

CHANGE YOUR LIFE. CHANGE YOUR WORLD.

# activated

Vol 23 • Issue 4

## THE CROSS

Meeting my best friend

## Natalie's Sunday School

A dream deferred

## The Night He Laughed

A parent's peace

## EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION OF STORMS AND HOPE

There's a common misconception that the Cape of Good Hope lies at the southern tip of the African continent. In reality, the point where the Atlantic and Indian Oceans meet is about 150 km to the southeast, but the fact that this confusion has endured for so long and is still quite common illustrates what an inaccessible and terrifying area this was for centuries. Although attempts to circle around Africa go back to the pre-Christian period, the first successful (documented) rounding was by Portuguese mariner Bartolomeu Dias in 1488. (It turned out the secret was to sail far out in the open ocean rather than to hug the coast.)

Tradition says that Dias originally named the area the Cape of Storms, and that he was overruled by the king of Portugal, who chose the name we know it by, as it represented the hope of a new route to the east.

Death, once the "cape of storms" where life and hopes were shipwrecked, was conquered when Jesus rose from the dead on Easter morning. When Mary Magdalene and two other women went to the tomb where Jesus had been buried, it was still dark. They had no idea how they would move the stone that sealed the tomb and they wondered how they would complete the embalming of Jesus' body. To their surprise, when they reached the tomb, the stone was rolled away... but the body was gone.

Mary begins a conversation with a stranger in the garden, and one word from him turns her darkness to light: "Mary." She recognizes the voice. It's confusing, astonishing, unbelievable—and yet, Jesus is alive!

As a result of Jesus' resurrection, like those fifteenth-century explorers, we can see beyond the "Cape of Storms" to the hope of heaven and eternal life with God. This living Jesus is with us still and promises each of us: "Because I live, you will live also."<sup>1</sup> That is the heart of our faith, and the reason we celebrate Easter this month.

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1. John 14:19



# RESURRECTION REPLICATE

BY RUTH DAVIDSON

NATURE OFTEN SPEAKS TO US OF GOD'S CREATION IN ALLEGORICAL SYMBOLS, such as the most miraculous event in history—the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The Resurrection Plant, also known as the Rose of Jericho or the Dinosaur Plant, is a little tumbleweed that curls into a tight ball during dry weather. But submerge it in water, and you can watch this “living fossil” dramatically transform from a shriveled mass into a resplendent spreading moss within hours.

Its fern-like foliage is one of the most intriguing phenomena on the planet. The plant can lie dormant for as long as 50 years without water or light, only to suddenly unfurl its lacy deep green fronds when exposed to moisture once more. It has the ability to seemingly spring back to life over and over again—even after completely drying out.

When I first witnessed this sensational wonder magically open up right before my eyes, I could see where the name “Resurrection Plant” originated.—My thoughts were immediately directed to Jesus. Neither death nor the grave could keep Him. He rose triumphantly to save us from our sin.

RUTH DAVIDSON WAS A MISSIONARY TO THE MIDDLE EAST, INDIA, AND SOUTH AMERICA FOR 25 YEARS. SHE IS NOW AN AUTHOR AND CONTRIBUTOR TO THE WEBSITE [WWW.THEBIBLEFORYOU.COM](http://WWW.THEBIBLEFORYOU.COM). ■

“I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live.”—*Jesus, John 11:25*

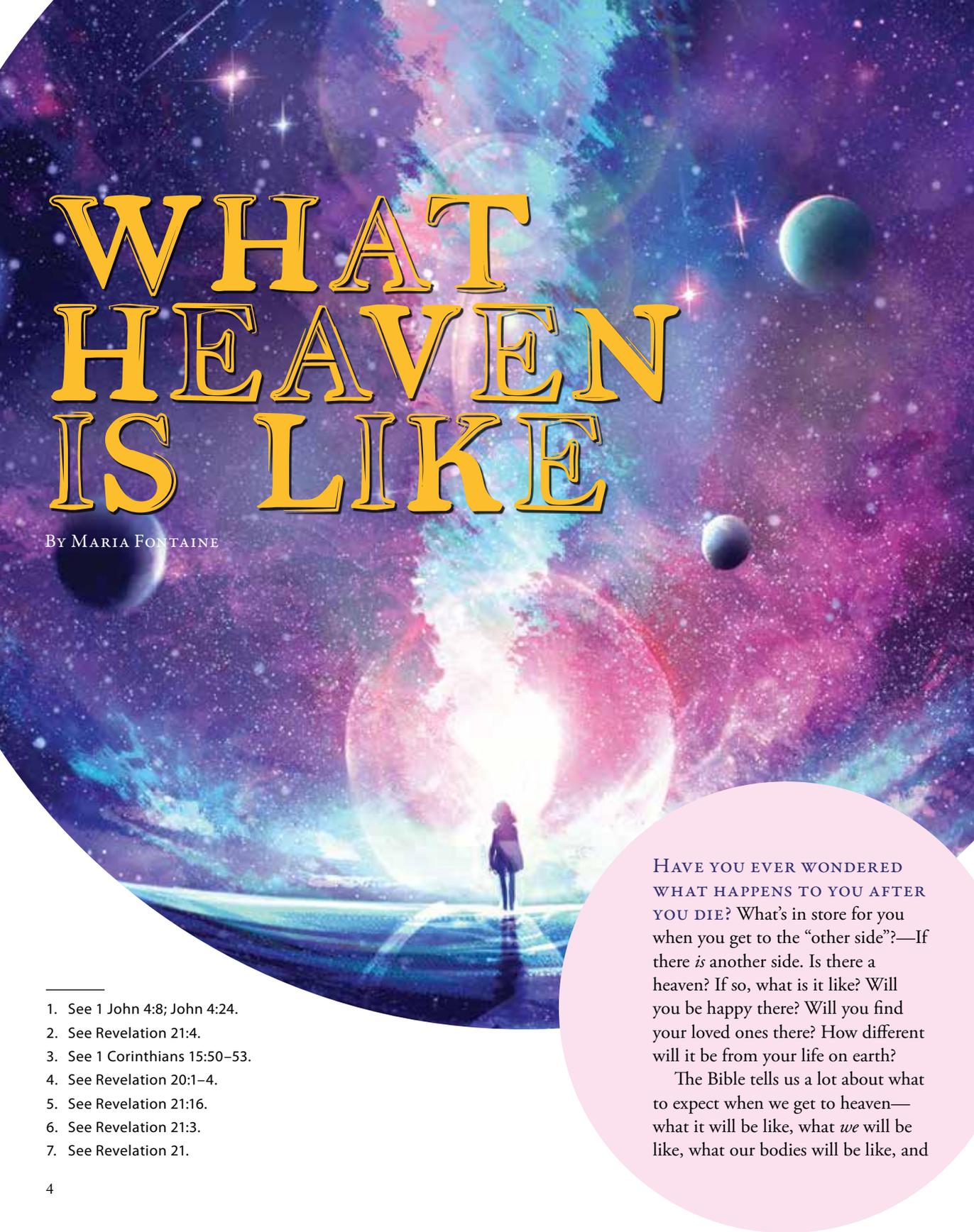
If we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus.—*1 Thessalonians 4:14*

If we have been planted together in the likeness of his death; we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection.—*Romans 6:5 KJV*

Our Lord has written the promise of resurrection, not in books alone, but in every leaf in springtime.—*Martin Luther (1483–1546)*

There are many paths to living a balanced life. A Christian perspective to having a balanced life begins by examining your relationship with God. How close are you to God? Do you seek His wisdom often or are you trying to go through life on your own? We can often feel alone when life becomes overwhelming. A relationship with God means that you are never alone.<sup>1</sup> The more intimate your relationship with God, the more faith you have that He will help you through even the toughest times.—*Susan J. Knowles*

1. See Romans 8:35; Psalm 91:10–11.



# WHAT HEAVEN IS LIKE

BY MARIA FONTAINE

1. See 1 John 4:8; John 4:24.
2. See Revelation 21:4.
3. See 1 Corinthians 15:50–53.
4. See Revelation 20:1–4.
5. See Revelation 21:16.
6. See Revelation 21:3.
7. See Revelation 21.

HAVE YOU EVER WONDERED WHAT HAPPENS TO YOU AFTER YOU DIE? What's in store for you when you get to the "other side"?—If there *is* another side. Is there a heaven? If so, what is it like? Will you be happy there? Will you find your loved ones there? How different will it be from your life on earth?

The Bible tells us a lot about what to expect when we get to heaven—what it will be like, what *we* will be like, what our bodies will be like, and



what life will be like. There have also been numerous accounts from people who have had a near-death experience where they have died momentarily, gone to heaven, and returned to tell the tale of what they experienced.

According to the Bible, one of the biggest differences between the earth life and heaven is that heaven is a *perfect* realm, a place filled with God's presence, where we can enjoy all the beauties and wonders that we have here on earth, but without the sorrow, pain, emptiness, loneliness, and fear that so often grip us, and without the selfishness, greed, hate, and destruction that we see in the world around us.

God's kingdom will be filled with love, beauty, peace, comfort, understanding, joy, compassion, and most of all, will be enveloped in the love of the One who loves us more than anyone—God Himself. The Bible tells us that God is a God of love. In fact, He *is* the Spirit of love.<sup>1</sup> Therefore His home, the kingdom

of heaven, is a home of love, where there will be no more pain, sorrow, rejection, grief, or loneliness.<sup>2</sup>

We know from the Bible that in the afterlife we're not going to be faceless, disembodied spirits, wisping around with no form whatsoever. We will have bodies, much like we do now, but without the sickness, discomfort, aging, or pain that we experience in our earthly bodies.<sup>3</sup> We'll be able to enjoy each other's company and live happily together forever in the presence of the One who created us and who loves us.

Many people have the mistaken impression that heaven is a very boring place where Christians sit around on clouds, play harps, and sing praises to God. I'm sure that people can play the harp if they want to, and we certainly will be praising God, but our life in heaven will be *much* fuller than that! In fact, I believe that we will live much fuller lives than we do here on earth, except that we won't have the stress, worry, sickness, and struggle for survival that we presently endure. We'll be fully occupied with things that truly matter and that make a difference in other people's lives. We'll be investing our time in things that give us joy and inspire us, instead of the drudgery, the drab routine, and the senselessness that many of us have experienced in our daily lives here.

The Bible tells us that Jesus Christ Himself will return to reign over

the earth, together with us, His children, for a period of a thousand years known as the Millennium.<sup>4</sup> One of the tasks during this time period for those who love God will be to help reconstruct, reorganize, and reeducate the people who remain on earth. We will bring His kingdom come on earth: a place where love, truth, and justice predominate; where everyone has enough, and no one has too much.

The last two chapters of the Bible's book of Revelation describe a gigantic golden city<sup>5</sup> that will come down out of heaven after the Millennium to a newly restored earth, where God will dwell with man.<sup>6</sup> Those who love God and have received Jesus as their Savior are going to live *with* Him in His wonderful golden city! The Bible describes the city streets as being made of gold, with a wall encasing the city made of twelve different types of precious gems.<sup>7</sup>

The good news is that, through believing in and receiving Jesus, anybody can enter into the kingdom of heaven and experience the joy, fulfillment, and everlasting love that God wants to give each of us in the life to come, and even if this life may not be transformed, we can each carry a little of that heavenly life in our hearts here and now. It doesn't matter who you are or where you've been or what you've done. He promises to forgive.



None of us are good enough to deserve entrance to heaven; none of us deserve to go there through our own merits. That's why God sent His Son, Jesus, to this earth over 2,000 years ago. Jesus paid the price for our salvation by dying for the sins of humankind, and so, through believing in Him as our Savior, we can receive His gift of eternal life. That relieves us of the burden of trying to be good enough to go to heaven, which we couldn't do anyway, because we are all faulty imperfect human beings.

Jesus opened the door to eternal life in His kingdom for each of us through His death on the cross. You can't earn it, neither can you be too bad for it, because salvation is a gift of God. Jesus *loves* you just the way

you are. He knows you. He knows your thoughts and everything you've ever done, even your deepest secrets. He knows it all, but He loves you anyway, because His love is infinite.

His love is so far beyond anything that we can understand or see with our eyes here on earth. His love can fill any emptiness and heal any pain or hurt. His love can bring joy where there was sorrow, laughter where there was pain, and fulfillment where there was a lack of purpose or meaning. Whenever you need Him, you can call out to Jesus, and His love will be with you and He will help you.

You can receive His love and be assured of your eternal destiny with Him in heaven by simply praying and asking Jesus for His gift of salvation. If you open your heart to Jesus and invite Him into your

## BORN AGAIN

To be born again and enter the wonderful kingdom of God, receive Jesus as your Savior by asking Him into your heart:

*Dear Jesus, I believe You are the Son of God and that You died for me. I need Your love to cleanse me from my mistakes and wrongdoing. I now open the door to my heart and I ask You to please come into my life, fill me with Your Holy Spirit, and give me Your gift of eternal life. Amen.*

life, He will be with you forever. You can never lose Him! Once you receive Jesus, you've got a permanent reservation in heaven that can never be canceled, and when your life on earth is finished, you will dwell in His presence forever!

Although salvation is a free gift, once you have received Jesus in your heart, He wants you to do what you can to love *others* and tell them about God's heavenly kingdom. Share with others the truth about Jesus and the love He has given you so that they can also experience joy in their lives—both in this life and in the next one!

MARIA FONTAINE AND HER HUSBAND, PETER AMSTERDAM, ARE DIRECTORS OF THE FAMILY INTERNATIONAL, A CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY OF FAITH. ADAPTED FROM THE ORIGINAL ARTICLE. ■

# THE CROSS

BY SALLY GARCÍA

AROUND CHRISTMAS LAST YEAR, a Jewish friend of mine shared a photo from Israel, where three symbols were erected on an outdoor display, supposedly representing the three main monotheistic religions. There was a Jewish menorah, the Islamic Star and Crescent, and a Christmas tree.

I explained to her that a Christmas tree is not really a symbol of Christianity. To believers, the symbol of *Christmas* is baby Jesus in the manger. But the symbol of *Christianity* is the cross.

In many parts of the world, crosses are banished from public places, and in some countries, Christians are not allowed to wear a cross as a symbol of their faith. Is this cross so powerful that the powers of darkness must eliminate it? Consider the Coptic Christians, who for hundreds of years have tattooed the cross on their wrists as an indelible testimony of their faith, even in the face of brutal persecutions.<sup>1</sup>

I received Christ as my Savior in 1971 when I was 17 years old and studying at the University of Texas. I really didn't understand the concept of sin, nor the idea that someone

could have died for me 2,000 years before. All I knew was that I needed help.

A Christian friend had answered a few of my questions with Bible verses and then asked me, "If you really want to know if Jesus is who He said He was, why don't you just ask Him? If He doesn't answer, you have lost nothing. If He does answer—you will know Him for yourself."

She handed me a written prayer to repeat with her. The prayer asked forgiveness for my sins and thanked Jesus for having died on the cross for me. I didn't understand these words and told her that I would just pray silently in my own words. She must have been skeptical that I would really pray, but I closed my eyes—and in contrast to my outward silence—I inwardly cried out with

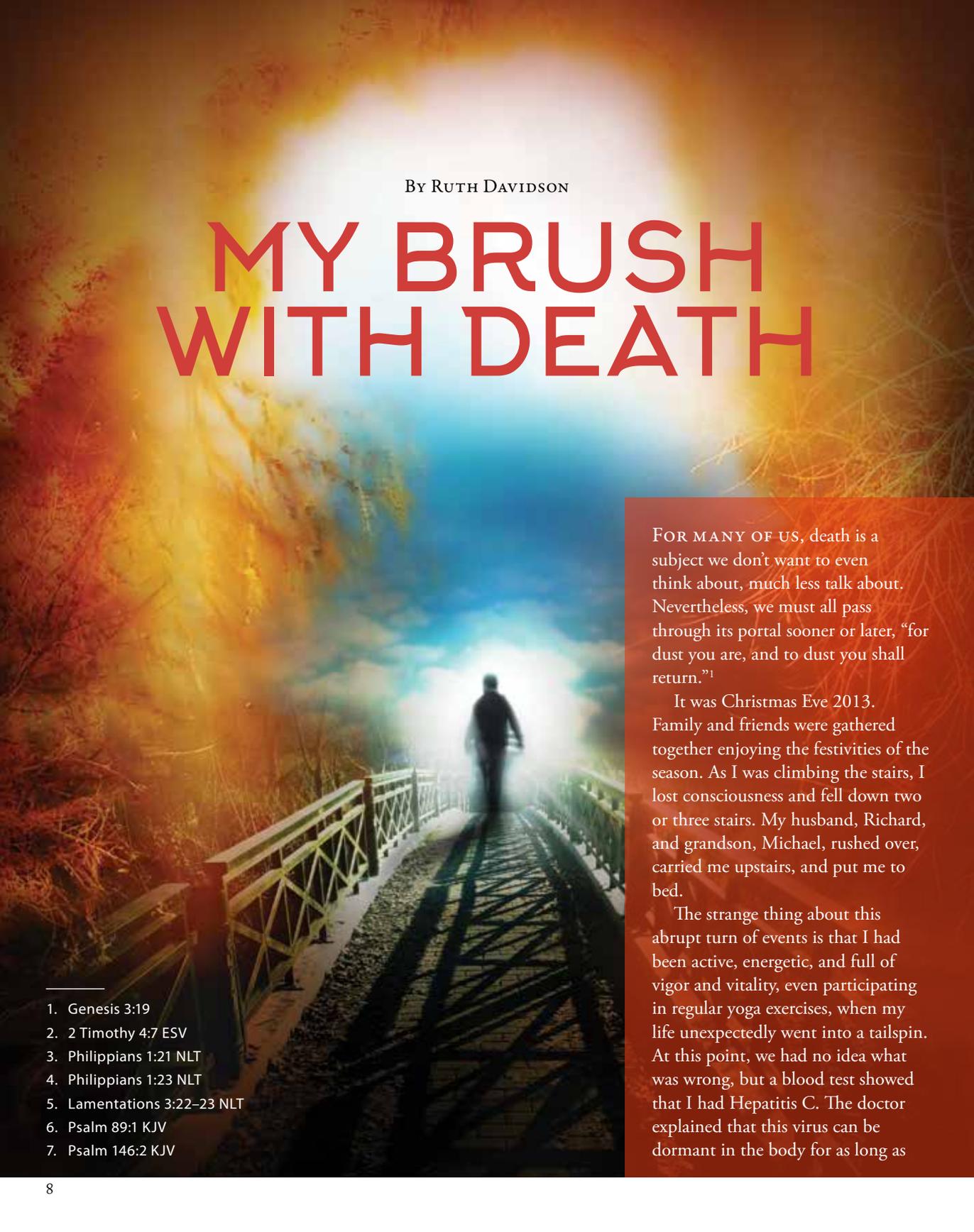
all my soul, *Jesus, if You are who You say You are, please come help me!* And He did! Within a week, I was not only certain that Jesus was the Son of God, but that He was now abiding in me and transforming my life.

Jesus quickly became my Best Friend, and for decades we have traveled the world together. I have loved His teachings in the Gospels and have found peace and safety in the knowledge of His unconditional love.

This Easter, in every country and under every circumstance and condition, there will be fellow believers contemplating the cross. What a privilege that we can join them.

SALLY GARCÍA IS AN EDUCATOR, MISSIONARY, AND MEMBER OF THE FAMILY INTERNATIONAL IN CHILE. ■

1. See <https://sttekla.org/2019/09/the-meaning-of-our-coptic-cross-tattoo/>.



BY RUTH DAVIDSON

# MY BRUSH WITH DEATH

FOR MANY OF US, death is a subject we don't want to even think about, much less talk about. Nevertheless, we must all pass through its portal sooner or later, "for dust you are, and to dust you shall return."<sup>1</sup>

It was Christmas Eve 2013. Family and friends were gathered together enjoying the festivities of the season. As I was climbing the stairs, I lost consciousness and fell down two or three stairs. My husband, Richard, and grandson, Michael, rushed over, carried me upstairs, and put me to bed.

The strange thing about this abrupt turn of events is that I had been active, energetic, and full of vigor and vitality, even participating in regular yoga exercises, when my life unexpectedly went into a tailspin. At this point, we had no idea what was wrong, but a blood test showed that I had Hepatitis C. The doctor explained that this virus can be dormant in the body for as long as

1. Genesis 3:19
2. 2 Timothy 4:7 ESV
3. Philippians 1:21 NLT
4. Philippians 1:23 NLT
5. Lamentations 3:22–23 NLT
6. Psalm 89:1 KJV
7. Psalm 146:2 KJV

30 years. We had been serving as missionaries for the last 40 years, and the most outstanding possibility of infection we could recollect was a foot operation I underwent with complications some 30 years before, which had required a blood transfusion.

During the next several months, I was rushed to the intensive care unit three different times. The doctors put me through every test imaginable, attempting to save my life, but the situation looked very bleak. When all hope seemed to disappear, the physicians finally advised my husband to take me home so I could die in peace, surrounded by loved ones.

Take me home he did, but Richard was not about to let me go. He and my family and friends from around the world prayed desperately day and night for my healing. I am sure that their love, concern, and prayers were key ingredients in my recovery. God is still on the throne and prayer changes things.

This wasn't the first time I'd found myself approaching the threshold of the hereafter. I had been in this somewhat surreal dimension two times before, perceiving sound as from afar, almost as a distant echo—the first in a near-drowning experience when I was 13, and the second while entering a four-day coma. I felt myself slipping or being drawn away,

as if there were an invisible vacuum sucking and pulling me. Feeling so helpless and unable to fight, I was losing strength and felt sure my earthly life was reaching its end.

This third experience began abruptly but moved far more slowly. Truly, I thought this time it was for keeps, that life was over for me. My weakened and bewildered state left me with thoughts of wondering if this rendezvous with death was worth the arduous fight to push back. The apostle Paul's words rushed into my mind: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith."<sup>2</sup>

I had virtually lost all hope of recovery and felt that even if given more time, I would be doomed to merely "existing," a prisoner trapped in a shell of a body, completely helpless and dependent on others for everything, including being pushed around in a wheelchair for the rest of my life.

Not afraid of dying, and with full assurance that I would go to heaven, I felt ready to accept my passage to the hereafter. Again, Paul's words came to me: "To me, living means living for Christ, and dying is even better."<sup>3</sup> Though not in prison, like he was, I was a prisoner of my own flesh, trapped in a near-helpless body, completely dependent on the care of others. My deep, innermost

feeling was of being "torn between two desires: I long to go and be with Christ, which would be far better for me."<sup>4</sup>

Just when I was at the point of surrendering to death's invitation, Richard leaned over and tenderly whispered in my ear, "Honey, I love you." Though I'd heard these words countless times from him throughout the years, this time it was as though a blinding lightning bolt pierced through all that darkness, a bright luminous beacon of hope, coupled with love. Those endearing words catapulted me back to life! At that moment, I was invigorated with fresh strength and courage to overcome and defeat the sting of death.

Each morning that I see the rising sun, I have to pinch myself to acknowledge the fact that I've escaped the grave. "The faithful love of the Lord never ends! His mercies never cease. Great is his faithfulness; his mercies begin afresh each morning."<sup>5</sup> I constantly remind myself that each day is a gift, and nothing is to be taken for granted.

I'm so grateful that my rendezvous with death got postponed. "I will sing of the mercies of the Lord forever: with my mouth will I make known His faithfulness to all generations."<sup>6</sup> "While I live will I praise the Lord: I will sing praises unto my God while I have any being."<sup>7</sup> ■

# SHAKEN BY LIFE'S CHANGES

**Q:** *I prefer stability and routine to big changes and drama, but the latter seem inevitable. That's unsettling. How can I learn to handle changing circumstances so they don't rock my world so much?*

**A:** You're right; change is inevitable. In fact, life is a never-ending series of twists and turns. Growing up takes about 20 years; growing into the person God wants you to be takes a lifetime. Helping our children through their growing pains changes us nearly as much as it does them. When those dearest to us go through upheavals, it affects us too. Relationships at every level evolve continually. Big-picture issues—the economy, politics, the environment— affect us. We can't escape changes, but we can learn to work through them. Here are some tips:

**IDENTIFY THE ISSUES.** Separate the aspects you have some control over from those you don't, and commit all

1. Matthew 19:26
2. Philippians 1:6

aspects to God, who is ultimately in control of everything.

**UNDERSTAND THE ISSUES.**

Differentiate between the practical aspects and the emotional, and deal with each accordingly. Together they may seem overwhelming, but individually they are more manageable.

**KEEP AN OPEN MIND.** What you've been doing or the way you've been operating may have worked reasonably well so far, but there may be better alternatives.

**ENLIST GOD'S HELP.** Circumstances may overwhelm *you*, but God cannot be overwhelmed. "With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."<sup>1</sup>

**STAY POSITIVE.** Focus on the opportunities, not the obstacles.

**FIND AND GIVE SUPPORT.** Chances are, you're not the only one involved. Communicate and find ways to make things work out to everyone's advantage.

**BE PATIENT.** Progress is often a three-step process—one step back and two steps forward.

**THINK LONG-TERM.** "He [God] who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ."<sup>2</sup> ■

## A PRAYER FOR TIMES OF CHANGE

Heavenly Father, Your creation is in constant movement—seasons and cycles in perpetual motion. Help me to flow with life's seasons, to not be afraid to let go of my comfortable habits and routines in order to discover new things. Instead of holing up in the security of the familiar, help me to be willing to venture out to learn new things. Help me to not stagnate, but to progress and continue to grow. Most of all, help me to change in the ways You want me to change, so I can become all You know I can be.



# ETERNAL MOMENTS

BY ROSANE PEREIRA

I WAS ONCE TRAVELING IN A VAN FULL OF PEOPLE, including my oldest daughter, her husband, and my two-year-old granddaughter, Sharon. When Sharon got fussy, I moved to sit next to her and said: “Let’s sing!” Right away, she quieted down and we proceeded to sing her favorite song, “Quacky the Duck.”

“Again, Grandma!” Once, twice, twenty times, until everyone in the van was begging her to change the song, to which she replied every time: “Again, Grandma!” At the next stop, her mom bought some snacks to distract her, to the relief of all. But 14 years later, I still remember the great time we had, while she enjoyed the song and I enjoyed her contentment.

Last month, my youngest granddaughter, Diana, came to spend an afternoon with me. She’s three

and as bright and full of energy as Sharon was at her age. I invited her to accompany me to the market, to which she replied: “Only if the turtle goes too!” This turtle is a huge stuffed toy that her mom left at my house, since she lives in a small apartment where the toy community is already well populated.

When we got to the market, I tried to put her in a cart with the turtle, but she insisted on putting the turtle in a small cart and pushing it all by herself. She placed the toy to face her, so she could see its face the whole time. As soon as we got home, she asked me for crayons and paper and proceeded to draw a surprisingly faithful reproduction of her turtle.

She drew the triangular head, the pink skin, the purple mouth, the two eyes with outside and inside circles, like the originals, and then the hair.

I had never noticed the turtle was pink, and especially that it had hair, although it had been on my couch for months. It was a work of art for a three-year-old, which I proudly showed the whole family and hung on my wardrobe door.

In his book *God Came Near*, Max Lucado describes such moments so well: “These are eternal instants. Moments that remind us of the treasures around us. Moments that rebuke us for wasting time with temporal preoccupations, like money, properties, or punctuality. That can bring a mist to the eyes of the hardest hearts and give new perspective to the most gloomy life.”

ROSANE PEREIRA IS AN ENGLISH TEACHER AND WRITER IN RIO DE JANEIRO, BRAZIL, AND A MEMBER OF THE FAMILY INTERNATIONAL. ■



# NATALIE'S SUNDAY SCHOOL

BY LI LIAN

I FIRST MET NATALIE YEARS AGO AT A LARGE CONSTRUCTION COMPANY WHERE SHE WORKED AS AN ACCOUNTANT. A colleague of hers had shown her the *Activated* magazine, and then told us that she wanted to receive the monthly edition. Natalie mentioned that she ran a Sunday school and shared the story of how it had begun.

Years earlier, she had felt very perplexed about her relationship with God. She knew He had blessed her in many ways with a caring husband, a good job, a nice house, and plenty of friends. On the other hand, it seemed that no matter how hard she prayed, she was not getting what she wanted most in life.

For over seven years, since she and her husband married, they had wanted to start a family together, but all the different treatments and medical interventions they had tried had failed. Even more puzzling was the fact that, from what the doctors could tell, there was no logical explanation for why the couple could not have a child.

Coming home to a quiet house each day after work—her husband's job required him to work longer

hours—she always sensed that something was missing. Natalie had asked for prayer in every prayer group she knew, and she and her husband had discussed adopting, but they hadn't yet decided which agency to use or when.

One morning, standing in front of her dresser, as she was getting ready for work, she started praying for the day ahead. She was feeling stressed about some challenges at work, which quickly escalated into worried thoughts about her life and future. Feelings of anxiety gripped her as she wondered if she and her husband were choosing the right path and how their decisions would play out in the future.

It was in the middle of this turmoil that she heard God speak quietly to her heart. He asked her if she was willing to put aside the issues she was facing and turn her attention towards helping others.

As she was pondering this, she drew the curtain at her second-story window and gazed outside. Not too far away, she could see a few disorganized rows of makeshift tin and cardboard shelters. A group of about a dozen children dressed in tattered clothes was playing outside,



There are some people who live in a dream world, and there are some who face reality; and then there are those who turn one into the other.

—Douglas H. Everett (1916–2002)

some running around kicking a makeshift football, others sitting on the ground talking, and others playing with empty plastic bottles in the dirt. None of the children had shoes on their feet, and Natalie knew that probably few of them had had the opportunity to attend school for any significant length of time, which meant that the majority of them would be semiliterate or completely illiterate.

That gave her an idea. That same day after returning from work, she changed her clothes and walked down to where the children were. She called them over and invited them to play a game all together. The next Sunday, she returned and told them a Bible story, which she illustrated on a chalkboard she brought with her. Every Sunday afternoon after that, she presented them with new games, activities, and stories. She taught them how to read and how to sing, explained basic hygiene principles, and occasionally gave them food, clothing, or other things they needed.

After a few months of hosting these simple Sunday school classes, she suddenly began to feel very sick and nauseous. Sure enough, she was pregnant! The nauseous

feelings eventually subsided and she continued her Sunday school classes with the children throughout her pregnancy, before giving birth to a baby boy. She and her husband were overjoyed!

She said that her son is now old enough to help her manage the Sunday school. He prepares all the material that she will teach, helps her organize things, and joins in the games. At an annual gathering, she went on stage and shared her story with the audience, encouraging mothers to get actively involved with children in their communities.

Sometimes in life it seems that we have to wait a long time to see the desires of our hearts fulfilled. God sometimes allows the delay in order for us to draw closer to Him. But when we put Him and His service in first place, we can trust that He will work His good purposes in our lives in the time and way that He knows is best.

LI LIAN IS A COMPTIA CERTIFIED PROFESSIONAL AND WORKS AS AN OFFICE AND SYSTEMS ADMINISTRATOR FOR A HUMANITARIAN ORGANIZATION IN AFRICA. ■



BY KOOS STENGER

# THE NIGHT HE LAUGHED

I WAS AWAKENED IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT BY AN UNFAMILIAR SOUND. I looked around the room. My wife was still sound asleep, her steady breathing reassuring me that everything was fine.

But just as I was drifting back to sleep, I heard it again.

“Hahaha... Haha.”

Careful to not disturb my wife, I slipped out of bed and looked at baby Martin in his crib. He was sleeping but smiling.

“Bwahaha.” Another bubble of joy burst from his tiny lips. This time, it woke up my wife as well.

“What’s happening?” She rubbed her eyes.

“I don’t know, but Martin seems to be having a good time.”

Martin hardly ever had a good time! From the day he was born, his life had been one of suffering.

He and his twin brother were born prematurely, at seven months. His brother was healthy, but Martin had a heart defect.

Martin was only six weeks old when he went into surgery.

Afterwards, the doctor smiled and gave us a thumbs up. “All went well. Your little guy’s a fighter.”

But all *didn’t* go well. While his brother grew into a healthy, chirpy baby, Martin grew steadily weaker, until he was so weak that even the slightest draft would turn into a cold. Inevitably, the cold would become pneumonia, and we would be back in the world of tubes, doctors, and stress.

When Martin would look at me with his big, serious eyes, I could sense his unique softness. But happy? No, that wouldn’t be the right word to describe him. He hardly ever smiled, but who could blame him? How do you comfort a baby that doesn’t understand why he’s suffering, or even that his life could be any different?

As his parents, we prayed fervently for him daily. *Dear God, please heal him. Please make him better.*

One night, a week before his first birthday, my wife prayed a different prayer. The constant trips to the hospital, the pain permanently etched

on Martin’s face, and the relentless fear were getting to be too much.

“Dear God,” she prayed while we knelt by his crib, “I put Martin into Your hands. If You want to take him to You, I will accept that. But whatever happens, don’t let him suffer any more.”

That was the night that Martin laughed.

At one point, he roared with laughter, shaking his little fists in the air in excitement. For nearly an hour, he chuckled and chortled, as we watched with tears in our eyes.

The next day while he was nursing, he suddenly turned pale. “Something’s wrong!” my wife cried, and I raced over, just in time to witness Martin’s last moments in this world.

My wife and I looked at each other. Even though we felt deep sadness, a beautiful peace also surrounded us.

We knew that Martin was home.

KOOS STENGER IS A FREELANCE WRITER IN THE NETHERLANDS. ■



BY MARIE ALVERO

# FORGIVENESS FIRST

**MARK'S GOSPEL TELLS US ABOUT A PARALYZED MAN WHO JESUS HEALED.** Jesus was teaching in a room so crowded that the man's friends had to make a hole in the roof and lower him down on his bed. But then, Jesus' first words to him were, "Your sins are forgiven."

Some in the crowd were astonished that Jesus declared that He could forgive sins, so He followed that up with: "So that you know I have the power to forgive sins, take up your bed and walk."

Of course, the man did just that. But have you ever wondered why the first thing Jesus gave him was forgiveness? Wasn't his most obvious need healing? Maybe to you and me, who put such weight in how we are faring in this life, and perhaps even to the paralyzed man that day. But Christ,

who sees all eternity, knew that he needed forgiveness most.

I read this story again a few days after receiving the news of someone's death. Another family without a parent. More hurting. And my heart asked, *Jesus, why don't You heal us now? How can You allow us to be so broken?* I think I will feel that a little bit every time I hear sad news, and that's okay. But catching this line in the story got me thinking that maybe I have things the wrong way around.

I really want to be okay *now*. And I want all the people to be okay. I want healing, provision, peace, safety, joy, and all the things that make life okay. But Jesus already made it okay when He offered forgiveness for sins, just like He offered the lame man healing for his spirit even before healing for his body.

"I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."—Jesus, *John 16:33 NIV*

This year, there has been so much loss in my little world that it's forced me to think more along these lines. Is my hope really in heaven, or do I have my stock in this life? Jesus warned that even His followers would continue to have trouble in this world, and we are going to continue to run into loss, death, and suffering. But He followed that up with the promise that He had overcome, and that He would help them—and us—do the same.

That's how we can be of good cheer.

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FROM JESUS WITH LOVE

# ALWAYS AND FOREVER

I pour forth My love constantly, without end, but how much you see and feel My love depends on your faith—how much you look for it and recognize it in the innumerable ways that I manifest My love each day. Whether or not you see it or feel it or recognize it does not change the fact that My love is constant and abundant and unconditional.

You cannot deserve it or work for it or be worthy of it in yourself, for My love is a gift. I love you because I love you. It is as simple as that! I love you, I will never stop loving you, and I will never love you any less than I do today. I will always love you with a perfect, unending, and abundant love.

I long for you to partake of this love of Mine in all its richness and beauty. My love for you is forever love.