

# BURNED ALIVE!

A fiery crash, a desperate prayer,  
and the miraculous healing  
adventure that followed.

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**JERRY GOLDEN**

# BURNED ALIVE!

Jerry Golden needed a miracle.

In 1976, Jerry Golden's life and ministry changed forever. He was a converted Jew, a former prison convict turned prison evangelist traveling the country with a powerful message of salvation.

But one fog-shrouded February night, a fiery airplane crash left him burned beyond recognition, given no hope to survive the night. He cried out in desperation. His prayer, and the miraculous answer that followed, took Jerry Golden from prison evangelism to a ministry that encompasses the entire world.

Does God allow disaster in our lives to teach eternal truths? Can He replace pain and despair with healing and hope? Can He lead us through the valley of destruction and death to new vistas of purpose and Christian service?

Jerry Golden knows the answer. His adventure took him through the darkest days of his life into the bright reality of God's faithfulness, and beyond.



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# Burned Alive!

By Jerry Golden

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P.O. Box 10268, Jerusalem 91102, Israel

Publisher's Note: While activities and accounts detailed in this book are true, names of some of the characters have been changed to protect their identity.

Correspondence with the author should be addressed to: Jerry Golden Ministries, P.O. Box 10268, Jerusalem 91102, Israel

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International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Bible Publishers. NOTE: I apologize for using the NIV, I didn't know better at the time, I now use only the KJV.

**NOW IN THIS INTERNET VERSION YOU NOW READ HERE THE AUTHORIZED, KJV, KING JESUS VERSION, HOLY BIBLE SCRIPTURES, WILL REPLACE THE ONES FROM THE NIV WHEN THE BOOK WAS PUBLISHED. NOW I KNOW BETTER AND HOPE YOU DO TOO. WE ALL HAVE NEED TO GROW FROM FAITH TO FAITH AND THAT MORE SURE WORD IS IN THE KJV HOLY BIBLE.**

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**BURNED ALIVE.**

Jerry Golden Publisher  
Jerusalem, Israel

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Dedicated to the one individual who, without any doubt, is the most wonderful and dedicated person God has ever allowed me to know: my wife Connie.

*Wherein ye greatly rejoice, though now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness through manifold temptations: That the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honor and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ: Whom having not seen, ye love; in whom, though now ye see him not, yet believing, ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory: Receiving the end of your faith, even the salvation of your souls. I Pet 1:6-9*

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# Foreword

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Jerry Golden's story is one that would melt the hardest heart. Who would ever believe that a man who would just as soon kick your face as look at you could experience the power of the gospel in such a way that his life would be totally committed to healing the hurts of the brokenhearted.

The thing that amazes me the most about Jerry Golden is that he never gives up. The desire to obey God and to risk everything in doing so has transformed the story of a man who would just as soon burn you alive to a man who has not only has been burned alive, but who is now burning alive with compassion and a heart to do the will of God.

Dozens of books could be written on those dynamic adventures he has experienced in the last few years, and I am sure dozens more in the years to come, but at this point in time, *Burned Alive!* says it all.

*Mike Evans*

## *Preface*

I must have looked like a corpse walking out the front door of Willis-Knighton Hospital.

It was late April 1976, a windy, warm afternoon in Shreveport, Louisiana. I was wrapped in sterile white bandages from head to toe beneath a loose pair of pajamas with the legs cut out. An oversized bathrobe draped my shoulders and knotted at my waist. My shoulders were stooped; my arms so shriveled that my hands curled up under my chin. For weeks, hospital attendants had watched me hobbling along with these same tiny, stuttering steps, and had adopted a name for me. Jokingly they called me "Egore" – I reminded them of a zombie in a Frankenstein movie. Connie, my wife, was beside me as we swung to face the double-glass doors. Buddy Graham, my close friend and doctor, was hurrying across the foyer with a wheelchair.

"Steady," Connie whispered. "You'll have to stand here a moment."

Without thinking, Connie reached her hand behind my left elbow to brace me. Her slightest touch sent a tremor of pain racing up my arm and neck. I winced and turned my head sharply toward her.

All I saw were her eyes, wide and deep, a rich pool of blue glimmering with tears in the afternoon sun, and I forgot my pain. I wanted to reach for her and pull her near, but my joints were stiff, my body isolated beneath layers of pads and bandages. I felt inadequate to express the emotion that welled up inside my throat.

If I could have found the words, I would have told her how lonely life can be without a single, loving touch, and how I had missed her kisses. Normally I'm not sentimental, but today, at this moment, I found myself thinking about the last time Connie had kissed me. It had been three

long months ago—on Saturday, February 12, to be exact.

I could remember that kiss so clearly now because I had squeezed it through my mind in a thousand replays since, savoring it in the stillness of my hospital ward. I could still picture Connie, a bright blue scarf around her neck, driving me out to the local airport where a single-engine airplane was waiting to fly me and two other ministers to a prison crusade service in Atmore, Alabama. I had slid quickly out the car door, grabbing my briefcase and Bible from the seat beside me.

By the time I had walked around the front of the car, Connie had rolled down her window.

"I'll see you later tonight," I had said. "Why don't you pick me up about eleven?"

She had grinned. "Why don't you call like you usually do? Since when have you ever been on time?"

"You're right as usual," I had replied. "Okay, I'll call you about eleven."

We had smiled together, and I had leaned low to plant that kiss on her lips.

"Bye now," she had called as she pulled away.

Had we foreseen what would follow later that night, maybe we would have lingered on the runway, tasting the moment together before she drove away.

That's why I wanted to tell her now, standing in this hospital lobby, how important her touch against my elbow was to me, regardless how much it hurt.

But before I could speak, Buddy arrived with the wheelchair, stopping it six inches behind my knees. Slowly he lowered me onto a horseshoe-shaped air collar that cushioned me from the hard cloth seat. Two young aides then rolled me quickly through the sunshine to our small car and lifted me inside. One struggled to drop me from the wheelchair onto the car seat while the other positioned the chair. Every movement, every touch, was agony.

I couldn't explain to her what it meant to be lying comfortably in my own bed again, listening

to my children huddling outside my door. Twelve weeks before I was dying in a hospital emergency room with seventy-five percent of my flesh burned away. My lips had been seared away; an ear was gone. My face had swollen to full expansion and cracked open, until a doctor who thought I was unconscious had told a nurse beside him, "Make this man as comfortable as possible. He's not going to live through the night."

I had felt the heat of hell itself in my eyes and throat, a pain so intense the room around me had turned deathly black. I had screamed through the night, through the following day, for weeks. But I had not died.

My survival meant the doctors had to make a more optimistic prognosis: I would remain in a burn unit for at least five years, they had said, and would need dozens of plastic surgery operations just to reconstruct my face. I would never be able to walk long distances without tiring, and was told to forget about sunshine—probably I would never stroll or swim again unless I was bundled up in thick, heavy clothes to protect my skin.

That was twelve weeks ago. Today I was home, staring at the ceiling through eyes that had been touched by Christ Himself. Home, without even a single plastic surgery operation. So much had happened, more than a simple, ex-con, Jewish preacher could ever explain, or deserve. But one thing remained clear: I knew I would never forget a detail, not in a million years.

Now, as Connie flipped off the overhead light and closed the door behind her, leaving me alone, I flipped on the movie projector buried deep inside my brain. Some scenes had been grotesque, others bittersweet, but I wanted to remember them all. I wanted to relive those weeks again and uncover still more precious truths.

Better yet, I wanted to share the secrets God had revealed to me, with you.

# Chapter 1

---

I had wanted to fly ever since Uncle George crashed his plane into the house.

World War II was over and most of the young soldiers had returned from unnamed beaches in the Pacific or the foxholes and tank traps of Europe. Most were ready to pick up the pieces of their lives and begin to reshape them. Jobs were plentiful and easy to find, and a soldier, freshly mustered out, could start to work almost as soon as he landed back in his old hometown.

The war had meant little to me then. I was born in 1940, and by the time the letter arrived to tell us that an uncle I had never seen before was arriving home that week, I was a mere fledgling of five years old.

Uncle George immediately seemed different from the other soldiers in town. He was tall, broad-shouldered and tanned like most of them, but somehow he didn't share that solemn Jewish urge to return to the homestead, marry and settle down. He had seen the war from the cockpit of a sleek Air Force fighter plane, and his close encounters with death had only increased his love of excitement and adventure. Uncle George enjoyed a good laugh and a clever practical joke, and never seemed to mind when the laugh or joke was at his expense. From the first time he lifted me high into the air and shook me roughhouse-style, we were friends.

It was good to have a friend in those days. I was one of only a few Jewish boys in our small community of Morgantown, West Virginia, and still too young for companions from the local grade school. Father, an entertainer, was away a lot, traveling more and more with his act as a magician. He played the big spots like Carnegie Hall, and gave us clues by the money he made and lost so quickly that he was a heavy gambler as well. He was every bit alive, but often he would leave on trips and not return for months, sometimes for a year or more. Mother and I were

left to live off the income he sent home and keep house in his absence.

Father was a mysterious man. He had married my mom in his mid-fifties, while Mother was still in her early teens. Probably he had supported a family in his younger years before Mother, but he had never said, and had clearly told us that his past was none of our concern.

Mother was a little into the show business life that Father was so good at, and before I came along, the two of them would make his tours together. Having a son at age fifteen changed all that, however, and Mother adapted herself, whether she enjoyed it or not, to the domestic chores of a housewife. We were always provided for since Father's parents were wealthy and lived nearby, and because Father always managed to return home with plenty of money.

But his trips came more and more frequently and he stayed away longer and longer, leaving me with the deep inner feeling that perhaps I was unwanted and un-liked. Father was my idol, sure, but we weren't friends.

That's why I liked Uncle George. He was home, near me, and pretended to have time.

"Want me to tell you what I did in the war, Jerry?" he asked one day as he stepped off the porch and hopped a row of rosebushes near the steps. "I killed Nazis. Yep, I shot 'em out of the sky, like this."

Then with his hands poised like a gunner's, he proceeded to drill some imaginary German fighter plane full of holes.

"Kablewie!" From his throat came the perfect descriptive sounds of battle, and with my mouth hanging open, I stood transfixed, picturing the burning wreckage, trailing black smoke, diving out of the sky and exploding on some distant wooded knoll.

Uncle George, in the meantime, had stretched out his long arms as if they were airplane wings, and with them churning like the blades of a Dutch windmill, had set off to notch another kill. In my mind, I had gone with him. Uncle George was the greatest, the tallest, the proudest

pilot in the entire Air Force. At least, he was to me.

And with him at home in Morgantown, my little world was never the same. He was always there to pull a new stunt and liven up a slumbering town resting in the rolling green hills of West Virginia.

By 1946, the post-war boom had caught up with Morgantown, and homes were going up in a new development called Morgan Heights. Mother and I moved into a beautiful new home Father had purchased for us.

It was a wood-frame duplex, as were many homes of the period, squeezed tight against another with the exact same likeness. Inside, at each end of both living units, were coal-burning ovens, surely one of the greatest marvels for young eyes. Outside, two tall brick chimneys seemed to stretch to the clouds as they rose from the roof. I especially loved the porch and the wide yard in front.

We were lucky to have it. For a few months before we moved in, Father had become suddenly ill.

Mother thought the tuberculosis that racked his slender body had returned with him from a recent trip to Africa. What had he done over there? He never said. We only noticed that once he returned he was never the same. He continually grew worse, and since TB was incurable in those days, soon died.

"Jerry, are you finished eating?" Mother asked at lunch one summer day.

"Yes, Mother," I answered. I spread a few remaining beans around my plate, hoping it would appear emptier than it really was. "Can I go now?"

"You can go only if you've finished everything. Drink your milk, then go."

The milk was gone in one gulp. But not the beans. Never the beans. Money had grown tighter with Father's death until some days we ate beans for every meal. I grew sick thinking about it.

We were a good Jewish family eating beans practically three times a day. Disgusting.

I scampered outside into the warm sunshine. But before my legs could carry me off to climb to the highest limbs of the closest maple tree, I heard a noise. An airplane! Coming my way! It had to be Uncle George.

Uncle George had never lost his love of flying, and it was easy for him to drive to the local airport, rent a plane and escape for several hours in the air. He had done it often, and sometimes when he knew I was home, he would signal me with a friendly low buzz over our rooftop.

Zoom! I saw the plane dip until it cleared the house by only a few feet, then watched as Uncle George dipped his wings. I could see him in the cockpit, laughing and shaking his glove as he always did.

Another pass, and he was still laughing, and another, and then on the fourth buzz past the Golden residence, he dropped the plane way down, just to see how close he could skim the roof without touching it.

He didn't make it. Pulling out of his dive, the plane's right wheel crashed into the chimney.

Several bricks came tumbling down the white siding, while others fell into the hearth below.

Uncle George, still laughing, flew on.

Collecting my wits, I ran inside.

"Mother!" I yelled. But one look around the living room where the fireplace was told me what Mother had already discovered. Black coal soot filled the air like a fine powder, and burned ash and charcoal grime now covered all the furniture, carpet and drapes. Mother looked angry, holding a handkerchief over her nose to breathe, while I couldn't help but burst out laughing.

Uncle George!

With Mother busy cleaning up the dark, sooty mess, I hurried back outside. I was eager to wave and jump and yell the next time he passed over.

But there were no more passes that day. I waited, but the sky was quiet. No airplane, no buzz or zoom or "bombing run". No Uncle George.

Thirty minutes later, I spotted him walking from the woods just over a hill beyond our subdivision. He was still wearing his flying clothes, still waving his gloves. I ran over to greet him and watch him laugh when I told him about the soot from the fireplace.

"Jerry!" he called when I was yet a dozen yards off. "I crashed that plane! Ha!"

"Wh -- what?" I stammered.

"I crashed it!" he repeated. "Come on, I'll show you."

With that he grabbed my tiny fist with his big gloved one and took me to a spot where, nestled in the treetops, broken and desolate, hung Uncle George's airplane.

And Uncle George was still laughing, rolling up with glee. I joined in with him, and from that moment onward, I wanted to fly. I wanted to grow up and sit behind the throttle like my uncle had done. I wanted to feel the plane around me, soaring, diving and twirling wing over wing at my command. From that moment, freedom and adventure meant only to fly, and I never lost its sense of thrill.

One Saturday, Uncle George picked me up at my white house in Morgantown and took me for a short ride in the country. Once outside the city limits, away from the traffic, he pushed down the accelerator, racing the engine while the wheels pushed us up beyond seventy miles an hour. I felt I had joined the special world that belonged only to free spirits like my uncle, like I had tossed myself without a backward glance off cliffs of derring-do.

The feeling lasted only until the red glare of police lights appeared in our mirror, forcing us back to reality along the roadside.

"All right, buddy!" bellowed the policeman. "I tailed you at seventy-one miles an hour in a fifty mile-an-hour zone. You must think you have a license to fly!"

"As a matter of fact, I do, Officer," Uncle George said, and he reached into his hip pocket for the evidence. He held the permit, officially authorized and stamped, out the window for inspection. The officer was taken back. His jaw tightened, his eyes bulged, as did mine. He shook his head.

"Well, I'll be!" he exclaimed, studying it closely. "Okay, get out of here. But take it easy, will ya?"

Years later as I weaved my steps between the long, thin shadows of iron bars on the floor of my two-man prison cell, I remembered Uncle George. Perhaps it was the low humming sound I heard overhead that brought him to mind.

I backed to the edge of my bunk and peered into the bright sunlight to get a look. The bars divided the window into evenly sized rectangles and made it hard to study the whole sky, but beneath the clouds, miles beyond the prison walls, I spotted a classy, single-engine airplane. To me, it represented all the adventure and thrill of life, and I watched it from the window until it disappeared from view. I had hardened into a convict who used his fists to stay alive, but an airplane soaring lightly in the soft blue sky could still touch a responsive chord inside me. Maybe it was the last reserve of child-like wonder I had left.

"Wow, that's freedom," I thought. "Someday I'm going to fly like that. Someday, when I get out of this joint."

I sighed. If only I could flash an impressive card and drive away as easily as had Uncle George. But it didn't work that way at Angola Prison. This was where people came to rot. There was no getting out once you'd been locked in a cell for fifteen lonely years.

## Chapter 2

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Everything in my childhood led me toward Angola Prison.

Life changed drastically with Father's death, but Mother changed most of all. She was young and attractive, and with six years of maternal responsibility behind her, most without Father around, she strained for release. I know she loved him dearly, but with his passing, only one small item separated her from the adventures of youth-me.

So the years just after Father's death proved my most formative. While Mother made her way from odd job to odd job and from boyfriend to boyfriend, I was carted back and forth between home and grandparents. As a youngster, my choice was simple: live the stern, strict life of a Jewish schoolboy with elderly grandparents, or try to keep up with Mother's drinking, cavorting friends. Staying with Father's parents meant diligent studies and formal etiquette, which I found quite repressive. My grandparents were elderly and not capable of coping with a high-spirited grandson. They ruled my life with an abrasive "no."

Mother and her boyfriends, on the other hand, offered what seemed the perfect opportunity. She never enforced the rules, and chances were good that when friends came calling or when Mother took a new job, I would be overlooked completely. Often I faced the morning with absolutely no supervision at all, free to attend school or skip out for a day in the woods. It wasn't surprising, then, that as Mother took over a nearby nightclub, I advanced no further academically than the eighth grade.

My frequent and lengthy stays with my grandparents equipped me for life much more than my young perspective could realize, however. I was drilled and lectured, schooled and exemplified in the traditions of Judaism, and when I passed my Bar Mitzvah at age thirteen, I had memorized

half the books of Moses, or so it seemed. How meaningless were the pages and pages of rules, I thought. How ridiculous to think a man could ever hope to obey the fine points of God's law, much less that he would want to. What good were ancient rules that applied to nothing in my small-town, unsettled, abandoned world? Judaism was the tradition of my grandparents- old people's rituals and ceremonies-that only attempted to keep me out of, not help me into, the world of other boys.

So feelings of rejection, isolation and alienation deepened inside me, spreading and branching like cancer in the hollow of my heart. My grandparents, I assumed, didn't understand me, my mother didn't want me, and my Jewishness trapped me.

But though I chose to reject my Jewish heritage, I soon found I couldn't escape it. I ran into it bitterly during my first year of public school.

It was lunchtime one lazy autumn day, the kind of day that makes a first-grader restless as he walks from the classroom to the dingy brown tables of the cafeteria. Outside the air was chilled with a touch of winter, while inside I sat in a woolen sweater near a steam radiator with perspiration moistening my face. I gazed blankly into my beans. As soon as the teacher gave the usual nod, I crunched my milk carton and sack into a springy wad, lobbed them into a corner trash can, and darted out the door.

They were waiting for me.

Off to the right, several yards away, stood three larger classmates. I had suspected they didn't like me, but today as I bounded down the cafeteria steps, they took up a chant that became the provocation of a thousand fist fights in the years that followed.

"Christ killer!" they shouted together.

"What?"

"Jerry is a Christ killer! Jerry is a Christ killer!" Over and over they screamed it, until their

ugly sing-song began attracting other children who had finished their lunches and had stepped out for a romp on the playground. Most of them, their faces told me, seemed just as perplexed and bewildered as I was, wondering what possibly a Christ, much less a Christ killer, could be. Angry, hurt and outnumbered, I was just deciding to fight when a teacher emerged from a classroom and stepped in between. My taunters smirked and backed into the shade near the school building, still huddled together.

It was the last time I can remember that I didn't go to war whenever I heard that chant.

Later that day I heard another word closely tied to the mysterious phrase I had learned on the playground: Jesus. Jesus and Christ were one and the same, I was told. So, I reasoned, Christ was a last name. First name, last name; Jesus Christ. Simple enough.

"Grandmother," I asked after our formal dinner that evening, "who is Jesus Christ?"

Her eyes widened. "Don't ever say that name in this house again!" she screamed in her frail voice. And with that, she slapped me across my cheek with the back of her hand. "That's nothing a good Jewish boy would ever say!"

I was more careful after that. And I never forgot. Eventually I learned that Jesus was a Jewish teacher, perhaps a prophet, whom Christians worshiped as the Son of God. A silly idea, I told myself, maybe more absurd than my own Jewish upbringing.

I took Mother's remarriage with mixed emotions. My stepfather seemed to be a kind and a good provider, but when his affection continually focused on his new wife while ignoring me, I retreated further and further behind the walls I was erecting around my feelings. At least we could dress a little better and Mother didn't have to pace the floor worrying where our next meal was coming from, but now I had to share her attention with another man -- a Gentile at that--and I was never cute enough or helpful enough to merit his love on my own.

High on the hill where my grandparents lived, word that my new stepfather wasn't Jewish

fanned a family crisis, with me caught in the middle. I was the only son of Zane Golden, the only grandchild living in West Virginia. Mother had never been fully accepted, but her remarriage found her totally ostracized, and my grandparents made new efforts to persuade me to live with them and continue my Jewish indoctrination. Mother and my stepfather rarely resisted their attempts, of course, so I was often driven to the house with the big rooms only to sneak out at the first opportunity and run to our new home outside

Morgantown. There was virtually nothing my aging grandparents could do about it but bring the car and pick me up again.

Mother didn't care if I stayed at home as long as I made myself scarce while she entertained.

So I learned how to observe her friends without being seen, and taught myself to gamble better than her older crowd. For fun I practiced pool by the hours, standing atop a stack of wooden soft drink crates I piled around the table. By twelve years old, I was good enough for several of Mother's male friends to drive me to low-lit pool halls and bars in surrounding towns and bet me against other "Joes."

More and more I hung out in the joint Mother managed, playing cards and dice until I could win at any table game. And I drank, sometimes downing a fifth of whiskey and several beers in a few hours.

Frequently I ran into the name I had heard on the playground: Jesus Christ. I fought over Him at school and argued over Him at home. just once, I thought, I'd like to meet this man I'm supposed to have killed. Instead, I was branded for a crime I knew nothing about.

Christians! I hated them. In gangs they would fight me over this one dead man, while I had heard of a so-called Christian in Germany who had massacred more than six million Jews during World War II, including two-thirds of my relatives. Because of a faraway place called Dachau, where hundreds of Goldenberg's had marched naked into massive, open gas ovens, my grandparents

had worn black for ten years.

Then came the Saturday night I learned about Christians up close.

It was late, around ten o'clock, and I was already in my pajamas, lying in bed. Mother and my stepfather were sitting in the living room, reading the afternoon newspaper and chatting.

Suddenly I heard car doors slam near the street, followed by the muffled whispers of several dozen men walking up the driveway toward the house.

The doorbell rang. Mother answered it.

"Yes?" she called from behind the cracked opening. "May I help you?"

"Grab that Jew!" one man yelled, and when he did, the house quickly filled with men all dressed in white cloaks and tall hoods with holes cut out only to see and breathe. From beneath wide, draping sleeves they brandished clubs, knives and guns. Once the door was opened, they charged in from hiding behind shrubs along the house and from the porch outside. My stepfather was caught still sitting in his chair. He threw up his arms as they approached, but both were caught in mid-air, and he was dragged across the hardwood floor toward the front door.

"Trash!" raved the leader. "You're the husband of this Jew woman, aren't you?"

He turned to the others in the room. "Search the house," he ordered. "I know there's a little Jew boy around here somewhere."

On command, several hooded thugs sped through the kitchen and down the hallway that led to my room. In a second, one stood in my doorway, silhouetted in the hall light. He seemed to fill the door frame.

"Ahh!" he exclaimed. "Get up, you dirty Jew, before I cut your heart out!"

But instead of moving, I froze, trembling beneath the blankets. Before I could think, he swooped back the covers and grabbed me by an arm and a leg.

"Please, Sir," I begged.

"Shut up!" he cursed.

Still I couldn't move, but this time because he was pulling me across the bed. Then he shoved and kicked me down the hallway. Cut and bleeding, I arrived in the front yard with Mother and my stepdad.

There were more hooded men in the yard than I had imagined from the noise I'd heard inside. All stood in a circle, shouting the same chants, cursing and holding torches. All dressed the same: long white cloaks and tall, ghostlike hoods with rough black letters stitched on the side. "K-K-K."

So that's who these men were.

I had always thought the Ku Klux Klan hated only blacks. At school I occasionally overheard the whispers of classmates discussing the nightly activities of their Klan fathers, usually the morning after a raid into the black community just outside Morgantown. "You'll never find a black in Morgantown after dark," one had boasted, "because the sun will rise on a dead man if the Klan catches him."

It was true. Not a single black family lived in Morgantown, and I'll never forget the morning I walked across the Morgantown-Monongahela Bridge and saw two disfigured black teenagers hanging by thick yellow ropes from the bridge trestle, dead. No witnesses ever stepped forward to report these "mysterious" killings.

But we weren't black. We were Jews. To men who want to hate, hate knows no color.

By now, dozens of men, all in white hoods, had gathered in our front yard. Most of them spotted the beams of their flashlights on Mother while several others hit her, clubbed her, molested her, and laughed. My stepfather struggled to reach her, but they held his arms tightly behind him and beat him about the face and chest. He moaned.

While Mother finally lay still in the long shadows of the circle, the crowd focused its light and

attention on its Gentile scapegoat. Cursing obscenities and threats, they whipped him as he stood defenseless, and when they thought another lashing might kill him, they shoved him to the center of the circle and coated him from head to toe with hot, smelly tar. He screamed in pain.

I was mocked and beaten, but I could see my stepdad as the Klan doused two large buckets of chicken feathers on him. Hatred was almost liquid in that circle. It, more than the physical abuse, ripped at me like a claw in my stomach.

Satisfied that we had been sufficiently disciplined, the group disbanded, but not before soaking two railroad ties in gasoline, strapping them in the shape of a Christian cross, and setting them ablaze. With my face still buried in the dirt where they left me, I could see the flames brand that cross deep into the lawn. I watched as Mother staggered to her feet, snatching at the shreds of her blouse, and stumbled to my stepfather's side. She was crying. We all were.

I had lived through another encounter with Christians, followers of a man they said I had murdered on a cross like the one then burning deep inside my mind. I hated them. I hated Him. The next morning, Sunday, the raid on the Golden house was the topic discussed quietly in most of Morgantown's small Sunday schools.

"The Jews," they whispered between prayers, "sure learned their place last night."

## Chapter 3

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Angola Prison was a garbage pile for the nameless discards of life. When I first arrived in 1964, my temporary quarters were assigned to the Receiving Room where 150 callused criminals were quartered in a space just slightly larger than an average living room. The bunks were triple-high tiers, squeezed so tightly together that it was easier to crawl across the bottom beds than walk down the narrow aisles.

I had been tossed into a cage with only my wits and fists to protect me. Slowly I elbowed my way to the sleeping area, careful not to disturb the arms and legs protruding from lower and upper bunks. Sooner or later I knew I would confront a knife or razor or lead pipe, but I wanted to avoid a fight on arrival day.

I slumped down into my cot and looked around. Most of the men were watching television. Others were strung out on their mattresses, reading, sleeping or staring holes in the bottoms of the bunks above. There was a lot of time to fill.

In those days, I was one of the more civilized inmates. My only crime was that I hadn't squealed on friends who had ripped off a New Orleans hotel. Most of the men around me were incorrigible murderers or thieves. Homosexuality in Angola was almost epidemic, and sex-related killings were frequent. First-timers, or "fish", who couldn't slug it out with the bosses were assaulted almost from the moment they arrived. Guards seemed to look the other way. Sexual attacks weren't one of my problems. I could defend myself. But I often felt a twinge of pity for a fish who couldn't.

If those years in Angola gave me anything, they left me with a vivid impression of what hell must be like. Most people think of hell as physical torture alone, but in prison I learned there are

two kinds of torment, one as deadly and bitter as the other.

Sure, the living conditions of Angola were hell itself: the stench, the curdling sounds you could never completely shut out, the violence, the cockroaches that infested your mattress and cell, the total despair of looking ten, fifteen, even twenty years in the face knowing you'd never get out of the filth.

But just as tormenting were the memories I brought to Angola with me. My thoughts became a sadistic ghoul that slipped into my mind to steal my sleep after an exhausting day of trying to stay alive. I spent an eternity second guessing, culling through my childhood, wondering how my

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life might have turned out if Father hadn't died, blaming Mother for pushing me out of her life and onto the streets, cursing the suckers who had ripped off the hotel and left me holding the bag.

My anger was never far from the surface. The fighting I had learned on the playgrounds and streets of West Virginia now served me well in Louisiana. In time, I became the top con of Angola State Prison, an operator who used violence and intimidation to control the prison's drug traffic and loan shark business.

My capacity for gentleness and love was nonexistent. I was cocky and street smart, toughened by a life of looking out for myself, a man without conscience who used people until they crossed me, then turned on them..

"Skeeter" Mullins knew how tough I was. Skeeter was one of my pushers who had borrowed \$600 one day. The deadline for repayment came and went, but Skeeter hadn't paid.

"A few more days, Jerry. Gimme a few more days," he pleaded. So I did.

But when a week went by with still no dough and no Skeeter, I went collecting. A top con has to enforce his rules. If everybody heard I had let one loan slip by unpaid, they all might be tempted to try it, and I'd be out of operation in a single day. No way that was going to happen to

me.

I caught Skeeter alone in the education building one afternoon and gave him a "fair" choice: face my knife or lay out his arm. He closed his eyes and stretched his arm across a table, crying pitifully while I smashed it to a bloody pulp with a baseball bat.

"Business," I reasoned aloud, walking away. "I gotta keep 'em in line."

My world was perverted, upside down. I thought I had reached the top when I really had snagged the bottom. And I groveled in that dirt and misery for six years, never caring at all.

Then came the day a prison guard tapped me on the shoulder and ordered me to follow him to the chapel. For an instant I thought about telling him where to go.

"Sorry, Jerry," the guard said. "Warden's orders. If you refuse, I'll have to take you to the hole."

At the time, even twenty-one days in isolation seemed better than a talk about religion. But I knew I'd be stripped and searched before I was thrown inside, and I couldn't afford a shake-down with the fortune in drugs I was carrying in my pocket.

Shrugging my shoulders, I marched like a shadow behind him. There in the chaplain's office I faced an elderly man of eighty with pearly white hair and stooped shoulders. He was impeccably dressed in a dark business suit and bunched up tie, and his eyes contained a smile even brighter than the one that pushed back the corners of his mouth.

We shook hands, eternally it seemed. Even before I could thrust my hand back into the side pocket where the drugs were, he started talking about Jesus.

I wasn't buying. "You can cut this Christian stuff," I interrupted. "I'm a Jew."

"I know," he replied. "You mentioned that in your letter."

Letter? I sighed. Oh, that letter. Several weeks before I had eyed a strange-looking card on my cot that read: "We help men in prison." I thought I had hit upon a perfect money-making scheme

and had written with a sob story asking for all the clothes, money and books this group called "Criminals Anonymous" could give me. I never suspected it was a Christian organization. Hardly.

Yet here I was, catching bits and pieces of old Mr. Graham's testimony, listening as he showed me how Isaiah and the Jewish prophets talked of Jesus Christ in their ancient writings. Somehow I was drawn to this elderly man.

Still, it wasn't his words alone that penetrated me; it was his radiant warmth. The gentle gestures of his hands, his carefree nature; no one had treated me with such respect and concern.

When he told me he had driven more than three hundred miles from Shreveport just to meet me, I was fascinated. I couldn't comprehend such a thing.

In a daze, I walked back to my bunk, mulling his words over and over in my mind while I fumbled at the New Testament he had insisted I carry with me. I could not comprehend the words Mr. Graham had spoken. I could not comprehend the courage of his personal appeal to me, or his determination to visit me, to win me. I had heard the gospel story many times before, but this time without reason it cut through all my mental barricades and emotional defenses. It cut deep into my spirit, touching some living, feeling part of me I never knew existed. I felt humbled, vulnerable, broken. Before I had felt walled in, trapped inside myself with nothing but my hate and ugliness and despair. Now, unexpectedly, a voice came crashing through my heart and soul that gave birth to a fresh, new relationship:

"Let go, Jerry. Let Me."

I did a lot of letting go in those days. Nothing compared with the light, happy feeling I got as I flushed thousands of dollars of drugs down the commode, or dumped knives, razors and brass knuckles into the open sewer lines. It was harder to back down to a six-inch blade at my throat, however, and only Jesus and time could train me to control my fiery temper.

Fortunately I had both. Jesus was always with me, and I had all the time in the world.

Resting on my mattress one day, I read Mr. Graham's New Testament, well-thumbed by then.

In the Gospel of John, my eyes fell across the story of Jesus, on trial for His life. I could picture His expression as the nasty, spitting guards had slapped Him and stripped off His clothes. Vividly, as if I were standing in the crowd outside Pilate's window, I imagined the blood that had caked in His beard from the festering wounds of brambles and thorns. Mocked, lashed, His beard plucked, I envisioned Him as the cross was dropped into place with a force that ripped His flesh into gaping, crimson holes.

Innocent, but executed.

I could relate to Him until that point. In my life before Christ, I had kept steady company with pain -- shot three times, stabbed twice, my ribs kicked until they snapped in half like the wishbone on a Thanksgiving turkey. Once my teeth had been knocked out and my hands fractured.

I had deserved my pain, but Him?

Somehow I felt I could understand the sorrow of the man who hung in humiliation between two crooks like me.

But it was His dying words from Luke's account that broke me. In spite of the agony, He had cried, "Father, forgive them!"

The pocket-sized testament slipped from my hands as hot, clean tears welled up in my eyes and raced down my cheeks. In a moment I was on my knees beside my bed, sobbing like a child.

"Help me to forgive like You did, Jesus," I prayed. "Help me to forget."

As I studied His Word and prayed, He did help me. I returned the watches, rings and other valuables I had "confiscated" from prisoners who had defaulted on their loans, and tried to tell them what had happened inside my heart. Many of them, not believing the change in me, dropped by privately to find out more. In the two years I remained in Angola after beginning my

new life with Christ, dozens of inmates were convinced it was for real. Together, one on one, we would slip to the floor where they met, up close, the same Master and Lord who had befriended me. In time, God's forgiveness extended across my entire past life. I lost the bitterness I had held against my father for dying so suddenly, and against my mother, who I thought hadn't wanted me.

Even the deeper scars were healed, like my contempt for anyone who didn't have the same Jewish blood flowing in his veins that I had in mine. I forgave Christians and the Ku Klux Klan; I even forgave myself.

On May 1, 1972, I strolled out the gates of Angola Prison a free man. Outside the high brick walls, the sunshine felt warmer against my skin than I could remember. How green the trees appeared! How white the clouds! The same cedar; and patch of open sky I had viewed through the rusty red bars of my cell window had never seemed this animated and colorful before.

I drank in a long look at the prison's front gate, then ducked into Mr. Graham's waiting car. Like a saint he had driven from Shreveport to pick me up. I spent the next several months working with him at Criminals Anonymous, visiting prisons, telling men, women and teenagers headed in the wrong direction in life how Jesus could turn things around.

And though I was an uneducated, Jewish ex-con only months removed from the pen, hundreds who heard my story came forward. I watched in awe as Jesus met them -- not a gaunt, anemic, sissy Jesus, but the Carpenter of Nazareth with brawny shoulders and callused hands. The injured souls I spoke to had soured on life. They didn't need a Christ who lived in the private office of a plush church building; they needed to know the Christ who had worked hard, yet had never returned evil for evil when life had dealt Him a bum deal.

It was this Jesus I told them about. Then I had only to stand back and let the Great Fisherman do the rest. At the outset of a life-long ministry, I learned an important secret: As much as I

ached to reach the world; as much as I wanted to bind up the bruised and heal the brokenhearted;  
as much as I longed to love the whole world, Jesus longed to more.

## Chapter 4

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I was sitting quietly in my study one dank winter afternoon when the telephone rang. On the other end was Chaplain Byron Smith of Alabama State Prison in Atmore, Alabama.

"Jerry," he said, "would you bring a team of ministers and musicians and hold a service for our inmates in the chapel here?"

"Byron, I would be happy to."

"You know how it is when the weather turns cold and there's nothing for the men to do except stay cooped up in their cells all day. I'm afraid there's going to be some trouble unless we can ease the tension. The warden's agreed to let me have a one-night crusade. Can you come on February the twelfth?"

"Chaplain, I wouldn't miss it for the world," I answered. "Let me give it some prayer and check my calendar. I'll get back to you."

I dropped the receiver softly and pulled my large calendar schedule from the lap drawer of my desk. February 12 was an empty square six weeks or so away, so I penciled in the Alabama appointment and called Chaplain Smith back. As I hung up the phone a second time, I couldn't help but smile. Sure I'd go, I thought. Only four years earlier I had been an inmate myself, probably just as fidgety on a colorless winter day as were the inmates making so much trouble in Atmore Prison now. I understood how one empty day fades into another, until some demon inside practically lunges at every chance to break out. I remembered what it felt like to be locked year-in and year-out in the same cell, to walk the same exercise yard, to see the same faces and feel the same hatred every day.

But a lot had happened to me in those first years after my stretch in Angola. The work God

had led me into had mushroomed. At first it began with small meetings, sharing my testimony with church clubs and Bible study groups. Then the story of an ex-con preacher spread until there were almost more invitations from churches around the country than I could handle.

With each new door of service came new responsibilities. I left Criminals Anonymous to establish Christian Prison Ministries, working with Christian businessmen, lawyers and faithful supporters who believed Christ was the only solution to crime.

More and more the house trailer behind my home became a temporary shelter for newly released inmates looking for a job, and more and more the phone rang, often in the middle of the night.

"Jerry, listen, I'm at the bus station in downtown Shreveport," one caller said. "I was just released today. I've got no job and no place to go. I know it's late, but I really want to go straight. I'll appreciate anything you can do to help me, brother."

Every caller was an opportunity. Hanging up the telephone, I slipped my feet into my slippers and felt my way to the car. In an hour or so, I was asleep again, happy that another inmate had a temporary home to sort out his thoughts as he struggled to face a world that had changed dramatically since he had seen it last.

In the morning and days that followed, we'd help him find a job and settle down. Meanwhile, he would hear what Jesus had done in Jerry Golden's life. That was the best help we could offer, after all.

But when a man breaks the law and goes to prison, his family enters a prison of its own.

Without a breadwinner, family members can lose the house, the car and furniture, even go without food. So to those wives of inmates who wrote us, we supplied clothes and food. Christians in the free world soon heard what we were doing for prisoners and deluged us with more than we could give away.

Ours was a faith lived out in the only way we knew how. "I was hungry and you gave Me something to eat," Jesus had said. "I was thirsty and you gave Me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited Me in, I needed clothes and you clothed Me; I was in prison and you came to visit Me." We took His words as a commandment.

Jerry Golden, the minister, grew as well. I discovered the secret of waiting on the Lord. Instead of wasting time looking for people to help and things to do, I learned to cultivate prayer.

My Heavenly Father could accomplish more in five minutes than I could in five years, so instead of trying to pry open doors of opportunity, I trusted them to Him. My responsibility was to remain faithful to Jesus; His job was to lead me, as does a good shepherd, to those we could help the most.

Then came Connie. I met her at a church social and soon learned that this young girl loved the Lord with all her heart. She was a gracious lady of strong emotions and courage who seemed like a beautiful flower blooming in the desert. I was amazed by her. She could love strangers and work tirelessly, as if the more love she gave to others, the more she had to give.

Connie had been raised in church, but my past as a Jew and ex-convict didn't faze her. As we talked, I realized how very special she was, and in time we were married.

She became my constant source of stability and strength, working beside me with prisoners and their families or helping me organize our home and office. More than any other companion I could have chosen for myself, Connie was the perfect addition to my life and ministry.

In a subtle way, my marriage gave me an important insight about God's forgiveness upon which our work depends. I wondered how the Lord could give such a lovely gift as Connie to a man like me. He couldn't, of course, unless He had completely erased my past.

That truth alone drenched me in love. Gone, the long years of searching for meaning, striking back at a world I felt had thrown dirt in my face? Could Jesus forget about those years and treat

me as if they had never happened?

Yes! Connie was proof. She was a living, loving reminder that I had been translated from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light with no police record to haunt me. And if Jesus had done as much for me, I knew I should treat others whom He had forgiven in exactly the same way.

Eventually our home in Shreveport grew to include Johnny, Adrianna and Charity. For the first time in my life, I had young ones who relied on me. I watched them grow, and since I had never had a dad to teach me about my Heavenly Father, the Lord instructed me through my children.

Jesus waited patiently as we made our mistakes, and with every trial conquered, He increased our responsibilities a small measure more. We began recording teaching messages for prisoners, sending them on request to any inmate who asked for them, as we did Bibles and study guides. I spoke more and more on radio and television at the invitation of newsmen or evangelists who had regular programs.

We were reaching into state and federal correctional facilities in eighteen states. High schools by the hundreds asked us to come, and sometimes we would preach for more than an hour in three or four schools a day. We had heard that young people weren't interested in our message, but we had heard wrong. Great numbers of teenagers were searching for a reality to replace the materialistic, empty lifestyles of their parents. For everyone who surrendered to Christ, society was spared a potential criminal.

But how could we continue to deliver the burdened message of my heart face to face with those who needed it most and continue to travel such great distances? When God sent the answer, I smiled to realize how easy it would be.

I would learn to fly! Sure, why not? Suddenly I remembered Uncle George and his airplane,

dangling between the limbs of a tree. I couldn't help but burst out laughing.

So in my spare moments, I took flying lessons and earned my pilot's license. With an airplane I could rent from the local airport, I would make my longer trips in the air, saving precious time and fatigue. The airplane became a most effective tool in distributing the gospel, and in one month alone, I traveled more than nine thousand miles above the clouds.

When February 12 dawned crisp and clear in Shreveport, my life and ministry were in full stride. Nothing in the still morning air gave me the slightest clue that things would change so dramatically so soon.

The day started with its routine sameness. As usual I drove to the office early to open the morning mail. I was glad it was Saturday and the office was free from visitors and phone calls because today I felt pressed to pray about a burden that had stirred inside my heart during the past several weeks. God was trying to tell me something fresh and exciting, but as yet I knew only restlessness.

It was after I had settled into my desk chair to sip an eye-opener cup of coffee that my burden suddenly crystallized, ripping into my consciousness like an unexpected flash of sunlight in a dark prison cell:

*Preach to the whole Church. Preach to the whole man.*

The thought hit me so suddenly I couldn't take another sip from my porcelain cup. I slid it firmly away from me on the desk top, and dropped my head, crying.

To an ex-con evangelist like me, ministry meant preaching and sharing with former prisoners and runaways like myself. I had always felt insecure about addressing the needs of long-time Christians- after all, I was a new kid on a block of saints, I thought. It was one thing to give my personal testimony to churches and prayer groups; it was completely different to preach directly to their needs. Who was I to understand the needs of Christians who had started out for Christ

dozens of years before me?

My heart weaved and dodged the thought, but it remained fresh and strong. I was inexperienced, unlearned in theology, yet it didn't seem to matter to Him.

But if my message was to change, I cried aloud, I had important questions that had to be answered.

I reached for a tall stack of letters and prayer requests that had arrived just that morning, and traced my fingers across the top address.

"Jesus," I prayed, "I have to know why You let these beautiful Christian people, represented by these letters, suffer so terribly. Why do You heal some, but wait years to heal others? Why do You choose never to heal many at all? Why, Lord?"

"Lord, if I'm going to stand on that stage and claim You heal, I have to know the answer. I have to know that You're not a haphazard healer." Too often I had seen the poor, the destitute, the elderly and dying walk dejectedly from a platform of high hopes, unchanged.

"Teach me, Jesus. I don't want theories; I want to know Your character and power for myself. *Whatever it takes*, Lord, help me to understand Your ways so I can love as You love and see things as you see them."

That prayer was as earnest and sincere as any in my entire thirty-six years. I couldn't have guessed its consequences.

But in the early morning quiet of my tiny office, I still had no explainable, intellectual understanding of God's choices, no "handle" of sorts on the hidden mysteries of faith. For the millionth time, I closed my hands around the thick clump of written requests and committed them to God's will. I did it almost in resignation, as if I were dumping them on God so I couldn't take personal responsibility for the things He chose *not* to do.

"Some minister you are," I sighed to myself. "You've copped out."

By lunch I had pushed my prayer session out of my mind and had talked with the ministers

who would make the Atmore trip with me. Richard Sanders, a pastor at age thirty, would help me at the conclusion of the service, counseling and praying with inmates who would respond to the salvation invitation. Allen Davis was the youngest at twenty-six, but his resonant, anointed singing could melt even an audience of ice cubes. Both men had testimonies that prisoners could relate to, and both knew how to support me with their prayers as I brought the evening message. Allen and Richard were hand-picked by God for this trip, and I could tell by their voices over the phone that they were eager to get underway.

Later that afternoon, as we prepared to climb aboard our beautiful blue and white airplane at Shreveport Downtown Airport, I couldn't help but feel a fresh sense of excitement. I knew God had a special work to do for the Atmore prisoners, and with the weather crisp and clear, I couldn't help but believe the entire trip was ordained for success.

I kissed Connie goodbye. Neither of us could tell with that kiss that this night would bring us to the brink of disaster for our ministry and our life together. The next time I would see her, everything would be different. Jerry Golden would be screaming in agony, burned beyond recognition. It would be weeks before she could kiss me again, and by that time, I would be miles down the road to understanding the mysteries of God that had for so long eluded me.

## Chapter 5

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The remainder of the day passed fluidly. Allen, Richard and I turned the three-hour flight from Shreveport into a party, telling tales and clowning happily. We found on arrival that Chaplain Smith had thoroughly organized the prison auditorium platform, which saved us an hour or more of work. We had only to walk into the steamy hot, crowded chapel and begin.

As usual, a high percentage of prisoners attended only to escape the boredom of their cells for a couple of hours, thinking a syrupy church service might make good sport. But we were expecting their remarks and snickers, and pressed on. Allen sang after I had shown a media presentation about my life during and after Angola. The Holy Spirit began to convict. I preached; the men were quiet.

At the invitation, dozens stepped forward, and Richard, Allen, Chaplain Smith and his staff joined me in praying for each one. Once stony faces now melted into fountains of tears as scores of convicts wept at the foot of the platform. Every inmate who would take one was handed a Bible and study guide for his own personal devotions. We watched those who had dared to cry, who had shown the courage to walk to the front, exit red-eyed and smiling into the rear corridor for the march back to their cells. Often they left in pairs, with huge, bulky arms thrown around a friend's shoulders, acting with the same joy and spontaneity that affects Christians everywhere who have met with Jesus.

The crusade had been a rewarding success. I couldn't have prayed for more. By 10:15 p.m. we were singing and joking as Chaplain Smith drove us to the airport for the flight home.

The plane's blue and white metallic sheen sparkled in our headlights as the station wagon braked alongside. It was a precision aircraft, a brand new, fully instrumented, single-engine

six-seater with retractable wheels and three hundred horsepower, perfect for our flight. The moment our car stopped beside it, four weary but happy passengers climbed out.

Our first job was to empty the sound and video equipment from the rear of the station wagon and load it compactly inside the airplane's front-end baggage compartment. While I unlocked the storage section, Larry opened the car's tailgate and hopped inside.

"Let me help with that." Chaplain Smith reached through the opened hatch for a heavy film projector, amply crated in a heavy cardboard box lined with Styrofoam. Allen, his tie dangling from an unbuttoned collar, grabbed the door frame and slid the projector forward. Together the pair began to clear the contents and stack it inside the plane.

It was Richard who first mentioned the fog.

"Looks like the weather's turning bad," he said abruptly.

Strangely, I hadn't noticed. I turned away from the car lights to see for myself.

Overhead, billowy clouds drifted silently across the sky, while a hazy fog now blanketed the ground like a patchwork quilt. It had rolled in during the service, a little at a time, until I could easily see we were faced with a serious aviation problem. Even though the fog seemed to be shifting southward, away from our westerly route home, I grew uneasy.

I paced my words slowly "I don't know", I said to Richard.

"Don't know *what*?" I felt his attention slide off my face and stare into the darkness. "You think it's too foggy to fly tonight, don't you?"

"Could be," I admitted. "From here it looks pretty thick in spots, but maybe it's not too dense above the ground."

"Can you fly through it-get above it?" he asked.

"Well, maybe," I replied, digging my hands deeper into my jacket pockets. "But this airport is rather tricky to fly into; at least it was this afternoon. Let me walk down the runway and take a

took, then I can tell you more."

I stepped into the fog toward the farthest end of Runway 18. Nine paces later, I stopped and turned around. Richard hadn't moved, but he was completely shrouded in fog. I knew then our chances of getting home that night were slim.

Alone I stepped to the end of the concrete pavement and felt for the barbed-wire fence I knew was several yards away. With it I found a clump of tall trees just beyond the runway's end, providing a natural barrier between the airport and a residential subdivision yards away.

Besides the fog, that was another thing that worried me. Atmore was a small rural town, sure, but the private airport was located in a residential section. At some point in time, the city had begun growing, building up around it, until now, lovely brick homes with manicured lawns lined the outer perimeter. The fog had reduced visibility to near zero, but I could still glimpse an occasional kitchen light through the mist and naked tree branches.

The night was so still and hushed that for an instant I pictured myself again inside the isolation cell at Angola. Sometimes there the endless black days would become so painfully silent that an inmate would snap mentally. One prisoner had broken under the strain. He had ranted and screamed and bashed his head against the coarse brick walls until the warden ordered him moved to a psycho ward. That's what silence can do to a man.

Well, maybe this night wasn't quiet enough to make me flip out, but the air was so still the only sound my ears detected was a faint humming filtering down from above me. I peered through the heavy fog until a cloud drifted away to give me a better view.

The humming sound came from about a hundred feet or so above me, almost directly above the fence.

Power lines!

The evidence was stacking up quickly that we shouldn't leave the ground. The houses, the

power lines feeding the houses, the trees -- I counted lots of them even in the fog--all made a spider web of danger we would have to thread our way through. A takeoff now would be a calculated risk, something no pilot with any sense would ever do. A mechanical failure, a stall, trouble of any kind, and we'd never see far enough to set the plane down safely.

But then again, why not go tonight? The same Heavenly Father who had brought us safely to Alabama, who had touched the lives of so many hardened men, could easily deliver us to our families. It didn't make any sense to think God would bring us all the way to Shreveport to do His will only to allow something terrible to happen now.

What I couldn't know at this moment, of course, was that God had chosen this foggy night to answer another important prayer of mine, one I had raised long hours earlier in my private morning quiet time. Tonight He would bring me safely through disaster, and along the way He would give me a first-hand demonstration of His power.

From the direction of the airplane, I heard Richard and Allen, in faint but audible voices, anxiously talking about seeing their wives again by morning. Richard had even more reason to urge him home. His wife was expecting their first baby within days. It gave me a deep sense of relief when the two of them discussed the fog and reached the same decision I had made. Who needed more confirmation than that?

We were going.

Chaplain Smith, Allen and Richard stood chatting near the wing of the airplane when I strolled up.

"Next time, let's keep a stopwatch on Jerry," Allen said, winking. "I had a few songs I could have used tonight, but he ran too long again."

The chaplain laughed loudest. "Oh, what a choice!" he said, grinning. "Jerry's preaching or Allen's singing!" We laughed.

While they talked, I made my usual pre-flight inspection. I checked the oil – ample -- and pressed open the clamp holding the gas sub pumps, draining water, oil and other fluids that might have collected inside the main fuel tank. I palmed the wheels for tread- plenty -and manually worked the rudders and ailerons on each wing. These were important to change direction in flight. Everything checked out perfectly, just as it should on a new \$72,000 aircraft. The air service I rented from in Shreveport kept it in excellent condition.

Chaplain Smith stepped near the wing. "When can you come back for another service?" he asked. With one hand he brushed back a tassel of gray hair the wind had scattered about his forehead.

"Whenever you ask us to come," I told him. "Next time we'll bring more Bibles and study guides. I noticed we ran short tonight."

"I'll take care of that tomorrow," he assured me. "In the morning I'll make the rounds and ask who didn't get a Bible. We'll make sure anybody who wants one gets his own. Don't worry about it."

By now the special media equipment, amplifiers, cameras and speakers had been carefully locked in the plane's front- and rear-end baggage compartments. We were ready to climb aboard.

"Connie promised Johnny he could wait up for me tonight," I said. "He's probably half asleep by now. All set?"

The four of us then joined our hands in a small circle and bowed our heads prayerfully before entering the plane. We ended with a unison "amen". Allen then hoisted up and made for the rear two seats, Richard for the front right, and I turned for a final handshake with my good chaplain friend.

"Thanks for everything," I said again. "Let's keep in touch." He promised we would, and I walked up the wing, found my seat and strapped myself in.

Still I felt uneasy about the trip, so when I saw Chaplain Smith standing where I had left him, I slid back the side window and quipped: "Don't worry. If we don't get off the ground, it won't matter. We'll go up in a ball of flames."

He laughed and nodded, waved, then backed away. But as suddenly as I had opened my mouth, I wished I could catch those words and bring them back. Too many times I had been snared with my own words. I certainly didn't want to predict trouble this night. Listening to myself sent a nervous chill up my spine.

The door locked cleanly when I pulled it to. A twist of the key and the engine shuddered and whined, then settled into a low hum. My wristwatch read 10:30 p.m.

The sound of the plane's engine woke slumbering fifteen-year-old Tommy Gehman, the oldest of three sons of Reverend Martin Gehman, a Methodist minister whose house fronted Runway 18. Though the one-story house was only a hundred yards from our taxiing area (and closer still to a nearby pasture), it was shrouded completely in fog. The teenager tossed back his heavy February blankets, slipped his feet to the cold floor and raced to his father's bedroom.

"Daddy," he called from the doorway, "did you hear that airplane crank up?"

He had and was getting up. It was too bad a night, he knew, for a plane to start out. Maybe vandals. Before there had been vandals, men who had tried to steal a plane late one evening and had damaged several others in the process. Quickly he wrapped a bathrobe around himself and stepped onto the porch, listening.

The night was silent except for the plane's distant humming, a hundred or so yards away. And dark. Either the automatic timers had doused the runway lights, or the fog was too thick to peer through. He decided to call the police. Maybe it was just a strange feeling, but there was something unsettling about this whole thing.

Was that a plane he heard taxiing toward the north end of Runway 187 It was! "Hey, don't

take off!" he wanted to yell. With a knot building inside his stomach, the pastor tightened the cords holding his robe about him and marched to the telephone to obey a familiar inner tugging. As soon as the airplane left the ground, he knew there would be trouble.

"No time for games," he muttered aloud, dialing. "Hello? Ambulance? I need an ambulance at Atmore Airport. Send someone out here as soon as you can! Runway 18." He slammed down the receiver, surprised at himself for talking so loudly in a sleeping home.

There was only one ambulance unit in Atmore. One van equipped with first-aid and other emergency paraphernalia had long served the small rural town. Tonight, for the first time in anyone's memory, the unit had gone home with its only driver. A simple Fire Department dispatch raised her easily, only a block from the airport service building. She was on her way.

When the stocky Methodist preacher dropped the phone in its cradle the second time, even a doctor had sprung into action. Off-duty physician John Stevens was toying with his new car CB monitor when the notice came through. He was close to the scene since his backyard also touched airport property. He punched his car into drive and squealed out the driveway, never bothering to acknowledge the call.

At the north end of Runway 18, the plane paused briefly, long enough for me to glance at the constant speed propeller gauge and instrument panel and see that everything was working properly. A short nod to Chaplain Smith, now almost unseen through the cloudy overhang, and we were on our way.

I revved the engine up to take-off intensity, clicked off the main cabin light and stepped on the rudder. The plane began rolling—thirty, forty, fifty, fifty-five, seventy-five miles an hour, with fenceposts and runway lights disappearing behind us. Once up to speed, I pulled back on the throttle and we leaped gracefully into the air, banking to the left as planned.

That's when it happened.

Even from my pilot's seat I felt it. Forces like a gigantic fist pounded against the front-end baggage compartment and yanked the door open!

Instantly the plane lurched. The hatch suddenly had become a perilous, flat anchor, disrupting our air flow, cutting the power of our lift in half, drawing us like a snared bird back to earth. I felt the surge, and my heart leaped into my throat!

The indicator panel told me the truth of the moment. We hadn't climbed to two hundred feet, yet the instruments clearly showed we were falling between three and four hundred feet a minute.

We were going to crash!

But where? In someone's living room? A child's bedroom? I shuddered at that. Would we fall like a lifeless sparrow into the nest of power lines below?

Allen and Richard knew nothing of the tragedy unfolding at that instant, holding us captives in its icy grasp. So few seconds were left that I didn't want to alarm them. We were at God's mercy, I knew, and if this was the moment He had chosen for us to die, better to let them slip into eternity at peace.

The plane lunged severely to the left, and I all but stood on the rudder trying to shift us back to the right. The air speed dropped radically from seventy-five miles an hour to fifty. I remembered the grove of trees, but I had to risk it. I eased the nose downward, hoping to pick up speed.

I tried everything in the instruction manual-and some tricks even the manual doesn't know-but nothing worked. The plane, bridled by forces beyond its control refused to gain altitude.

The constant speed propeller had worked before, but now it jammed. I gripped it, physically trying to make it respond, but failed. It feathered and flapped helplessly in the air.

Baffled and scared, my heart slammed itself again and again against the walls of my chest. I fought to remain composed. Panic tried to worm itself into my mind as every desperate effort I tried proved futile.

Then God stepped in.

Miraculously I sensed His presence as He supernaturally took control of our plunging death trap. My muscles relaxed, my mind cleared, my decisions once again became rational. The moment I surrendered my fear and inadequacy to Him, fear became a stranger. Seconds ticked away like a time bomb while I struggled to correct the incorrectable, but I never lost hope. We hadn't been abandoned.

Only a second was left when I noticed a patch of ground just inches from the tip of the left wing. I braced and whispered, "Oh, God, I leave it to You. I can't land this plane. You'll have to set us down wherever You want us."

Weeks later I would discover how beautifully God answered that frantic prayer.

The ground reached up and grabbed the wing as the last grain of sand dropped through the hourglass. There was a jolt, the screech of crunching metal, the splinters of breaking glass.

Impact! Explosion!

## Chapter 6

---

The wing tip outside my window forced its way into the ground, transforming the aluminum aircraft into an instant inferno. Unbearable white heat shot up my legs as the left fuel tank ripped open and drenched the cockpit with eighty gallons of flaming gasoline.

Incredibly, I was still alive, but only because God Himself had taken the controls and landed the plane for me. He had dropped the rear section like a huge scorpion's tail, raising the position of the wings. Then with precision flying, He had guided us, tail down, wings up, through an open gate ten feet wide. Our wings had skirted above a row of fenceposts four feet high.

Above the fence-with its only gate ajar for our burning wreckage to slide through-were menacing power lines. God supernaturally had flown our crippled machine low enough to miss the overhead wires, high enough to clear the fence, and straight enough to squeeze through the open gate.

And if that wasn't miraculous enough, we had fallen from the fog into the only vacant field in a congested residential subdivision. Investigators who later measured and charted every piece of debris that cluttered the field were astonished that a disaster could appear so organized.

Usually there would be several dozen head of cattle grazing lazily in this pasture. Tonight, for unknown reasons, most of them were gone. The few that remained were frightened by the searing ball of yellow fire that mushroomed above the crumpled, blazing ruin.

Flames engulfed the interior so quickly that my clothes and the flesh on my legs were already burning. Allen! Richard! Alive? I turned feebly to my right.

Richard was startled. He struggled to free himself, but the door beside him was jammed. With both hands he was trying to work the handle.

"I can't get it open!" he yelled.

Fire licked at him from the floorboard as I reached across, tore off his nylon seatbelt and shoved the door ajar. He tumbled out as flames began eating into his left side.

Hurriedly I struggled to climb out behind him, but my mind raced to Allen. Moments before, an eternity ago, he had been stretched out leisurely across the back two seats.

"Allen! Are you back there?" I screamed.

No answer!

He had to be back there! Maybe a piece of heavy equipment or flying metal had struck his head and knocked him to the floor. I pictured him ignited, engulfed in flames and burning to death. And I remembered Jesus, dying for me at Calvary. He had not loved His own life then, but had given it freely that I might live, Now it was my turn. My Christian brother was back there, and his life was my responsibility. I could jump out the right door to safety or I could chance my life for his.

I decided to go back.

The air itself was on fire. Inhaling meant sucking flames directly into my lungs-instant death.

I clamped my lips together and dove to the floor for Allen.

I was an instant too late.

Just as I reached the rear row of seats, the right-side fuel tank exploded. The force lifted the wreckage off the ground, and like a hand clapping down on a carton of eggs, drove us hard again back down.

I staggered like a drunk, steadying myself against the iron frame of once-padded seats. In a step or two I hit the rear door. No Allen! He must have jumped clear on impact. Or maybe he was thrown out. But there was no time to think about that now.

I could feel the double-knit suit I was wearing as it melted into my flesh. My hair was burning-

it reeked horribly-and fire danced up and down my body. Already my eyes were swollen closed, but I wasn't so conscious of pain that my mind couldn't focus on another more immediate need: air. I had to get air!

My lungs ached as I stumbled to the plane's rear hatch. The door had been blown away, but instead of a cool wind to soothe my skin, a hellish ring of red-orange fire now fanned out from the plane for fifty feet in every direction. The only way to reach safety was to make a dash through the heart of those flames,

Running was the very worst thing I could do, but I was doomed if I did and doomed if I didn't.

I leaped into the fire, charged through the flames, and hit the ground rolling. My body had become a human torch.

Dizzily I took a deep breath, not knowing if I would live or die. My mouth literally gaped open as I inhaled.

It was fresh! Praise God, it was cool, fresh air! I began gulping air like a man starving for food.

"I see a light!" The voice was Allen's. He was alive!

Already the ambulance, lights flashing, was closing in. Allen could see its headlights, like cat-eyes, puncturing a hole in the darkness. Quickly he was beside me and I felt his hands touch my burning skin as he tried to stand me upright.

"Jerry, there's a fence over there we have to cross to reach the ambulance. Can you make it?"

I would try, I told him. He took my arm on one side, while Richard helped on the other. Together we began staggering toward the lights, singing choruses as loud as we could: "Jesus, Jesus, Jesus; there's just something about that name." The words were our comfort in those hectic moments, and as they lifted us from that forsaken, parched Alabama field, I felt the presence of God like I had never experienced it before.

I couldn't see. My face had swollen to full expansion and cracked open like an over-ripe watermelon on a hot summer day. Facial tissues were oozing fluids mixed with blood, and my double-knit suit dripped with melted flesh off my arms.

Every movement was agony. Without seeing, I knew that bones were all that remained of my hands. Sand and gravel were grinding into my arms and legs. Could hell be any worse?

Finally we reached the fence. I bent low and began to crawl over. As I did, I suffered a screaming, horrible torture more intense than anything I had ever known before.

"God!" I cried frantically. "You promised You'd never put more on me than I can bear. I can't bear anymore! I can't take anymore!"

My prayer didn't escape His notice. Instantly I felt His strength. My spirit was washed of trauma and fear. I relaxed, realizing that I lived only by the strength of Christ who lived in me. I lived only because He willed it so. Or else I perished. Amazingly, I was stooping, twisting, turning, climbing over the barbed-wire strands, only because God's power surged through me from my shoulders to the small of my back. His glory radiated around me, and somehow as I fought through the fence and walked on, I sensed I was in a sanctuary alone with Him. His presence was overpowering. The agony and stench gave way, and I felt my spirit lifting, soaring, taking me outside my physical body.

I had heard stories of this happening. Occasionally in my travels, some individual would pull me aside and tell me of strange experiences with the supernatural. But when the person would get to the part about his soul leaving his body and floating through air, I would cringe. That bordered on astral travel - spiritism. God doesn't work like that, I thought. Furthermore, it had never happened to me, which meant it never happened at all.

Wrong. It was occurring now without my control, as if God was calling me out of my body.

Pain ceased, and I found myself somewhere in the air, watching Allen and Richard clumsily

guide some burned, ugly man across the stubby grass of the pasture. Suddenly I realized the man they were half-pushing, half-dragging was me. I was staring at Jerry Golden as my disfigured hulk made its way to an ambulance, but I felt eternally removed from the scene below me. I was experiencing a beautiful fellowship with God, and I understood in the depths of my soul that I had been spared to tell the richness of these moments.

Then as quickly as it had begun, it was over. My spirit sank back into my body, and the agony started all over again. But I walked with more confidence now, singing even louder the praises of God.

Tommy, Martin Gehman's son, stood near the fence with his father. One look at me in the eerie yellow light of the burning wreckage and his stomach turned. He threw up.

Later I realized what he saw. As I climbed through the fence, I became entangled. Huge chunks of black, burned flesh peeled off my hands and hung across the wire like strips of charred hamburger on an outdoor grill. It was sickening.

I climbed into the ambulance with the help of Richard and Allen, and collapsed onto a stretcher. The siren wailed and we sped away for the emergency room at Atmore's Methodist Hospital. What had happened still had not fully registered in our heads, and as if the moment was an animated dream, we continued our singing and joking. Allen and Richard winked at each other and smiled, and the van filled with our noisy, clowning voices.

We weren't Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, the three Hebrews of Bible days who had been tossed into a fiery furnace. Unlike them, we hadn't escaped unharmed. Still we had escaped with our lives, and each of us had something to be thankful for.

The scene had a pronounced effect on our ambulance driver. Weeks later, Connie received a letter telling us the lady had given her heart to Jesus because of what she had witnessed that night.

By the time we reached the Atmore emergency room, the ambulance was a horrible sight.

Blood and fluids had seeped from every inch of my body, soaking the cloth stretcher beneath me, and even filtering through to the floorboard. My friends still had the strength to sit up, but everything we touched turned to blood.

The driver had radioed ahead, and white-smocked attendants met us as the van screeched to a stop. The door handle turned and yanked open, and gloved hands

reached inside. I was lifted by my shoulders and lowered onto a portable hospital stretcher.

The swinging doors of the emergency room parted with a crash as we rushed through.

Dr. Stevens, who had heard the call over his car CB radio, arrived almost simultaneously, but since the hospital had no facilities for burn patients, there was little he could do. With a knife he tenderly removed a sharp edge of propeller that protruded from my skull, but the explosion had damaged my face and forehead so extensively he couldn't sew them up.

Someone found a metal cutter and snipped off my wedding band. My hands had puffed so large that the gold ring was eating through my skin, what was left of it.

"We can't help this man here," Dr. Stevens said. "He's burned too badly. You'll have to drive him to the burn unit in Mobile where they have the equipment to help these kinds of burns. Here, take this and get on the road."

Into the driver's hands he thrust his brief emergency room report. Then my collapsible bed was lowered and fitted into the ambulance. Allen and Richard also climbed aboard and sat on each side of me.

The full extent of the pain was now vividly real. I was almost delirious, but I was still conscious. I could hear and understand every word said to me, and I could tell from the doctor's voice that my condition was extremely critical.

All I could think to do was scream the name of Jesus.

Somewhere along my unorthodox path to Christ, I had heard that a man couldn't die while he was speaking the Lord's name. Since at the time I couldn't think of anybody who had died speaking His name, I screamed it over and over, louder and louder, in English, Hebrew and Yiddish. God must have heard me because I was still alive sixty miles later when we arrived at the University of South Alabama Medical Center in Mobile.

I was rushed into a modern, anesthetic-smelling emergency room, especially outfitted for burn victims. Allen and Richard were taken upstairs and admitted to a general ward, while a burn specialist evaluated my condition.

I was exhausted. I lay quiet and still, so still the aides thought I was unconscious although I was very much aware of my surroundings. The doctor examining me turned away, and through the thin, sterilized mask that screened his mouth and nose, I heard him instruct a nurse who stood close by.

"Why, this man has third-degree burns over seventy-five percent of his body," he said in low, whispered tones. "You might as well make him as comfortable a possible because there's nothing we can do. He won't live until morning."

I heard his words and wanted to scream! What doctor could tell me I wasn't going to live when I shouldn't have survived the crash in the first place? After God had delivered me from the burning wreckage, why would He take me now? Yet now a stranger who didn't know what I knew - who didn't know *whom* I knew - had given me up as a lost cause. I wasn't buying that, and I wanted to tell him so.

But the sudden onrush of emotion triggered new waves and stabs of pain that shot through my body. Again I began shouting the name of Jesus, moaning and groaning between each sob. I had never felt such torture in my life.

My face was charred too badly to cover with an oxygen mask, so nurses plunged hoses directly

into my nose. In poured the air, and my lungs and chest heaved heavily as I breathed.

As I struggled to live, writhing in hot blood on the hospital table, Jesus came again to me.

Scriptures I had committed to memory vibrated through my mind with new understanding. "I am the Lord, who heals you." For so long, those words had seemed intended for ancient people of an ancient day, but tonight, spoken in His soothing voice, it was a promise I could count on. "I am the Lord, who heals you." No one could wrestle that promise from me.

Another verse came to mind: "By His wounds you have been healed." The Bible hadn't said that I could be healed, or even that I would be healed. The scripture said I had been healed already through the wounds Jesus had suffered more than two thousand years before.

Provision had already been made! God was willing to heal! God was able to heal! Understanding those truths made me so happy I wanted to shout. All I had to do was rely upon God's Word.

And then as cloth-covered faces and gloved fingers hovered above me, I realized the key" to the whole evening. I was on a mission, a ministry. Just as God had once called me to preach the message of Jesus Christ, He was now calling me to suffer for His sake. He was preparing me to minister to the whole man, and He was allowing me to test the weapons at my disposal. The Potter had power over the vessel to do with it whatever He pleased.

"Oh, yes, Jesus," I prayed. "Do whatever pleases You. Take this pain and use it to make me a better servant. Or take me now to be with You. I surrender myself to You ."

I yielded myself to God's providential hand, just as Isaac had submitted to the drawn knife of Abraham, and I robbed Satan of a precious victory. I could see that my Heavenly Father had allowed my disaster because He loved me. He didn't want me to die; He wanted me to learn; to touch in my unbearable pain the fullness of His provision; to tell others.

There were natural reasons why I wanted to live -- I was young, with a wife and kids-but more

than anything, I wanted to be used of God. I wanted to be an instrument fully equipped for service in His kingdom. Now I was facing my greatest battle, and He had allowed me to participate with Him-not to chasten me, but to enrich me.

It was truth too wonderful to contain, and I didn't have breath enough to thank Him.

## Chapter 7

---

Johnny was sitting on the den floor near the sofa's edge, mechanically flipping the pages of a magazine, when the phone rang.

"That's Daddy. He's home, Mom!" he called. With the passing hours he had grown weary, but now the noisy ring of the telephone pumped new energy into his boyish eyes. He jumped up.

Connie was tired, too, but more accustomed to waiting. Through the years she had learned to manage the household during the day and fill the quiet hours after dinner with reading, cleaning or projects that never seemed to get done with the children in the house. Tonight she sat in the soft light of a tall pole lamp, pushing and pulling her sewing needle through the hem of a school dress for Adrianna.

She smiled. Adrianna was big enough now to select her own clothes for class every day, but was still too young to mend them when they tore. It was pleasantly reassuring to know that no matter how tall and independent the kids became, Mom would always be needed for something. Good thing, too, that Mom had wisely picked durable clothes with wide hems, allowing for Adrianna's weedish growth. Otherwise, a closet full of bright dresses would be discards before a season had passed.

While she sewed, Connie prayed. There was little to distinguish her prayers from the rest of life, for even as she tugged the thread through the double layer of material, she hummed a worshipful melody. With her quiet inner voice, she prayed for family members, for those lives our ministry had touched, for opportunity to minister to yet others.

Quiet moments were the best time for praying, she had often said. She imagined that God liked to sit and talk, too-as now, for instance, when the hour was late and the chores were done,

and life was ... well, uncluttered.

Connie pulled the last stitch tight and bit through the thread. It was a school night, and school nights meant the routine family chores. During the week, evening rules were drawn a little tighter, guarded with less flexibility than at other times. Tonight Adrianna had kept them all: dinner first, then homework, bath, bed. Lights out before nine. Baby Charity had run out of laughter and spunk almost as soon as the afternoon had run out of sunshine, and was already sleeping snugly in the far room down the hall. The door had been softly closed.

Only Johnny had special permission to stay up until his father called. He was the oldest, big enough to watch out for his sisters while his mom drove to the airport.

So when the telephone's brash ring cut the evening's drowsiness, no one was alarmed. It was past 11:30, time for Dad to call with his customary request: "I'm at the airport. Come and get me."

Connie laid her sewing beside her and walked to the phone. Johnny was at her heels.

"Hello!" The greeting was a formality. Who could be calling at this time of night except Jerry? she thought.

But it wasn't Jerry. The voice that answered her wasn't familiar at all.

"Is this Mrs. Jerry Golden?" a stranger asked.

"Uh, yes, it is. This is Mrs. Golden," Connie's heart began racing. Something must be wrong.

"Mrs. Golden, this is Byron Smith, chaplain at Atmore where Jerry held his service tonight.

I'm calling to tell you that your husband has been in an accident -- a plane crash at the airport here. He's alive, but he has burns on his face and hands, just how bad I don't know."

Alive? Burns on his face and hands? The words flashed in Connie's mind like a yellow caution light, conjuring up horrible images. Jerry's hurt, she thought. A man I've never met is telling me my husband won't be coming home tonight.

Connie turned to Johnny, standing at her side. His young face was bright with anticipation.

"Just a minute, please," she said into the receiver. Then she kissed her son. "This isn't Daddy, honey. He's been delayed. You run on to bed." Her voice trailed off without breaking, but tears had gathered in her eyes. When Johnny disappeared into the hallway, she quickly turned back to the telephone.

"Thanks for waiting, Chaplain Smith. I had to send my son to bed. Jerry, uh, how is he? And the others - are Allen and Richard all right?"

"Jerry is hurt - I don't know yet how badly - but he's alive. The other two were also injured, but they're in better shape. Stable condition. I don't know exactly how it happened, Mrs. Golden. I was at the airport with them, and as soon as the plane got off the ground, it seemed to fall straight back down. There was an explosion."

"Oh." Connie felt weak and slumped against the wall, picturing a fireball in her mind. "And where is Jerry now?" she asked.

"He's been taken to the University of South Alabama Medical Center in Mobile, Mrs. Golden. I knew you would want to get to him as soon as possible."

"Yes - yes, I would. Thank you."

In the moments following the phone call, Connie's emotions see-sawed between disbelief and despair. *He's alive*, she assured herself. Thank goodness it was no worse than that - burns on his face and hands. Nothing really serious. Everything was going to be fine. Still, this couldn't be real. This kind of thing doesn't happen to good people. How could it? Why tonight? Why Jerry? Tears were cold against her cheeks; she choked from a lump in her throat. Numbly she lowered herself into a chair and began to pray.

"Lord, I've got to think clearly now when Jerry needs me so badly. I need Your peace. Thanks for sparing him; now give me strength to go to him. He's alone and hurting, Jesus, so comfort

him and flood his body with healing. Help me as I make arrangements to be with him."

Johnny was fumbling with his last button hole in a bulky pajama shirt when Connie cracked open his bedroom door.

"May I come in?" she whispered.

"Sure. Has something happened to Daddy? He's not coming home tonight?"

Connie slipped to the side of the bed and sat down.

"The plane Daddy was flying crashed in Alabama an hour or so ago," she explained. "He needs me. If I find a way to go to Mobile tonight, can you tell the girls in the morning?"

"Uhhuh."

"I'm going to call Grandmother Johnson and Great-grandmother Forbes. Ma Ma Forbes will come and stay here with you and the girls, and hopefully Grandmother will take me to the hospital tonight. Someone will drop by early in the morning to take you to school, and by the time you get home, Ma Ma should be here. So climb in bed and get a good night's rest. I'm going to depend on you a lot tomorrow."

"Yeah."

They sat side by side awhile on Johnny's turned back covers, discussing who to call if something went wrong at home, where to find food in the pantry. Then they joined hands and bowed their heads together. They asked healing for Daddy, safety for Mom, and extra courage for the girls, who would wake in the sunshine to find their dad seriously hurt and their mother gone. Connie was almost surprised she had grown so calm since her first prayer in the living room. She hadn't panicked. Her mind was tranquil and decisions were made with clarity. The starting point, of course, was to call her mother, who lived two hundred miles to the southeast in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

In several brief sentences, Connie told her mother the news.

"Dear Jesus, dear Jesus," Mrs. Johnson prayed into the phone. "Of course I'll help you, honey.

Why don't you call the airport and see if someone there can fly you to Baton Rouge tonight, right now."

"You think there will be someone who would make a flight this late, Mother?"

"It's a big airport. I'm sure there's a pilot around somewhere. Maybe the rental service will fly you down. If you can get here tonight, I'll be packed to drive you to Mobile. Hurry now."

A few more calls and everything was arranged. The flying service was eager to help. A pilot would fuel a single engine airplane and be standing by when Connie arrived. Her Sunday school teacher agreed to look after the children until Ma Ma Forbes reached the house, and Bob Davis, a family friend, agreed to personally break the news to the wives of Allen and Richard, especially Mrs. Sanders, who was carrying her first child.

Within an hour, a suitcase was packed and closed, and Connie was stepping aboard an airplane bound for Baton Rouge.

"You're not afraid to fly tonight, are you, Mrs. Golden?" asked the pilot. "I mean, the plane your husband crashed in was larger than this one. Does it bother you to fly in a light plane like this?"

"Oh, no, no. Everything's fine. I'm apprehensive, yes, and nervous, I suppose, but not afraid. I guess when something happens to someone you love, what might happen to you doesn't seem nearly as important. Jerry's a super-safe pilot. I can't imagine what possibly could have gone wrong. It had to be mechanical-you can never predict those things-because Jerry would never take a risk he didn't have to. Not Jerry."

Suddenly it occurred to her how much she had been talking. She stopped abruptly.

"I'm terribly sorry. I usually never talk this much."

The pilot smiled faintly as he looked at her. Sure he understood, and as the plane droned

above the low bank of heavy clouds, the two chatted frequently. Talking momentarily crowded the evening out of Connie's mind.

Eventually, though, the conversation thinned into silence. It was dark inside the tiny cockpit, so she closed her eyes and leaned back into her seat. Her head was spinning with questions, memories and complicated thoughts that couldn't be shoved aside forever. In her mind, she could almost picture her husband as she had first met him. She was rather shy when this tall, curly haired young man had first approached her as she served potato salad at an after-church fellowship. She thought of their first talks, their long walks, their marriage. The ministry had grown beyond their wildest dreams from those early years of struggling and stumbling. They had learned by trial and error.

What would life be like after tonight? It was a troubling question, but not frightening. Whatever happened, she would always be there. She would *resolve* to be there. Once they got past this accident, they would carry on as usual. And regardless how bad things became, no matter what happened next, they would always be together, trusting God, who would work all things out for His glory. It was good to know that though the boat of life was swamped and dashed with waves of uncertainty, one could anchor securely to the rock of faith.

"Oh, Connie," she muttered quietly to herself, "you're entirely too uptight. How serious can this be? He only has burns on his face and hands, after all."

She sighed deeply and began to sing. One chorus especially expressed what she felt, a child's song with simple words that she sang over and over: "God is so good; God is so good; God is so good; He's so good to me."

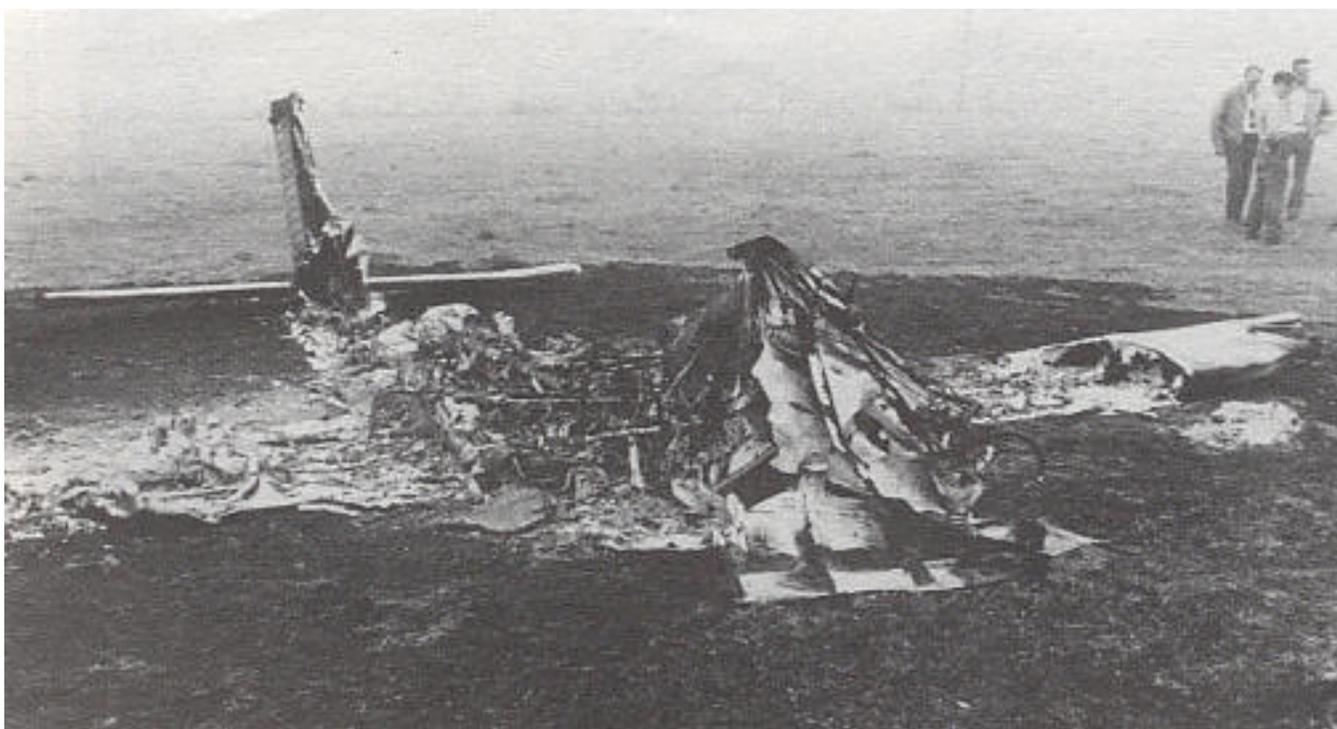
Baton Rouge airport was foggy when she stepped from the plane-the weather report said that much of the South was the same way-but Connie was serene. Quickly she greeted her mother and dropped her suitcase into the trunk of a waiting car. The two ladies slid inside.

Mrs. Johnson slammed her door and studied the road map on her lap. Down the highway lay five hours of driving, fighting the glare of oncoming headlights through the dense fog, drinking stale coffee to stay awake.

"It's three o'clock," Connie said meekly. "We can be there by eight. Let's hurry. Jerry needs us."

"Don't worry, honey. We'll make it."

Mrs. Johnson smiled, hit the accelerator with her foot, and moved among the traffic on Interstate 10.



*Actual wreckage of Jerry's rented airplane in Atmore, Alabama, pasture.*



*The healing in progress. This photo was taken during Jerry's hospitalization in the University of South Alabama Medical Center in Mobile.*



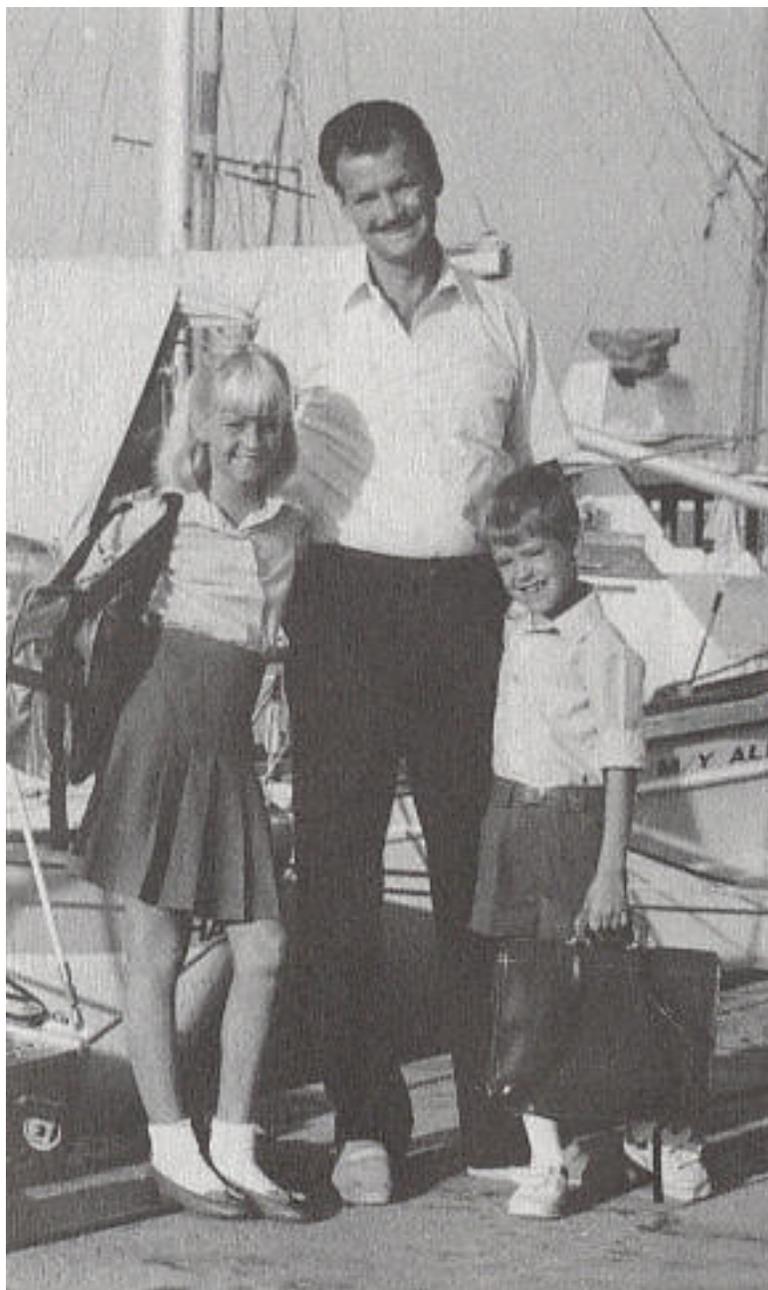
*Jerry Golden today.*



*Connie Golden, 1987.*



*Jerry's ministry today includes this "Gospel Ship" which sails to ports in the Middle East.*



*Jerry with Charity and Joel near the Gospel Ship in an Egyptian port.*

## Chapter 8

---

I didn't sleep at all that first night in the Medical Center. Nobody sleeps with burns that bad. Instead I lay in the darkness of swollen eyes, quoting scriptures and talking deliriously to God. The more unbearable the pain became, the more I talked. Talk was all I could do. Blinding pain had deadened my senses and cut me off from the outside world. I was a spirit and mind trapped inside a burned, hideous body, screaming.

In these first-night hours, as doctors and nurses peeled back my skin and operated feverishly to keep me alive, I directed all my thoughts toward God. I prayed and cried, as much to take my mind off the physical torment as to seek His help. I slipped through desperate prayers into a world of the spirit where I could see the ugly, angry side of me, and I heard myself say things to God I never thought I'd say. Selfishness had been hidden in my heart all along, but I had never seen it so clearly before. Now it came boiling to the surface, and I saw that my spiritual victories of early evening were hollow. I was a human being pushed to the limit of endurance, where Christian character survives only if it is genuine. To my dismay, another side of Jerry Golden ruthlessly stepped forward, not at all the image of myself I wanted Jesus to see.

"What kind of love is this, God?" I cried aloud. "How can You love me and allow me to endure this pain? It hurts, God; it never goes away.

"You know me, Jesus. I've led thousands of people to You. You called me to preach and minister. Why do I have to suffer like this?"

Hearing those words slip out my mouth filled me with remorse. I couldn't believe I really had said it. Was I telling God I didn't deserve the cup of suffering He had dished out for me? Earlier, I had accepted it, but now that the pain was excruciating beyond description, was I giving it

back? Did I think it was offered by mistake, that someone else, could have drunk it with any less agony? Did I think someone else deserved the cup of suffering more than me? Could I wish this kind of agony on anyone else?

My body shuddered. Had I thought for so long that I had more coming to me in life than hardship and suffering? Was I so good that I deserved more than what the Master Himself had received? *Oh, Jerry, I cried inside, don't you see what you've become? You've made a mockery of God's grace. You've made it worthless. Remember when you were a kid, when you thought you had to earn your father's love? That's what your attitude is saying now. You think God should love you because you've earned it.*

*But you haven't earned it, I reminded myself. You haven't seen yourself against the incomparable riches of Christ. You're self-centered and arrogant, and if Jesus didn't love you so much, He had every reason to walk off and leave you alone in this room.*

Besides my stabbing physical pain, I found myself wounded even deeper, far beneath in the cavity of my soul. I wanted to cry, but I couldn't. Continuously my chest heaved and panted, sucking in all the air my lungs could hold. I knew that Jesus would never leave me, but for an instant, I realized what total despair I would feel without Him. Before, in the days when I was locked in prison and hated everyone and everything around me, loneliness had become so familiar. But there would be no comparison now should Jesus ever leave me. It was one thing to die and go to hell without Him-that's horrible enough-but it's infinitely worse to live and know Jesus, to feel His warm love and joy, to know His fullness and peace, and be shut off forever without Him. That's what hell really is, after all: existence without Jesus; that pathetic scene of Lazarus and the rich man, writhing in torment, yet seeing Paradise afar.

At the thought, my heart broke with love for Jesus -- love that reached and clutched for Him. I was that pathetic man in torment. I was ugly and desperate, and Jesus was my only friend.

Around me, I could hear nurses and doctors scurrying to connect me to hoses and needles, talking to each other through their thin, sterile masks. They wore white robes and gloves, and when one walked near me, I smelled the acrid odor of hospital chemicals mixed with the stench of burned flesh.

I realized how repulsive I smelled, and it was a sensation impossible to describe. I wasn't stifled by the repugnant scent of melting rubber or clothes nearly as much as I was repulsed by the stench of my own arms, legs and face. I was lying in a large white room with six other victims like me, all screaming and stinking.

At times I could hear the doctors and aides running in panic to the bedside of a man they thought was dying. They would strip away the rotten skin and tissue and open his chest to shoot adrenaline through a big needle directly into his heart. Many patients didn't survive the night. At least there was one difference in this place and hell, I thought. Here, at least, a man could die and escape the pain.

The sun hung low in the sky when Connie and her mother arrived. They parked the car in the front lot, in the shadow of the hospital's tall brick facade. Both were weary and hungry.

Inside they approached the receptionist at the front desk.

"I'm looking for patient Jerry Golden," Connie told the nurse at the station.

"Do you know which unit he's in?" asked the nurse in charge.

"Uh, no," Connie answered. "He was brought in last night with burns on his hands and face."

"One moment, please." The nurse disappeared into a doorway behind the counter and reviewed her records. Returning, she said, "You're looking for the burn unit, which is down the hall to your right."

"Mother," Connie said as the two walked away, "I wish Jerry knew we were coming. I expect him to be sitting up in his bed. Well, this way we'll surprise him."

"Now, Connie, don't get your hopes up. You don't know what to expect. If he was just blistered all over, he wouldn't be in a place like this."

Within moments Connie found the burn unit door, which sealed the area to visitors. She rang a bell outside to gain entrance. The nurse that responded seemed highly professional and aloof. Working several years in an atmosphere like the burn unit, caring for such extreme cases, can squeeze emotions like a woolen skirt through a ringer washer. It was easy to understand why a nurse would be distant, almost detached from the patients and their families who entered the unit daily.

"Yes?" the nurse asked.

"We would like to see Jerry Golden, a patient who came in last night," Connie replied.

"Are you Mrs. Golden?"

"Yes, and this is my mother."

"Mrs. Golden, we'll have to bring your husband out to you. We keep burn patients in a sterilized atmosphere because so often burn victims lose immunity. The only way for you to see your husband is through a big glass window. We'll roll him up to it and connect you by telephone. You, talk like you usually do on a phone, and he will hear you through speakers on his side of the glass. And don't, be intimidated by nurses. We understand perfectly how wives talk to their husbands."

She pointed the pair to a row of molded-plastic chairs in a waiting room off the main corridor, and asked them to be seated. Several minutes later, the nurse appeared again.

"Your husband is waiting for you at the window down the hall," she said. "All set?"

"Ready," Connie answered, scooping up her purse. She and her mother hurried into another large room to find the plate glass divider that separated burn patients from the outside world. By this time, Connie was cautious. How badly was Jerry hurt if he was brought to a sterilized

burn unit and isolated from visitors? What was really happening here? Had she been told everything? Would the next few steps bring reassurance or terror? The nurse was leading too slow, she thought. She longed to break away and run to her husband's bedside, to scoop him into her arms and comfort him until her trembling subsided. She wanted to kiss him and whisper "I love you", releasing her fears as her husband reassured her that all was well.

Instead she arrived at a plate glass barrier which reflected the glare of bright overhead lights. Beyond it was a broken man burned horribly beyond recognition. Connie stared and gasped. There was no warmth other than the heat from the lights. There was no privacy, no intimacy. Nurses were all around. Connie's mother was at her side. How could the hurting, longing heart of a loving wife reach out to a dying husband so far away, so completely separated by a heavy glass wall? Could there be any healing at all in a world so sterile and impersonal? Connie sighed with anguish and turned her face away.

I will never forget our first encounter after the crash. Several attendants rolled my portable bed to the glass and, drew back the curtain. I was covered loosely with a sheet that had been draped above me so that it scarcely touched. The skin on my face hung where it had split open, but my eyes were still tightly shut. Nurses on each side of me dipped cotton swabs in petroleum jelly, slid them between my puffy eyelids, and pried them apart.

My eyes couldn't focus through the greasy jell, of course, but I saw enough to know Connie wasn't expecting to see me in such sad condition. Her expression poured out her heart to me. "Oh, no," she seemed to say through the glass. "This' can't be Jerry."

In my eagerness to see her, I never thought how I would appear to her. I had never considered myself a handsome man, but now I must have looked extraordinarily grotesque, like a piece of dry, overcooked meat. My lips were almost completely seared away. I was black and red, unrecognizable except for my hair and the name chart the nurse had attached to the foot of my

bed. My body was wired to bottles and cylinders. Rubber tubes ran into my kidneys to keep them flushed, and into my lungs to pump out the fluids.

Connie and her mother wore the same look of shock and horror when I first saw them. Their faces told me everything I needed to know about my condition. When we talked about this moment in the following weeks, Connie explained how waves of nausea pounded her stomach as she stared at me. Tears almost blinded her.

"That's my husband lying there," she told herself when she remembered to think. After a few seconds of silence, she fumbled for the telephone and placed it against her ear.

"Jerry, darling, I'm here. How are you feeling?"

Connie is a woman of strong emotions and indomitable spirit. When she spoke, she forced a wide smile across her face and tried to make her voice sound cheerful. But she couldn't fool me for long. We talked for no more than a minute when she appeared visibly shaken. She turned around and handed the telephone to her mother, who stepped up with a few words of encouragement. Connie walked away holding her face in her hands.

"Now, Jerry, we've prayed and we've called our Christian friends in Shreveport. Everyone is praying. God has healed you. Did you hear me? God has healed you, and He's going to pull you through. Jerry?"

I nodded weakly, half-heartedly, and our five minutes were up. One nurse stepped in to take the phone from Mrs. Johnson. Another rolled my bed and entourage of bottles back into the main ward room. I felt better having seen my wife. The pain had not lessened, to be sure, but it was comforting to know she was nearby.

I knew how troubled she was. God made man and woman one flesh through marriage, and I could literally feel the anguish she was feeling for me despite her courageous smile. Even more, it tortured me to realize that because she was my wife, she probably understood my pain as

intently as I had understood hers. I had hoped to spare her from witnessing my discomfort.

Connie and her mother walked away from the window and visited Allen and Richard on the hospital's third floor. Both were in good spirits. But as soon as possible, she excused herself to be alone. While her mother returned to keep vigil near the plate glass window, Connie looked down the halls until she sighted a small chapel on the main floor. It was after 9 a.m. She was tired, hungry and hurting. Worse, she hadn't been alone to pray since the first call came though the night before.

As soon as she sank to her knees, she began to sob. She expressed her exhaustion, her fears, her doubts. She poured out her soul. She prayed for God's healing in her husband's body. Soon she found herself giving thanks to God that three men were alive who certainly should be dead. There was no time to fret over what might happen next. The sight of the pathetic body in the burn unit had made her realize how quickly life itself could be snatched away. Yes, there was a lot to be thankful for.

Then in tears, she prayed for herself and the important task God had given her.

"Please, Lord, let me be strong. Let me see only beauty when I look at Jerry, for as he is now, I see only ugliness. I can't face him like that, Jesus. His appearance weakens me, and if he sees me weak, it will hurt him.

"Help me see him through our beautiful love. Let me see beauty every time I look at him - not the burned man on the bed, Father, but the handsome husband You gave me. If I can see him through love, he will see it in my face and will want to get well even faster."

Sometimes prayers are like casual conversations with God, like the peaceful time in the den at home before Chaplain Smith's phone call. But at other times, they are effort and agony. Connie's prayer session in the chapel was agony. It wasn't preparation for the battle to follow; it was the battle. The reason she could help me so unselfishly as the weeks passed was because she had

carried the intense groaning and hurting of her heart to God in prayer. She found renewed peace.

It was a struggle. It was warfare. But the heaviness lifted and His strength prevailed. Her soul felt light and clean. The deep recesses of joy within her were assurance that all would be well.

The next time I saw her, she was changed. I marveled at the love I sensed radiating through her eyes. She spent the rest of the day sitting in the waiting room outside my ward, just in case I might need her. At 10 p.m., she was still there, and her encouraging faith, buoyed by prayer, sustained my own.

## Chapter 9

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Later Saturday evening, Dr. Gerald Berg, the physician assigned to my case, approached Connie with a report. It was encouraging.

"Mrs. Golden," he said, "your husband has made wonderful progress today. It's getting more and more likely that he's going to survive this crash."

"You mean --"

He held up his hands to cut her off. "Let me finish. Your husband is still in very critical condition -- very serious -- and this is a very important time for him. But, I do see indications, and very promising ones, that he might make it." He gestured with his shoulders and arms. "Of course, I can't tell you what kind of life he would lead if he did live; certainly he would have to live in the Medical Center for a long time, maybe even years. These kind of burns, this severe, sometimes take years to recover from." He smiled, trying to offer encouragement without conveying unrealistic expectations.

"I know Jerry's condition is most serious, Dr. Berg,"

Connie replied. "We're praying."

At the mention of prayer, the doctor dropped his head, studying the papers in his hands. Perhaps he thought his comments had sparked a hope that could never be realized. The data still wasn't strong enough to indicate that recovery was imminent. The prayers being said now should be for the solace of family members, not for a patient who was still extremely fragile. Dr. Berg knitted his brows as if in thought. He didn't want to sound cruel.

"Last night I wrote that your husband had third-degree burns over seventy-five percent of his body," he said. "He had lost the skin and muscles on most of his fingers and parts of his arms and

legs. He had lost a lot of blood, too. Before he came here, a doctor in Atmore removed a piece of metal from the propeller that had caught him across the forehead, but he was burned too badly to sew up the cut. I'm sure you saw the open gash right about here." He pointed above his right eyebrow.

"Now, his eyes are swollen shut and his ears were mostly burned away, but he can still hear you, and we can help him open his eyes for a short time. He can still speak to you, though he's weak. His body can't keep fluids down, so we're continuously feeding him glucose and blood. You saw the bottles -- I'm sure you're familiar with those things.

"When he arrived last night, he was having, a hard time breathing, so we attached him to fresh oxygen by running lines into his nose. It's not pretty, Mrs. Golden, but it's kept him alive for now."

He paused, letting his words soak in. When Connie failed to speak, he began again.

"But, with a close examination late this afternoon, I think now ... well, I think I can revise that diagnosis of third-degree burns over seventy-five percent downward to second- and third-degree burns over sixty percent of his body."

"Was there some mistake?" Connie asked. "Maybe he wasn't hurt as badly as you thought at first?"

"Hmm, uh, no, I don't think so," Dr. Berg answered slowly. "No, I checked him personally. I've never seen anyone in the condition he was in survive through the first night. No, he has extreme burns, all right -- I think you realize that just by looking at him-but he has progressed some. Let's keep our fingers crossed."

It was difficult walking the tightrope between hope and reality.

"Don't get me wrong," he continued. "Your husband still needs a sterile atmosphere and a trained staff waiting on him around the clock. He could still be lying in that room five years from

now, but at this moment, I'm saying he has a slim chance to live. I didn't think he had even that before.

"Now, these next few weeks are going to be so important for him, and your role will be critical. I hope you can find a way to be here at the hospital as often as possible and focus your attention on your husband. I assure you, these next few weeks are going to be just about as hard on you as they are on him. But, well, this is such a sensitive time."

So Connie and her mother made plans. They agreed Connie would fly from Mobile to Shreveport to pick up her car at the airport, then drive to the house to make more permanent arrangements for the children. My mother-in-law would stay with me until Connie returned on Monday or Tuesday.

By Sunday morning, the crash had made at least small headlines in practically every newspaper in the South, especially those in Shreveport and Mobile. Friends who had not heard from the word - of - mouth chain that Connie had started the night before read the story or caught it over radio or television. It was the number one topic in at least three churches in Shreveport - those attended by the Sanders, the Davises and the Goldens.

Our home phone rang incessantly with friends wanting more information or offering to help, and when my address in the Mobile hospital was made public, I was deluged with cards and letters by the sack full. Many cards came from people I had never met personally, but who had been helped in some way through the prison ministry. I was overwhelmed.

Sometime during that Sunday morning, Mrs. Johnson drove Connie to the airport, then continued on to visit a church she had seen advertised on a poster in a hospital cafeteria.

Obviously it was a church that believed in healing. The pastor stopped at one point in the service and called for a special time of prayer.

"If anyone in the congregation has an urgent need, step into the aisle and walk to the front," he

said. "Let our elders pray for you."

Mrs. Johnson moved out with several others and approached the pastor.

"I'd like to stand in for my son-in-law," she told the man awaiting her. "I'd like the Lord to give him a new suit of skin."

The next few days were indeed critical ones for me. My body was emerging from the shock of what had happened and was beginning its long road back. With Connie away, my mother-in-law tried to rally my spirit, reading scriptures and cards and leading prayers from her post beyond the window. I found it hard to be cheerful, though, when large hunks of flesh dropped off my arms and legs every time someone touched me.

By the second day, Monday, the doctor said it was okay to eat something, and believe me, anything tasted better than the bland fluids the nurses were dripping into my system. I started to order a hearty dinner of fried chicken, then changed my mind. Maybe I ought not ask for anything "fried", I told myself. So I just ordered chicken and cake. With a good set of teeth and taste buds, I went to work on a drumstick, loving every bite.

But for an active person like myself, time dragged by tormentingly slow. My arms and legs became stiff and unmovable; I might as well have been bolted to the bed. To divert myself, I studied every textured square in the ceiling and became acutely aware of the sterilized world around me.

Despite puffy eyelids, I could see that the burn ward was a large white room, divided into smaller cubicles by white curtains pulled along on rails fixed into the ceiling. I could see into several other cubicles when the curtains were pulled apart. Always at the end of each bed stood a tall metal rack of bottles hanging upside down like bats in the corner of a dark attic. Doctors and nurses wore their white smocks and thin, plastic gloves -- necessary utensils, of course, but bothersome. I passed my entire stay in Mobile never seeing the faces and hands of the staff that

attended me.

I had become a resident of a colorless world where every sense was either extinct or greatly exaggerated. Before the swelling in my face subsided enough to let me open my eyes, I could adequately describe much of the place by what I could hear, smell and feel. Vision only increased my awareness. I studied every detail closely to help divert my thoughts from the pain.

But no diversion was ever enough. I felt so much agony I didn't think I could go on, much more than I thought any man could endure. I screamed prayers night and day -- the clock meant nothing to the ward's seven patients. On all sides around my cubicle, the dying ones were groaning hideously, and in chorus with their pathetic wails, I must have screamed "Praise the Lord!" a thousand times or more.

Dr. Berg later told me that if I had stopped screaming, I would have died. My skin had lost most of its pores, through which blood gets most of its oxygen. Screaming pumped in enough fresh air to offset the "breathing" my skin could no longer do. It helped me ventilate.

I remember one morning when several nurses rolled the bed of another patient close to mine. My body had frozen so still that I couldn't turn to see who was lying beside me, but from his accent, I could tell it was a black man, probably from Mobile. In his hoarse voice, he said, "Reverend, don't ever stop praying. Don't ever quit." He gulped for air. "I think your prayers are keeping me alive."

His statement changed the way I viewed my own situation. Never had I realized that God could use me to minister to others while lying helpless myself. It was an exciting thought, and I began calling out prayers for all the burn patients around me.

Surely my prayers weren't lost in the air. Surely they weren't hitting the ceiling as hysterical screams and echoing back to earth. I envisioned them as seeds which would sprout and grow to bless others, and I was planting an orchard.

Praying made me realize that I could always communicate with God no matter in what condition I found myself. Just like Elijah or King David or Daniel, or any number of biblical heroes, I could ask and receive answers to my prayers. I could take my spiritual authority in God's will even while lying in a bed of blood. My body might be charred and wrecked, but my spirit was viable and eternal. It would never lose its ability to call out to my Heavenly Father. Spiritual matters were eternal matters, and now I could see the necessity of nurturing them, cultivating them, through prayer. For while my body would decay and pass away, my spirit would live forever. As the apostle Paul wrote, whether in life or death, I am with the Lord.

So I rejoiced in prayer throughout the day.

On Tuesday, Dr. Berg stopped by for my morning examination. He seemed in a robust mood.

"Golden, you amaze me," he said as he checked the bandages on my left leg.

I grimaced from the sudden tug to a bandage. "Oh, yeah? Why's that, Doc?"

"This leg looks remarkable, just remarkable," he answered.

"Don't let that amaze you, Doc," I replied, smiling. "God is healing me. I'll be getting out of this hospital before long."

"Yeah, well, keep your optimism but don't waste your prayers. I'm agnostic."

It wasn't like me to smash anyone over the head with my faith. I'm not the kind who uses religion as a club. So I eased up. The doctor walked away, and I didn't see him again until later that afternoon. In the meantime, I asked the Lord not to let my big mouth turn him off. The healing Jesus was doing would be testimony enough.

When he returned, he stood by my bed, scribbling on a chart and talking at the same time.

"What we have to do now is keep infection from setting in," he explained. "We have to keep treating the burns and keep you sterile." Then he gave me a long list of "ifs" that might set back my recovery. I had no room in my head for negative comments, though, so I didn't listen too

closely.

When he finished, I said, "Doc, what are all these tubes for?"

"Well, for a lot of things actually. The big one there" -- he pointed -- keeps liquids flowing into your body. It keeps you from dehydrating."

"Is it medicine or something?" I asked naively.

"Hmm?" He mused as if the clipboard in his hand had taken him a million miles away. "Oh, that. Well, it' glucose-sugar and water."

"I hate so many tubes, Doc. Can't I unhook this glucose tube and drink the water through my mouth instead? That would eliminate the biggest tube."

The doctor glanced up and peered directly into my eyes.

"You want to *drink* the water instead?" he asked.

"Uhhuh," I replied. "Why not?"

"Because that's a lot of water, a lot of water. You'd get sick of the taste."

"It would beat these tubes, Doc," I countered. "I could do it."

He frowned and scratched an ear lobe. "Golden ... yeah, I suppose you could. But if I find that you're not taking every swallow I tell you to take, I'm going to reconnect the drip so fast you'd think your arm was attached to a faucet. Understood?"

"Understood."

So by the third day, the hospital had pulled the drip tubes, and I began a regular routine of drinking gallons of water each day. The doctor was right: soon I tired of the taste. But I disciplined myself because I had fallen from 185 to 118 pounds in two days. I was drinking to stay alive.

Connie arrived from Shreveport that Tuesday, and her mother returned home to Baton Rouge.

With Connie at our first window meeting was Billy Crosby, a close friend and pastor from

Shreveport who had once pastored in Mobile. I could see tears in his eyes when he saw me, but he acted cheerful and offered to give Connie lots of help.

Billy called his friends in Mobile until he found a family with a tidy garage apartment for Connie to stay in as long as she remained in Mobile. The family agreed to let Connie use it rent-free. Other friends of Billy's brought television sets and radios by the apartment to make Connie's stay as comfortable as possible.

We weren't the kind of people who could easily borrow things or indulge in our friends' generosity, so these kindnesses taught us quite a few lessons about how to lean on others. Receiving with no ability to repay can be a humbling experience. From it, we learned how to give to others in the proper spirit.

I was totally surprised when Connie told me our friends back home had formed a Jerry Golden Medical Fund. Summergrove Baptist Church had first felt the burden to help, then congregations of all denominations joined in. Shreveport Bank and Trust agreed to handle the fund.

I was flabbergasted. Like most ministers, I had never carried much insurance, but thankfully Jesus didn't make us shoulder that worry alone now. The fund made it possible to pay our monthly bills, the costs of Connie's stay, and my medical bills in Mobile. We anticipated lots of those.

Connie told me all the news during our short, chatty sessions at the window. Then she would return to the sitting room to await my next call. She never left for lunch without leaving word at the nurses' desk, so if I needed her I could have her paged in the cafeteria.

Soon Dr. Berg dropped his two-a-day limit on visits, and I could call for Connie anytime I wanted. The nurses fully understood the therapy my wife was for me, and patiently carted me back and forth to the glass. There Connie read the mail from home or just whispered "I love you" to soothe me. Our visits were all I had to look forward to, and it seemed like an eternity between

them. I would let as much time as I could bear pass slowly by, then I would pester a nurse to roll me to the window.

One time I caught Connie smiling, as if she had a private joke.

"Jerry," she said tenderly, "do you remember the last time you called for me?"

"Yeah," I nodded. "It was this morning, about eight hours ago."

"No, honey. It was only an hour ago."

"Oh. I guess I lost track of time."

## Chapter 10

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Of all my experiences in the Medical Center, I dreaded the whirlpool treatments most. These daily ordeals are undoubtedly the worst memories of my life. I would rather endure a dozen plane crashes than suffer through a single whirlpool session.

Every afternoon, four or five attendants lifted me from my bed to a portable cot. The plastic bed sheet would be covered with blood and fluids that had drained from my body into a trough around the sides. With me on the cot, attendants changed the sheet, then pushed me down a hallway to the whirlpool room inside the ward. I remained connected to my needles, tubes and bottles. A removable glass case over my cot protected me from infections in the air.

Outlining the cot were reinforced holes that could be attached to a large winch beside the whirlpool. The attendants hooked the winch to the holes in the cot's fabric lining, raised it up, and swung it over the water with me still inside. I dangled above the large tub like a newborn baby dangling from the mouth of a stork.

My short session in the whirlpool was more than a nice soak in the bathtub. The water had been heated to 120 degrees, until a white steam rose from the surface. It was so hot that once my skin touched it, my eyes would see black.

There was no slow entry into the water, either. I was never allowed to test the temperature with my toes or sink into it gradually. The hospital thought it best to drop a patient into the "cauldron" quickly. The pain might come all at once, but it was over sooner, or so the thinking went.

So I would dangle over the tub until they dropped me, then the world around me would black out and I would scream endlessly. No drug could deaden this kind of hurting. The pain was

excruciating, and shot through my bones and nervous system until I thought I would die.

I told myself this must be the cruelest punishment of all -- hot water on third-degree burns. I couldn't understand how it could possibly help my body. I would become delirious; my mind would blank. I would momentarily forget where I was. Always I screamed. Nothing could stop the agony. Nothing.

My daily stay in the whirlpool lasted ten minutes before the winch at last would grind away and raise me out. Then the second onslaught of pain hit as cold air touched the tender scar tissue when I was lifted up. I was told I yelled so loudly the noise could be heard outside the ward.

Only a doctor can explain what good hot-water treatments accomplish for burn victims. I know that these daily soaks cleansed my body of undesirable fluids and helped loosen my blood-dried bandages.

As soon as the winch lowered me onto the portable cot again, two nurses with scissors and scalpels began at my feet and worked their way up and down the entire length of my body, cutting off all the dead skin. They pulled back the flesh to where the new skin joined the old, and cut right at that point. I felt every tug and cut, for to completely sever the old skin, the nurses often cut into the new. My nerves were raw by the time they finished this "body trim" every afternoon.

I tried to praise God between each scream as I squirmed on the plastic sheet. Every inch of skin drained and bled, until I lost so much fluid the nurses had to open new IVs. More screams as they coated the fresh, open sores with white salve and covered the salve with wet pads. The salve and pads were wrapped in sterile gauze.

I could focus only on the things I could see up close, like my fingers, where bones still protruded from the bandages. I was repulsive even to myself, more a grotesque monster than a human being. Surely the merciful God who had spared my life wouldn't let me remain this ugly

forever, I cried. Several times when my eyes were closed, I could picture my children staring at me with horrified expressions on their faces. How else could they react if their daddy came home scarred and disfigured? What if we could never play together in the warm sunshine again? How could my children love someone ugly and useless? My questions went without answers. My anxiety gradually became a nightmare.

Since patients in the burn ward had no relationship to day and night, the hospital staff tried to simulate time as best they could by dimming the overhead lights during the evening.

One morning, much too early for dawn, the bright lights overhead suddenly switched on. The ward buzzed with nurses and doctors scurrying to the curtained partition of one extremely injured man. Although I was delirious with pain, I could hear them whispering and running back and forth across the room as the activity along the far wall increased in volume and intensity. A doctor frantically pounded both palms hard into the man's chest, while a nurse measured a large hypo. Obviously the man was more than critical. He was dying.

This wasn't the first man to die during my few short days in the Medical Center. Two others had gone before him, and always the sequence was the same: the bright lights, the bustling about, then nothing. Silence. No piercing cries or rantings, no loud exchanges between doctor and nurses. Only silence. It was frightening. As long as the patient screamed, other listening victims like myself had hope. But when the noise stopped and the white sheet was drawn up to cover the patient's face and hair, a part of all of us died with him. We each despaired, alone in our separate fears and self-pity. Each death or crisis reminded us that we were all lying in a burn ward for one reason only: because we were men literally biding time, suffering while waiting to die. The hospital staff did all they could to help, but no one could live for us. The odds against us ever again seeing the outside sky were so astronomical they were laughable.

Who was Dr. Berg kidding when he told me how well was progressing? I thought. At times I

felt so dead that a fifty-fifty chance seemed cruel optimism. I felt suspicious and angry. Maybe the doctor had told the dead man across the big room the same upbeat things he had told me.

Ah, it didn't really matter, I sighed, pushing my head further into the pillow beneath me. If the doctor was right, I would laugh about all this someday; if he were wrong, nothing could bring me back to tell him so. What I really needed was to stop listening to a doctor I hardly knew and to start believing the Great Physician who cared for me and was able to heal me.

But it wasn't easy. Every day brought a new emergency, and every emergency brought me to a new crisis point in my own faith. Every time the entire ward staff would hurry to a bedside, I found myself trembling, afraid to die. For some reason, I couldn't release my life to Jesus like I had that first night after the crash. When I had realized then that there was nothing I could do to save myself, it had been easy to place my future in His hands. But now, I couldn't *leave* my life with Him. I kept renegeing and pulling back, trying foolishly to retain some sort of control over my own destiny, as if I were saying, "Don't take me now, Lord; I'll tell You when." Once again when it counted, I found myself clutching at my will, not His.

Mentally, I could accept what it meant to be "dead in Christ." Having died to self through the work of the cross meant I didn't have to fear my physical death. The death of my outer body would release my inner man to live with Christ in an eternal home He has prepared for me.

Dying was the doorway to a new and far more wonderful reality. Passage through the doorway comes by appointment, not by chance. Jesus has an appointed time for every believer to die. So if He called me home while I was lying on a plastic hospital sheet or struggling at the controls of a crashing airplane, what should it matter to me? My will should be to accomplish His will, and if He called me, I should prefer the reality of Paradise above the pain and trauma of earthly living. At east, I understood as much mentally. Working it out in my heart was the hard part.

I was experiencing with new clarity the reality of two existing worlds. As humans, we were

involved in two levels of activity simultaneously. With my flesh stripped away, my spirit was emerging as the great plain on which the wars of my will would be waged. It had always been that way, but now without the desires and temptations of a carnal body to distract me, spiritual realities -- the activities of the spirit world--were becoming more visible and focused.

Suddenly through my delirium, I saw a horrible demonic-looking creature float without legs down the aisle between the cubicles and approach my bed. The distorted figure came on quickly, carrying an object that resembled a garden shovel. I froze. The moment it arrived beside my bed, it raised the shovel above its head and slammed it down hard into my chest!

I gasped. My breath was gone!

The creature was like nothing I had ever seen before, and I couldn't tell in my fright if it were spiritual or physical. I was feverish, crying. I felt I had passed from the realm of physical matter into a world of spirit beings. The hospital room had melted away, and I was lying inside a deep, dug-out grave with the creature perched on my left. Again I felt something heavy, as if a load of bricks had been thrown violently against my chest. I was suffocating!

A thought from regions beyond my own mind then flashed through my head: *The devil! Fight him!*

I sucked in as much air as I could, until my lungs would burst from any more, and screamed as forcefully as I could: "Jesus! Jesus! Jesus!" My eyes were clamped tightly shut. I trembled spasmodically, recoiling against the grave wall like a stupefied child.

Moments later, I relaxed and opened my eyes. The creature was gone. I found myself sitting up in bed, looking across the room at the bright lights overhead, breathing freely. The nightmare experience was over as suddenly as it had begun. It had been as real in the spirit world as anything in the physical realm. Satan had tried to take away my life! He had come to kill me! Only the power of Jesus' name had prevented it.

It took several hours before my rapid heartbeat finally subsided. When it did, I became aware of a man across the room crying in pain. He must have been weeping before, but I hadn't noticed. Now his anguish troubled me for I well understood the kind of pain that reduced a husky young man to sobs of hysteria. My heart stirred and ached for him, until I couldn't take it any longer. "Father," I prayed aloud, "please ease my friend's pain. Take it away and give him rest; heal him like You are healing me.

As I prayed, my heart broke. Even though I didn't know the man, I sensed I knew what he was thinking. He was thinking about dying, about his wife and kids, about leaving them alone. He was thinking about dying so young, but he was hoping and perhaps even praying that he could. Anything to get out of the misery. He was thinking the same thoughts Jerry Golden had thought in the last several days.

Desperately I wanted God to do something for the man, something miraculous. I wanted God to show Himself to the young patient like He alone could do. Were there no words I could say that would move Almighty God to help this unfortunate victim of tragedy?

Before I could continue praying, I heard a voice, the familiar voice that had whispered to me several hours before. Without a doubt it was the voice of Jesus.

*Jerry, I would have you pray that you might bear this man's pain.*

His instructions sent me reeling. My tongue lodged in my throat and almost choked me. I couldn't believe I had heard them. I tried to shake them off, but they only returned in stronger tones; as a command, not a suggestion.

I cried to God. "Did I hear You right?" I asked incredulously. "I'm lying here unable to bear the pain I've already got, and You're telling me to *ask* You to add that man's pain to my own? You've got to be kidding!"

Maybe I had deluded myself all along. No one, not even God, had the right to ask something

like that. God didn't love me if He wanted me, in the suffering I was going through, to take on the awful pain of a man I didn't even know. A person could be asked to give only so much, and I had given mine.

God was God, I reasoned. He was different because He didn't have to feel pain if He didn't want to. Let Him do it.

Maybe I had been wrong about a lot of things, I thought. Any God who couldn't look down from heaven and see the terrible shape I was in, who couldn't see that I was not capable of enduring more pain, maybe that God couldn't heal, either.

So deliberately I did the most unforgivable act of my entire life, far worse than all my prison crimes combined. Without physically moving from my bed, I literally turned my back on God. "Forget it!" I shouted angrily. "Not me!"

This time my hard resolve brought no satisfying sense of self-justification, rather emptiness and guilt. I realized I had turned my back on the only friend to stay with me throughout the entire ordeal of the past week. No one could have brought us through the fiery plane crash but Him; no one could have kept me breathing through that first horrendous night. When Connie was sitting quietly at home, still unaware that anything had happened to me, it had been Jesus I had turned to, and *He had never turned me away!*

Yet now when He had asked me for one compassionate act of obedience, I had refused. I could see my hypocrisy. Always I had been on the front lines to help the unfortunate, to care for the sick, to feed and clothe released prisoners. I had built a ministry around acts of generosity. But always there had been a line between what was mine to keep and what I was willing to share with others. I didn't mind being "put out" by people needing a place to stay or a helping hand -- there was something noble about that. But this time Jesus was asking me to give something that would hurt so much to give. He was crossing the line I had marked as *mine* -- untouchable -- and

was asking me to surrender the very thing I clutched so selfishly, the thing that constantly balked at His discipline and lordship: the rights I had to my life.

He had brought me to the central issue of my salvation. Would it be *my* rights or His? All the messages I had preached on love really didn't mean much if I was loving through my own pride, did they? I really didn't love others as I thought I did. My ministry had been based on my need to feel important, my need to have others love me for my generosity. I had given to others more for myself than for Jesus.

I had given for the wrong motives. Now He was telling me that I had not given anything until I gave Him all. He didn't want my busy acts of service; He wanted every fiber and shred of my will. He wanted to be my Lord. He wanted *me*, and I had withheld.

When I realized my sin, my heart crumbled with the furor of a bursting earthen dam. I sobbed without tears because my body couldn't produce them. My heart heaved, my body shook uncontrollably, and I screamed with all the intensity I could:

"Oh, my God, my God, my God! Forgive me for even thinking such a thing! Don't ever leave me, Jesus! Don't ever go away!"

I forced my arms to stretch down to my sides, and even though my fingers were still raw strips of open flesh and bones, I grabbed the metal railing on the side of the bed as tightly as I could.

"Father," I cried, "I pray right now, in Jesus' name, that I might share that man's pain in his desperate hour. Put his agony on me, Father, and give him relief. I don't care how much it hurts - even if it kills me. I don't ever want to say no to You again!"

With that I pulled myself rigid, fully expecting the greatest onslaught of pain I had ever known. I took a deep breath and waited. It never came.

Instead I was flooded with a soothing, calm peace, and all my hurting fled away. I became quiet for the first time in days, and as my pain disappeared, the cubicle across the room grew

silent. For an hour or so, neither of us screamed again.

Dr. Berg made his regular rounds that morning, and I couldn't wait to tell him what had happened.

He listened as sympathetically as he could, but it was clear he wasn't buying my story.

"Golden, it's very easy to explain what happened to you," he said. "You haven't moved at all in days, ever since you were rolled in here. Your joints are stiff, almost frozen. So when you tightened your grip on the bed railing, you jerked and the fluids in your joints were freed. Simple. It was soothing, but it was temporary. Naturally your pain subsided, but it hurts some now, doesn't it?"

We were both thoughtful for a moment.

"Doc, if you say it wasn't a miracle-well, that's your opinion. But explain something to me. I understand why I stopped screaming, all right, but what happened to the man across the room to make him stop screaming?"

Dr. Berg looked down at me and shook his head, then turned and walked away in silence.

The next day, the sixth day since the crash, he returned to my curtained partition with a distinguished, white haired gentleman dressed in a white smock pulled over a light blue dress shirt and tie. The man wore a sterile cotton mask across his mouth like everyone else.

At the foot of my bed, both men stopped while Dr. Berg explained the complications of my case and what the hospital had done to help.

"Dad," he told the man, "you're looking at a miracle, the first real miracle I've ever seen in my life. No question about it. Six days ago, I didn't think this man was going to live through the night. Now I'm thinking about sending him back to his hometown in another week or so."

They stared at me for a few seconds more before stepping to another bedside.

I smiled and turned my head to the side. Finally the doctor was beginning to understand. But when I lifted my hand, I shuddered. All I saw was bones instead of fingers. Yes, it was miraculous

I was alive, but if most bodies took a year to heal to this extent, I dreaded to think what I *should* have looked like.

What was it Dr. Berg said about going home? In another week or so? At first thought, a week seemed like an eternity, but it certainly sounded better than the five years he had predicted three days before. I savored the idea for a minute, musing over it, letting it float around my mind like a Jewish patriarch sampling a choice Passover wine. I felt a twinge of pride, as if I had accomplished something wonderful.

"Connie should know about this," I said, and I started to call for a nurse. Still, it wouldn't pay to be hasty. I stopped. Maybe the doctor was exaggerating to impress his dad. Before I mentioned something this exciting to Connie, I first needed to talk with Dr. Berg. I needed to make sure he had his facts straight.

There was no doubt in my heart and mind that God was healing me. It wasn't an instantaneous miracle, but it was miraculous all the same. No one but God could make my body respond and heal in a fraction of the normal time.

Yet, even in this moment of joy, I felt ashamed. At last I had tangible evidence that Jesus was healing me. Now that I had heard the doctor pronounce as much, the proof wasn't the fulfillment I thought it would be.

I chided myself. Grow up, Golden! Why do you always need signs pointing to God's work in your life? Why do you always need proof? Faith doesn't need proof!

When I stopped long enough to think about it, I found clues to my progress in the events of the first week. Several times Dr. Berg had mentioned that I would be rolled into surgery the following morning, but as yet, I had never had a single operation. Every time an operation had been scheduled, the doctor had canceled it. There should have been surgeries on my tendons, kidneys and throat, but Dr. Berg kept scratching them off his list. My body was healing so fast

that surgery was unnecessary.

I chuckled and said, "Jesus keeps interfering in things. wonder what Dr. Berg thinks of all this."

The white-haired visitor strolled back to my bedside at that moment and leaned against the railing. He was alone.

I greeted him. "Didn't I hear the doctor call you 'Dad'?" I asked.

"Yes, that's right," he answered softly. "My son tells me you've come a long way this week. How do you feel?"

"Well, to be honest, not so good, but much better than I have a right to feel."

We smiled. "I'm getting better, Mr. Berg," I replied. "I've been lying here thinking how much better I am today than six days ago, even though I can't see much of a difference on the outside."

"My son tells me you're a minister, Mr. Golden. Where do you minister?"

Briefly, I gave him an explanation of my prison record, and told him how God had saved me and led me to help ex-cons and their families. I shared some of the many miracles God had done in my life since I had founded Christian Prison Ministries. Then I told him about our service in Atmore and how God had kept my friends and me alive through our crash. Talking slowly, I recounted the important lessons God had taught me in those few days in the Medical Center. My feelings were deep and strong. It was refreshing to voice them. I must have talked for twenty minutes. When I looked up again, Mr. Berg had tears in his eyes.

"Have I offended you?" I asked.

"Oh, no, Mr. Golden." He reached into his vest pocket for a handkerchief. "Really, I don't cry like this often, but listening to you has touched a soft spot inside me, I suppose."

"Oh"

"I'm a minister, too, you see. Rather, I was a minister." The old man dabbed the corners of his

eyes with the cloth. "I'm retired now, but somehow inside I know I shouldn't be.

"I left the ministry, Brother Golden. Several years ago, I ran away as fast as I could. You see, I always believed God could do the things you say you've seen Him do, and I've always preached that way, but ... well, nothing like that ever happened to me. In fact, I preached that God could perform miracles and be especially real and visible in people's lives, but ... well, hardly ever have I felt the presence of God like you've just described. I guess over time, I just stopped believing."

He looked at me and waited. "Oh, I know what you're talking about, all right, but I've lost something. I always wanted a relationship with God where I could feel Him and see Him work in my life, you know. But, uh, mostly, it's been rather dry."

The old man looked down at my feet. "And what good is it to keep preaching something you have doubts about yourself? What good is that? Why keep telling people that God can heal when you've prayed for so many people in your own congregation over the past twenty or thirty years and nothing seems to happen?"

"So, when things got troublesome in the last church I pastored-problems with deacons and the board, you know -- I just said what's the use? I resigned. And, I must confess, I've been bitter and disappointed with Christians ever since. It's been hard, real hard, to study my Bible since then. I don't know, Mr. Golden. The way I feel now, I don't think I could ever go back.

"But ... well, I feel so deeply hurt, yet so guilty. I try to think I did the best I could, but..." He sighed. "A bad experience, I guess."

I listened to his story as long as I could, until I knew I had to say something. Mr. Berg sounded a lot like the Jerry Golden of six days ago.

"Mr. Berg," I said, "I can't believe anyone could have a bad experience with God. God can only be as real and close to us as we allow Him to be. He doesn't give to some and not to others because He likes some people better. No way. God gives to everyone who asks and is willing to

receive. He gives liberally, knowing we are unable to repay.

"Know something? Most Christians who don't have the blessings of God in their lives still haven't surrendered important areas of their heart to Him." I paused for breath. "Are you hiding something?" I asked. "If you can't feel God near you when you pray, I've got to think it's because you're hiding sin in your life. He'll be near if you aren't keeping anything from Him."

Gathering courage, I went on.

"I've lain here for six days pitying myself for the condition I'm in, always defensive with God because He chose to let me go through this. But now I can see that God has a reason for allowing me to be here. Before, I wanted to be healed for all the wrong reasons. I wanted to show myself to my friends and say, 'Look at me. God healed me because I'm super-spiritual, His good friend! I wanted to get the glory for the healing and not return it to the One who is doing such a good work.

"See how selfish that is? How can God use someone who thinks like that? But you know what? He is cleansing me. My heart and motives, everything. He is exposing my sins to me. I have to repent -- I have to! In spite of my selfishness, Jesus is healing me. He loves me enough to heal me regardless how unworthy I am. I see that so clearly now, and I'm never going to hold back from a loving Savior again."

When I paused, I saw Mr. Berg crying openly. He leaned so hard on the railing that his knuckles turned white. His head was drooped, his eyes closed, but he made no attempt to hide his feelings from other patients and medical workers in the room.

Then the tall, husky figure grabbed a corner of the sheet which was draped across my shoulder.

"Brother Golden," he said softly, "can we pray? I mean, will you pray with me?"

In an instant he was on his knees, his hands still around the metal rail now above his head. I couldn't move -- I couldn't turn my head to see him -- but I heard him sobbing below the level of

my bed. His courage and brokenness soaked my heart with compassion, and I prayed fervently to God, asking for forgiveness for both of us; asking God to renew the love we once had shared with Him. When I hesitated, Mr. Berg picked up the prayer, a cry of re-dedication from a man who had flirted with failure -- not because he had given too much to Christ, but because he had not offered enough.

Our prayer ended. The old man was standing, smiling, brushing the tears from his eyes when his son approached. The young doctor had seen everything, and now with a broken heart, he asked his dad and his patient to pray with him. He slipped to the floor and prayed a sinner's prayer. It was an adventure in the mercies of God I never would have seen had there been no plane crash, and I will never forget it.

Never again have I doubted the providence of God. Never again have I questioned the unimaginable lengths He will reach to place a witness in the pathway of one searching, hurting soul.

Never again have I doubted that the steps of a righteous man -- and his crashes -- are ordered of the Lord.

# Chapter 11

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It was the afternoon of the eighth day, and I was screaming again. I had completed my eighth whirlpool and trim, and a short, plump nurse with a white antiseptic mask stretched tight across her face was wrapping me in salve and wet pads. I looked like a mummy and felt just as dead. As usual, my nerves were raw and exposed, and every reflexive twinge of her hands sent new tremors of pain down my arms and legs.

If that weren't bad enough, now she was leaning low over my face, close enough for me to feel her hot breath on my cheek. I cracked open an eye. Her face was two inches from mine, her tweezers were poised above my nose, and she was yelling.

"Dr. Berg!"

I thought my head would split from her high-pitched scream. She called again.

"Dr. Berg!"

The doctor sounded noticeably perturbed when he answered, but the nurse was insistent.

"Come quick, Doctor!"

"I mumbled some half-audible question like, "What's wrong? What's happening here?" which the nurse ignored. In the curtained room next to mine, the doctor slapped shut his log book with a familiar thud and walked to the foot of my bed.

"You're not going to believe this, Doctor," the nurse warned.

"What? Believe what?" I was becoming more alarmed with each passing second.

"Hush, Golden. Please step back, Mrs. Hunter," ordered the doctor. "Give me a chance to see what's going on here."

He moved quickly to my head and bent low as the nurse had, studying my face intently.

"Look there," Mrs. Hunter commanded, as she pointed.

I closed my eyes and circled my tongue around the inside of my mouth, one of the last sensations I could still extract at will. My mouth was dry.

"Uhhuh," Dr. Berg said slowly. "Uhhuh, uhhuh. Yes, I see it."

"What, Doc? See what?" I pleaded. "Won't someone please tell me what's going on?"

Dr. Berg straightened up and silently motioned to the nurse with a sideways glance. "Mrs. Hunter, let me have a minute to talk with Mr. Golden, please."

"Certainly, Doctor." And she stepped away.

"Jerry, you're not going to believe what Mrs. Hunter found."

"Well, for heaven's sake, what is it?" I cried. "If I could climb out of this bed, I'd throttle someone for making me suffer all this suspense."

He smiled. "Hey, watch it. You'll like this news. Jerry, you're eyebrows are growing back!"

He might as well have dropped me cold into the boiling whirlpool. I was thoroughly dazed. It was unbelievable that eyebrows would grow back at all, much less this soon. I opened my eyes wide and stared into his face, searching his expression for a clue to tell me if he was giving me the truth.

"Honest, Jerry," he nodded. "Your eyebrows are growing back just like they were before the crash. You have reason to be excited. Here, take a look."

From the baggy pocket at the waist of his jumpsuit, he pulled a small, rectangular mirror and held it slightly above my eyes so I could catch a glimpse of the new hair for myself.

There, through the red and black layers of scar tissue, sprouted tiny new shafts of hair. I gazed spellbound for several seconds, then looked again at Dr. Berg.

He chuckled. "Don't ask me," he said in mock self defense. "I don't know what they're doing there any more than you do. Eight days ago, I wouldn't give you a wooden nickel for your

chance of growing any hair on your face as long as you live-not a whisker, not an eyebrow, nothing."

He positioned himself on the side of my bed and kicked his dangling foot to and fro. "And I'll tell you something else, if you promise not to get too excited."

"You're telling me not to get excited?" I retorted. "Naw, I'm not excited."

Dr. Berg pretended to flick my ear with his index finger.

"There, right there. The stub of an earlobe is growing where there wasn't anything yesterday.

How 'bout that?"

"Praise God!" I yelled. "Praise God!"

"Yeah, praise God," he said, looking down at me. "Your lips are healing, too. In fact, you're making wonderful progress.

You have a lot to be thankful for."

I nodded in agreement. "Wait until Connie hears this!"

But while my heart was tripping with excitement, the doctor suddenly seemed to hesitate. His young faith was still wading in the shallow water of low expectations, while mine wanted to set sail. I could tell he was struggling between what his eyes told him was happening and what his years of medical training argued should be happening. Nervously he cleared his throat and fidgeted with the sheet on my bed.

"Look, Jerry, I don't know what's happening here -- I admit as much. But don't you think you should be careful not to get your hopes too high? I mean, maybe you'll get a partial ear and that's all, or maybe just a few scraggly eyebrows. Partial recoveries are more the norm than the exception. You're likely to have dozens of plastic surgery operations and skin grafts before you can live a normal life again, so don't build this thing up to yourself and Connie without giving it time. Promise me that much."

I nodded my head, but he continued.

"Don't forget the hard realities here. Your face is still swollen; your skin is still sensitive. You've lost a lot of weight. I'm not trying to discourage you; I just want you to approach each day cautiously so you don't get depressed, that's all."

"Doc, you're the one who doesn't understand," I replied. "I'm going to get well, completely well. I know it." I made him look at me. "I know it. God still heals today. That's not some ancient rumor the modern theologians hushed up in a conference somewhere. Look at me, Doc! A fact is a fact. And the fact is: God is healing me!"

I stirred my head on the pillow, my heart surging with emotion, realizing I had found the answer to the question I had asked God nine days before. I understood that Jesus was the Master and I was a servant. He was a Potter; He had power over the clay. I knew I would serve Him if He healed me, or serve Him if He left me laying on that same hospital pillow for the rest of my life. Either way, He was the Lord. I would exist by His strength. I understood that some are chosen to suffer and carry the scars while others are chosen for healing; and He receives glory from both.

I clamped my eyes shut. The tears spilled down my face. "Doc, Jesus is showing both of us how wonderful He really is. Those He heals give Him glory, and those who bear the pain with joy give Him glory. He is honored by both. This way, the Father can look down on a multitude of believers -- Christians the world over--and say, 'Some I have healed; some have endured; yet all give me glory.' Yeah, there's glory in suffering, just like there is a glory in being healed.

"But, Doc, I know He wants to heal me. I'm not making that up. I know He wants to heal me even more than I want to be healed because He can receive more honor from my life that way.

"That's how I've been praying today. I want Jesus to do with me whatever can give Him the greatest glory and joy, even if it means leaving me here to die. And He keeps assuring me that

His greatest joy is to heal me so I can tell others about His love. No, I'm going to be perfectly well, regardless how things look now."

The doctor looked at me warmly through his deep blue eyes. "Yeah, I can see it," he responded.

"I guess I've been listening to your deafening prayers so long that I believe it, too."

He patted me and said goodbye, leaving me to peer above at the ceiling and think about all that had been said. I had sounded so confident. Why, oh, why, were there still traces of doubt? Why did I continue to circle the mountain of fear? Would I *really* stay in this room, willingly, forever? Could I? It was a room of monotony and repetition, more dead than alive; a sky of white acoustical tile, each a foot and a half square, each touching an identical square on all four sides. Could I accept life in this tiny, sterile world? *Was I willing to spend my life in one prison after another?*

One afternoon a nurse replaced the plasma hanging on the rack beside my bed and walked out, closing off the curtain doorway behind her. I had been motionless during her brief visit, watching her movements between the slits of my swollen eyes.

Usually I wore no covering on top of me besides my bandages. At most, I was draped with a sheet, probably when someone on the hospital staff got tired of looking at my open wounds. The tendons and muscles in my arms were fused together, as were the muscles in my legs, and my arms were beginning to curl toward my sides because I had not exercised them enough. Bright lights still pained me, causing me to squint through my puffy eyelids. Probably because I was still and my eyes appeared closed, the nurse assumed I was asleep.

Just beyond the curtain, I could see her silhouette with another nurse. The two were talking softly.

Have you seen the guy in this one?" asked the nurse leaving my cubicle. "He's got to be the ugliest man I've ever seen in my life. He'll never look halfway normal."

The two stepped past each other to continue about their duties.

But the words weren't lost on me. I had never expected to win a beauty contest, yet I had never dreamed I looked worse than any other burn patient. I didn't mind Connie teasing me about my "twisted smile" or my "sinister eyes" but when a stranger who worked full time with burn victims said I was the ugliest person she had ever seen, my old fears rolled up from within me. If people were really thinking that way behind those white masks, I couldn't help but feel totally repulsive. I had the overwhelming urge to find a mirror and see for myself.

For more than an hour I struggled, summoning every ounce of strength I could muster to lift myself off the bed. Finally I raised onto my elbows and slowly dragged a leg off the plastic sheet and over the metal rail. My foot dropped and propelled me to a hunched sitting position. Ten minutes more and I was perched on the edge, staring at the floor so far beneath me. I gripped the rail with one hand, pulled the air hoses from my nose with the other, and jumped.

I hit the tiled floor in the most sickening landing I can describe. Blood spattered everywhere. Flesh from my hands stuck to the rail and ripped off down to the bones. Needles popped from veins in my arms, stomach and neck. The tubes leading from my kidneys pulled away, and an acrid odor began filling the room. But I was determined to go on. The jolt started my heart beating quickly and my body draining fluids faster than ever. Within seconds I was lying in a slimy, slippery puddle of blood. I fought to my feet, but instantly collapsed, too weak to move.

The same two nurses I had seen outside my partition heard my commotion and came running. One screamed. "I'll get a doctor," yelled the other.

Alerted attendants also hurried alongside, all softly scolding me, all searching my body for places to grip. I was so badly burned that large chunks of flesh and muscle still unpeeled every time I was touched, but there was nothing else to do but manhandle me clumsily and push me

onto the bed.

Everything was black around me as I stared straight above, lying on my back. My face twisted into a right contortion of pain as every needle was reinserted into new, tender arteries. It hurt, but as one nurse reminded me, it was my own fault.

Dr. Berg came rushing in, looked over the mess I had made, and shook his head. "He'll need a transfusion," he asserted, almost disgustedly.

That was my first experience with depression, but there were a thousand other battles after it. Despite a rising tide of faith, my emotions were raw -- soaring and plunging like a roller coaster with every whim and circumstance. After each daily high came a daily low, a peak then a valley, often within minutes of each other. My psyche was fragile, and Satan took advantage of it to taunt me mercilessly. He mocked every scripture I had quoted, and wore me down with negative thoughts. I'm sure he would have kept up the game as long as I did nothing about it.

But beside him, I heard other thoughts, the hope and confidence that comes from Christ. Between the two, my mind clamored like an echo chamber filled with voices, all vying for attention.

*"You're going to die right here in this room without ever touching your wife and children again,"* said one.

*"You'll be a witness of the power of God,"* promised another.

*"Look at you. Who can help you now?"* scowled the first.

I sensed I was caught up in an eternal quarrel between good and evil, the kingdom of darkness and the kingdom of light. Heaven voted for my healing, for the fulfillment of God's will for me.

Satan called for my death and God's defeat. My vote made the difference.

When I saw the significance that my will played, I decided to stuff the ballot box.

"I'm healed," I cried for the millionth time, loud enough for everyone to hear. "Thanks, Lord, for healing me."

Jesus had said that whatever we bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever we loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. In my prison vernacular, I couldn't help but think He was saying, "Move it, Jerry. Without your vote I can't win."

## Chapter 12

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By the time I left Mobile on March 4, traces of eyebrows, earlobes and lips were apparent despite the jagged crisscross of stitches that tracked across my face. Even so, I never received a single cosmetic or plastic surgery operation. I was encouraged and enthusiastic, but yet a long way from full recovery.

Often I was bothered by my kidneys, which were having a difficult time functioning without help. And atrophy caused my arms, which had remained immobile since the crash, to curl inward so that my hands dangled uselessly high under my chin. Most of the time they rested on my chest.

My body was still cleansing itself by secreting blood -- huge drops that seemed to seep through the skin and coat my pillow a moist red. But when I learned the importance of what was taking place, I didn't mind nearly as much as I had before. The sight of blood seeping through my skin looked far worse than it actually was -- and, in fact, it looked terrible. Constantly I had to remind myself that my body was bleeding away the poisons inside, and my new skin wasn't really the sieve it seemed to be.

Nothing was worse than when I would forget and scratch a portion of the itchy new surface, which would break open and bleed profusely. I had to discipline myself not to scratch at all, even when it seemed itching would drive me out of my mind.

Waiting for me at the Shreveport hospital was the whirlpool and "trim" routine which had become an expected daily agony. Always I had believed that if a person experienced the same sensation day after day, eventually the experience would dull. But the whirlpool and knife sessions were forever an exception. I never grew accustomed to the pain.

Meanwhile, as my body was growing its new tissues and skin, I was adjusting to life without a chemical balance, meaning I could easily catch a cold or disease. I was extremely susceptible to pneumonia or any bug that might float down the hospital hallway and make its way into my system. With no body immunity, we feared I might contact something lethal and die before a doctor could recognize the germ and prescribe a strong antibiotic.

My new skin -- what I had of it -- was tender and splotchy, without pigments. I faced the dismal prospect of never again walking bareheaded in the sunshine for fear of sunburning. Furthermore, the experts told me the tendons in my hands were damaged so badly they could never be repaired. Even if a skin graft did "take" on my fingers, they said I still would never use them again.

I felt I was a medical oddity, a black and red mass of contradictions. I had been reduced to little more than a breathing, thinking vegetable, yet I was healing years ahead of schedule. My body was dilapidated, but I was leaving Mobile after only three and a half weeks, seventeen months ahead of the most conservative, optimistic estimate.

Most of the federal and state agencies had filed their investigative reports of the crash by this time, and with them and the letters we received from Martin Gehman, we pieced together an account of what had happened back on February 12. No one could show what actually had caused the plane to lose altitude, but most speculated that the latch on the front-end baggage compartment had been left ajar and had opened when the plane had banked to the left.

Remarkably, damage to the plane would have been minimal had there been no fire. Photographs showed that the engine had been lifted off the frame and tossed several hundred feet away, but other than a crumbled propeller and signs of fire, it looked repairable. The plane itself had been metal with cloth-padded seats, all of which were destroyed. The wings and tail skeletons remained attached to the cabin, although the luggage and video equipment in the baggage

compartments were scattered all over the field.

Reverend Gehman said the tie-down hook on the underside of the tail plowed a groove into the ground several hundred feet long, straight through the heart of the open fence gate. The groove had been measured at a half-inch deep, proving the plane had skimmed above the ground before the wing tip first made impact. The evidence confirmed what I had suspected about the tail dropping down to raise the wings above the fenceposts.

Reverend Gehman estimated that all this happened within the length of a football field from his house, where three young children slept. His home was just one in a long row of brick dwellings God had steered us past.

Few investigators described the crash like I had experienced it inside the cockpit: desperately fumbling with controls, unable to stabilize the plane's pitch, much less direct it to an open field. Most of them thought the plane had made a deliberate and amazing emergency landing that had avoided all the power lines, trees, houses and fenceposts, and had set down top-side up. It was amazing, all right, but I knew I had nothing to do with it. All the more, I believed God permitted the disaster for my benefit and His glory, and knowing that, I could stop the torment of reliving and rehashing each second I had spent at the controls. I knew everything had transpired just the way He intended.

March 4 dawned bright and warm, almost cloudless, a good day" for a flight, Connie said. By 10 a.m. I was wrapped in wet pads and sterile gauze and covered with a white linen sheet.

Connie was outside signing the final papers and release forms while I waited anxiously to get underway. I had an attendant roll me and my rack of bottles to the window where I could watch. Before long, Connie waved, snapped shut her purse, and walked toward the big ward door.

Several orderlies wheeled a portable stretcher alongside my bed and skillfully used the winch to lower me onto it. Every jerking motion, no matter how slight, felt as if my hide were tearing.

Just before I was wheeled into the hallway, Dr. Berg entered. "I'm sending along a tranquilizer in case the flight gets bumpy enough to wear on your nerves," he said. "If you don't get it on the plane, don't be surprised if you get it when you get to Shreveport. I've already talked with the doctor there today."

He smiled. "Take care of yourself, Jerry," he said, then turned to walk away. Before I could speak, a nurse began pushing my stretcher down the aisle toward the door. I was quiet, thinking about the hospital and Dr. Berg.

As an attendant opened the ward door, the nurse pulled the sterile sheet over my face to shield me from the air in the hallway. Hidden underneath, I could see the overhead lights, even an occasional silhouette as someone stepped between me and the bright lights. Everything else was white.

I heard the nurse speaking. "Touch him only on his neck, behind his head." Then I felt Connie's cold hand slip beneath the sheet and insert itself between me and the pillow, the first time in three weeks we had touched. With her hand on my pillow, she walked beside my bed down the hospital hallway, through the swinging emergency room doors, and out into the warm sunshine.

The yellow sun was dazzling and brilliant, even through the sheet. I loved its cleansing warmth.

Quickly my stretcher was collapsed and lifted into the ambulance. The doors slammed shut. I whispered a short goodbye to the hospital that had become a central part of my life in a brief time, and we were underway.

Connie and I talked little during the flight home. I was weak and drowsy, and my emotions were whirling like a merry-go-round. Not only was I flying for the first time since the crash, but I was about to roll from the rear door back into the town where friends knew me as I used to be.

What would the changes mean? What would my friends think of me now? The sheet spread across my face became a screen to hide me from rejection. I was ugly to look at; perhaps no one could accept me, I thought. I pictured myself at home in Shreveport, lonely in the midst of my family and acquaintances. Perhaps I was so homely and disfigured that my friends were right to avoid me.

I had spent days anticipating this trip, thinking about the faces I soon would see again, but in an instant all my cheery thoughts were gone. Now every person was a potential source of rejection, someone who might take one look at me and never come back.

As the plane rocked gently, I slipped into a new depression. I didn't want pity or sympathy; I wanted to be accepted as if nothing had happened. Maybe that was too much to ask of my friends, I thought. Perhaps I couldn't expect people to see something acceptable in a body as ruined as mine. I felt ugly, and envisioned myself a rejected, lonely man.

As usual, Connie understood. No words were spoken, but she kept patting the pillow beside my head, reassuring me.

From the moment the plane skipped down on Runway 14 of Shreveport's downtown airport, I felt my heart racing, swelling with anticipation. I was braced and ready. The whine of the engines died away and the doors opened. I was bounced from side to side as attendants from Willis-Knighton Hospital climbed aboard and lowered my stretcher to the ground.

From beyond the chain-link fence bordering the runway, I heard voices mixing together in a noisy cheer.

"Jerry, I wish you could see this!" Connie whispered. "So many friends are here to meet you!" The attendants rushed me from the plane to the ambulance that idled nearby. The sun was hot, stinging my skin. We hurried on before the open air and heat could harm me.

Still, I could hear the familiar voices, and I was moved. I wanted to wave to each of them, but

couldn't. We quickly pushed through, never slowing, until the voices faded behind me. Within seconds I was resting inside the ambulance, looking at the underneath side of the same old sheet. Buddy Graham, a friend and doctor, met us at the door and climbed aboard with Connie. I could see him through the linen sheet, measuring the hypo Dr. Berg had recommended, pulling back the plunger until he had the correct dosage.

"Here's a little something to help you sleep, Jerry," he said as the needle point bit into my arm. Already the bustling and emotional strain had left me too weak to speak. I closed my eyes. Buddy pulled the needle from my skin. "By the way," he continued, "welcome home, brother."

Several weeks later I saw Johnny and Adrianna for the first time since the crash. Charity was yet too young to make the trip to my upstairs room. I first saw them from the window as they walked across the street below. They spotted me, too, and waved. I cried, half from extreme joy and half from the pain of sitting upright, and waved in return. My eyes followed them through an intersection and into the hospital lobby.

With Connie they scrubbed clean, donned slip-on hospital gowns, hats and masks, and burst into my room. They looked so much like clowns, all three of them, that I couldn't help but laugh. "Daddy!" Adrianna exclaimed, running to my bedside. "Look what I brought you!"

She unfolded a yellow sheet of manila drawing paper folded like a homemade get-well card and spread it across my chest. On it was a purple flower with a long green stem, a warm orange sun above the fold, and the words, "Welcome home, Daddy! Love, Adrianna," scrawled in black crayon.

"It's precious, Baby. Thanks very much. Your daddy loves you."

"I missed you, Daddy. Everybody at school has been talking about you and your crash and asking me questions. I tell them you're getting better!"

Adrianna's face shone as if a moonbeam were inside. "All my friends heard about you on television, Daddy!"

Johnny was more reserved, but he laughed with his sister. We were together, and I felt more alive than I had been in a month. My children still loved me. I was their father, and nothing could change that.

We talked for the better portion of an hour, until Buddy reappeared in the doorway.

"Your dad is getting tired, children. Time to go, everyone," he said.

"Come to see me again soon," I told them. "I missed you, you know."

"Okay, 'bye," they called as Buddy herded them out.

The thick oak door slipped quietly shut and Connie stepped to my bedside. She had been sitting in a plastic chair near the window, watching.

"You were afraid of that, weren't you?" she asked quietly.

"Of what, Honey?"

"Of this first visit; of seeing the kids again. You were afraid of what they were going to think, weren't you?"

Her eyes were filled with tears. I stared helplessly into them for a moment, amazed that my feelings and thoughts were so open to her.

Finally I found the words to answer. "Yeah, I guess I was. I don't want them to hate the way I look. I don't want them to cringe at the sight of my face. I want them to be proud of their father."

I moved my eyes away from hers, which glistened in the pale light. "I don't want to lose their love," I confessed, "and sometimes I'm afraid I might."

Connie put her cheek near mine. It was soft and wet. She stroked my hair, her voice breaking with emotion.

"Those children are so proud of you they can't contain it," she whispered. "Adrianna talked

about nothing but visiting you all last night; so did Johnny. Charity's eyes light up whenever anyone of us mentions Daddy.

"Did you see the card Adrianna made? It took her over an hour, just for a crayon drawing. But she wanted it to be special for you on her first visit."

Connie pressed her hand against my pillow. "Jerry," she said tenderly, "don't ever think the kids see you as something ugly. They don't. To them, you're the most handsome father in the world. They understand about your face, and they're praying for it, but it's not ugly to them. They know what you've been through, and they love you now more than they've ever loved you before. Don't pull away from us."

I blinked my eyes and tears streamed down my face. Connie brushed them away with her fingertips.

"I won't pull away," I cried. "I know they love me. I know you love me. You couldn't touch me if I was repulsive to you."

We were both crying, letting the tears run freely down our faces. Connie looked at me with a gentle expression and said, "Don't be afraid, Jerry. Jesus has something wonderful ahead for you. Maybe it's something only a wife senses now, but in time, you'll see. When this is over, you'll have more than ever before -- like Job. And don't worry about me. When I look at you, I see nothing but the most handsome man in the world."

I sniffled and smiled. "If I'm handsome, it's because you make me feel that way."

"Jerry?"

"Yeah, Honey?"

"I love you."

"I love you, too."

## Chapter 13

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Within another two weeks, enough muscle tissue and skin had grown over my back and thighs to attempt a skin graft, the first of four I would have during the next two months or so. Buddy told me frankly he didn't expect the graft to last, yet we proceeded in faith.

We could be encouraged, after all, because we were taking skin from perhaps the most severely burned area of my body, where we had never expected smooth skin to grow in the first place. This new "suit of skin" was an answer to my mother-in-law's prayer.

The first operation fitted skin over the back of my left leg and took more than three hours.

Following surgery, Buddy ordered me to lie on my stomach for five days while the leg healed.

He brought me a portable cot inside the room for Connie, and she stayed with me during the regular nurse's shift throughout that first week. She fed me, helped me turn my head, entertained me with news from home, and often scratched me when I itched. It was depressing to lie uncomfortably on my stomach burns, but Connie made the time pass more pleasantly by staying close.

Buddy soon told us that the graft had been a complete success, and scheduled others on my shoulders and arms. Each was a separate miracle since we were transplanting skin that had grown where scar tissue had been only weeks before. Buddy watched each area carefully for signs of infection.

Skin grafts usually make the area they cover feel coarse and callused, or so I'm told, but my grafts were an exception. Connie noticed the difference one morning as she adjusted a bandage across my shoulder. Instead of taut, rough skin, my shoulder was smooth and soft, textured like the skin of a baby. For sure it felt "looser" on my arm than the other skin, and there were no pigments to give it color, but it looked remarkably normal. In fact, unless you knew I had a skin

graft, you might overlook it altogether.

The big news, though, was my face. Without plastic surgery, my ears, nose and lips simply reconstructed themselves. They grew back as perfectly as if they had been molded from the originals. I've never known such fascination as I did during those weeks as I watched God's healing power work gradually every day. This healing was not the product of "spiritualizing" through loud, pious-sounding prayers. It continued whether I felt depressed or serene, spiritual or empty and alone. Regardless how I felt, I observed first-hand the faithfulness of God, sculpturing and crafting like the creator He is: first a small lump of skin, then an ear, a nostril, a lip.

The skin that had once been charred and black and stretched so tightly it had ripped open returned to its former shape and color. Buddy and I tried to analyze why my face never needed surgery, while my arms, shoulders and legs needed skin grafts. Neither of us could fathom the reason. To this day, I believe God lovingly healed my face because He understood my fear of appearing ugly to my children, however vain that concern might have been. A little scar tissue on my arms and hands didn't bother me, but I didn't want Johnny, Adrianna or Charity having to apologize for their daddy's grotesque face. God's amazing re-creation of my face was a crowning demonstration of His affection, far exceeding anything I ever could have asked of Him. What little burn effects that remained on my wrists and hands only reminded me of the great adventure of healing I had passed through. I shared a physical memorial of the experience, much as did Jacob, who limped for the rest of his life after a dramatic confrontation with the angel of God. More and more, that is what the crash symbolized to me: I had confronted God.

But it was as I stared into the mirror one day that I saw perhaps the most convincing proof of God's unlimited love for me. Whiskers -- brown ones that matched the color of my hair -- appeared through the pores of my chin. The doctors had told me that skin which has been burned away rarely produces hair again, but mine did. It was an insignificant, unexpected detail when

compared to the miraculous healing of my ears and lips, but it brought tears to my eyes nonetheless.

I had not asked for facial hair, but God had remembered. How thorough and complete are all His ways.

As I rubbed my hand back and forth across the stubble, I thought that nothing anyone could have ever done, however majestic, would have demonstrated my Heavenly Father's love for me any better than did those plain brown whiskers. Most men are annoyed by them, but to me they were beautiful, and every bit as personal as if God had called my name out loud. Immediately I went to work growing the wide brown mustache I have worn to this day.

Gradually I gained my strength. Buddy unhooked the needles and hoses when he found that my body retained its fluids again. My kidneys returned to normal, and I began to stand for short periods, even though touching anything might break open scabs and start new, profuse bleeding. Believe me, it was well worth the risk to stand once again.

Connie would help me to my feet by bracing her hand behind my neck while I pushed against her, digging my feet into the floor. I stood or walked until I became tired, then she helped me back onto the bed. As yet I couldn't sit in a chair because my posterior was burned too badly.

One of my first visitors was Norman, my barber, who came to cut my hair. For two months, no one had combed it regularly for fear that a hair might fall into the open sores on my forehead and become entangled in a scab. A snag of the comb then would tear open a healing wound.

Norman had known me since I had first moved to Shreveport and had teased me about my curly hair. In those days before the crash, he often would pull a lock down low over my forehead, hold it firm, then release it. The clump of hair always would spring into its original tight coil.

But the heat of the fire had left me with limp, straight hair, and Norman thought there was no way it would ever be curly again.

"No, I've seen this happen too many times before," he remarked. "The heat takes the tension out of the hair and it never comes back. If you're like most curly haired fellows I know, you've probably wished you had straight hair, anyway."

Connie, though, liked my hair better with curls.

"I've prayed about it," she said flatly, "I married a guy with curly hair, and that's exactly what I want."

That's exactly what she got. My hair regained its original curly pattern by the time I left Willis-Knighton Hospital.

I saw an illustration on television that showed me clearly what Jesus was trying to teach me through His miraculous attention to details like my whiskers and curly hair. One program told of a man who had worked hard and saved money for an overseas cruise. When he retired, he had put aside enough for a boat ticket, but little more, yet he was determined to visit an exotic South Pacific island at least once in his life, no matter what the personal sacrifice. He purchased the ticket, and with no funds left, prepared a large box of saltine cracker and peanut butter sandwiches to take with him as his only food.

But after several days at sea, a giant wave swept across the ship's deck where he sat relaxing and washed his cracker sandwiches away. It didn't take long before the passenger was a hungry man.

Two more days and the man grew desperate. When a porter walked by carrying delicious smelling steaks to a private stateroom, the aroma cracked the last reserves of the little man's pride. He could bear his hunger not a minute longer.

"Sir," he said to the waiter, "if I washed dishes or mopped the floor, could you get me one of those steaks? I'm starving, and I haven't any money left."

The porter looked at him curiously. "Aren't you a passenger on this ship?" he asked.

"Yes, sir."

"Then your meals were included with your ticket. You're entitled to safe passage and your choice from the menu."

So many people like Jerry Golden go through life starving, content at best with peanut-over-cracker sandwiches. It took a plane crash to teach me that God has prepared much more for us. Jesus was waiting anxiously to heal me, and His love omitted no detail. His love reached far beyond my ability to believe.

Jesus must look on us as a father delightfully teaching a baby to walk. We may take our first step of faith and fall, but to Him we're walking. He scoops us into His arms and caresses us, showering us with compassion. Sometimes, I suppose, we forget what a magnificent, loving, faithful Father we have, so He shows us again and again the infinite breadth of His kingdom-and reminds us that all of it is ours.

We must understand the lesson the hungry passenger learned. We must realize that our ticket includes much more than safe passage. Christ has made provision for our every need.

# Chapter 14

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It isn't possible to circle a date on the calendar as the day God completed my miraculous healing. Little changes in my appearance occurred for months. Twelve weeks after my plane tumbled from the clouds into an Alabama pasture, I was out of the hospital and headed for home. In July, six months after the accident, I began an abbreviated speaking schedule to churches and prisons near Shreveport. By then my face had healed so perfectly that no one, not even my family, could tell it once had been burned so terribly. My voice was now resonant and strong again, and my arms, which had hung uselessly at my side, gained enough strength to permit most common household tasks.

But before I could walk up the wing and step inside the cockpit of a single-engine airplane to pilot for the first time since the crash, I had a serious talk with God. I knew I had to conquer any fear of flying that lingered in my psyche from the February disaster, and the only way to put those fears to rest was to confront them. Only then could any real psychological progress be made.

I was testy as I started the engine; sweating profusely as I lifted off. But once the airplane leveled out at eight hundred feet, I had experienced God's peace and comfort in yet another supernatural way.

It happened like this: As the plane shot through a bank of low clouds, the Holy Spirit helped me finally to realize the futility of worrying about death. At last I understood clearly the absurdity of clutching this present life and fretting over the future. Circumstances could appear perfect, but God could take me from the sky if He desires; or conditions could be hopeless, yet God

could intervene. A routine flight could become a nightmare, or if God so ordained, a nightmare could become a watershed blessing in one's life, just as it had for me.

So what's the use of worrying? I reminded myself of the truths I had learned while staring into the white ceiling tile above my burn unit bed. Where else could I have discovered such spiritual riches? What other school could teach such lasting and rewarding lessons? And after surviving the harsh ordeal and reaping such a harvest of knowledge, would I trade the experience for a lesser understanding, the shallow existence I lived before the crash?

The real death for any Christian occurs when we die with Christ at the foot of His cross. Dying to self there, we no longer need to worry over circumstances and tragedies because in Christ our lives are never left to chance. Nothing can overtake a child of God without His prior knowledge and consent. Our steps become ordered of the Lord. Our experiences are but steps in our sanctification -- our equipping for service in His Body. He knows the path we take. We can trust His infinite wisdom.

And if God has permitted the trials that confront and challenge my life, if God never straps me with more than I can bear, if God knows the beginning from the ending, why then should I withdraw in fear? Why should I dread the future?

How much better it is to relax in Jesus, trusting His great love, giving Him full responsibility for my life. As long as I follow Him with an unfaltering heart, as long as I seek His will above my own, doesn't my future rest well with Him?

"The eternal God is your refuge," Moses wrote, "and underneath are the everlasting arms." I smiled and remembered how the apostle Paul had expressed what I was thinking: "For none of us lives to himself alone and none of us dies to himself alone. If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord."

I know as I scanned the patchwork ground below me that I could trust Jesus to bring experiences

into my life that would deepen my faith and character and make me a better, more useful servant of God. With Him at the controls, all things would work together for my inevitable good. Several weeks after my last regular visit to the hospital, I received a telephone call from Reverend Eugene Spruel, a close friend who had served on the board of directors for Christian Prison Ministries.

"Jerry," he said, "I've been talking with Curtis Brown, the business director at Willis-Knighton. He wants to meet with you about your bill."

The call troubled me. Connie and I had always tried to cut every unnecessary medical expense, but the costs of two months of specialized treatment had spiraled out of our control. My treatment had involved a private, sterilized room, a daily whirlpool session, four skin graft operations, a registered nurse on duty around the clock, and many other expensive elements. On the day Eugene called, we hadn't received our final bill, but we expected to owe more than \$50,000 after we had exhausted the funds given us by churches in the area.

So I was rather apprehensive as I sat in Curtis Brown's outer office, waiting for our meeting. Mr. Brown rose to greet me as I entered moments later. He smiled broadly and extended his right hand. We greeted, then I slipped into a brown leather chair at the front edge of his desk. "Mr. Golden, I've known about you for a good while now," he began. "You know, I'm a good friend of Dr. Graham, who has kept me quite well informed of your progress. I must say that when you came here, none of us gave you much of a chance. But your proved us wrong, and I'm glad."

I smiled nervously.

Mr. Brown leaned back in his swivel chair. "And we've been very impressed with Buddy's handling of your case. He was the one who turned your room into a quality burn unit and lined up the blood transfusions you had to have. A remarkable job for one man, just remarkable."

I nodded my sincere agreement and appreciation.

"Buddy tells me you were an evangelist working with prisons before the crash, Mr. Golden. He's told me quite a lot about your work-how you've helped feed and clothe hundreds of prisoners and their families, how you've preached and held prison crusades around the country. Tell me, what are your plans now. Any different?"

It was a question I had given some thought to. Ever since that first night in Mobile, I had repeatedly asked God what I would be doing for the rest of my life, after I left the hospital and the pain behind me.

Continually I had returned to two scriptures which provided the bedrock of my convictions. I knew according to Romans 11:29 that the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable. And by Philipians 1:6, I knew that God would continue to perfect the good work He had begun in me in Christ Jesus. My spirit told me that one day I would minister again, perhaps to prisoners or maybe to others around the world. As clearly as I could, I explained my thoughts to Mr. Brown, telling him I was convinced I would return, somehow, to the ministry.

Then he moved quickly to the point of the meeting.

"Mr. Golden, your bill is imposing -- somewhere in the neighborhood of \$50,000. I'm sure you're aware of that."

"Yes, Sir."

"Well, the hospital board is concerned about it. That's a lot of money for any person to have to pay, much less a prison evangelist."

I interrupted. "Now, Mr. Brown, sure it's a lot of money, but we'll manage. I'll take a secular job if I have to, but God has never let us down --"

"No, no, Mr. Golden. I don't think you understand what I'm trying to say. We're not afraid that you're going to skip town, if that's what you mean. But we are aware how this community

pitched in and contributed to your support when they heard about the crash. Don't forget that hospital board members attend church, too."

He chuckled. "What I'm saying is that you've helped a lot of people and this community appreciates that. The way they came through for you proves that point. Well, Willis-Knighton wants to do something for you, too, but I'm afraid the only help we can offer is simply to remove this large hospital bill you have hanging over your head." He smiled broader and leaned toward me. "Would you mind it too much if we stamped 'paid' on that \$50,000 invoice?"

"You mean-all of it?" I asked incredulously.

"All of it!" he said happily.

Moments later I walked down the corridor, my heart beating rapidly. Nurses were rushing past me, but I hardly noticed. All I could think about was this latest miracle in a series of miracles conceived in the heart of a loving God. Willis-Knighton had erased my entire bill! In one stroke! I couldn't wait to tell Connie!

A scripture sang into my mind: "He who did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all-how will He not also, along with Him, graciously give us all things?"

I raced the car toward home, darted up the front steps, and yanked open the door.

"Connie!" I yelled. "Connie, come quick!"

"What!" she called from another room. "Dear God, is something wrong?"

When she reached me, I grabbed both her shoulders.

"I've been to the hospital," I said. "They've canceled our debt! We don't owe another cent!"

"Wh -- what?" Connie's eyes opened wide and instantly flooded with tears. She had been drying a plate with a long cloth towel; now she used it to dab at the corners of her eyes. She stared at me.

"Jerry!" she said at last. "Oh, Jerry. Praise God!"

With that I hugged her tight against my chest. We had faced the greatest trial of our lives, and God had brought us through not owing a penny.

We laughed and cried simultaneously. "The blessing of the LORD, it maketh rich, and he addeth no sorrow with it." (Proverbs 10:22).

From that day to this, I have traveled extensively, telling as faithfully as I can about the providence of God in my life. With every passing year, I have watched my physical body strengthen. I wasn't supposed to walk in the sunshine for years, but now I swim and enjoy all the outdoor recreation that I did before the crash. The skin graft on my shoulder and back has tanned to a healthy brown. I never had a plastic surgery operation, but my face is perfectly healed. The only noticeable scars I carry are on my forearms and hands, but when I see them, I rejoice. They do not hinder my movements in the least; they are simply my private reminders of God's great love for me.

And like job, my riches after tribulation have doubled. Christian Prison Ministries was renamed the Jerry Golden Ministries because our work now includes congregations around the world. Recently we found a ship, and from a base in Tel Aviv, we began sailing the Mediterranean, winning converts and establishing churches in the ancient ports of the Middle East. Now I tell everyone who will listen that a Heavenly Father who loves them not only can set them free from sin, but can heal their bodies and provide for their every need. I tell them with conviction because it has happened to me.

My family expanded, too. After my recovery, Connie gave birth to a healthy, nine-pound baby boy we named Joel Lee Golden. Without Jesus, I never would have known my fourth child. Today, I rejoice at a life as full as mine.

Connie and I sat close together on the sofa the other night with our thick photo album stretched across our laps.

"Hmm," she said quietly. "Here's a picture of you when you were first released from Angola. Remember?"

"Yeah," I replied. "I had all the enthusiasm in the world back then. I was a raw, young convert."

"Did you have any idea what you would do when you left prison?"

"I didn't know exactly where I would go," I answered, "but something deep inside told me I was going to preach. It was something I knew, but I can't explain how I knew."

She turned a page, and we saw a snapshot of the pasture in Atmore with the wreckage of my plane strewn across it. She traced her finger along each piece.

"I still can't believe you went through that. It just seems impossible that you survived."

"What if I hadn't survived?" I asked suddenly. "What would you and the kids have done?"

She leaned away from me and raised her head to look straight into my eyes.

"I never thought about it," she said. "Not once. I know that if God had chosen to take you, He would have prepared me, but I never thought for a minute that you'd die."

"Why not?"

She looked thoughtful. "I don't know". It was just something I knew deep down inside, like how you knew you'd preach. I can't explain it, but I knew Jesus was with us. I knew that living was His will for you."

I lifted my right arm and slipped it around her. She dropped her head onto my shoulder, and we sat there in silence, thinking. Several minutes went by. Finally I spoke.

"What if something like that ever happened again?"

The question went unanswered. Connie reached for my hand and closed her eyes, a faint smile across her lips.

I knew what that smile meant. It meant the world could melt away tomorrow, yet we'd be unafraid.

It meant we might stumble down a dark, twisting pathway that led to another raging inferno,

but we wouldn't fret. For deep inside we had a knowledge we couldn't explain; a firm, precious grip on the hand Divine. Whatever the tomorrows would bring, however bleak the nights, we knew we could always reach for Jesus, and always find Him there.