can weep and mourn and laugh and play all at the same time with no contradiction, that we don't have to understand everything to be able to move on, that there are people who care that you have no idea who even know about you let alone are praying for you, that sometimes just getting out of bed and putting one foot in front of the next is success, that God is not just a promise-maker but the original promise-keeper, that he does want to do "exceedingly abundantly beyond all we ask or think."

Thank you for reading this. Thanks for your love and prayers. I hope and pray that what me, Andrew, Nathan and Amy are living out is in some ways encouraging to you. That perhaps in some way through the highs and lows, ups and downs of our journey you are finding some encouragement for your journey.

Thanks and Praise:

- A healthy pregnancy for Amy
- The fun of preparing for a new baby
- How well the kids are doing

- Precious friends who continue to pray
- The beauty of Belize
- My sister Marsha
- Laughter
- Andrew's scholarship offers
- Gary's potential writing projects and speaking invitations
- Our CHR team and JBU family

Prayer Requests:

- Nathan, Amy and our Oliver/Merrell baby
- Andrew's college decisions and his last semester of high school
- The courage to take some risks
- Our continuing journey in redefining ourselves and our family
- Gary's potential writing projects and speaking invitations
- That God might be glorified in all that we do

April 2008

Marriage's Bereavement Phase

I serve a risen savior,

He's in the world today

I know that He is living, whatever men may say

I see His hand of mercy, I hear his voice of cheer

And just the time I need Him, he's always near

He lives, He lives, Christ Jesus lives today

He walks with me and talks with me along life's narrow way

He lives, He lives, Salvation to impart

You ask me how I know He lives, He lives within my heart

He is risen. He is risen indeed! That's the good news of Easter.

This of course was my first Easter in 28 years without my beloved Carrie and it was an interesting week for the Oliver family. Early in the week Andrew and some of his friends went to Kansas City for their senior Spring Break trip and later that week Nathan and Amy went up for a “final” pre-parenting getaway. Our little KC retreat has been the scene of a lot of happy family times, some productive writing and seminar planning for me and Carrie and now a whole new batch of fresh memories for our “new” family.

In the middle of the week I went down to M.D. Anderson for my own 6-month check-up (and received a great report) and while down there saw many of the places where Carrie and I had spent hours waiting for tests and treatments and waiting for some hopefully good news but with each and every visit assured that, whatever the news, God was with us and would continue to be.

Our good friends Ehab and Sylvie once again opened their home to me and over the years it has become a kind of home away from home. While at the hospital I went to the waiting room where Carrie and I would go to several times a year for her 3-month check-ups, sat down, recalled from memory some of the Bible verses we’d share with each other and spent some good time remembering and thanking God for the many precious memories and blessings and that God answered the prayers of many in allowing Carrie to live for over two years beyond the initial prognosis of 3-6 months. That in itself was a huge miracle for someone with metastatic pancreatic cancer especially with someone who had a tumor as large as Carrie's.

On the Thursday of Easter week some good friends invited me over to their house for a Passover Seder dinner and it was a wonderful experience. If you ever have the opportunity to participate in one of these be sure to take advantage of it. What a powerful object lesson and reminder of the death, burial and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ and the hope we have today because of what took place two thousand years ago.

On Saturday before Easter Sunday I finished going through most of Carrie's clothes. That was a hard one and it took a lot longer than I had anticipated. From working with so many other people who had regretted going through their loved ones things too quickly and giving away many things they wish they'd kept I decided to wait at least six months before doing this. It was amazing how a certain jacket, or blouse or skirt or pair of beach shoes brought back boatloads of precious memories. In some cases as I held a particular piece of clothing in my hands I could hear the sound of the ocean, see the sun bouncing off of her blonde hair, see her walking on the beach or hear her laughter. Memories are wonderful things and even more priceless when you've lost that special person. On Sunday we went to church with Marsha and then celebrated a delicious Easter dinner together. Even though our family has been significantly redefined we are still family, still enjoy being together, still have a lot to be thankful for and a lot to look forward to.

Thanks to all of you who haven't quit praying for us and asking about how we are doing. A friend of mine who lost a spouse shared with me a quote from Nicolas Wolterstorff's book, *Lament for a Son*: "The pain of the no more outweighs the gratitude of the once was. Will it always be so?" Early on I was frequently overwhelmed by the pain of "no more" Carrie and "no more" Matt and the fact that my life would never ever be even close to being the same. The good news is that early on God encouraged me to let Him help me turn my grief into gratitude and I can now, eight months later, say that gratitude of the "once was" IS greater than the ongoing pain of "no more."

This thoughtful friend also shared their experience of the first Easter without their spouse and talked about feeling "ambushed" at times by the sense of grief and loss. Ambushed is a great word to express what happens from time-to-time. I've talked with many people whose loss was many years ago and who still get "ambushed. I'm glad our Lord gave us a model for dealing with loss. When I think about Jesus weeping alongside Mary and Martha it struck me that even though Jesus knew that he could and actually would raise Lazarus he still wept with them. Someone has said that tears are love in liquid form and this past week I'm understanding that in some new ways. If you've had a loss don't be afraid to cry. If you follow the tears they will lead you to the heart of your heavenly Father.

From my experience as a counselor I know that it's easy to dwell on and allow the pain of the loss to obscure the many good and wonderful things about loved-ones that makes the loss so very devastating. I decided early on to ask God to help me feel the pain, have the freedom to shed the tears, acknowledge the loss but put it all in the context of what was, what God did, the myriad of ways he showed up in 27 years of marriage and what he is continuing to do not just in spite of but truly in the midst of the "adventure" that he in his sovereignty is allowing me and my family to experience. Our gracious God continues to answer that prayer and the heart is healing.

In *A Grief Observed*, C.S. Lewis wrote, "Bereavement is not the truncation of married love but one of its regular phases—like the honeymoon. What we want is to live our marriage well and faithfully through that phase, too. If it hurts (and it certainly will) we accept the pain as a necessary part of this phase." That is so true. Loss and saying goodbye is one of the phases of marriage and one of the phases of life and in some ways doing it well involves grieving the loss of and at the same time celebrating the blessings of the past while keeping one's mind and heart open to whatever God has in the present that only he can see. None of us are here by accident. The fact that we are alive means that God still has something important for us to do.

It's springtime here in Northwest Arkansas and as I sat down to write this update I looked out my office window and noticed the first signs of buds on the trees that have been planted on the JBU quad in memory of Carrie and Matt. The Lord gives, the Lord takes

away and the Lord gives again. Our life is made up of seasons and after a winter, no matter how long and cold it may have been, there always comes a springtime. A time of new growth, new hope and new opportunities. You may be in the midst of a long winter season and I want you to know that everything Carrie wrote about in her journal and everything I'm writing in my updates is true. It's the real deal!

Andrew is doing great and has decided to go to Biola University and our whole family is excited for him. My sister and I went to Biola and Nathan graduated from there just a few years ago. It's a great school with a wonderful heritage and we have some wonderful friends out on the West Coast that I'm looking forward to spending more time with. This will be a new chapter and a fresh start for Andrew. He is working hard as yearbook editor and is doing a remarkable job.

We are having a lot of fun getting ready for "our" baby. Amy has had several baby showers and we're making some changes in the housing arrangements here so they can have ample room for all of the stuff that comes with a little one. May 22nd isn't that far away and there is a fresh spirit of hope, anticipation and joy in our home. Nathan continues to do well at his job, exceeding expectations, and getting some great training that most young men his age would never be exposed to. It's a constant joy to have Nathan's office right down the hall from mine and to hear compliments people give to him and especially to see him using his God-given gifts and training to make a difference in the lives of literally hundreds of couples in Northwest Arkansas and in the kingdom.

I continue to read through Carrie's "Journal of Hope" and was interested in what she had to say this time last year. Let me start with what she wrote on June 14, 2005, her first entry in her Journal of Hope. She started with this acknowledgement: My Journal of Hope is dedicated to my Lord Jesus Christ who bends down and listens to me. Throughout her journey, even on her last day here on earth, she was very much aware of God's presence and knew that God's love, goodness, grace and mercy were more real and more powerful than the cancer.

"During those first few hours of terrifying fear while we were in Kansas City, I could not sleep and would wake Gary and touch him often and awaken early in the morning. Thoughts of what will happen to my kids, how can I go to my son's wedding, what about those grandbabies, who the heck will take care of Allie since she only likes me. The poor cat will die of a heart attack. All those really hard thoughts that we humans think when we are scared, when our life has changed, when there seems like there is nowhere to go. On the second early morning, (about 4:30 AM) my Psalm for the day was Psalm 91. God began to show me that there are no dangers during the day or terrors by night that He cannot protect me from. This was going to be a whole new faith walk. God so clearly had been working right up to this point."

Now I'm jumping to her edited entry from March 10, 2007, just a few months before Carrie experienced her "ultimate" healing. As I look back I continue to be amazed at her genuine courage and strength and faith she continued to have in the midst of some bad medical reports, declining health and increasing discomfort and relentless pain.

"So what will these next few weeks look like? I have been greatly reminded of what looks like and feels like limitations in the last week. I wanted to start back into my exercise. Walking and lifting weights. Wow my legs are weak. My upper thighs were a pretty strong part of my body but lifting the weights did not come easy last week. I tried to lift the wheel barrow over something in the garage but found it very difficult. Thought I might have a little temper tantrum in the midst of it but I figured out another way to get it out of the corner without lifting it over the lawn mower and having a tantrum. I still felt a little mad about the whole thing. I then began to wonder if I would have been able to lift it even in my strong days. I then decided this conversation with myself was not that helpful and decided to get on with the yard work I set out to do.

I planted 12 pots of pansies and spread 17 bags of mulch, trimmed several bushes and removed leaves. I thought I would be a lot more achy but not too bad. I did move more slowly than I usually do but here are some benefits to moving slowly! I was much more methodical so I did not lose my scissors and trimmers under something while working like I usually do and I am sure moving slowly kept me from pulling a muscle or something. See there are always the positives! I love yard work and missed out on it last year due to being gone. Oh how thankful I am to play in the dirt. Remember I grew up with my Farmer dad.

In these next weeks I desire to catch up on some more reading on walking with Jesus. I plan to read Phillip Yancey's book on Prayer, subtitled "Does it Make any Difference". Of course I know the answer to that! I will be traveling to Florida with Gary for Spring Break while Andrew is gone to visit friends, enjoy the warmth of Florida and very importantly finish our book (Mad About Us) we are writing. Another book deadline! What will God do this time!

I want to continue cooking for others, give and love and serve as God shows me how I can. I bought a new recipe notebook and I want to throw out the old recipes in my life and fill this folder with new ones, fabulous Food Network recipes! Yeah! I want to please the Lord even when I feel alone and wonder if he is still there. I put our little Easter tree up last week. Gary's Mom gave us all the little fun things to hang on the tree when she was alive so I always think of her as I assemble. I bought an apple blossom tree a couple of years ago for these Easter items so now when I hang them and look at the blossoms on the tree I think of life. I think of Jesus and his life as he arose that day on Easter and once again I have hope. I have to have hope, it is like oxygen to me. Can't live without it.

This life is not about me. I have already had to surrender many times over. My stomach has been worse since returning from Houston. The fluid does not seem to be draining. I am sad, I am disappointed and frustrated. I have no clothes that fit. My O's don't fit over the stomach. We joke that I look like an anorexic pregnant lady. I want that fixed. I can't think of anything along the way that has been more frustrating than this predicament. Nausea, diarrhea, radiation, you name it does not rate up there with this protruding stomach. It gets down right uncomfortable and the thing is I need to eat but it makes me not want to eat. Not enough room!

I surrender God. I surrender. I also keep trusting, and hoping and believing and know that Easter is coming. I have said it before that a precious intercessor was praying over me early on after the diagnosis in 2005 and she prayed that I would not focus in on symptoms and be frightened by them. I have never forgotten that prayer. She too had walked through cancer. I go to bed at night I check every morning to see if this stomach has gone down because I believe that it will. Please believe with me. The cancer cannot have me. It just can't and yet I surrender to my God, to what He is doing in my life.

In these next few weeks I will watch my pansies grow, will finish a book with Gary, I will wait expectantly for a continued working of the Lord's hand, I will surrender, I will enjoy friendship, will walk and lift and breathe. I will go to church on Easter and I will rejoice and I will continue to expectantly wait on the Lord..."

I hope that you had a blessed Easter. That you took time to remember how much God loves you, that He sent His only begotten son to die and rise again so that you could have eternal life and a hope that transcends any and all of life's difficulties. That's the legacy that Carrie lived and left behind for us to learn from. That's the good news of the gospel.

Thanks & Praise:

- Easter and what it means in our lives
- Precious friends who continue to write and call and pray
- A healthy and happy and very pregnant Amy
- Nathan, Andrew and Marsha
- The joy of preparing for a new baby
- Andrew's scholarship for Biola University
- The beauty of springtime
- Our CRE and JBU family

Prayer Requests:

- A healthy time leading up to the May 22nd delivery of our little girl
- The courage to face what needs to be faced
- The ability to grieve boldly and celebrate boldly
- The ability to put first-things-first and make wise choices
- Andrew's last semester of high school
- Our continuing journey in redefining ourselves and our family
- That God might be glorified in all that we do

May 2008

Emotional Ambushes

There has been a lot of joy and laughter in April but in many ways it was one of the most painful and difficult months since the death of Matt and Carrie. April 21st would have been Carrie's 49th birthday. Usually I would have been buying 4-5 cards, a couple silly, a couple serious, and one or two that only a husband should give to his wife and that nobody else should see. I would have purchased a couple of gifts and had a plan to try and surprise a woman who could never be surprised. Sometimes I thought Carrie knew what I was going to get her before I did. She was a real stinker that way. But, for the first time in 28 years there was no one to buy cards or gifts for and I found myself missing her and missing doing those little things in ways I hadn't anticipated.

The week of April 21st was a rough week with a number of emotional "ambushes" and her birthday was a day of both sorrow and celebration but while I had a lot of tears it was in all honesty mostly about celebration. At times it's still very hard to believe that she is no longer here and at the same time there are a ton of good things to remember and a lot to be thankful for and I choose joy.

These past few weeks I've really had to practice what I've preached in my "[Sovereign Joy](#)" message... "So we don't look at the troubles we can see right now, rather, we look forward to what we have not yet seen. For the troubles we see will soon be over, but the joys to come will last forever. For our present troubles are quite small and won't last very

long. Yet they produce for us an immeasurably great glory that will last forever. (II Corinthians 4:18)

I've decided that sometimes success IS making yourself put one foot in front of the next. Yesterday was one of those days. I woke up feeling drained, weary, discouraged, alone and very sad. After work I made myself go to the JBU gym, change my clothes and walk the 100 steps 20 times. Didn't feel like it. Didn't want to. All I was aware of wanting to do was to sit down and stare at the ground. Didn't know where I'd find the energy to do it but the good news is I was able to use the time to talk to the Lord, recall scripture that I had memorized, recall all of the things I had to be thankful for, thank God for my family and friends and the precious little granddaughter I'll soon be holding and at the end of the time I felt a bit more energy and much more aware of God's presence. It was well with my soul. It was kind of like Psalm 29:11-12: "You turned my wailing into dancing; you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, that my heart may sing to you and not be silent. O Lord my God, I will give you thanks forever."

Someone once wrote that grief is like walking through molasses. So true. I'm also learning that grief is like a smoke alarm. It can be triggered by bacon burning or by your house burning. It doesn't matter how much smoke there is or how big the fire, once the alarm is triggered the volume of the alarm is the same. Maybe I'm becoming aware of the cumulative impact of the many physical, emotional, financial and relational losses over the last four years. The phenomenal aloneness. The loss of plans and dreams that will never be realized.

I think I've become more aware than ever of our human frailty and how fragile the heart can be. In the midst of the losses there is always the reality of the fact that: "Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. I say to myself, "The Lord is my portion; therefore I will wait for him" (Lamentations 3:22-24) and then, "Though he brings grief, he will show compassion, so great is his unfailing love" (Lam 3:32).

Thanks to our many friends who remembered that it was Carrie's birthday and called or wrote or left messages. If you have a loved one who has lost someone and you don't know what to do, just leave a 10-second voice mail message that you are thinking of them and praying for them. That's as good as a card. I continue to be amazed at how many people tell me how God used their counseling with Carrie, hearing her speak or reading what she had written or just a conversation with her to significantly impact their lives. She's been gone for almost a year now and her life continues to bear fruit and point people to our Lord Jesus Christ.

Well, that's probably more than enough reflection for one update. On the more fun side, Andrew went to his senior prom and Nathan and Amy and I went and took pictures. He

looked so handsome and had a great time. I'm so proud of Andrew and how he has dealt with the losses and the healthy decisions he is making regarding himself and his future. On one hand I'm heartbroken that Andrew won't have a mother to see him graduate from high school, hug and kiss him as we drop him off at college, attend his wedding, etc., but at the same time I'm comforted by the fact that he still has family that loves and supports him and many extended "family" who faithfully pray for him and even some Southern California friends who will be a support for him. Andrew is moving into the best and most exciting chapter of his life.

Nathan and Amy are doing great. Amy is very much "with child" and everyone comments on how radiant she looks. She appreciates the compliments but is very ready for little Alivia to arrive. We thank the Lord that the pregnancy has been wonderfully uneventful and that all of her check-ups have gone well. We've learned not to take anything for granted and this is no exception. My old bedroom which is now their bedroom has been transformed into to a bright, happy, cheerful, colorful and warm room where little Alivia will start her earthly adventure surrounded by love and prayers. It's a joy just to walk into the room and will be even more so when there is a little one in the crib. New life, new hope, new joy and a reminder that God is the giver of every good gift.

Nathan continues to be involved in many important aspects of the NWA Healthy Marriages program of CHR. In addition to refining the curriculum he is in charge of training and supporting our Marriage Champions which is the core aspect of our mission to change the marriages of Northwest Arkansas. It's fun to see Nathan teach and speak and to see the way couples old enough to be his parents respond to his leadership. If you'd like to see more of what he is doing you can go to www.nwamarriages.com.

Thanks again for those who send words of encouragement. A friend recently wrote: "I bless you, and pray that your broken hearts be healed hearts. As you live in the depths of the deepest wells, may you find His light in the darkness—His joy in your sorrow, His glory in your valley. As you sow "liquid prayers" in your tears, as you 'plant' seeds through the ministry of tears of sorrow, of travail, of desperation, of compassion—may you reap a harvest of spiritual breakthroughs experience a spirit of rejoicing and a spiritual harvest of great joy." There is that joy word again.

Thanks & Praise:

- A celebration of Carrie's birthday and a life well lived
- Precious friends who continue to write and call and pray
- A healthy and happy and very pregnant Amy
- The joy of preparing for a new baby

- The beauty of springtime
- Our CHR and JBU family

Prayer Requests:

- A healthy time leading up to the May 22nd delivery of Alivia
- Nathan & Amy, Andrew and Marsha
- The courage to face what needs to be faced
- Andrew's last semester of high school
- Our continuing journey in redefining ourselves and our family
- That God might be glorified in all that we do

June 2008

Celebration!

“You’ve turned my mourning into dancing; You removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, That my heart may sing to you and not be silent. O Lord my God, I will give you thanks forever.” Psalm 30:11-12

Wow, what an amazing month this has been. It started with our celebration of the first anniversary of Matt’s home going on May 5th and culminated with the birth of Alivia Merrell Oliver on May 21st and Andrew’s high school graduation on May 24th. Let’s start with the really big news.

Alivia Merrell Oliver—May 21st, 2008: In the early evening of May 20th Nathan and Amy went into the hospital followed by our family (me, Andrew and my sister Marsha) and some of Amy’s friends and we began the vigil waiting for the good news.

Between 5:30 p.m. and 2:30 a.m. different ones of us would make trips into the birthing room to chat with Nathan and Amy, check in, get refreshments etc. Andrew made a McDonald's run around midnight to get some supplies for those of us in the waiting room so it was quite a night/morning.

Finally, at 2:34 a.m. precious little Alivia decided that she’d had enough of staying inside and was coming out to join us. I had just stuck my head in the room to see how things were going. The curtain between the door and the bed had been pulled and I was just about to announce my presence when I heard my precious granddaughters first cries. I ran out to the waiting room to announce her birth and let everyone know that it was a perfect delivery and all was well.

Unfortunately the enormous joy was dampened by the news that in trying to sew Amy up they weren't able to stop the bleeding and had rushed her to the ER. The bottom line is that we almost lost Amy that morning. After losing 5 pints of blood and two surgeons being unable to stop the bleeding suddenly and miraculously the bleeding stopped, they sewed her up and they took her out of the ER and into the ICU. By God's grace Amy left ICU after only 6 hours rather than the 48 hours they had first predicted and by more of God's grace Amy and Alivia are doing well.

Amy's mom Lynn was scheduled to come out in late May but due to the medical emergency she came out immediately and it was great to have her around. Carrie's family was already scheduled to come down from Nebraska for Andrew's May 24 high school graduation so most of our extended family was able to visit Amy and Alivia in the hospital and see her at home within days of her birth.

One of my greatest joys has been to see how well Nathan has taken to being a father. He is a full-time dad and doesn't just make a "cameo" appearance every now and then but is available 24/7 to lovingly care for his daughter from diaper changing to being up in the middle of the night to helping with her feedings (as best he can) to bathing her. He also is doing an amazing job in caring for his beloved bride. Nathan is one that needs his sleep so these first two weeks have been a major adjustment for him as he has had to go without his usual quota of sleep—but there hasn't been one complaint. You'd never know this was Nathan and Amy's first time around as parents.

All the stuff grandparents say about grandchildren is true. I now understand why some grandparents think THEIR grandchild is the most wonderful little person ever born. It's been fun to see Andrew and my sister Marsha holding Alivia and I've so enjoyed holding Alivia, taking her for walks (actually I walk and she is held by me) outside at 11:30 p.m. up and down our street when she is pretty sure she doesn't need to sleep, and to hold her early in the morning. One evening last week I had enjoyed a very full and rewarding day at the office, had some great appointments, dictated a number of letters and answered many emails, but the highlight of the day, the most rewarding and very best part of the day was holding little Alivia in my arms and late in the evening walking up and down our street talking to her, telling her stories about the family and about her Grandma Carrie, and singing to her. She's not old enough yet to tell me to stop singing so I'm going for it while I can.

Thanks to all of you who have sent cards and notes and gifts and have let us know that you are praying for us. We have a lot to be thankful for and so appreciate your celebrating with us this gift of life.

Andrew's High School Graduation: On Saturday, May 24, Andrew Michael Oliver graduated in the 100th graduating class of Siloam Springs High School with honors.

Carrie's family came down from Nebraska and stayed a couple of days and it was a very rich time celebrating this significant event with Andrew after having just welcomed his niece Alivia into the world. We were all very aware that Carrie and Matt weren't physically present with us and while I had to slip away a couple of times to deal with the hard pain of that reality it really was a time of great celebration and joy.

Those of you who have had a child graduate from high school know what it's like to see your big one who was once a little one take their diploma and walk down the ramp into a new chapter of their life. Thousands of days and tens of thousands of hours of memories passed through my mind. Pictures and sounds of many happy times when our whole family was still here. But the high school years are over.

Andrew is moving on and it's time to, once again, redefine my relationship with this "new" Andrew. It's time to say good-bye to my high school student and hello to my young adult on his way to Biola University in Southern California.

After the graduation ceremony our immediate family enjoyed an extended luncheon together in a private room of a restaurant in Rogers, gave Andrew some gifts and told some family stories. In the late afternoon Andrew and his friends Christian Koons and Ben Pollard were honored at a joint reception hosted by our three families. A special thanks to Carey and Wendy for their loving work in putting this together.

I am so proud of Andrew. Over the past four years he has watched me have major cancer surgery and go through significant chemotherapy and radiation treatments, his mom battle metastatic pancreatic cancer for two years, the death of his brother Matt and then seeing Carrie pass into the presence of our Lord. Through this long, deep and dark valley with more losses than any teenager should ever have to experience he has not given up, not allowed the losses to define him and continued to do well in school, getting elected to the National Honor Society, being editor of the yearbook and being involved in a Bible study group. I know how these past four years have rocked my life and redefined my world and I will never know what it's been like through the eyes and heart of a teenager. But by God's grace, the prayers of many faithful friends and some real determination on his part he has done well. Thanks for your prayers for Andrew and please continue to cover him in his new chapter of his life.

A Celebration of Matt's First Full Year in Heaven—May 5th: Yes, it was a celebration. It seems like it can't be a full year that we have been without Matty's big smile and laugh and bright green eyes and great hugs and goofy sense of humor. It has gone so slowly and it has gone so quickly. About two weeks leading up to this day I started to become very aware of some "emotional clouds" hanging over my head, some increased sadness, weariness and lethargy and knew it was time to begin to deal in a new way and at perhaps a deeper level with the reality of Matt's death. Grief is somewhat like an onion, there are

many different layers to it and peeling it always brings some tears to your eyes. I smile and laugh a lot more than I did a year ago but the loss is still very real.

When there is a loss there are always several choices one can make in dealing with it. You can wallow in the pain of the loss and dwell on what once was and never again will be. You can live your life in the past and stay focused on the yesterdays of what was. Or you can acknowledge those realities while at the same time thanking God for and looking at them in light of what were many wonderful memories and times of great joy. Someone once said, “With each new dawn there is delivered to your door a fresh, new package called ‘today’. God has designed us in such a way that we can handle only one package at a time...and all the grace we need will be supplied by Him as we unwrap the package.” I think that’s what the Oliver family has chosen to do and because of that we continue to experience “sovereign joy” in the midst of our journey.

About a week before this special day a friend sent me a note that said, “I bless you, and pray that your broken hearts be healed hearts. As you live in the depths of the deepest wells, may you find His light in the darkness—His joy in your sorrow, His glory in your valley. As you sow “liquid prayers” in your tears, as you ‘plant’ seeds through the ministry of tears of sorrow, of travail, of desperation, of compassion—may you reap a harvest of spiritual breakthroughs experience a spirit of rejoicing and a spiritual harvest of great joy.”

I’ve been reading through Carrie’s “Journal of Hope” and here is what she wrote about Matt’s memorial service. Much of what she expressed then is still very real today.

The Memorial Service on May 9th will be one of those days in time we wish would we would have never had to experience and yet a day where we will never forget the hand of God on all of our families lives, hearts, bodies and souls. We gave our son to the Lord that day to be held in His loving arms while we are left to figure out life here on this earth without him. I will talk more of that day, when I can, but for now it was a blessing and the most difficult day of my life.

We now are walking on the other side of the service, of a death several weeks from the event with holes in our hearts still battling cancer, working at jobs and Andrew finishing up school. Those initial days can be hell on earth that drive us straight to heaven. If we had not sought all that the heavenlies have to offer we would not have made it. We would have given up on life, on love, on relationships, on God, on each other and sunken deep into darkness. We are still in the light, even though we hurt.”

Carrie said it so well. “We are still in the light even though we hurt.” Thanks for reading this update and for your continued prayers for the Oliver family!

Thanks & Praise:

- The arrival of Alivia Oliver
- Amy's miraculous recovery
- A healthy and happy Nathan and Amy
- The joy of seeing, hearing and holding little Alivia
- Andrew's Graduation
- Andrew's Future Plans
- The life of Matthew David Oliver
- The loving support of our extended families
- The beauty of springtime in the Ozarks

Prayer Requests:

- The ongoing health and growth of Alivia
- Nathan & Amy, Andrew and Marsha
- The courage to continue to face what needs to be faced
- Andrew's preparation to go to Biola in August
- Our continuing journey in redefining ourselves and our family
- That God might be glorified in all that we do

July 2008

Power of Perspective

There is something very special
About our prayer time with the Lord.
We have His full attention and He has ours.
He listens with the heart of a father,
Understands with the compassion of a friend,
And fills the conversation with peace, wisdom and hope.
When we lift up the lives of others
And ask Him to meet their needs,

He gently reminds us—
I care for them even more than you do.
EVERYTHING the Lord has
In His heart for you is good—
He loves you so much.
(DaySpring Card)

Andrew and I worked in the yard this afternoon and early this evening I ran the sprinklers and when I went outside to check on something I inhaled the wonderful aroma of water on newly cut grass and I was reminded that every day there are little reminders that God does love us so very much through family and friends and nature and through all of the little things that are so easy for us to take for granted...like sight, sound, touch and smell and that's just for starters.

In some ways this month in between the anniversary of Matt and Carrie's home-going (May 5th and July 2nd) has been a difficult one but in other ways it has held a lot of joy and blessings. Alivia of course continues to be an unbelievable joy, making new sounds, trying to hold her neck up, chugging (I do mean chugging) her bottle, getting fun new expressions on her face and waving her arms around. I just don't get tired of looking at her. Amy and Nathan are such a great mom and dad and Alivia couldn't have a better uncle than Andrew. He loves to hold her and care for her and does a great job. He is very gentle with her. I'm so proud of my family.

Speaking of Andrew, we are already starting to get him ready for our trip out to Biola in August. He is thrilled to be out of high school and on his way to the same school his dad, aunt and older brother attended. We have some dear friends out in California who have invited Andrew for visits so if he gets bored he will have somewhere to go. It means a lot to have friends that open up their hearts and their homes for your kids. One of his graduation gifts was a Long Board (a big skate board) and Andrew's been having a lot of fun with it. He is proud of some of the scars he has earned as he learns to manage this new mode of transportation.

We had a wonderful Father's Day and this was the first time that one of my sons and I were able to celebrate it together. That is one of the fun "firsts" unlike most of the "firsts" we've had this year. Nathan and I enjoyed a great meal out on our deck with Amy, Alivia, Andrew and my dear sister Marsha. We are always aware that our Carrie and Matt aren't there to celebrate with us. Even when we aren't talking about it we are aware. But that doesn't keep us from laughing and playing and sharing and talking about the future.

At the first of this month I went out to Southern California to speak at a men's conference with my dear friend Norm Wright. We hadn't seen each other since I went to visit him in Bakersfield after the death of his precious wife Joyce. In the months following the deaths of Carrie and Joyce we talked on the phone 5-6 times a week. Sometimes the calls included long stretches of silence because one or both of us were so choked up we couldn't speak or because by the sound of sobbing on the other end we knew that silence best said what needed to be said. We had many long chats and, as always, some great times of prayer together. It's impossible to overstate the value of good, godly, faithful and loyal friends especially when they also have a somewhat warped sense of humor. On one afternoon I talked Norm into going on an Alpine Slide with me. He had never been on one before and we had a ball. Actually, I had as much fun watching him as I did riding the slide. The picture of Norm and I are as we're riding up the top of the mountain on a ski lift for our second ride down.

The Healing Journey: Early in the month we finally sold Carrie's Xterra. I know, it's just a car, but it's a car that had a ton of memories. Carrie loved her Xterra. She took great care of it and enjoyed driving it. I knew it would be hard for me to let go of it but I didn't know just how hard until I saw the new owners drive it out of our driveway. I walked out to the street to get the last glimpse of it as it rounded the corner, sensing that it was another letting go, another saying goodbye. I know, it's just a car but it symbolized and was a point of connection with so much more. Sometimes when the kids weren't watching I just go sit out in the car and play some of the Christian CD's that Carrie so enjoyed. Some of the best memories of my life were trips we took in that car and just seeing my blond babe waving at me with her amazing green eyes and huge smile on her face. After I caught the last glimpse of the car I went back and sat in a little swing we have in our front yard for about 45 minutes and laughed and wept and remembered and thanked God for his goodness, mercy and grace and that as I look back on my 27 years with Carrie I have few regrets.

It's amazing how much difference it makes what we choose to focus on. In life we can have a fear focus or a faith focus. We can have a problem focus or a promise focus. What we choose to focus on makes all the difference in the world as to how we experience life. Professor Vicki Medvec studied Olympic medalists and discovered that **bronze medalists were quantifiably happier than silver medalists**. Can you guess why? Silver medalists were more likely to focus on how close they came to winning the gold so they weren't that excited about getting the silver. The bronze medalists were more likely to focus on how close then came to not winning a medal at all, so they were just thrilled to be on the medal stand. The power of perspective. What we choose to focus on makes all the difference in the world as to how we experience life.

During times of despair, discouragement, disappointment and even a bit of depression it's much easier to allow that rascal "fear" to slip in the back door. Fear that you'll never heal, that things will never be normal again, that you'll never have the happiness and joy that you so loved, fear of being alone...and the list goes on. In one of Henri Nouwen's books he quoted a prayer from a woman who had been in a concentration camp in World War II. Here is the prayer of Etty Hillesum:

There are those who want to put their bodies in safe keeping but who are nothing more now than a shelter for a thousand fears and bitter feelings.

Don't let me waste even one atom of my strength on petty material cares. Let me use and spend every minute and turn this into a fruitful day, one stone more in the foundations on which to build our so uncertain future.

Even if I should be locked up in a narrow cell and a cloud should drift past my small barred window, then I shall bring you that cloud, oh God, while there is still the strength in me to do so.

Yes, I'm still heartbroken and a day doesn't go by when there isn't an ache and a sense of being partial, incomplete, missing something. I'm heartbroken that I don't have my best friend to talk to, to bounce things off of, to plan with, to pray with, to care for. I'm heartbroken that Alivia will only have one grandmother (albeit a great one) to love on her. I'm heartbroken that Nathan and Amy don't have the opportunity to draw on Carrie's love and wisdom and share this new chapter of their lives with them. I'm heartbroken for Andrew that he didn't have Carrie there to see him graduate from high school, to see the look of pride in her loving eyes, to feel her hug, to hear her voice and know of her love. I'm heartbroken for Andrew that he doesn't have his mom here to help him get ready for Biola and that Carrie won't be able to be there to hug and kiss him as we drop him off at college and some day to attend his wedding and the list goes on.

Ambushed is a great word to express what happens from time-to-time. From my experience as a counselor I know that it's easy to dwell on and allow the pain the loss to obscure the many good and wonderful things about a loved-one that makes the loss so very real and painful. I decided early on to ask God to help me feel the pain, have the freedom to shed the tears, acknowledge the loss but put it all in the context of what was, what God did, the myriad of ways he showed up in 27 years of marriage and what he is continuing to do not just in spite of but truly in the midst of the "adventure" that he in his sovereignty is allowing me and my family to experience. I do have a good time remembering and thanking God for the many precious memories and blessings and that God answered the prayers of many in allowing Carrie to live for over two years rather than the initial prognosis of 3-6 months. That extra year and a half that God gave us was a miracle and one of many answered prayers.

I find myself continuing to enjoy reading the Bible and books related to spiritual growth. I want to learn new and more effective ways to deep water my spiritual root system. That takes intentionality, commitment and time. One ongoing challenge for me is to remember that “recognition of a need does not constitute a call” and to be discerning in how busy I allow myself to be. I’m trying to err on the side of “being still” but that is not how I’m wired so some of the books including some of my readings in Celtic spirituality are a precious reminder of what first-things-first looks like.

Prayer continues to be a lifeline and at times I feel like I’m still in the introductory course of prayer. Here’s a little poem I came across that you might enjoy.

*How shall I pray?
Are tears prayers, Lord?
Are screams prayers, or groans or sighs or curses?
Can trembling hands be lifted to you,
or clenched fists
or the cold sweat that trickles down my back
or the cramps that know my stomach?
Will you accept my prayers, Lord,
my real prayers,
rooted in the muck and mud and rock of my life,
and not just the pretty, cut-flower, gracefully arranged
bouquet of words?
Will you accept me, Lord,
as I really am,
messed up mixture of glory and grime?
Ted Loder, Guerillas of Grace August*

Thanks & Praise:

- The growth of Alivia
- Amy's health
- A healthy and happy Nathan and Amy
- The joy of seeing, hearing and holding little Alivia
- The joy of watching Andrew and Alivia
- Andrew's Future Plans
- The loving support of our extended families and precious friends
- A great future

Prayer Requests:

- The ongoing health and growth of Alivia
- Nathan & Amy, Andrew and Marsha
- The courage to continue to face what needs to be faced
- Andrew's preparation to go to Biola in August
- Our continuing journey in redefining ourselves and our family
- That God might be glorified in all that we do

August 2008

It's Been One Year

I'd better warn you, this entry is a long one so if you are tired and sleepy or have something in the microwave you may want to come back later. If you have a few minutes...read on.

July 2—Carrie's One-Year Anniversary: July 2nd marked the one-year anniversary of Carrie's home going and this past year has been an emotional, psychological and spiritual roller-coaster. I've experienced what David wrote in Psalm 88 and 89:

"O Lord, the God who saves me, day and night I cry out before you...for my soul is full of trouble...you have put me in the lowest pit, in the darkest depths...I am confined and cannot escape; my eyes are dim with grief. I call to you O Lord, every day; I spread out my hands to you...But I cry to you for help, O Lord; in the morning my prayer comes

before you...you have taken my companions and loved ones from me; the darkness is my closest friend. “ (Psalm 88:1-2)

“I will sing of the Lord’s great love forever; with my mouth I will make your faithfulness known through all generations. I will declare that your love stands firm forever, that you established your faithfulness in heaven itself.” (Psalm 89)

Over the past couple of months I’ve often found myself thinking about Carrie’s last weeks. She knew that she was a small part of something much bigger. Many people struggle with meaning and purpose in life, especially as they find themselves unable to be and do what they’ve been used to being and doing. Many try to create meaning where there has been none. The reality is that dying is ugly and when cancer has been eating away at our body how can we still be beautiful or at least enjoy and reflect the beauty of who God is when we are looking ugly and struggling with constant pain and the probability of dying with a boatload of unrealized hopes and dreams? Carrie rarely struggled with meaning and purpose but she did struggle, as I still do at times, with the brevity of life.

One year later I still vacillate between having to make myself get up each morning and just wanting to survive to times of great focus, clarity, creativity and sovereign joy...and that can happen several times a day. I still get ambushed. Sometimes it’s a mild ambush and sometimes it’s almost immobilizing. One minute I feel like I’m standing on the beach enjoying a beautiful summer day and the next minute there is a huge tsunami crashing down on top of me. But the great thing is that no matter how many waves crash on top of me or how big the waves are...by God’s grace I’m still standing!

Here is what I wrote on July 3rd:

“Yesterday was the one-year anniversary of Carrie's home going. Wow, it's hard to believe. I took the day off and spent it with my kids. I woke up early about 5:30, had some good time in the Word and some time to think, reflect and pray. Alivia hadn't slept much (thus Nathan & Amy hadn't slept) so from about 6:30 – 8:30 I walked with her and rocked her and both she and her mom and dad got some good sleep. Part of the time I sat holding Alivia on the couch that had been Carrie's “wardrobe” from this world to the next, where she breathed her last breath of earthly air to breathe her first breath of celestial air and suddenly it struck me that a year ago I was holding my wife on the same couch and in the same room that I’m now holding our granddaughter. Job was right, the Lord gives, the Lord takes away and then he gives again and again and again. Blessed be the name of the Lord.

We had a late breakfast, made some of Carrie’s caramel brownies, picked up my sister Marsha, went out to one of Carrie’s favorite hole-in-the-wall pizza places by her favorite lake, then went down to the lake where we enjoyed the sinful brownies, talked and I read

some excerpts from her Journal of Hope, we released 6 different colored balloons which we watched fly across the lake and high into the sky, then drove to the Columbarium at our church where we have a space for some of the remains of Carrie and Matt, I read a few passages of scripture that meant a lot to Carrie and that she had us read to her just one year earlier on her last morning here on earth. At night we watched a couple of hours of home videos with a lot of Carrie scenes and then shared some of our favorite memories of Carrie & Mom. Today is a new day.”

All things considered it was a great day and another “Ebenezer” to God’s goodness, grace and mercy. We laughed a lot and we shed some healthy tears but the bulk of the day was primarily rejoicing and giving God thanks for my great wife and a great mom, for 27 years of marriage and ministry, for a gazillion great memories and much more.

Anniversaries can be positive and/or painful but each one provides an opportunity to reflect. Here’s what Carrie wrote on the first anniversary of her diagnosis:

May 15, 2006 “For those who know me I am not a person that anticipates or ruminates on “sad” anniversaries. I love birthdays, wedding anniversaries, and anniversaries of celebrations. For those loved ones that have died I am more likely to think of them not on their day of death but rather on their day of birth and think about them and miss them then. So how do I look at this year anniversary of walking through cancer? Certainly it was a very traumatic day and I do remember it well...

In this anniversary (Carrie and I received her diagnosis on May 17, 2005) week we walked through finding out that the tumor was inoperable and that I had a positive lymph node in my neck. All of these experiences could add up to trauma, tragedy and crisis. Certainly in my experience of being a human I felt these things but what I know to be true and what I celebrate with this year anniversary is that there was a moment where I came face to face with my Lord Jesus Christ and we talked about my choices and really there were only two.

One choice would be to succumb to the trauma and tragedy of it all and sink into a deep dark angry depressed state and perhaps give up and give in to the statistics of the cancer that was growing in my body. The other choice, and I remember it well, was to “choose” to cling tightly to Jesus and to “live” desperately needing Him 24 hours a day and trusting that He would be there for me just as His scriptures have promised for thousands of years. Scriptures that I would have said I believed but didn’t always function like I believed them.

So what does this anniversary feel like as I walk through it this week? I celebrate this year anniversary, not necessarily the diagnosis, but I celebrate a year of life, perhaps more living that I have ever lived, I celebrate relationships, my family, my friends and those that I pray for and uphold me in prayer. I celebrate scripture and truth and healing

and holiness. I celebrate finding Jesus to be all that He says He is and trusting Him to strengthen me in my loneliest of moments and to believe that His love is really all that I ever need, even while living on this earth. I celebrate the working out of "His purpose in His Kingdom through this experience of cancer. I am in awe of what He has done and am deeply humbled. This anniversary is a "marker" of God's tremendous love.

I look forward to another year of my life on this earth. I do not look that far ahead for He has taught me to live in the "here and now." It is in the here and now that we were designed to live. It is in this here and now that He will supply all my needs, every single one of them and it is in the here and now that we experience the fullness of who our Lord is.

You see, I am thankful for this anniversary. Thankful for so much I could never put it all down in one little journal entry. I celebrate life, love, laughter, goodness, healthy moments, new friends, old friends, my family. May 17th is not a day of trauma but rather it has become a day to remember, a day to mark understanding the experience of "hope and healing." I am grateful."

I too am grateful! I really can't imagine is going through what I'm going through with the Lord, without a loving family by my side, without a boatload of precious, warm and wonderful memories. I can't imagine what it would be like to going through the loss of a son and a wife with a ton of regrets. I can't imagine what it would be like to look back with a ton of "If only" or "What if?" or "Why didn't I?" By God's grace I don't have very many regrets. There aren't many things I'd do differently. But I know many people who in their grief don't have many precious memories to celebrate and they are haunted by things they wish they'd done differently.

That's one reason why as you are reading this and if someone comes to mind that you need to talk to and let them know you love them, that they are important to you, that you value them OR if there is something you need to apologize for (even if they haven't apologized to you for what they did wrong) then stop reading this, pick up the phone and give them a call.

If some things have come to mind that you'd like to do differently in a relationship then immediately grab a pen or pencil and write it down. That's right, stop right now and write it down or else you will forget. Many lives are littered with great ideas, good motives, warm thoughts and good intentions that were never expressed, never followed through on and just forgotten.

Life is waaaaaaaaay too short to have regrets and it doesn't have to be that way. I no longer try to live tomorrow today. I don't try to live this afternoon this morning. I feel what comes. I let the tears flow when appropriate. I look for the good that I am missing that is contributing to the pain that I am feeling and I thank God for that good, for those

precious memories, for the laughter, the loving glances, the hugs and kisses, the loving (and sometimes not so loving) corrections from someone who knew me and whose heart I could trust and with whom my heart was always safe...I choose to thank God and to celebrate.

Carrie's last entry in her "Journal of Hope" was June 13th, 2007. She had less than a month left on this earth. The cancer had ravaged her body, she was in fairly constant pain, she was having to have her stomach drained on a weekly basis, it was hard for her to get comfortable because basically she was just skin and bones. We were both in the wake of the devastation of Matt's death and felt like deer in the headlights...and that's just what we were.

Now, here is the amazing thing. In the midst of all of this Carrie was clear that God was at work, that He hadn't forgotten and that He still wanted to somehow showcase His faithfulness, goodness, mercy and grace through our faith-story. Carrie's last two weeks here on earth were fruitful ones.

Our friends Eric and Jennifer Garcia had asked us to be the speakers for the opening session of the AMFM annual conference in Charlotte. Carrie didn't have the strength or energy to make the trip on commercial airlines and we thought we'd have to cancel but Eric arranged for Steve Uhlman, a Christian businessman with a huge servant heart who is committed to strong marriage and families, to fly us on his private plane so that on opening night we were able to with complete candor and transparency share God's grace and goodness to us in the midst of our dark valley of grief and pain and loss.

The next week we had the joy of speaking for the Kanakuk Family Kamp. Twice that week I had to take Carrie to the ER in Branson to have her stomach drained of fluid that was accumulating. We spoke together in the morning and tried to manage her discomfort in the afternoon and evening. Yet, of that event Carrie wrote, "*It is hard to put into words the glorious time we have had...and we know without a shadow of a doubt we were to be here to share about marriage, difficulties and the power of the Lord.*" That's either massive denial or, and I was there with her, it was a sense of God's power and presence that surpassed the pain and discomfort of a body that was, unbeknownst to us, only weeks away from becoming a brand new body as she would meet her Lord.

"In the first few days after Matt's death about all I could do spiritually was to repeat 'Jesus I know that you love me, Jesus I know that you love me, Jesus I know that you love me' and I would say to Him 'and Jesus, I love you for you still have not left me or forsaken me.' Sometimes all of this being said in agonizing, gut-wrenching weeping."
"Waiting is hard, it is tedious and it is something the enemy uses to discourage us because he wants to wear us down and out as we wait. The enemy cannot have us, will not have us. We are in the arms of Jesus, we are confined to His love and His safety. We

pray that whatever this day brings for you that you will experience this love and safety as well. Oh, we hope that for you. One does not have to go through cancer and the death of a child to feel in confinement. Be at peace in His arms and allow your heart to beat softly and slowly as you experience the love of Jesus in fresh deep ways.”

Now that’s the real deal ...

Nathan & Amy & Alivia: In mid-July the kids went to West Palm Beach to be with Amy’s Mom and Dad, her two sisters and Alivia’s two cousins. On July 15th Nathan and Amy celebrated their third wedding anniversary. They were able to find child care for Alivia (Amy’s folks just happened to be available) so they were able to get away for a rare night with just the two of them. They were married in West Palm Beach so it was a special treat to be there with family and then to be able to celebrate their anniversary.

Alivia continues to grow and by God’s grace is a healthy and spunky little gal. She is sleeping better (God does answer prayer), is holding her head up, still has big blue eyes, is making sounds that we’re sure are words that we just don’t understand, and more of her personality is coming out. Only those of you who are grandparents will know what a special blessing it is to watch your kids parent their own child, to see the love, compassion, dedication, intensity and constant concern. When I watch Nathan and Amy with Alivia I’m reminded of God’s love for His little children and that He is even more concerned.

Gary, Nathan and Andrew in the Grand Tetons: While Amy and Alivia stayed a bit longer in Florida, Nathan came home to join Andrew and me on a trip to the Grand Tetons. This is one of my favorite places in the whole wide world and has a lot of memories for me from my childhood up through adolescence, young adulthood to today. I took Nathan and Matt here when they were 13 for their “rites of passage” trip (Andrew got to go to Australia) and Norm Wright and I have had numerous fishing trips there. We hiked, went to a rodeo in Jackson Hole, rode a gondola to the top of the ski area with an amazing view of the entire valley, spend a day in Yellowstone, took a 15 mile hike with a 3,000 foot elevation gain, saw moose and buffalo and other critters, caught some trout in the morning and had them for dinner at night. It was a wonderful time and with Andrew being a college student and Nathan being a dad we may not have a lot more father/son trips in the future. Precious memories.

The day after we returned from the Tetons Nathan and I boarded a plane for Denver. Our good friend, Matt Farmer was finally getting married to the classy Jenna Love (they met at Kanakuk—go figure) and they asked me to officiate and Nathan to be a groomsman. Since Matt is a graduate of the Air Force Academy he was able to have the wedding in the academy chapel. If you’ve ever seen pictures of it (if not Google it) you’ll see an amazing piece of architecture both inside and out. It was a wonderful wedding between

two people who love Jesus and love each other. It's always a joy and a special honor to be a part of the miracle of a marriage...to see two become one.

Gary's Skydiving: Yeah, at the end of the month I did a static line jump which means I got out of the plane (on purpose) and let go and for several seconds prayed that my chute would open...and it did. It was an amazing experience. In the few seconds between my jumping out of the plane and my chute opening I sensed God saying to me, "Gary, this is how I want you to live--just trusting me to be faithful." Sometimes life feels like a freefall and at other time we know we're covered. Once the chute opened and I checked to make sure everything was working I was able to enjoy an amazing view and a fresh awareness of our God's majesty and the fact that HE is the chute that always opens. Andrew is going to be doing a "tandem" jump soon and I'm sure this won't be my last jump.

Other Stuff: At the end of the month I was able to speak for another week at Kanakuk Family Kamp and had a wonderful time. Kanakuk is an amazing place and has one of the most unique family camps I've ever seen with families from all around the country. This was the last place that Carrie and I ever spoke at together so it was especially meaningful for me to come back, this time as a widower and a single parent but still one who loves to talk about the goodness, grace and mercy of a gracious God.

In August I'll take Andrew to Biola and drop him off for his freshman year of college. At some point not too far down the road Nathan and Amy and Alivia will probably be moving to West Palm Beach and I'll be alone in this lovely large house that once was filled (most of the time) with love, joy, laughter and dreams. Our three-car garage will only have one car and I'll have sole responsibility for the cats. Now that's depressing. Will I have times of loneliness, sadness, discouragement, aching, longing and even some depression—probably. Will my faith in my Lord Jesus Christ be the same when I'm alone in an empty house—I think so. Will I still be able to experience love and joy and laughter and maybe even start dreaming again—I know so! Perhaps not 24/7. But I know that it will somehow work together for good. I've staked my life on it.

Thanks & Praise:

- A warm and wonderful July 2nd celebration of Carrie's life and legacy
- Nathan and Amy's 3rd wedding anniversary
- The continued growth of Alivia and the joy she brings
- G-Paw's joy of seeing, hearing and holding precious little Alivia
- Andrew's Future Plans
- The loving support of our extended families and treasured friends

- The beauty of the Grand Tetons
- Being a part of Matt and Jenna's wedding
- A great future

Prayer Requests:

- Taking Andrew to Biola
- His roommates, friends and first semester at Biola
- The ongoing health and growth of Alivia
- Nathan & Amy, Andrew and Marsha
- The courage to continue to face what needs to be faced in responsibly transparent ways
- Our continuing journey in redefining ourselves and our family
- That God might be glorified in all that we do

October 2008

Change is a Constant

It's been a couple of months since my last update. I had decided that for the first year after Carrie's death I'd write a monthly update and then perhaps do some periodic ones after that first anniversary. Thanks to a number of friends who have gently pushed me to continue to share the journey and thanks for your continuing prayers!

Nathan, Amy and Alivia Moving to Florida: I ended my last update with what has proved to be a prophetic paragraph. *“At some point not too far down the road Nathan and Amy and Alivia will probably be moving to West Palm Beach and I'll be alone in this lovely large house that once was filled with love, joy, laughter, dreams and lots of people. Our three-car garage will only have one car and I'll have sole responsibility for the cats. Now that's depressing. Will I have times of loneliness, sadness, discouragement, aching, longing and even some depression—probably. Will my faith in my Lord Jesus Christ be the same when I'm alone in an empty house—I think so. Will I still be able to experience love and joy and laughter and maybe even start dreaming again—I know so! Perhaps not 24/7. But I know that it will somehow work together for good. I've staked my life on it.”*

Well, shortly after I wrote that Nathan let me know that they would be moving to West Palm Beach in late October. That was their original plan before Matt died and after Matt's death they decided to postpone their plans to spend more time with Carrie and Andrew. Nathan is eight years older than Andrew and he really wanted to know his

“little” brother better and since that would be Andrew’s senior year in high school it seemed like a great opportunity to do that. I applaud Nathan and Amy for setting aside their plans for a year to invest in their family. Amy’s family lives in West Palm Beach and it has been her desire for a long time to move back home and God has opened some great doors there for them. I’ll fill you in on what they are doing in a future update.

So, on October 22nd the kids and I will pull away from the house here in Siloam Springs and I’ll say goodbye to another chapter of my life and begin a new one. I’ll now have one son on each of the coasts. This November I will celebrate my first Thanksgiving in 28 years without my wife or any of my boys around. That will really be a different experience for me. But I will celebrate with my dear sister Marsha. I will celebrate 28 years of precious and deeply meaningful memories and I will give thanks and praise to a good, mighty, merciful and generous God who has given me much more than I ever deserved and who isn’t quite finished with me yet.

This has been an amazing year with me, Andrew, Nathan, Amy and (in May) Alivia living together in our home. It’s often the case that after a loss (and in our case two losses) the emotional upheaval and grief process can produce a significant relational disequilibrium that can have a negative effect on close relationships but that hasn’t happened to us. In this year we didn’t just tolerate each other but learned to understand and love each other more, care for, serve, and encourage each other. In this year of living together there hasn’t been a single negative incident. Given what we have all been through and the emotional roller-coaster we’ve been on and that all of us are strong people it is a testimony to God’s grace and goodness to us and the relational legacy that Carrie left for us.

Andrew to Biola: On August 16th, Nathan and Andrew took off in Andrew’s car for a brothers road trip to California. They took an extra day to visit the Grand Canyon together and had a great time of memory-making and bonding. A few days later Amy, Alivia and I flew out to meet them. We arrived several days before Andrew’s freshman orientation at Biola so that we could have some time together before school started. We have a lot of family memories in Southern California (where I grew up and where we took the boys to visit my folks when they were young) and Nathan wanted to show Andrew what he had learned about getting around Southern California when we spent his four years at Biola. We visited Long Beach, ate at the El Dorado Park restaurant where we had eaten many meals with Mom and Dad and Marsha, went to Knott’s Berry Farm, we guys spent an afternoon body surfing at Huntington Beach then had a burger and malt at Ruby’s on the pier and we all just really enjoyed being together. When we took Nathan to Biola, Carrie and Matty were with us and as we visited some familiar places we remembered and were grateful. A thoughtful friend let all of us stay at his house while he

and his wife were out of town and it couldn't have been a better way to introduce Andrew to this wonderful new chapter of his life and create some priceless family memories.

Of course it was hard to say goodbye to my precious Andrew but knowing where he was, the quality school that Biola is and the kind of support he has out there made it a bit easier for me. Andrew's four years of high school have been some of the most painful, discouraging and difficult any young man could experience: seeing his dad go through a fourth cancer surgery, chemotherapy and radiation and not knowing for a time if he would make it, seeing his mom valiantly battle one of the deadliest forms of cancer and fight beyond the 3-6 month prognosis for over two years, having one of his brothers die a tragic death and then two months later watching his mom go to be with the Lord to join his brother and then, for his senior year of high school, dealing with a myriad of emotions in the process of healing from two massive losses, anticipating moving away from home to start his college life as well as working through a redefinition of what it means to be a family. That's a lot of pain, trauma, grief and loss for one teenager to experience but Andrew has come through it in ways that make me (and Carrie since I figure she knows what's going on) proud. So when we flew back to Arkansas on August 26th it was with mixed emotions but mostly joy and gratitude for a gracious God and a very real hope.

By the way, Andrew's birthday is on November 7th and if you'd like to contact Andrew and perhaps send him a note of encouragement, a birthday card or let him know you are praying for him you can contact me via this website and I'll send you his mailing address.

Watching Alivia Grow: One of my greatest joys in these past few months has been watching precious little Alivia grow. Few grandfathers have the opportunity to spend the first five months with a grandchild in their home. I've loved hearing her sounds, watching her grow and develop, holding her and taking her for walks and experiencing the huge blessing of seeing what a great dad my son Nathan is and what a great mom Amy is. I've loved watching how she looks at me when I'm giving her a bottle, how she takes my fingers, the new noises she makes, how she likes to munch on my fingers while she is teething, how much more she is smiling, how alert she is and all of the sounds she is aware of and how she smiles. Those are just a few of my favorite things. When all is said and done the most important thing in life is our family and I've been blessed beyond words to have been given the gift of having this part of my family not just close by but in the same house together.

I Rarely Ask Why But At Times I Do Wonder: As a young Christian I remember wondering if it was okay to question God. For some reason I've not felt the need to ask "why" but through this healing process I've realized that it's more than okay or acceptable to wonder, to question, to struggle and even on rare occasions to doubt. When Mother Teresa died in Calcutta at the age of 87 her diaries were collected by authorities of the Roman Catholic Church and taken back to Rome. As they began to transcribe her

diaries many were shocked when they read words that described some of her tremendous inner turmoil. This is from one who to the public always seemed so strong and confident of her faith. For example, in 1958 Mother Teresa wrote, “My smile is a great cloak that hides a multitude of pains . . . [People] think that my faith, my hope and my love are overflowing and that my intimacy with God and union with His will fills my heart. If only they knew.” In response to this and other entries in her diaries “Il Messaggero”, Rome’s popular daily newspaper noted, “The real Mother Teresa was one who for one year had visions and who for the next fifty had doubts—until her death.”

About a year ago my good friend Dale Schlafer gave me a little book of Puritan prayers. *The Valley of Vision* has been such a blessing. Here are a few lines from one of the prayers:

*Thou hast brought me to the valley of vision,
Where I live in the depths but see thee in the heights.
Let me learn that the valley is the place of vision.
Lord, in the daytime stars can be seen from the deepest wells,
And the deeper the wells the brighter thy stars shine;
Let me find thy light in my darkness,
Thy life in my death,
Thy joy in my sorrow,
Thy grace in my sin,
Thy riches in my poverty
Thy glory in my valley.*

Precious Memories of Matt: About a month ago I received a precious note from one of Matt’s best friends when he was at Huntington College. It revealed a side of Matty that I knew but that many others didn’t know. The young man who wrote this will never know what this note meant to our family. For those of you who knew Matt you’ll find this especially meaningful:

Hello Gary, I have been meaning to do this for a while now. I have been fairly busy but today I had an experience that made me think of Matt more than normal. Every day I think of Matt. Today was an exception. I am once again attending Huntington and am in a class that Matt and I were both in at one point. I have to take the class over again so that’s why I’m back in that frame of mind.

Anyway, I was sitting outside like I did with Matt only 4 years prior and when discussing what we were assigned to discuss by Steve and Twyla I thought back about how much fun we used to have (Matt and I) thinking analytically about everything, challenging the bible, and always coming to the same conclusion...God's love is irrational...and his passion unreasonable...I remember that we were both fans of Brennan Manning and that we both looked at life through these eyes that God put specifically in us...I write you this to not only encourage you but also to let you know this...I am taking 10 classes 5 through Huntington, 4 through IU online, and 1 through ivy-tech...I am working 40 plus hours a week at true value...I embarked on this journey after getting out of hell...the reason why I did not grow cold at the world for sending me to hell on earth is simply because of Matt...not that he died but that he understood me...no one that I know of can relate to me in as many ways as Matt did. The realization that there's one out there that had understood my mind's eye gives me great hope...God is the only one now that understands me...however, I started thinking when I heard that Matt died (which was about the time that I was released) that Matt being the only other one who thought like I did about what Jesus means (and how to explain to others our views would blow people out of the water!) that I must become more educated in what we both barely touched on and become better prepared to deliver this rad view to others so that they would be set free as Matt and I were...

I recently had the chance to hear a well-known speaker and let me tell you I was anticipating a great display of wit and representation of the God that Matt and I knew...however, he didn't talk at all about how simple God's love is...why is it that great philosophers miss this point? The Wisdom of the Cross...it blows my mind so much that I can't remember it all myself much of the time....

So this has become long winded...but I want you to know that I know no one that has meant more to me than Matt and I hope to show the world what we saw...every time I get down and exhausted I quickly am reminded that God is near and that Matt would have liked what I am aiming for and who knows when my time is gonna be up on earth...I will and always do miss Matt but he is an inspiration to me daily...I love you Gary and I thank you for your support in the past...

Here is a part of what I wrote back to this young man:

I too miss Matt every day. When many people think of Matt they tend to first think of how he died, yet I always think of who Matt really was underneath the intense and relentless spiritual warfare, the depression, the fear, the low self-esteem and the addictions. I think of his bright green eyes, his energy, his quick mind and his wonderful love for nature. I think of how he fought through so much and of all of the progress he had made. As you know, Matty loved the Lord, he loved life and he loved people. He was loyal to a fault. His sense of humor was amazing. His ability to think philosophically, theologically and

psychologically was at times astonishing. So often when I think of him a smile comes to my face. Few people could make people laugh like Matty could. During the last few months of his life he was doing better than he had done in a long time. We spend many hours talking about C.S. Lewis, theology and what his options were after graduation. He was really excited about going into some form of ministry where he could share what he had learned from some of his mistakes to help people and make a difference in the lives of others. In fact, we had one of those conversations just a few days before he died. That was his heart.

When I went to clean out Matt's room after his death here is a prayer that he had taped to his bathroom mirror. Matt told me this is something that he started and ended every day with. Now I do the same...

Lord, I choose to give myself to You, whatever the cost may be.

Take every aspect of my life and use me for Your Kingdom to glorify Your name.

I'm not here on earth to do my own thing, or seek my own fulfillment or my own glory.

I'm not here to indulge my desires, to increase my possessions, to impress people, to be popular, to prove I'm somebody important, or to promote myself.

I'm not here to be relevant or successful by human standards. I'm here to please You.

The desire of my heart is to discover what it means to delight in you.

I want to have my heart captivated and my mind entranced by the superlative beauty and incomparable sweetness of who You are.

I understand that delighting in You alone will dislodge sin from my heart.

So help me to learn more fully how to enjoy You, love You, worship You, serve You and be exuberant in my love for you.

I'll do anything that You want me to do, go anywhere that You want me to go and say anything that You want me to say.

Father, there isn't any gift that You have for me that I don't want.

If You want to use me in a way that I'm not used to, I yield myself to that.

Today I re-dedicate myself to You.

I love You, my God, and I choose to live and serve in Your way.

I trust You, Lord, to do that which I cannot do myself.

Teach me, guide me, and empower me and reveal yourself through me.

In Jesus' Name, Amen

Thanks & Praise:

- The continued growth of Alivia and the joy she brings
- G-Paw's joy of seeing, hearing and holding precious little Alivia
- Our wonderful time taking Andrew to Biola
- The kindness of the Carders in opening their home to us
- Andrew's being able to attend Biola and that he is doing well there
- This past year of living together as a family and having the kids close by
- The loving support of our extended families and treasured friends
- The great future that Amy, Nathan and Alivia have awaiting them in Florida

Prayer Requests:

- Strength, perspective and faithfulness in this new chapter of my life
- Nathan, Amy & Alivia's move to West Palm Beach
- Andrew's roommates, friends and first semester at Biola
- The ongoing health and growth of Alivia
- Nathan & Amy, Andrew and Marsha
- The courage to continue to face what needs to be faced in responsibly transparent ways
- Our continuing journey in redefining ourselves and our family

November 2008

Marsha

My Sister: A lot has happened since my last update! We've enjoyed the dedication of precious little Alivia Merrell Oliver, moved Nathan and Amy to West Palm Beach and experienced the home going of my beloved older sister Marsha.

It was quite a shock when on Friday morning, October 24th, I received a call that my dear sister Marsha had fallen asleep the night of the 23rd and sometime early the next morning woke up breathing celestial air. I know she was met by our Lord Jesus Christ, our Mom and Dad, dear Carrie, Matt and other loved ones.

That Wednesday and Thursday Nathan and I were driving the moving van and Amy and her mom were driving the car on the kids move down to their new home and new lives in West Palm Beach. I had called Marsha on Thursday night about an hour outside of West Palm just to check in and see how she was doing. We had a nice long chat, she sounded good, we laughed about a few things, I told her that I'd see her on Sunday and that I loved her and the last words I heard her say were "I love you too Gary" and I thank God for that special gift. You never ever know when a conversation will be your last one with someone you love.

Marsha contracted polio on her fifth birthday and we were told that she wouldn't live past the age of 30. She spent most of her teenage years in hospitals. By God's grace they were off by 36 years! These past 10 years she had started to experience the effects of Post-Polio Syndrome and was confined to her electric cart but she lived by herself and drove herself around in her special van and was notoriously independent. However, she was becoming weaker and she was just one fall away from being unable to take care of herself and having to go to assisted care. In fact, when I came back from Florida I was going to have to have a talk with her about making plans for that possibility but now it doesn't matter since she has been healed.

We almost lost her last summer and I thank God that He graciously gave us one more year with her. Precious Amy was great in initiating and scheduling dinner times either at our house or Marsha's. We would get together a couple of times a week. When she'd come to my place Nathan and I would get her special ramps out so she could get into our home. When Carrie and I built our house we made the downstairs wheelchair accessible in case one of our family members had to come and live with us so Marsha was able to zip around (and she could go fast in that scooter) our home without any problem. We would have dinner, watch Lost together and just enjoy being a family. Here is what Nathan and Amy wrote about Marsha on their blog:

"Marsha, you taught us about contentment no matter your life circumstance. You taught us about rising above pain and beating the odds. You taught us how to have joy and happiness even when life is not what you hoped it would be or as easy as you'd like. Thank you for enriching and blessing our lives with being a faithful servant of God and for being exactly who He created you to be. We rejoice that you are whole, that you are free and that you are worshipping our good God. We will miss you, sweet Marsha."

Wow, it seems unreal that in only 18 months we've experienced the loss of a son and brother, a wife and mother, a sister and an aunt. We Olivers know where our beloved ones are but there are still massive holes in our hearts and in our lives. It's a huge loss for Nathan and Andrew who have grown up with their Aunt Marsha and on every birthday received an early morning call hearing Marsha's voice singing happy birthday. She was just as excited about other people's birthdays as she was her own. During Andrew's high

school years as I fought my most serious bout of cancer and Carrie spent two years fighting her cancer, my sister Marsha was in many ways more than an aunt to Andrew. She and Andrew were very close and would eat out together at least once a week. As we were looking at some pictures for Marsha's memorial service Andrew found one from several years ago with our immediate family and Marsha—six people. As he looked at the picture he noted that half of the people in the picture were now with the Lord. It still seems very unreal.

In a card a friend who recently lost a sibling wrote about what it was like for her and it echoed some of what I am experiencing. It seems like there are a gazillion losses on many different levels. For example, Marsha and I had made plans to eat together a couple of times a week. In fact, she was going to teach me how to cook for one person. We had made plans to write a thorough Oliver family history. Only my older sister Marsha shared my life from the beginning until October 24th of this year and with her loss is the loss of laughter, tears, intensity, sibling camaraderie, childhood memories that only siblings can share and help each other remember. In Marsha's case, she remembered details and dates that I'll never know. She was the keeper of the history of two generations of Jackson's and Olivers. She was my last real living connection with Mom and Dad, with my childhood, with people who have long since passed on. In fact, in some ways it's a different level of loss of my Mom and Dad, of memories of them when they were both healthy.

Through yet another loss God is teaching me what it means to be a friend. Immediately upon learning of Marsha's death one of my oldest and wisest friends send me the following note:

“Gary, the Lord has had me up since 2:38 this morning a part of which has been interceding for you. As I have been praying this is what I sensed the Lord saying to me: ‘John (not his real name), don't be like a friend of Job for Gary.’ I assume that this means I am not to try and answer your questions that you posed on the phone the other day, when you called and let me know of Marcia's passing. I too have all those questions and if I were to try and answer, would push you away from the Lord and His sustaining power. I don't know the answers! I just know that in all of this mess you have are going through--somehow He is there in the midst of it with you. Gary, keep sharing your frustrations, anger, and pain with Him--that will not affect how much He loves you. Know that I love you and grieve with you in these days. May you find in Him just enough to make it through today, and each day thereafter, until He shows Himself mighty on your behalf. That I know He will do! I love you brother.”

Over the past few years I have developed a deep confidence in the goodness of God. I still trust his intentions for me but His timing doesn't always make the best of sense. I continue to desire to resign and relinquish my dreams and expectations to his at time significant updates and revisions. In my experience there is often a line between a healthy

attachment and an undue attachment to any state, place, position or relationship. At times I feel like Mary in Luke 1:38 where she said, “I am the Lord’s servant, and I am willing to accept whatever he wants.” But it’s not always easy.

Alivia’s Dedication: While this past month has brought some deep sorrow there has also been some times of great joy and celebration. On October 18th we were joined by Amy’s wonderful parents, Rick and Lynn for Alivia’s dedication at our church in Northwest Arkansas and Marsha joined us for that special occasion. It was an amazing experience to see Nathan and Amy in front of our church family holding little Alivia and dedicating themselves and their daughter to the Lord. I’m rarely at a loss for words but I don’t have the words to express what a joyful and deeply moving experience it was.

Moving the Kids to West Palm Beach: These past weeks also involved Nathan and Amy packing their earthly belongings for a long-anticipated move to West Palm Beach. On the Sunday before the move we had a lovely going away party for them and Marsha was able to join us for that fun event. On Wednesday morning the 22nd we drove away from Siloam Springs with me and Nathan in the van and Amy, Lynn and Alivia in the car and on Thursday night we arrived in West Palm to begin the new chapter in our lives.

While it’s somewhat bittersweet to have the kids move away it is actually more sweet than bitter. The Lord has opened some great doors for them there. They will have their own home and Amy will be able nest and to use her great decorating skills to reflect her own good taste. They’ll be close to Amy’s Mom and Dad, her sisters and Alivia will be close to her cousins. I’ve been massively blessed to have my granddaughter living with me for five months. It’s been a joy to watch her becoming more alert, aware, stronger and wanting to crawl. It’s been fun watching her appear insulted when she is offered a sippy cup—she wants to drink from the same cup her Dad drinks from. On her last full day here I spent an hour in the morning with her just holding her, walking around with her, singing to her and praying for her. It was a joy. It’s amazing to see how her progression accelerates with every new month. I can’t wait to see her again at Christmas.

Please pray for the kids as they look for a new home, arrange for financing in a difficult economy and as Nathan starts his own counseling practice and is involved in some other ministries. There are many opportunities there for them and one of their greatest challenges will be to discern what God would have them to do and what they need to say no to.

Andrew’s Birthday—November 7th: Due to Marsha's memorial service Andrew came back home the week before his birthday and we had Part 1 of a great celebration with Nathan and Amy. Amy made some amazing carrot cake, we shared some gifts and some memories of many happy family times. Since I had already purchased the airline tickets for his actual birthday Andrew came back home the following week for Part 2 of his

birthday and we had some great father and son time together. We spent his actual “birth day” in Tulsa. I’ll be out in Southern California the week of November 17th so we’ll have Part 3 of his birthday celebration in (comparatively) warm sunny California. By the way, Andrew recently had his phone number changed. Email us for his new number.

Thanks:

- For the life of my dear sister Marsha L. Oliver
- For the “extra” year God gave us with her
- For this past year with all of us living together in the same house with no major problems
- and with a lot of good memories
- For Nathan & Amy’s safe move to Florida
- For Andrew’s 19th birthday
- For the way God continues to bless The Center for Relationship Enrichment at JBU
- For so many things to be thankful for
- The beauty of the Fall leaves in Arkansas

Prayer:

- Emotional healing for the family
- Andrew at Biola
- Nathan & Amy & Alivia’s new life in Florida
- Nathan’s new job and ministry
- My taking care of the myriad of details of Marsha’s estate
- My health
- Going through Thanksgiving and Christmas without Carrie, Matt and Marsha

January 2009

Bittersweet Reminders

I just returned home from taking Andrew to the airport here in Northwest Arkansas for his trip back to Biola. It's always hard to say goodbye but I'll be making a couple of trips out to Southern California the spring so I'll have a chance to see him several times before he comes home in late May. He's been home for over a month and it's been a real joy to have him around—we've had some great father/son time together.

Thanks to those of you who have asked when I was going to write my next update. I've gotten behind a bit. Part of it is busyness and part of it is the bittersweet nature of doing these. The painful part is that it stirs up the memories of life without Carrie, Matt and Marsha and all of what that means every day and many times a day. The very sweet part is that it's a great reminder of a life filled with ample blessings, wonderful memories, the faithful presence of dear friends who don't forget and the extravagant ways in which God continues to bless me and our family.

November: This was my challenging first month in my big lovely house by myself and living here in Siloam Springs without my precious, gracious, cheery, loving, kind and encouraging sister Marsha. Early in the month I made my faithful pilgrimage down to MD Anderson in Houston for my check-up and praise the Lord I passed with flying colors. I stayed with my dear friends Ehab and Sylvie and the girls and had a brief time for a long overdue catching up. I was able to bring Andrew home for his birthday (November 7th) and we had a long weekend together. This was his first birthday without Carrie, Matt, Marsha, Nathan & Amy—he was stuck with his dad—but we had a great time. We are starting to find a new rhythm and the “new normal” is starting to take shape.

A major part of the month and what will continue for the next three to four months, was starting to go through all of Marsha and my mom and dad's things. When my Dad died several years ago we took the most important family stuff (and there was a lot of it) over to Marsha's since she had the room and was the keeper of the family history. The first couple of times I went over to Marsha's to work I couldn't stay more than a few minutes. It seemed generations of memories jumped out of every box I opened and I just couldn't take it and had to leave. As the month wore on it got a bit easier. It's amazing how a piece of clothing of a loved-one or a little nick-knack your mom had on her dresser when you were growing up can release a tsunami of precious but painful memories. Tears have become my friend. It's so easy to get overwhelmed by the pain of the loss (and nothing is wrong with that) but in time I've become better at “choosing sovereign joy” and being overwhelmed by the presence of precious memories and the grace of God evidenced by those little reminders. I thank God that we can experience pain and pleasure, sorrow and joy all at the same time, and that the joy can become greater than the sorrow.

This was my first Thanksgiving without any immediate family and that was really different. The Ostrandens had pity on their single friend (I guess all of my shameless hints worked) and invited me to join them and Rick's parents for a real Thanksgiving dinner and some wonderful family time. After dinner I drove up to Kansas City for some relaxation and refreshment. My mom used to say that most people have at least one "happy place" in their life—a place that they associate with relaxation, refreshment, inspiration and comfort. My number one "happy place" is the Grand Tetons, but the beach and the Kansas City Plaza are a couple of other special places in my life.

Another great joy during the month of November was working with my friends at The Center for Healthy Relationships at John Brown University. JBU is a unique place and my CHR staff are the best folks I've ever worked with. A special delight continues to be the development of our NWA Healthy Marriages (www.nwamarriages.com) program. Through a five-year federal grant we're having the opportunity to impact thousands of couples in Northwest Arkansas, decrease the number of divorces and increased the numbers of folks with rewarding and mutually-satisfying marriages.

December: This month started with Greg Smalley and I going to a Marriage CoMission Summit at the Winshape Retreat Center (founded by the good folks at Chick-fil-a) in Rome, Georgia. We spent several days meeting with marriage leaders from around the country to share what we're all doing and find ways to collaborate to make a positive difference in the marriages across our nation. On December 18th Andrew flew back from California to begin a delightfully long Christmas break. He had a great first semester at Biola and did well and at the same time was looking forward to being with his friends and to a lesser degree his father in Arkansas. Andrew was born in Denver and really enjoys Southern California but he is unashamedly and unapologetically an Arkansas boy.

On December 24-31st Nathan, Amy and precious little Alivia joined us in Arkansas for Christmas. This was Alivia's first Christmas and it was an indescribable joy for G-paw (that's me) to have her here and watch her enjoy her new toys, make more eye contact, attempt to crawl, make those delightful little sounds that only a baby can make and to hold her for hours, especially in the early morning when she hadn't let her mom and dad have much sleep. The wonder and awe of a newborn is amazing, but when it's your grandchild it's even more astonishing.

Going through a second Christmas without Carrie and Matt and then our first one without dear Marsha who was always so joyful and especially so around Christmas was difficult but we were able to focus on the many great memories we shared together and the new memories we are creating and were very aware of God's grace and goodness!

After our Christmas celebration we drove up to Kansas City and met Carrie's family (who drove down from Nebraska) for another Christmas celebration. For many years now

we've celebrated Christmas with Carrie's family either at our home or at one of their homes in Nebraska. As the boys get older and the families grow it's going to become more difficult for us to do that so we've got to seize these times when we can, carve out the time and make it a priority. It's been over a year since I've been able to go to Nebraska and that's very unusual.

December 27th would have been our 28th wedding anniversary. Marilyn (Carrie's mom) was the only one who remembered this anniversary day (I wouldn't expect anyone else to). The great news for me was that this year it was much more sweet than it was bitter. Being with the boys and Carrie's family in one of our "happy places" perhaps made it a bit easier. I was very aware of the blessing of our years of marriage, the joys, pains, adversity, blessings, setbacks and too numerous to count examples of God's presence and exceedingly abundant blessing on our lives and in our marriage and family. The cup can always be seen as half-full or half-empty and I choose to see it as half-full.

January: At the beginning of the month I flew out to Southern California to spend a few days with some old (and new) friends, many of whom I went to Biola or Talbot with or knew from my early years of ministry in Southern California. We call the group the Desert Fathers and I had the chance to reconnect with some men I hadn't seen since my seminary days. Some of them have really gotten old. I don't know how that happened. All of us have had our bumps and bruises (some more than others), have made some mistakes, experienced some profound blessings and are there to recall, recant where appropriate, listen to, love and encourage each other. It's a joy to spend time with godly men whose life has been spent walking with the Lord, serving Him and who have not only run well but who are committed to finishing well. We laughed and cried and shared a lot of stories, most of them actually true.

After a week in the office Andrew and I spent the weekend at the Kansas City Plaza. You may remember that this is a place Carrie and the boys and I have gone to for about six years, a place where we've done reading and writing, have unwound, been renewed and refreshed and come home energized for the next round of life. We walked and talked, went to a lot of movies and dissected them (and life) over some great meals. It was a treat to be with my youngest son and see how he is maturing and growing into a young man who can ask great questions and think for himself. Biola has been good for him and he is taking advantage of what it has to offer. On the 24th I took Andrew to the airport for his flight back to Biola and his life there.

Alivia Oliver: On January 21st Alivia turned 8 months old. A year ago Amy was pregnant and the kids had no idea what awaited them and now we have a 8 month old precious little girl. Alivia is crawling everywhere, pulling herself up to stand and walk along the furniture, pulling books out of her book box and actually sitting up in the tub by herself. Nathan is working several days a week doing individual and group therapy in an

addictions treatment center and starting his private practice and the kids are in the middle of looking for their first home. They are doing well and please pray for them that God will give them wisdom and discernment as they make one of the most significant purchases of their lives at a time when the economy is so unstable.

Observations: My mom taught me to appreciate the works of Maya Angelou. Here is a quote from her that I have found helpful:

"In the midst of hard times, you have to say, 'I know this will not last forever.' No matter how bad it gets, I'm always grateful to know that I don't have to stay with the negative. I don't have to continue in this climate of cynicism. I may not see the light at the end of the tunnel, but I know there is one...Happiness is not found in counting what you have, be it books or accolades or wealth or friends, but by appreciate however much--or little--you've been given...I'm grateful. I am truly grateful. I'm grateful for being here, for being able to think, for being able to see, for being able to taste, for appreciating love--for knowing that it exists in a world so rife with vulgarity, with brutality and violence, and yet love exists. I'm grateful to know that it exists. And I'm grateful to know it exists in me, and I'm able to share it with so many people."

What are YOU grateful for? We always have stuff to complain about. Loneliness, weariness, discouragement, physical, emotional, relational or financial problems are always with us. By God's grace there are discrete blessings in walking through the daily routines and dealing with the stuff of life and discovering, sometimes as if by accident, the manna that God has promised us for every new day. His mercies ARE new every morning.

For those of us who have suffered catastrophic loss and go through each day with an emotional/psychological/spiritual "limp" that only we are aware of (and don't want to burden others with) it is especially critical that we choose, that by God's grace and the power of the Holy Spirit we at times "will" ourselves to count our blessings and name them one by one. Not as some kind of pseudo-spiritual denial but as a testimony to the presence of God in our lives and an example to others that circumstances don't determine ultimate reality and that somehow what may seem to us like treading water and merely trying to be faithful to God's continued call on our lives by putting one foot in front of the other can actually be used of God to point people to a reality that transcends whatever circumstances the evil one is trying to use to distract and discourage them. Sometimes how we deal with pain points people beyond ourselves to the one who sustains us, who is living in and through us and since the beginning of time has kept every promise He has ever made!

I'm reminded again of one of my favorite quotes of James Sittser, which I've shared before:

“If I give the impression I think myself heroic, perfect, or strong, then I give the wrong impression. My experience has only confirmed in my mind how hard it is to face loss and how long it takes to grow from it. But it has also reminded me how meaningful and wonderful life can be, even and especially in suffering...My suffering is as puzzling and horrible to me now as it was the day it happened...catastrophic loss leaves the landscape of one’s life changed forever.” On the changed landscape can grow new dreams and hopes and relationships that compliment what has gone before and is a testimony to a God that will never leave us or forsake us. To God be the glory!”

Thanks:

- For so much to be thankful for over the holidays
- For a comforting sense of God’s presence
- Gratitude for the lives of Carrie, Matt and Marsha
- A great visit with the kids
- A great visit with Carrie’s family
- The sheer delight of watching little Alivia grow
- For Nathan & Amy’s great adjustment to Florida
- For the way God continues to bless The Center for Healthy Relationships at JBU
- Friends who continue to pray and reach out and encourage

Prayer:

- Continuing emotional healing for our family
- Andrew’s new semester at Biola and his desire for a part-time job
- Nathan & Amy & Alivia’s new life in Florida
- Nathan’s new job and ministry
- Amy’s getting her license so she can practice counseling in Florida
- The ongoing challenge of taking care of the myriad of details of Marsha’s estate

June 2009

Absent Love

February 23rd - Matt's Birthday: When I woke up this morning I received an email with the following verse: "You are my lamp, O Lord; the Lord turns my darkness into light." (2 Samuel 22:29) That's exactly what he does! Today would have been Matt's birthday. The "experts" on grief are right--in some ways it gets harder and in other ways it gets easier. The morning was rough as I was bombarded with memories from the first 24 hours after hearing that he was gone and I experienced a renewed awareness of the huge hole that Matt had left. In fact, I wept much more today than I did a year ago. I still see his face and his huge smile, I still feel his powerful hug and I still remember the last thing I ever heard him say, "I love you too Dad." Yeah, there is still a hole. At the same time I choose to thank God for the many good, pleasant, positive and happy memories that are actually becoming more powerful than the painful ones. One of my favorite memories of Matty is when he was about two and he took off his diapers and decided to try to climb over a short chain-link fence at our rental home in Lincoln. When I visualize his bare butt going towards the top of the fence I can't help but smile. That plus the reality of knowing where he is and that he is healthy and whole and still flashing his huge signature smile made it a day of grace and gratitude.

THANKS to those of you who remembered that anniversary and called or emailed me or the boys to let us know you were praying for us. I'm always surprised, amazed and blessed by the people who remember these anniversaries--you are a "Barnabas" to me and God is using you to teach me how I can be a better friend to others.

February 27 – March 1 San Simeon/Hearst's Castle with Andrew: Many families have "special" places they have gone to for vacations, places that are loaded with many rich family memories. One of those places for the Oliver family has been Hearst Castle on the central California coast. Shortly after the Hearst family sold the castle to the State of California my mom and dad would take me and Marsha there several times a year. We would stay in the little village of San Simeon, eat at small mom-and-pop restaurants in what was then the small town of Cambria, walk on the beaches and just enjoy the culture of the castle and the beauty of the ocean. We even celebrated Christmas there a couple of times.

As I was already out in Southern California for some ministry I was able to carve out a few extra days. Since Andrew had never been to Hearst Castle one of my great desires was to share this gold mine of beauty and family memories with him so on February 27th we headed up the coast and spent several nights at the Cavalier Inn which is where my family always stayed and where Carrie and I and the older boys (Nathan and Matt) had stayed when they were young.

We went on three different tours of the castle, enjoyed the thousands of years of history that is there. Andrew had his first taste of escargot. We walked on the beach, looked for smooth rocks, hunted for some “sea glass” for Amy and had many adventures. We saw hundreds of elephant seals who come there from across the globe once a year to mate. We drove up the coast and for the first time Andrew saw the beauty of Highway 1 and the beautiful coast. It was a delightful and memorable father-son trip.

March 21st - Florida Visit: For several years CHR has been awarded a grant to provide a weekend enrichment experience for seriously dating, engaged and married couples at selected Christian colleges and universities. I was fortunate to get to teach the one at Palm Beach Atlantic University. Not only did I have a delightful time with the faculty and students from PBA but I was able to spend a short time with Nathan, Amy and precious little Alivia. Actually, the kids had just moved into their new home and I was blessed to be their first guest to stay in the guest bedroom. On Saturday afternoon Nathan and I went fishing in the little waterway the runs behind their home and caught 5 bass—not bad. They have both worked so hard painting and cleaning and making this house a home. Alivia has grown so much since they lived in Arkansas with me. I’m thankful that I had those early months with her and at the same time I’d love to have more time with her as she is able to do and say and interact so much more now than she was then. It’s a huge blessing to see your kids walking with the Lord and doing well. It doesn’t get a whole lot better than that.

April 12th Easter: As I had my quiet time this morning I was thinking that Carrie, Matt and Marsha are celebrating Easter together in heaven for the first time and this is my dear sister Marsha's very first heavenly Easter celebration. She and Carrie always enjoyed celebrating Easter and Christmas and now she is enjoying the real deal. Thinking about my dear ones who have gone before me on this day isn't a sad thing for me but something of true joy--certainly for them and for me as I have the blessed hope of someday celebrating with them. Until then, I choose to count my blessings and make the most of today with gratitude to God for His goodness, grace and mercy especially in what we celebrate this weekend.

April 21st - Carrie's 50th Birthday: Today would have been Carrie’s 50th birthday. When I turned 40 and then again when I turned 50 Carrie had two outrageous surprise parties for me so about seven years ago I started to plan and to save money for Carrie's 50th party and a surprise trip to Italy. Today was a challenging day for me—more challenging than I had anticipated. While it was bittersweet by God’s grace, it was much more sweet than bitter and for that I’m thankful. Reflecting both on huge losses and on God’s boundless mercy, grace and loving-kindness really helps to put things in perspective.

It's interesting how special days like this can trigger so many memories. I didn't feel quite the same way a year ago. As I talked with Nathan and Andrew, Carrie's folks and several of her close friends I was reminded of many sweet, positive, warm, encouraging, humorous and very precious memories. Precious memories that are reminders of God's goodness, grace and mercy. Precious memories that cause me to give thanks.

Precious memories that don't merely keep me stuck remembering the past but that encourage me in the present and future that God has for me and my family and for my future relationships. Real love, genuine love, Christ-like love is transformational. When you love, have been loved and are loved...you are forever changed. My capacity to love both in the here and now and in the future has been massively increased by the love I gave and the love I was given by Carrie.

Precious memories can either become an anchor that keeps one stuck in the muck of what was or become the refreshing wind in one's sails that keeps one moving ahead to discover whatever God has around the corner.

I've written and spoken before about Sovereign Joy and how we as Christians are in a unique place to experience and express sorrow and joy—both at the same time. Today I'm aware of some sadness and sorrow, have shed a few tears AND at the same time am very aware of how rich and blessed I really am.

For the past few months I've placed some quotes in a little file that I created to look at when this special day (Carrie's 50th birthday) came and one of them was so special I thought I share it with you. It's from the devotional book, *A Year With Dietrich Bonhoeffer* and is the reading for February 13:

Absent Love

Nothing can make up for the absence of someone whom we love, and it would be wrong to try to find a substitute; we must simply hold out and see it through. That sounds very hard at first, but at the same time it is a great consolation, for the gap, as long as it remains unfilled, preserves the bonds between us.

It is nonsense to say that God fills the gap; God does not fill it, but on the contrary, God keeps it empty and so helps us keep alive our former communion with each other, even at the cost of pain...

The dearer and richer our memories, the more difficult the separation. But gratitude changes the pangs of memory into a tranquil joy. The beauties of the past are borne, not as a thorn in the flesh, but as a precious gift in themselves.

We must take care not to wallow in our memories or to hand ourselves over to them just as we do not gaze all the time at a valuable present, but only at special times, and apart

from these keep it simply as a hidden treasure that is ours for certain. In this way the past gives us lasting joy and strength.

From Letters and Papers from Prison 100-101

April 24 - Margaret Reed Visit: I happened to be in Phoenix for a conference and was able to fly in early and make a surprise visit to a very precious lady. Margaret Reed has been a part of the Oliver family since before I was born and was my mom's closet friend. She lived down the street from us when I was in kindergarten and when on the "rare" occasions I was sent home from school with a note pinned to my shirt because I had got in trouble she would call my mom to let her know that little Gary was on the way home. Those of you who have read Carrie's journal will recognize Margaret as the friend that Carrie spent several months with when she received some special treatments in Phoenix that I believe God used to help extend Carrie's life. Margaret is a godly woman, a prayer warrior and is always a source of strength, encouragement, wisdom and perspective. The hour I was able to spend with her reenergized me in ways she'll never know. I hope I can be a "Margaret Reed" kind of friend to others.

May 5th - Matt's Homegoing Anniversary: Wow, it's hard to believe that it's been two years since I last hugged Matt, heard his voice and saw his face. But it HAS been two years. Sometimes it seems like 10 years and some days it seems like 10 days. Grief and loss are funny that way. They can do strange things to one's perception of time. Given the depth of the emotions I experienced on February 23rd I decided I wouldn't let myself be blindsided once again. In the morning I received emails and phone calls from some special friends and that really helped me start the day knowing that while I was physically alone there were friends who were here with me in spirit. As I sat down and wrote a list of all of the things about Matty that I was thankful for I had a special awareness of God's presence in the room with me and was once again aware of an enormous ache in my chest and at the same time a huge smile on my face. I'm continuing to learn that with God's help we can to a great degree determine what grief does TO us and what it does FOR us—and that can be a huge difference.

May 21-25 - Alivia Oliver's First Birthday: I picked up Nathan late Wednesday night at the Tulsa airport and on Thursday morning we loaded some of my late sister Marsha's furniture into a rental truck and had a delightful father-son two day road trip to Florida. When I arrived at Nathan and Amy's home it looked much different from my first visit. Nathan had repainted the exterior, all of the boxes were unpacked and the house was now a home. On the 21st was Alivia's first birthday and with Amy's extended family there we enjoyed a wonderful celebration of this bright, wide-eyed spunky little gal. She is walking slowly but is very determined. She is talking a lot and there are some words that are understandable. She loves to play with her toys with other people and it seems like she smiles all of the time—honest. Amy and Nathan are a great mom and dad and are

blessed to live in a place close to a loving family. It was a joy for me to see Alivia playing with her cousins and to see the support that Nathan and Amy have there. I'm so blessed that I'm able to see her more than once a year.

May 28th - Marsha's Birthday: Today is the first May 28th in my entire life that I haven't had a sister and a special birthday to celebrate. Marsha had a way of making everyone else's birthday so very special and it was fun to plan things for her. It seems like there isn't a week that goes by when someone doesn't mention how much they miss Marsha, how much she meant to them and how much her smile, kindness and thoughtfulness enriched their life. That's especially true for those of us who were family or close friends.

There are at least a couple of times a week when I wish I could call Marsha and tell her what I'm seeing. I wanted to call her from Florida several times. I miss her laugh, her smile, her bright eyes, her always cherry greeting and I miss being able to remember with her, talking about Mom and Dad, our childhood, our uncles and aunts and special memories and our years of helping each other grow up. I especially miss all of those conversations...AND I rejoice that I know where she is at and who she is with! I tend to cry more on these anniversary days and I tend to rejoice more. The Christian faith is great in that way since we can do both and one doesn't contradict the other.

Dying, death, funerals and dealing with the loss of loved ones are in ways a surreal experience and it can feel like you are in a kind of haze. I remember when my Mom died it was like I was watching myself go through my Mom's funeral while I was doing her funeral. I knew it was real but it had this inexplicable strangeness about it. At the same time, sometimes during times of major loss we can be more receptive to seeing certain things more clearly or from a different perspective. Whenever I feel a pang of pain or an ache for a loved one that I know I'll never see again on this side of glory I've learned to stop, look and listen for the presence and voice of the Holy Spirit. I'm learning to use those memories from the past to re-energize me to serve others in the present. I remind myself that I am part of the living legacy or memorial of Matt, Carrie and Marsha and that I can still make a difference in the lives of those around me. As you go through each day be sure to seize every opportunity to pray with and for someone. If God wakes you up early in the morning spend some time listening for his voice in the Psalms. Keep a little notebook handy to jot down ideas and thoughts. Look for every opportunity you have to celebrate God's goodness, grace, mercy and faithfulness and remember that He is a promise-maker and a promise-keeper.

Praise & Thanks:

- For so much to be thankful for over these anniversaries of losses.

- For a comforting sense of God's presence.
- Gratitude for the lives of Carrie, Matt and Marsha.
- A great visit with the kids.
- A great visit with Carrie's family .
- The sheer delight of watching little Alivia grow.
- For Nathan & Amy's great adjustment to Florida.
- For the way God continues to bless The Center for Healthy Relationships at JBU.
- Friends who continue to pray and reach out and encourage.
- That God never leaves us or forsakes us.

Prayer:

- Continuing emotional healing for our family.
- Andrew and I in Germany for the month of June—I'll be teaching one of the two classes he'll be taking.
- Nathan & Amy & Alivia's new life in Florida.
- Nathan's new job and ministry.
- Amy's getting her license so she can practice counseling in Florida.
- The ongoing challenge of taking care of the myriad of details of Marsha's estate.
- My ability to do a better job of discerning good, better and best and saying "No" a bit more.

March 2011

Gary on "Bad Days"

There is a video that goes on this date.

June 2015

Lessons Learned from the Doorstep of Death

Imagine going to the doctor for what you think is a routine check-up and being told you have two, rapidly growing, inoperable tumors... and apart from an experimental chemotherapy treatment, you may only have three months to live. Three months....

What emotions might you feel? What thoughts would immediately flood your mind? What questions would you have for the doctor? For God? What specific worries and fears might you experience? Who is the first person you would call? What would you say? Where would you start the process of organizing the last three months of your life?

Well, that is exactly what happened to me, and those are some of the very questions I had to ask myself. By God's grace, everything turned out to be a positive experience—even a sovereign opportunity—for me. Once again, God turned what Satan had designed for discouragement into a chance to continue demonstrating, and even showcasing, His faithfulness by providing some life lessons that I hope God will use to encourage you or someone you know.

In order to understand those lessons, I need to start about 25 years ago when I was told that what doctors thought was just a benign growth on my tongue was actually cancer, and they were going to operate in two days. I stood there holding the phone while staring out the window. These things don't happen to me! These are the kinds of things I help others deal with. Me . . . have cancer? No way! As it turned out, this was to be the first of seven occasions when I would be told I had cancer, and the first of six surgeries for that dreaded disease.

Seven years ago, and just a few months after doing the funeral service for my father, I sat in a doctor's office and heard him give the same diagnosis to my late wife, Carrie, except that her condition was for inoperable metastatic pancreatic cancer with a prognosis of just three to six months to live. It was infinitely more painful for me to hear her diagnosis than it was to hear my own. In His goodness and grace God gave Carrie two more years. Little did I know that within a four year period, I would have buried my dad; my wife of 27 years; my 23-year-old son, Matt; and my only sibling, Marsha.

Just a few years later in 2010, I received my sixth diagnosis of cancer and on May 6th, just one day after the 3rd anniversary of the death of my son Matt, I had a 10-hour surgery, and a long recuperation with the first month confined to my bed. They had to remove 80% of my tongue and replace it with skin from my legs. I was told that at some point my friends might be able to understand a few of my words, but I would probably never be able to speak in public again and might have to live with a feeding tube for the rest of my life. That isn't good news for anyone, but especially for someone whose life

and ministry has been teaching, preaching, speaking, counseling, coaching and consulting.

At that point I decided to not accept the idea that I would never be able to speak again. I began the painstaking, wearisome and remarkably discouraging journey of teaching myself how to speak—hours and weeks and many months of sitting in front of the mirror, repeating my ABC's over and over and over again. At first they were unintelligible... I couldn't even understand myself. However, over time my friends were able to understand a few words and I slowly began to sound like a reincarnated Elmer Fudd. That was progress.

In November of that same year, as I was making good progress in my recovery, I went back to MD Anderson Cancer Center in Houston for another “routine” checkup and was shocked to receive my seventh diagnosis of cancer. I was told that they'd found two rapidly-growing inoperable tumors in my neck and that without a new experimental chemo regimen, I might have only three more months to live. Three months? Really? Bummer. They weren't sure the new “chemo cocktail” would help but it was my only option. Thus began a new emotional roller-coaster ride—and a new growth opportunity.

I thought that my chemo regimen in 2003 was nasty, but this time I felt like I had been hit by a Mack® truck. The effects included major fatigue (just walking up a set of stairs exhausted me), nausea, the loss of fingernails and toenails, sores and rashes on my skin, inflammation around my eyes that secreted a substance making it difficult to open them on my own (some mornings I actually had to pry my eyes open), a swollen tongue, a cognitive “fog” that impacted my ability to focus, decreased creativity, neuropathy (a numbness in the tips of my fingers and toes), difficulty concentrating, decreased appetite.... However, there was one positive aspect: I was still able to laugh at myself and my own jokes even if no one else was laughing. Somehow I knew that I wasn't alone, that God's promises were still in effect and that these circumstances didn't change the reality of a faithful God I'd served for most of my life. After several months of treatment, I was told by my amazed physicians that the tumors had disappeared, which is when I began the year-long healing process.

So why did I take the time to tell you my story in such detail? First of all, it is a testimony to the goodness of God. Furthermore, I want you to know that what I am about to share is not just abstract theory, pop-psychology or trite spiritualization of painful and challenging realities. I have lived through darkness, discouragement, agonizing emotional and physical pain, and faced the news that I may only have a few more months to live... and by God's grace, He allowed me to learn some invaluable life lessons. He has given me certain gifts along the journey and allowed me to grow in ways I never anticipated and I want to share them with you.

Emotional Growth

God used these events to allow me to experience significant emotional growth. I was raised in Long Beach, California. On the beach they had an amusement park called The Pike and, at the time, it boasted the world's largest wooden roller-coaster known as the Cyclone Racer. When I was in middle school, it only cost 50 cents a ride. I still remember the day when I had saved enough money to ride it 10 times in a row. It brought me great joy!

A roller-coaster is fun to ride, but it would not be very enjoyable to live on. Dealing with the diagnosis of cancer and being told you may only have three months to live can put you, and those you love, on an emotional roller-coaster ride. Yet, it can also provide a greater opportunity to learn when you can trust your emotions and when you cannot. Fear, discouragement, depression, anger, and anxiety are just a few of the emotions you will face, and sometimes they can seem to block your awareness of everything else.

I have spent most of my life helping people work through difficult and debilitating emotions. In dealing with cancer, I had to face these emotions head-on and decide if I was going to believe some of their lies and let them determine my reality or take them captive to what I knew to be true. I remember many days I would have to remind myself that “feelings don't always equal facts,” especially when success meant getting out of bed (it wasn't always easy) and just putting one foot in front of the other.

Also, I have come face-to-face with thoughts and feelings that at one time would have seemed overwhelming and impossible to cope with. I engaged in hand-to-hand combat against feelings of hopelessness, helplessness, loneliness, a depth of loss, disorientation, futility, irrelevance... and through it all, rediscovered that emotions are a gift from God with a message and, in God's hands, can provide a potential learning opportunity. However, I had to learn to slow down and stop... to look and listen for what God was saying.

Relational Growth

Another gift from wrestling with cancer has been learning to understand the healing power of friends in a new way and at a new level. Some of my friends have “taken me to school” on how to provide love and support at a time when you have no idea what you need and are just hoping to be able to make it through another day... and, on occasion, not being sure if you even want to see a new day.

Appreciating the power of presence is another area where I have grown—just being there sometimes for a person without any rehearsed statements except, “I don't know what to say, but I love you and am here with you.” This speaks to the power of a voicemail, e-mail or text message with no expectation of a response... the often repeated reassurance

that I was being prayed for... or a verse or poem. I was amazed by the number of notes I received from people I had never met. Any expression of concern or prayer is encouraging, but to receive one and two-page handwritten notes from total strangers was astonishing and a profound source of encouragement and validation of God's faithfulness.

Spiritual Growth

In the spiritual dimension, dealing with cancer, dying and death has given me the opportunity to better understand the power of perspective and praise. When it comes to perspective, most people go through life with a problem-focus. Their cup is always half-empty and they are experts on what could be better, what others have that they do not, who is better off than they are, and how they would be happier "if" their circumstances were different.

Cancer helped me develop more of a promise-focus. This simply means the reality of the day-in and day-out struggle of confronting cancer in my own life, and in the lives of those I love, has given me the opportunity to see the promises in God's Word from a whole new perspective. When I look at my life in light of what God has promised and experience Him as the ultimate promise keeper, it becomes much easier to move from a fear-focus to a faith-focus.

Another "gift" God has given me is a whole new understanding of the power of praise. "Count your blessings, name them one-by-one" are no longer just the words in a song that was so common it had lost much of its meaning. I began each day by counting my blessings—for a while in words that nobody could understand.

Dealing with the diagnosis compelled me to pursue God's Word. I was led to study the word "joy" and came up with some amazing discoveries. Did you know a primary objective in Jesus' teaching was that His disciples might experience JOY? Did you know the words Joy/Joyous/Joyful are found more than 200 times in Scripture? Did you know the verb, rejoice, appears well over 200 times as well? Look at these verses:

"... In Your presence is fullness of JOY; In Your right hand there are pleasures forever" (Psalm 16:11).

"For His anger is but for a moment, His favor is for a lifetime; Weeping may last for the night, But a shout of JOY comes in the morning" (Psalm 30:5).

"These things I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in you, and that your JOY may be made full" (John 15:11).

"Truly, truly I say to you, that you will weep and lament... but your grief will be turned into JOY.... if you ask the Father for anything in my name, He will give it to you. Until

now you have asked for nothing in My name; ask and you will receive, so that your JOY may be made full” (John 16:20, 23-24).

The Bottom Line

Here’s the bottom line—in my life, God used bad news to help me focus on the good news... and in the process get everything back into perspective. I have learned that success in life is not primarily how long I live, but how well I live. I hate cancer. Every nasty thing anyone has ever said about cancer is true. At the same time, God can use cancer to help a person surrender the illusion of control. I cannot CONTROL “how long” I live but, with God’s help, I can control “how well” I choose to live, for whatever time God chooses to give me.

As I write this, I have been told that while my tumors are gone, I am not entirely cancer free and must still take medication to keep the cancer at bay. There is a high probability that the cancer will figure out what the medication is doing and try to spread. Either there will be a new treatment available or it will be my time to “finish the course” and move on. Please know that I do not say that glibly or without emotion.

I am blessed that I don’t dread each day and very aware of how well I’m doing, especially given the nature of what I have been through. However, while counting my blessings is a very effective and legitimate way to maintain perspective by fighting the assaults of the evil one and warding off the almost constant emotional, psychological and spiritual warfare, I also know that it does not change for one second the new realities I have to learn to live with throughout each and every day. This can be very difficult, but God continues to prove Himself faithful regardless of the circumstances and, throughout every situation, I am able to experience sovereign joy.

During my adventures with cancer over the past 25 years, I have been given eyes that see things I had never noticed before, ears that hear with a new acuity and clarity, and a heart that is much more tender. I have grown emotionally, relationally and spiritually. I have discovered there is a big difference between surviving and thriving and know Christ did not die and rise again for us to merely survive. Just treading water is not what He meant by “becoming more than conquerors.”

If I am told yet again that I may have only three months to live, how will I respond? After prayerfully reflecting on what God has lovingly taught me through the adventures of the past several years, I have realized the most important considerations are not:

- IF I’m going to die... it’s going happen
- HOW I’m going to die... I can’t control that one
- WHEN I’m going to die... I can’t control that one either

- IF it's going to be hard or painful... it probably will be

When I finally come face-to-face with death—when it becomes my turn to cross that river—the most significant bottom-line consideration will be HOW I can reflect and manifest the goodness, grace and mercy of my precious Lord that I so abundantly experienced throughout my life in such a way that people will be able to see the difference Christ makes in every chapter of life... especially the final chapter. My hope and prayer is to draw on, and drink from, the reservoir of resources God has given me and, with His grace, respond in a manner that will cause people to say, “How great is our God!” In the meantime, every day is a gift of grace with new opportunities to “count our blessings” and give testimony to a quality of life that refuses to be defined by our circumstances, but instead by God’s completed work for us on the cross as we serve a risen Savior.

To God be the glory!

June 2017

Sweet Words from Sweet Friends

Several of Carrie's nearest and dearest friends penned some of their memories in honor of the tenth anniversary of Carrie's entering the presence of the Lord. Enjoy their sweet words as they remember...

Jane Beers

Oh, sweet Carrie. How I miss her so. Although it has now been ten years, not a week goes by that I am not reminded of all that I learned by journeying beside her during her final years on this earth. Though the dark cloud of sorrow often permeated her life and hovered over her as a constant reminder of pain and suffering due to the invasion of cancer in her body, Carrie displayed to the world that true joy is found in Christ alone. She modeled Jesus so well that sometimes when I am facing something difficult I think "what would Carrie have done?"

Observing her continual embrace of HOPE, both for the healing of her body on earth and for the eternal joy she knew would be hers with Jesus, was an incredible experience. I was privileged to witness that the more she suffered, the more she identified with Christ and let His strength and light shine right through her. The more she experienced pain and anguish, the greater she used this opportunity to show Christ and glorify him in this world (Col. 1:24). At times, I still envision her receiving these words from her Heavenly Father on July 2, 2007 with the greatest of joy and a beautiful smile on her face: “well done good and faithful servant.”

Well done Carrie Elizabeth Oliver. Thank you for teaching me what it looks like to savor life, trust in Jesus, and shine light into this broken world. You are so dearly loved.

Suzi Bradshaw

Carrie Oliver.

This inspirational lady pops into my head at the strangest moments... driving by Taco Bell, seeing shortbread at Starbuck's... odd times indeed. But oh, what an impact of hope and faith and perseverance she continues to be. The "If Carrie could live life to the fullest, laugh, have faith in our Lord, speak at retreats powerfully influencing women and marriages, in the midst of the big 'C'.." moments, are what can perk me up and spur me on to just believe and do it! Not blind faith. Carrie balanced her faith with knowledge, leaning on the body of Christ for wisdom and resources. I love the way she did life... Family and faith to the fullest. Times with Carrie and Gary were a 10. Oh, the laughter... but more so, the model of a marriage that was real, honest and a TEAM that dripped into our marriage model.

Thanks to our Lord for bringing Carrie to this earth. Marriages are different because of her. Grown-up girlfriends are richer. God did a really good work in Carrie Oliver. I am grateful to have had the way too few times to rub shoulders and experience the Light and Impact she brought to so many in this world.

Cheryl Carmichael

Some days it is hard to believe that it has been 10 years, and then there are days when I am reminded of a memory and it seems like it was just yesterday. Your wedding, our wedding, Travel Camp, birth of Nathan, cards (lots of cards!), skiing, birth of Matt and Andrew and our girls, camping together, so many treasured memories!

Carrie was my first BEST friend. I remember first meeting her at the DG house and thinking WOW she is beautiful and being a little intimidated. Not because she wasn't approachable but because she knew who she was, a child of the King. The Lord's plans are amazing though because who knew He would put us two together.

I'm so thankful for the 27 years of friendship, marriage to our spouses, children (she with 3 boys and me with 3 girls), joys, and sorrows. Passionate and faithful in all of her life! Love you and miss you dearly. What a reunion we will all have in heaven!

Julie Nelson

My thought and emotions are scrambled right now as I went back to Carrie's website and remembered:

I remember a friend who walked into my life and neighborhood some time around 1986-87. Carrie was creative, talented, beautiful and thoughtful. (Should I include I was also often very envious of her many qualities?) Her knowledge of Scripture was amazing, but what I admired most was her love of Jesus and her walk with him. She wasn't afraid to challenge me.

I was her guinea pig once as she needed to interview and tape someone who was going through a time of grief for a seminary class she was in. Her video stopped in the middle of our time but Carrie didn't want to interrupt my tears. So I finished only to walk through the taping again. Kind, yet twice painful!

Carrie and I traveled different roads as the years went on - some with bumpy patches. In the end though, we traveled the same path walking with Jesus as adults who knew that we loved and respected one another deeply. My last prayers with Carrie and for her will always remain treasured memories.

Lonnie Ostrander

It is impossible to fully explain the impact Carrie made on my family, especially my children. Whether original origami using the word HOPE given to Carrie by my teenage son or the vow by my pre-teen daughter to several years later make "hope" a permanent part of her forearm, Carrie's tenacity, love of life and refusal to give up have helped to shape us. How I truly miss my friend. And I celebrate her place in each of our lives.

Jan Phillips

It was my honor to work with Carrie and have her in my life as a precious friend from 1998 until she reached her heavenly Home in 2007.

Countless wonderful things can be said about her life but I want to pinpoint one exceptional aspect of Carrie's character that I saw evidenced time and time again - Carrie Oliver possessed a grateful heart – one that can only come from a close walk with the Lord – it takes practice to develop a grateful heart & Carrie practiced a lot!

Anyone who was the recipient of a thank you note from Carrie knew without a doubt that whatever they had done for her or given to her had blessed her and she was grateful. And oddly, as her illness progressed you would think that the frequency & length of those notes would diminish with the illness clamoring for her attention – but they didn't because her focus was on her Lord and on others rather than on herself – expressing gratitude was Carrie's lifestyle.

Carrie's character continues to be an encouragement for me to cultivate a deeper level of gratitude in my own heart. These two scripture passages express the legacy of Carrie's

life & shine a bright light on just one facet of that beautiful diamond named Carrie Elizabeth Oliver:

Colossians 2:6-7 (NIV) So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness. Colossians 3:15-17 (NIV) Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Wendy Soderquist Togami

In the last weeks of Carrie's life I remember two events that have stayed with me on the days I think fondly of my dear friend.

When Carrie became too weak to grocery shop she had our friend, Jane Beers, and I go to the store for her with a very specific list of items - "very specific" being the operative words here. She didn't want an onion, but a very particular kind of onion, and so on. Jane and I hit the mark about 80% of the time and delivered a mostly accurate array of groceries. In the next hour four of us were designated to unload and put away the groceries under her direction. This was a very life giving experience for Carrie, and she shone. It was her way to say, "there is a way I go about my life, and I will be darned if cancer is going to mess with it." It was her way to keep life normal even when her circumstances were extraordinary. She imagined every day that she was going to cook and to eat, as she always had.

Just a few days before she passed away I arrived to help her get ready for a hair appointment she wanted to keep. To be true there wasn't much hair to work with, but we spent the morning getting up, showering, putting on a cute outfit and makeup, matching jewelry and perfume. As each task was very painful and winded her, it was 4 hours later when we were finally ready to go. And then alas, her illness took her back to bed. I will never forget the necklace she was wearing, because we had spent a good deal of time deciding on which one to wear, and the one we choose matched just perfectly with her pink sweater. It was clearly the best fashion choice. We were both sad that she was too weak to go to her appointment, but felt fully committed to the morning we had spent trying. Trying was the life giving motion that kept her here with us for all the extra days we had with her.

My friend, Carrie, never meant to die. Her determined intent was to keep living in the way she had come to know until the moment God called her home. It was, in many ways,

a sweet way to pass from this life to the next. It has had a profound impact on the way I think of my everyday activities.

The poet/philosopher David Whyte says it well when he says . . .”to be human is to become visible while carrying what is hidden as a gift to others. . .”. And again,

“I want to know
if you know
how to melt into that fierce heat of living
falling toward
the center of your longing.”

— David Whyte

July 2018

A Happy Anniversary

It’s been 10 years since Carrie and our son Matt entered into the presence of our Lord. Some days it seems like only a year, and other days it seems like it was a lifetime ago.

After 10 years I still receive emails and notes and have people stop me at church, in the mall or at national conferences, to tell me how much Carrie meant to them, how much she helped and encouraged them, how they wouldn’t still be married if it were not for her impact on their life . . . and the list goes on and on. Yeah, that’s 10 years later. Amazing. That can be the impact of a life well-lived for our Lord Jesus Christ.

Carrie never saw herself as anyone special. Her heart’s desire was to be a faithful Christ-follower, a great wife and mom, a faithful friend, and to allow God to use her in any way He saw fit. That included counseling, speaking, teaching, writing, consulting . . . and just trying to be salt and light. Her blogs came out of her pain and her joy. Her certainty in the midst of her uncertainty. They came out of a sense that God was still at work in her life even if her circumstances didn’t make sense.

The last verse Carrie asked me to read to her was one that had become a favorite of both of us during our mutual “adventures” with cancer. Just a few hours before she entered glory, she asked me to read Habakkuk 3:17-19: “Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in

the lord. I will be joyful in God my Savior. The Sovereign Lord is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to go on the heights.”

Loss is an amazing thing that will change you, either for the better or for the worse. How it changes us depends on how we choose to respond to it and let God use it. These anniversaries are always bittersweet, but by God’s grace they are now much sweeter than they are bitter. Amazing grace.

I’m indebted to Carrie’s and my dear friend, Catherine Arnsperger, who lovingly put together the first site with Carrie's blog entries. When I called her to ask for help in doing a 10th anniversary update, she enthusiastically agreed.

An Oliver Family Update

Our oldest son Nathan is married to Amy and they live in South Florida. I have three delightful grandchildren, Alivia, Jackson and Brooke who are such a joy. Living so far away limits the time that I can be face-to-face with them, but we are able to FaceTime, talk on the phone and share pictures. Nathan and Amy have their own private counseling practice, home school, are part of a house church and make annual missions trips to Guatemala.

Our youngest son Andrew, recently graduated Summa Cum Laude from San Diego State University, with a master’s degree in Political Science with a specialization in Latin American Studies. He is currently working for a nonprofit in San Diego and weighing his future options. The chair of his research project encouraged him to go on for a Ph.D., but he feels like he needs to do some “real work” before making that decision.

What’s happened in my life? After three years of not wanting to date and thinking that I might never ever date again, one of my sons reminded me that, on several occasions, Carrie had encouraged me to at some point start to date and if I found someone special, to consider remarriage.

Shortly before she died, in her distinctly humorous kind of way, Carrie looked me in the eyes and said, with a smile on her face, “I’ve spent 27 years of my life helping you become a good husband, and it would be a shame for all of my hard work to go to waste.” She really meant the “27 years of hard work” and I knew she was speaking from her heart.

My son introduced me to a lovely lady who was the mother or one of his good friends. An interesting coincidence is that she was a nurse who cared for my late sister Marsha when she was hospitalized about six months before her death. Linda and I began to date, and after 11 months of dating and a 4-month engagement we were married. Linda has two wonderful children: Dan lives and works in the bay area, and Mandie and her husband Levi live in Kentucky.

I continue to thoroughly enjoy serving as Executive Director of [The Center for Healthy Relationships](#), and Professor of Psychology and Practical Theology at John Brown University in Siloam Springs, Arkansas. I also continue to travel and speak and consult and write and have done a lot of work in the area of Emotional & Relational Intelligence (ERQ).

How's my health? Some of you know my story of having had cancer seven times. The first six led to surgeries and the seventh was an inoperable advanced Stage Four (that's not good-smile) for which there was no treatment except for a newly approved cocktail of drugs. That was six years ago. If you want to know "the rest of the story" you can read my article "Lessons Learned from the Doorstep of Death" found in the "Journal of Hope" section of this site.