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PART IV

AWAKENING

GET ME OUT OF HERE!

Because of the booby trap charge, Brent was housed in the most secure part of the jail reserved for the alleged most dangerous inmates and those being punished by jail staff for breaking the rules for almost two months. The only difference was that Brent was allowed to have the things that he bought on commissary and was allowed to keep his mat during the day. Despite these privileges, he was repeatedly denied access to a Bible or any other book for over a month and a half.

It wasn't just the solitary confinement that hurt. It was that the human interaction he experienced with most guards and the shouts from other inmates were almost entirely negative in nature. Prisoners yelled insults, thumped on the other side of the block wall right where Brent's bunk was, or crowed like an out-of-control rooster. There was constant noise, bright lights, and attacks to his soul.

When inmates learned of our video visits, it became a time when that part of the jail would erupt in shouts to the point that Brent didn't think that he would even be capable of hearing us on the other end of the line. Our 10 hours of driving and his only bit of cheer would be drowned out. Brent plugged his ear he wasn't going to use on the phone to try to reduce the noise surrounding him to be able to hear us. Fortunately, when outbursts were at their worst, a guard took pity and moved Brent to a different place in the jail so that we would be able to hear each other at the kiosks.

Brent came to a point where he felt completely broken and thought he was done. If you've ever researched the mental health of people placed in solitary confinement, you know statistics are not good. This is one reason why we prayed constantly for Brent's mental health and encouraged him to call as frequently as possible despite the financial burden. The strong leader of my family was now, in a very real sense, a helpless castaway and object of scorn. The devil attacked his mind continuously.

One day, Brent called and said he believed me. He was referring to my experience when Roman was born. He had seen the light. Some may say that Brent went crazy and hallucinated. Others, who have been placed under extreme stress and have had a similar experience, understand. God sends angels to minister us when we are at our breaking point and can't take any more.

Brent pled with God, "Get me out of here!"

Brent meant out of jail in general, but that didn't happen. However, shortly after that prayer, the booby trap charge against Brent was dropped. His "classification" by the jail was changed and he was moved to an isolated medical cell. In the new space, there was only one other inmate. The two had significant communication limitations, but they were able to hear each other. Negative comments in this area were greatly reduced.

God answered, but not in the way Brent had expected. Although not what he wanted, the change in surroundings was a reprieve for his spirit against the relentless verbal attacks and extremely damaging psychological conditions.

SYMBOLIC SANDY

When in an isolation cell, a nurse named Sandy checked on Brent. He says that she treated him like he was human. He was very appreciative that she did her job in a professional manner without adding insults. About a month and a half later, he was moved to a medical cell. The “rec” area with the TV and kiosk was shared with her workspace. Brent asked Sandy if she would pray for his family. She said that she would.

When I was in jail, I could hardly wait until Monday because that was when church services were offered to women. The Bible had been my comfort in more than one way. By day, it renewed my spirit bringing hope. At night, it was my pillow. Isaiah and Desi bailed me out on Monday morning, so I never made it to the church service available to inmates.

I told my family of my intentions to attend a church service. I’d never felt so strongly. It was not just a want. It was a need. I didn’t want this feeling to fade away over time just because I was back in the “real world.” I didn’t want any distractions or excuses. Our family had been given a wakeup call and I didn’t want God to have to do anything else to get my attention. The Bible says that the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom. Using a Bible as a pillow for the previous five nights had left an impression on me. We were in a mess that only God could fix.

Six nights came and went. I was still trying to figure out where to go. It just so happened that the next day would also be Easter.

Going back to a church building for the first time in years, there was an extraordinary lady teaching the Sunday School class. Teachers for that class rotate, but for that Sunday in particular, it was Sandy’s turn to lead the class. That’s right... Sandy. A different Sandy, miles away from Brent, taught the Sunday School lesson that touched my heart and led the way for the healing process to start.

Was it a coincidence that two people named Sandy played a role as God’s ambassadors when Brent and I leaned on God or did God have something to do with it? Brent had never asked anyone at the jail to pray for his family. This “coincidence” with me happened the Sunday after Brent asked for prayer. I think it is one simple example of how God can connect anyone to anything at any place at any time. It’s important that we share these “coincidences” with believers and nonbelievers alike. God isn’t giving me special treatment. If we allow Him and we have the heart to follow, God is guiding each of us. The more we seek Him, the easier He is to find.

During the church services, an invitation was given for those seeking additional prayer support. Sandy and her husband were the first prayer warriors in my new church family to pray with me for our broken family. I know that many other people were also praying for us. I just find it

interesting and against the odds for Brent, in an isolation cell, to ask Sandy to pray for his family and within a week, another woman named Sandy prayed with Desi and me.

To me, the two women named Sandy in two different places represent God's vast power and ability to pull all things together. There are many people, many children of God, serving Him. Faith in Jesus is the one commonality that binds us. There is just one church... one bride. In this simple display of a name, God showed me how foolish it is to be divided by unimportant details. The common name was simply a symbol to remind me that God is everywhere all the time. Though my husband and I may be separated by hundreds of miles, God holds time and space in His hands.

KRISTIE, KRISTI, OR CHRISTY?

I didn't know I'd meet Sandy. I thought that it would be best if we went to church with Kristie, my sister-in-law. She regularly attends a church that is just down the road from her home. We were going to Kristie's house for lunch. Despite my intentions, I never called to ask when the church services started. Really, I expected to type in the church location and that the hours of services would appear. They didn't. By the time I found out that the information wasn't online, it was nearly midnight, and I didn't want to chance waking her.

I wasn't sure what to do or where to go. I was sure that I should be going with Kristie. Rather than waking up early and driving to the church, my brain searched for a temporary substitute. I remembered that Mr. Hallberg was a retired pastor. On a whim, I googled his name, the local area, and the word pastor. Immediately, promising search results were in front of me. A church website listed service times and an address so that we could find it. It wasn't what I'd planned or wanted, but it would suffice until I could talk to Kristie the next day about the service times.

The next morning, Desi and I arrived in time for Sunday School. A man pointed us to a room down the hall. It was the "mature" class. That's a nice way of saying "the class with people who have had many birthdays." The Holy Spirit was speaking through Sandy, who led the class. Filled to the brim with heartache, all she had to do was to mention anything like love or sacrifice and another tissue was needed. A burden of seemingly senseless pain was being lifted from me.

By the time Sunday School was over, almost all my tissues were gone. If Sunday School left me in tears, I'd better stock up on tissues before the regular service started. As my daughter and I quickly left the building to replenish my tissue supply from the ones in our car, the guy at the door exclaimed, "You just got here!" Explaining the need for tissues as we kept walking, he casually replied that the church has plenty of tissues.

At the car, I caught up with my runny nose and loaded a bunch of tissues into my purse, double or triple what I thought might be needed. As we got closer to the building again, someone was fast approaching behind us. Glancing behind me, I saw Mr. Hallberg. He was happy to see us and said that it made his day to see us there. After talking for a minute, he showed us where he and his wife typically sat in the sanctuary and invited us to sit next to them. It was good to meet Mrs. Hallberg. My previous assumptions made about her were right. Opposite of the bundle of energy she married, she is equally as nice but very calm.

The service was louder and less formal than what I had anticipated. There was a praise team leading the church in worship using a guitar, keyboard, piano and drums. As part of the service, teams of prayer warriors offered to intercede before God with those seeking additional prayer

support. Then the pastor presented the sermon. Throughout it all, there was God. I could feel His presence.

When going to church as a child and earlier in my life, I went because it was routine. I sang the songs, heard the message, and loved God, but I didn't feel God in the room. My impression was that we were worshiping in a building on earth, but that God was far away in heaven. As an adult, little by little, I had drifted away. I knew God was real, but I didn't understand how He longed for me to go to Him first and to talk to Him many times a day, like a best friend. Praying and reading the Bible had become increasingly sparse activities in my life. Morality was defined by me, not the Bible. To me, God was to be respected as the Creator and Giver of Life, but I failed to recognize the importance of Jesus. Jesus is the only way that God can have mercy on us. Over time, my mind was deceived. I put more faith in my own good works than in Jesus.

Now, after so much time away from an assembly of other believers, it was different. I could feel God in the room with us. It was a very humbling experience. In all my years of attending church services, I may have felt myself emotionally touched and holding back tears once or twice. Now, my tears wouldn't stop! It was like a unique time when I was a teen in my room and had unloaded all my worries to God during a rainstorm. The tears wouldn't stop. I went through all my tissues!

After the service, as I gathered my things, a lady came over, offered me a Bible, and thanked us for coming to the service. Introducing herself as Kristi, she said that she hoped she'd see us again. There was an instant revelation in my mind. God knew that there was another Kristi. He just didn't spell it out. There would be no reason to ask Kristie about the times for other services. Through my procrastination, God had led me exactly where He wanted me.

Fast forwarding a little less than a year. Our world faced Covid-19. Governments across the globe shut down nearly all churches citing safety concerns. Many churches who were not forced to close by law or mandate, voluntarily closed because they did not want to be held responsible or because of pressure from the public. According to mass society, if Christians met in person, they did not care about or love others that they could possibly infect.

Acts 2 really started to weigh on my heart. The early church met daily, and their numbers increased daily. This was a time to pray in unison... not to close churches! Who can bring help faster than God? I searched online and found a virtual prayer group that met 5 days per week. Although never meeting these believers in person, they became a source of encouragement, and the Holy Spirit within me grew stronger. In this group of about 10-15 believers was another Christy. Joining these prayer warriors in Jesus' name, we fought the enemy and pleaded for God's mercy.

DON'T SUE US

The felony charge had been dismissed a little over a month earlier. Isaiah still faced several charges that could still result in years of jailtime. He had been charged with obstructing justice, menacing, and resisting arrest. After hearing the testimony of officers on the scene, the prosecutor offered to drop all charges if Isaiah agreed to make a couple of statements.

Isaiah had to say to the judge that they had reasonable cause to arrest him. "Reasonable cause" is a gray area. Arresting someone in a red shirt because a crime is committed in an area by someone in a red shirt is "reasonable cause." Isaiah also had to make a statement that he would not sue any of the law enforcement agencies involved on that day. He agreed to make the statements.

We were all very tired and Isaiah wanted the job in North Carolina. If he didn't agree to the statement, he couldn't get the job because he'd still have pending charges and would need to prepare for trial. This was a time for forgiveness.

JOB FAIR

Roman was in the final stages of completing his student teaching. Because of our family's arrests, he had missed the maximum number of absences before it would affect his grade. The day before a job fair at his main campus, his college professor asked if he was planning on attending the job fair. He said that he wasn't planning on it because he had already missed the maximum number of days. His professor said that if he wanted to go, that it would not count against his grade because it was considered a professional development workday.

Roman was excited for the opportunity. He had originally wanted to go to the job fair but thought that the two days that he spent helping our family had ruled that out. He jumped at the chance, quickly updated his resume, and prepared for the long drive the next morning.

At the Job Fair, Roman visited different booths that were representing different districts in Ohio as well as some out of state districts. After gathering some initial data, he signed up for several interviews, but one especially grabbed his attention. It was a booth for the largest district in Alaska. Roman has talked about and dreamed about going to Alaska since he was little.

Roman said that he arrived about 10 minutes early for his set interview time with the Alaskan district and just started talking to the person at the booth while waiting for the interview. Roman shared his interests in different cultures and how he has used his life experiences and skills at camp to teach primitive skills. He said that he talked to this man for about 45 minutes. Interviews were scheduled in 15-minute blocks. Roman later learned that he was talking to the Assistant Superintendent.

Roman felt that the interview went well. The man said that he would have the Personnel Director talk to him within the next week or so. The next day, Roman got an email with more information to make sure that the district had a school that would best suit Roman's personality and lifestyle. Within a couple of weeks an official job offer was made. Forty-eight hours prior to the interview, Roman didn't even know that he could attend. God, in His perfect timing, worked out all the details of getting Roman to the exact right place, at the exact right time, to perfectly mesh Roman's strengths and interests with the right job.

WHAT IF YOUR STORY IS ENOUGH?

The second week that we went back to church, the first week happened to fall on Easter, the pastor's message was titled, "What If Your Story Is Enough?" During the whole sermon, I felt like he had tailor made it for me. I needed to tell my story. I already knew this to be true, but I didn't know how to do it or what part of "my story" I needed to share. As the service ended, my former co-worker tapped me on the shoulder and whispered, "That one was for you, Ty." I wasn't sure of the audience, point in time, or method of delivery... but I was certain that it was necessary.

What was my story? I knew God was disappointed in me for not sharing with others my experience during Roman's birth. (I'll tell you later or you can skip to the "extras" part and read it now.) Why had I not told others? Fear? Thoughts in my head saying that people might think that I was dumb, crazy, or a liar? Someone might judge me. This hardly seemed like something to be concerned about now!

I had a moment of clarity. These were lies driven by fear! The devil put doubt in my head because he wanted to keep God's love, help, and presence a secret. The devil didn't want me to speak! He knows the power of God's work! By myself, I am vulnerable to his schemes. The Holy Spirit working within me is something for the devil to fear.

Shortly thereafter, I awakened with the words, "Write it down." At first, I thought the story to be told was about my recent encounters with the legal system. My thoughts were consumed with my recent research and experiences Brent relayed to me. I started a list of things I thought God would want me to "write down."

Originally thinking of just 3 or 4 experiences, the list quickly grew to about 15 in about an hour's time. Memories kept coming to me. In just a few short days, I had recalled about 40 times when I'd seen God's hand in my life. When I reread my list, I was surprised. It had nothing to do with statistical research of prisons, prisoners, or the legal system. The overwhelming theme was evident. God had been active in my life many times. I had failed praise Him for to His handiwork.

The things I am writing about are not easy for me. In fact, some are quite difficult to think about. I find myself sitting and staring as I wait for the right words. It's easy to complain, but that's not God's way. Many times, I've seen God working when I'm struggling. It's not fun to write about such times. It's humbling and sometimes can be embarrassing.

I pray frequently and ask for the Holy Spirit to guide me. I imagine that for some reason, I am no longer able to speak to my children. Most of us do not know how much time we have left on earth. If I died today, what would I want them to remember or to know about? I should

have a better attitude about this task, but the truth is that I'm very much like Jonah. Jonah eventually did what God told him to do. He just did it after a very unpleasant encounter with a big fish. Jonah's experience should teach us all not to run from God's work.

I started writing about each of the incidents but hit many blockades in my mind, finding excuses not to do it. Words weren't coming to me, and I was busy... but the list of things to write about kept growing. I'm talking about all the little things... when I knew that God was near... or He sent words of encouragement... whatever I needed at the time. How good are my ears at listening and my eyes for seeing? We know He is everywhere, all the time, but how often do we really think about what that looks like in our lives? Early on, while working on this project, I learned to ask for the Holy Spirit to guide my words and to keep me moving. If my story can encourage you, it is my responsibility to share it.

I'm just one of over 7 billion souls alive at this given point in time. Imagine all of God's work that exists around the world that we either fail to recognize or do recognize but keep to ourselves because of pride. Please share your stories. They are gifts from God. It is selfish not to share something that could help someone else. Help your friends, loved ones, strangers, and descendants that will live after you have taken your last breath. You have a credibility with people who have known you for years that I don't have. We each have a group of people we can impact for the Lord. What if God helped you so that you would later be able to help someone else? What if YOUR story is enough?

BE STILL

Concerned about our finances and trying to think of possible solutions, I was reminded of a comment that one of my acquaintances had made a couple of months before I was arrested. She had asked me if I knew of anyone who could help take care of Granny. At the time, I didn't know of anyone. Now in my current situation, I thought that Desi and I could possibly be that help.

Not having a Facebook account, knowing her phone number, or where she lived, I asked my son for help. Using Isaiah's Facebook account, we were able to find her profile and sent a message letting her know that it was me trying to contact her and not my son. There was a reply the next morning. Desi and I arranged to go and visit her. Help had been found for Granny, but because of her own daughter's recent surgery, they were both temporarily homebound and in the need for some visitors.

It was both comforting and encouraging that I had the time to go and be supportive in her time of need. In return, she helped me with some of my insecurities. She has a tattoo that says, "Be still." She says that it is her reminder when facing a challenge that God says to be still. Let Him take care of the situation. Some of the things that she said were exactly what I needed to hear. It was a very tough time for me. As I type, it still is a tough time, but I have been given an incredible sense of peace. This is unexplainable unless you simply can believe that all things work together for a greater good. Faith allows peace to flourish.

Legally, I'm in the exact same circumstances as I was 2 1/2 years ago. My charges carry up to a ten-year jail sentence. To date, the best "deal" offered by the prosecution has been the maximum sentence. Added separately, Brent's charges carry more than a 1,600-year sentence. My lawyer says that Brent couldn't get that many years because it is over the limit of years legally allowed to be sentenced. Does that help? No!

Since the beginning of this huge change, my mom has spoken words of life, telling me that I'm "holding up very well." 2 ½ years ago I disagreed and thought I was a complete mess. Today, I know that's not true. Many people prayed for my family. God heard and in my broken state has given me enormous spiritual growth. I've been blessed with time to not just read the Bible, but to study and apply it. According to James, I'm very lucky to face these trials because I'm developing perseverance!

The Bible, in Exodus 14 and Psalm 46, reminds me to "be still."

CONTRABAND PILLOW

In an isolated medical cell, Brent could talk to a guy across the hall via a crack at the bottom of the cell doors. Over the course of four days, Brent was encouraged because he felt like God was finally giving him someone to talk to. Brent was able to talk to him about the Bible and other things. They asked a guard and were both allowed to go to a “rec” area to walk at the same time. This was the first time in about 2 months that Brent was able to really talk with another person and get some exercise by walking in a bigger room.

Brent found out that this person did not have a pillow. He did not have any money on his account and was sleeping on what the jail provided. Brent ordered an extra pillow by using his commissary money. When he got it, Brent left it on the table used by both in the small medical rec area with the TV, still in the plastic, so that when CJ got out of his medical cell, he could have it. The pillow was there for a couple of hours. Two guards opened Brent’s door and told him that he was now in lockdown. They wanted all of Brent’s belongings, the mat and blanket... everything. Brent asked what he had done. The answer was that he was attempting to pass contraband... the pillow on the table...

The reason I write this is to inform anyone who is not familiar with jail the reality that exists within confined walls with no transparency. Former editor of The Correctional Trainer, instructor of corrections and criminal justice since 1999, and author of 13 books dealing with the topic wrote on Feb 24, 2011, an article “What is contraband?” According to Mr. Bouchard, “As most corrections professionals know, almost anything that can be traded or modified can be considered contraband.” A few paragraphs later Bouchard added, “Even information can be considered contraband.”

With guards given this broad range of self-regulated authority, it is a breeding ground for the devil’s work. If a guard thinks that an inmate may gain loyalty by giving anyone else anything, whatever it is can be called contraband, the item confiscated, and the inmate punished. This directly defies God’s law to treat others with love. Brent had no idea that he wasn’t allowed to do this. He had never seen a rule book, any rules posted, and had not talked to any other inmates about the rules of the jail. When I was put in a general population cell at the same jail, I read a piece of paper taped to the wall that jail rules are subject to change without notice, for any length of time, by any guard.

Why have rules posted electronically or on paper if you also have the disclaimer that they can change at any time? There is a general rulebook on the kiosk if you know where to look for it. It assumes that the person reading understands jail terminology. Different rules apply in different parts of the jail depending upon different classifications. It is very confusing if you are

jail for the first time, have never done research on jails, or have never talked to anyone about their personal experiences in a jail. Who is the author of confusion?

Apparently, when you are in a cell by yourself, you are not allowed to give anyone anything. Period. Everything is contraband. If you are in any kind of isolation...even medical, the only way to have something not provided by the jail is for someone to put money on your account and be purchased through the commissary vendor. Money rules.

I thought that contraband was something illegal like drugs or weapons. That is included but from our experience labeling something as contraband is the rational guards use to throw things away that inmates have legally obtained. Anything modified in any way or used in a way not intended can be considered contraband. For example, using an empty peanut butter jar as a cup or storage container for hygiene products in one's tote to promote organization is contraband and is taken. Creativity is squelched and disorganization encouraged. How evil is a system that punishes someone for kindness, compassion, or simple organization? The fluorescent lights may never go out, but it is a very dark place.

Someone weighing about 150 pounds squishes the mat down to perhaps half an inch. I was about 120 pounds when I was in jail. The mats are about 2 inches thick. When I would get up, after laying on the mat, I could see in some places about an inch to an inch and a half indentation from my body weight. The elevated end of the mat provides about a one-inch incline when the weight of your head flattens the mat. Brent learned that CJ was over 500 pounds when he entered the jail. Now, he weighed in at about 375 pounds. I can't imagine how compressed his mat must be. Oxygen was deemed necessary by a doctor, so an isolated medical cell was CJ's only option. A pillow had not been prescribed. It was obvious that guards did not want him to have this luxury.

Brent was confused. He had been told in the past that people get a warning to avoid lockdown and he had not been given a verbal warning. The evening guard in charge said that Brent would have to talk to the one in charge in the morning, since the decision was made by the dayshift for him to be in lockdown.

The following day, Brent went to court in the morning before he was able to talk to the main person in charge. When he returned but before he got any of his stuff back, they told Brent that he was being moved to general population.

Maybe Brent needed to practice compassion and discussing faith with just one person. Maybe staff were slowly integrating Brent in with others. In any case, he was about to go to a place where several had no pillows, and at that particular jail, there were no rules against giving a pillow to someone within the same cell.

Acting out of love is never wrong. Imperfect mankind combined with unlimited power and virtually no accountability makes for a dangerous combination. It may go against rules and your motives may be misunderstood, but we have been given the directive from the highest authority to love others. Jesus doesn't say that officials will appreciate us. Jesus tells us that we are blessed when we are persecuted for His sake.

SAFETY IN CELL 112

After being in isolation for over two months, Brent called and told us that he was being moved to protective custody cell in the jail's general population. What did that mean exactly? He would be put in a cell with other people with similar charges. That sounded terrible! Brent's charges are awful! I called others immediately for prayer. We prayed for a "hedge of protection" all around him.

Brent called again to tell us that he was OK. His physical body was safe. What we learned over time was that his spirit was being challenged from a different angle. Instead of direct insults, there was constant exposure to immoral behavior and pressure to join. Lifestyles and values of the people he encountered were opposite from his own. He tried for a long time to explain why a different way might be more rewarding, but nobody seemed to agree.

After a while, Brent thought that the most repulsive man in the cell had a secret side to him. Underneath all the layers of filth, there was a positive motive. He was trying to prepare others for prison, looking out for everyone in a jail sort of way... or was he? Perhaps he was very manipulative, a master of deception, and was really scheming. In just four months, Brent was losing his common sense. He was beginning to think that the lesser of evils must be good. No! Evil is still evil... regardless of the degree! This was not a single spiritual battle. This was war!

Finally, Brent had to draw the line and told the cell boss, "No."

At first glance, that did not go over very well. Brent's life was threatened as well as the lives of our entire family. Despite this, Brent wanted to stay in that cell. He didn't feel that he should be the one punished by having to adapt to a different cell and inmates. We prayed that Brent would be safe, even if it meant that Brent was the one to be moved.

Within three hours, Brent was moved to a medical cell by himself. For the first couple of hours, Brent was upset, and felt as if the cell boss really did "run the jail." With more prayer and a little more time, Brent was able to reflect upon the situation. Sometimes when you are surrounded by many making bad decisions, it helps to step away and refocus.

It may be a small thing to you, but praise God the temperature in the medical cell was warm enough. In the past, Brent had mentioned that he shivered the whole time while in the medical cell. Brent was thankful that he could turn the TV off for some quiet or choose non offensive TV programming. There happened to be a Life Below Zero marathon, so he was able to watch 12 hours of that show, a place that was filmed very close to where Roman was teaching. It brought a sense of peace to have that simple mental escape to the tundra. This would not have

been possible in the cell with others where Brent had no control over the TV. He was able to get a good night's sleep and felt as though a huge weight had been lifted from his shoulders.

Later, Brent was moved back. The cell boss had been moved to the only other PC cell. In those simple ways, God provided for Brent's spirit to be renewed. Thank God for safety while in Cell 112.

MOTORCYCLE FOR A JEEP

Because of legal expenses, we tried to liquidate our assets as quickly as possible. If you can imagine the further heartbreak, our children liquidated some of their assets too. We had 4 motorcycles in our garage. We were wanting cash, instead of a different possession, but God and His opportunities should never be confined by our own wants.

Roman tried to sell his motorcycle for \$1,500. Nobody wanted to buy it for that price, but someone did want to trade a truck with blown brake lines for it. At the last minute and already enroute to pursue this option, we told Roman not to go through with the trade. Because of our sudden change in advice, Roman spent several hours riding the motorcycle in the rain for no apparent reason. He was not very happy with us. When he returned to the house, the bike had acquired a knocking sound. He lowered the price to \$1000. Someone came to look at it, but with the new sound, didn't want it. Water from the rain must have gotten in somewhere causing the noise.

Someone new called and wanted to trade the motorcycle for a Jeep Cherokee. By then the knocking was gone, but we really did not want a jeep. We wanted cash! Roman made the trade anyhow. Now we had a jeep with a lift kit, monster tires and other accessories... not practical at all. Roman listed the Jeep for \$3000. Someone came to look at it and offered \$1500. That satisfied Roman since it was the original asking price for the motorcycle, but he was working in North Carolina at the time, so he couldn't make the deal until the weekend. The arrangement fell through because the man didn't want to wait until the weekend. It seemed like we had spoken too soon and should have let the original trade go through.

About a week later, a different person arrived in a jeep and works on jeeps, offered \$2500. It was a perfect fit for all of us. So, with some extra steps, patience, and God's timing, we were blessed with nearly double the amount we'd imagined. The strange sequence of events gave us the money needed in this difficult financial time. Praise God!

I HAVE A BETTER IDEA

In case you've forgotten, legal battles had proven to be very expensive. It was also the last and most expensive semester for Roman's college. Until now, he had been able to take all his classes at regional campuses. For his final semester, student teaching was only offered through the main campus, which had much higher tuition rates. Under normal circumstances we could handle the cost, although it would not be pleasant. That was no longer our reality.

I had agreed to a tuition installment plan. The first payment had been made. Then came the four arrests. The plan flew out the window. I used to prepare for things far in advance... like retiring in 15 years, like having the perfect vacation spot because it had been booked 11 months and 3 weeks in advance, and like having supplies stockpiled for a natural disaster or civil unrest. Silly me.

Telling my son that I was very sorry, the news was broken that we could not afford the tuition. He would need a loan to pay for the balance. He loathed the idea. He absolutely did not want a loan and viewed it as making himself a slave to debt. He said that our country didn't have the money to loan. Even if most Americans in college incur debt, Roman didn't consider it an option.

I prayed and thought God would eventually change Roman's heart to accept the loan. Why go through all your college classes and then not get the piece of paper that makes it legal to get a job? To me, it is not logical. Sometimes Roman doesn't follow my logic. He was almost done with his student teaching before he finally submitted the application. According to the numbers and time frame, he qualified for a loan.

We received notice that Roman got a grant for several hundred dollars, but there was no information about the loan. Over \$2,000 in tuition was still outstanding. In addition to my prayers, we asked for additional prayer through prayer warriors at our church. We needed God's assistance. From my perspective, we needed that loan! It was the only solution I could see. That week, we kept checking on his account, waiting for the loan to be approved. Finally, Roman's account showed a zero balance. Relief! Now his diploma could be released.

Reviewing the details of how the balance got to zero confused me. The loan had not been processed. We didn't pay it. How could Roman have nothing due and no loan to cover the difference?

Apparently, God had been at work and had a better idea. Roman received a grant that he had never applied for or considered. The grant awarded was for the exact amount due. This mystery grant was the vehicle that allowed Roman to graduate from college debt free. When I was no longer able to meet my son's need and called on God for help, God stepped in and took

care of it. He went further than my expectations, blessing us beyond my imagination.
Incredible! Praise God!

GOD HAS A PLAN

We were going to visit Brent at the jail. We saw an older lady struggling with the kiosk designated for depositing funds to inmates. It's like an ATM except for the opposite. You put money in it. We stopped and asked if she needed help. Rather than being defensive or thinking that we might be trying to steal her money, she said, "Yes, it's so hard to see." She told us the buttons to press, and we were able to help her add money to her loved one's account. She said thanks and we went into our visit.

The second time we saw her was a repeat of the first time... she needed help again. Introducing herself as Dean, she asked us if we knew the Lord. We said yes and exchanged some more small talk.

We seemed to keep running into her. The third time we saw her in the parking lot. She stopped to talk to us and asked if she could give us a hug. We said yes. She said, "I just love you girls." She encouraged us further saying, "God has a plan." Dean was going to be getting cataract surgery but needed to do one eye at a time because it was getting hard to drive at all. We noticed the smashed bumper of her car. She asked us to pray for her safe travel back home.

Desi and I thought about it, discussed it with the family to evaluate any safety concerns, and then planned to offer to pick her up and take her to her visits until her surgeries were done. We didn't want her driving unsafely and knew the importance of family visits. We never had a chance to talk with her again. Her loved one's name disappeared from the kiosk indicating a release or transfer. I think our meetings with her were to send us the message that were her final words to us. God has a plan.

TOLLS

Roman and Isaiah were going to teach kids in North Carolina at a nature center for the summer. They'd stay at a campground during the week and come back to visit as often as they could. I was used to Roman working there and didn't worry even though it was a long drive since he had his brother with him.

Both of my sons got in the car and left with all their supplies. They had a full tank of gas, but without anyone realizing, they both left with only \$9.00 cash between them. Ahhhh! How could this happen? Roman was expecting to get paid from working the previous weeks and they had a bank card. What about emergency money?

Unaware, they took a toll road. They spent the \$9.00 going through several booths. When they got to the last booth to explain the matter, the person inside spoke first saying, "Don't worry about it. The person in front of you paid for you!"

Though I wasn't even aware that my children had a need, God was looking out for them. Thank you, random stranger, for listening to the prompting in your heart.

God didn't have to arrange that! It's too coincidental not to be from God. He wanted to do it. Why? He could've let them learn a lesson to be better prepared in the future. But... this reinforces the opposite idea. There must be a different objective. God will take care of us. He knows our needs before we even ask.

LAUREN

I met Lauren in jail. She woke up early but stayed in bed reading so that she wouldn't disturb others. She was also the one who cleaned and did dishes most of the time for other inmates.

One of my favorite jail memories, was when Lauren and Charity decided to have a Bible study. Their goal was to do homework given from a jail ministry program for another inmate in the cell. Until then, I had been quiet and stayed on my mat about 90% of the time.

When I heard the two discussing the Bible, I gathered my courage and climbed down, hopeful that they wouldn't mind me sitting at the table with them. Slowly testing the waters, I sat across from them and joined in the conversation a few times. They didn't ask me to leave or to be quiet. I was hoping that they would accept me as a fellow participant, yet very quickly I found myself mentally judging them.

Their sincere efforts and confusion struck me as cute and endearing. They cussed their way through the Bible verses trying to decipher the meaning. For most of my life, I've lived in a very sheltered and conservative world. People around me generally don't cuss. These women were from a very different culture. I was the odd ball. They weren't meaning to make God angry... they were honestly trying to learn how God would want them to live. God knew their hearts.

From my perspective, the process seemed messy, but I think that there is a good chance that God views all our attempts as messy. I'm pretty sure that is why He sent Jesus. We are like little children, three years old, trying to play a game of basketball on a regulation sized court. Nobody can ever score a basket. We can't even get close. If, however, we are held up to the basket by Jesus, it is possible for us to drop the ball into the hoop.

My heart had a special place for Lauren. I deliberately decided not to forget her. Privately, praying for her while in the same cell, prayers continued for her and her family after I was released. I assumed that God heard my prayers but had no way of ever knowing if they were granted. Hearing and intervening are different. I didn't know where Lauren lived or her last name and imagined that her circumstances would always be a mystery to me.

Awhile later and back at home, I folded my lawn chair to take it inside. Unfortunately, I had put our phone in the cupholder, and it flopped out onto the concrete sidewalk and cracked the screen. It is the first and only phone I've ever broken. After that incident, it was very hard to hear Brent or for him to hear us. A few days later, we went to a video visit. After the visit we went to Walmart to get a new phone. We didn't want Brent to worry and needed to be quick to get to the campground before Brent called. We walked straight back to the phones.

With surprised eyes, I thought I saw Lauren. Without the neon orange jumpsuits and block walls, I wasn't sure. In anticipation I asked the woman looking at the phone cards, "Lauren, is that you?"

It was! We hugged and briefly exchanged our circumstances since we had last seen each other. She introduced her son, and I introduced Desi. It was good to see her again.

Thinking about the timing and unlikely chain of events made me ponder. The five-minute exchange didn't change any of my physical circumstances, but it lifted my spirit. God reassured me that my prayers were being heard and answered. His reassurance strengthened my faith in other areas that I have no earthly knowledge... bringing peace. If God is willing to prompt the heart of someone to pay the toll for my two sons when I didn't even know that it was a problem or to ask for help, how much more is he willing to give other people I love exactly the right people and circumstances they need for healing and growth when I continually ask. The same is true for you.

THE SKUNK

After getting the phone, Desi and I set up camp. We were sitting outside of the tent in the cool evening air talking to Brent in the darkness. From the corner of my eye and with the help of the moon, I caught a glimpse of a skunk approaching. It had already walked parallel but within inches of our tent for several feet. Sitting only about a foot from our tent, it was headed straight for me. Uncontrolled and having lost all rational thought, I squealed like a little girl and lifted my feet from off the ground. Do you think my response helped?

Watering eyes, a headache and an overwhelming smell unfolded in my mind. Fear seized me and I forgot to pray! It was about 4 feet away from me! If it sprayed, the tent and all our belongings would stink. Our night would be ruined, and all our camping gear might need tossed. Can you get a skunk smell out of a tent? How many times would we need to wash our sleeping bags and everything else?

Amazingly, at the sound of my involuntary squeal, the skunk turned around and wandered away into the forest. You may think this is a story not worth mentioning, but I am taking no chances. Praise God that skunk simply walked away! I don't want to face that situation again with a different outcome. What a reminder of how our lives can change in just an instant! The entire scenario from beginning to end lasted no more than ten seconds. It gave me a quick example of both panic and relief! In this case, relief came within three seconds. Most times, the process takes a lot longer.

James says to consider it pure joy when faced with trials of many kinds and that testing faith will develop perseverance. This is certainly easier said than done. However, before the arrival of the skunk, I was sad and depressed that only two of us were camping instead of seven. After the skunk left, I realized that life could be worse. God, via the skunk, gave me an instant attitude adjustment. I am very thankful!

CHANGE OF HEART

Brent had told us many times that he wanted Roman, Desi, Isaiah, and I to stick together for emotional support and physical safety. This posed a conflict when Roman was offered a job in Alaska. Everything about the job in Alaska seemed perfect for Roman. Roman had wanted to go to Alaska since he was a boy. Roman loves different languages. He is not intimidated by harsher living conditions and appreciates indigenous culture.

Brent acknowledged all these things. He just thought that it was the wrong time for Roman to accept a job that would put him so far away. Brent thought that the job would still be there next year, and it would be better timing for our family. I felt that perhaps Brent did not see the big picture. Maybe it was perfect timing, even if it wasn't recognized. What if we were supposed to go to Alaska and Roman's job was the catalyst to move us in that direction? I really wanted to express these ideas to Brent, but he was in such a fragile emotional state I decided to keep quiet and went a different route.

I prayed. Then I prayed with other prayer warriors asking God to touch Brent's heart and for God to be in control of this decision. I wanted love to be in control. I did not want fear to have any power. Whatever the outcome, love would reign.

Only after covered in prayer did I talk to Brent about the job opportunity available to Roman. I vocalized that I didn't want fear to be a concern and wanted Brent to only respond out of love. Without argument, he agreed. Brent not only agreed but went beyond my expectations, called Roman and offered support. I'm not sure of what he said, but somehow Brent had all the words that Roman needed to hear.

Instead of division, there was a greater sense of unity and love. If you knew of the strong feelings involved, you would know that this could only be a result of the Holy Spirit's prompting... a complete change of heart.

STUCK IN NORTH CAROLINA

Isaiah bought a nice looking 1971 Buick Skylark. He had been told that it had been sitting in someone's garage for six years. He drove it around locally for about one week and decided that he was going to take it to North Carolina. Desi and I thought a newer vehicle would be more dependable and suggested that he take the 14-year-old Honda Accord. He declined and opted for the 48-year-old relic. Roman and Isaiah headed south together.

They successfully drove most of the way there. About 30 minutes from their destination, they stopped for something. Isaiah turned on the dome light to show Roman that even it worked. Suddenly, all the lights got very bright. Then everything stopped working. They popped the hood and saw that the battery was oozing. They researched quickly, found the closest Walmart, and walked 1.5 miles in the dark to buy a replacement. Then, they walked 1.5 miles back to the car, carrying the battery. After installing the new one, the car still wouldn't start.

Owen, a friend and co-worker, came to the rescue and dropped them off in the woods near to their work. They grabbed a few hours of sleep before they had to report. Isaiah had the Buick towed. Mechanics looked at it, said that all the electrical in the engine had fried, and replaced a couple things. Before a repair bill got out of control, work on it was stopped and Isaiah ordered a distributor from eBay.

On Tuesday of the second week, Roman learned that Randi, his ex-girlfriend and current friend, had on a whim gone to Asheville with her ex-boyfriend Peyton. They had been messaging for the past several days and planned to return to Ohio on Saturday. By Friday night, Isaiah had received the distributor we had sent him and installed it. Unfortunately, the car still wouldn't run. Friday night, Roman asked if they would drive to Durham... 4 hours away... an 8-hour roundtrip and bring them back to Ohio also.

Despite the odd mix of past relationships, Randi and Peyton agreed. They picked Roman and Isaiah up at 10 am Saturday and brought them north. We met them in Cambridge, about an hour south of our home. The following day, Roman and Isaiah traveled back in the Honda. Isaiah sold the Skylark but was glad for transportation and campground conveniences. These may seem like very uncomfortable, terrible times, but in the end everything was fine.

It amazes me how God brought circumstances and people together. There was no reason for Randi and Peyton to be in North Carolina. They both just decided to go and were planning on returning from their trip exactly when Roman and Isaiah had no work scheduled.

God acted because He was needed. I had worried unnecessarily. This time God had a plan in place to help through Randi. Three weeks earlier, a random stranger had paid a toll. I just

didn't know about the plans. These events reaffirmed to me that God would provide a way to help my kids, even when I was prevented. Seeing these connections gives me peace. God doesn't change and will be around for a long time.

THE CAMPGROUND BATHHOUSE

We were staying in a campground because of our video visits with Brent. Desi and I went to the bathhouse to get our showers. We were both in the shower stalls with the water running when two women and a baby came into the bathhouse also. One woman was talking on the phone. The other woman was changing an upset baby's diaper on the counter.

Through the shower noise and curtain, Desi heard the woman changing the baby's diaper say, "You're fine. Everything is going to be OK Desi."

After we were both out of the showers, Desi said that she thought the woman was talking to her. I asked what she meant. I could hear the women and baby enter, but the woman on the phone was closer to me so I had overheard more of her conversation than the woman talking to the baby. Desi was the one in the shower closest to the sinks and counter.

I spontaneously announced that it was a miracle. While in the shower, I had just been singing Angels Among Us in my head and wondering how often we have spiritual encounters that we fail to recognize. I didn't plan on sharing my mental singing and thoughts with Desi until she made her comment.

How many times do you have two people named Desi in the same bathroom? How easily could the woman have left off the name Desi? The baby would have still known that she was being reassured, even without using her name. It was only because the name was used in the sentence that Desi took note of the conversation.

It is only because Desi and I communicated our individual experiences that we were able to see a clearer picture of what had happened. Me wondering about something doesn't give a boost to anyone's spirit. Desi wondered if she was meant to overhear and be encouraged. Put them together and there was no question in our minds. I don't care if you call it a miracle, sign, unique coincidence, or divine appointment. God provided a simple sentence that brought incredible peace and an unshakable belief that everything will be OK.

FREE CHAIRS

Desi and I had set up a corner of the living room to be my online work area. I had a desk, bookshelves, and an appropriate background for online teaching. I was using a folding chair to sit on while I worked. Although it was functional and I was grateful that it was padded, I soon realized I was uncomfortable when I sat on it for hours each day.

At the same time, even though I tried only to feel thankful, my heart was sad. I had used and owned chairs in the past that were very comfortable. These things had been taken. I knew how the Bible told me to feel. Reading, knowing, and feeling are a lot different. I could be angry, sad, or get over it. I made a conscious decision to try to get over it.

There was money in our bank account. I could have gone and physically bought a new chair. I knew, however, that with all our expenses that I could not mentally handle buying a new one. The chair I was using had been a gift from my mother-in-law from several years earlier because she didn't want it anymore. Until now, we usually only used it when we had a larger group of dinner guests. I vowed to myself to be patient and thought I'd find something suitable at a thrift store. To my dismay, I couldn't find anything!

Anyways, it doesn't do any good to complain so I kept quiet about my wish for a different chair. It was a want... not a need. I was just fighting my own selfish desire for something better. A few weeks or maybe a month went by. A cushion already had joined my seat. It made me feel better but also added an inch to my height so that I was off centered on my computer screen. No worries. I found a plastic box, just about the same size as my laptop, to put under it to create the right height again. Nobody looking at me from halfway around the world would know the crazy setup I had to appear "professional." It worked.

Because of the Skylark issues, we quickly found the nearest FedEx place still accepting packages with 2-day express air mail when the distributor came to us. It was in St. Clairsville, about a 30-minute drive from our house. We had a small window of time to ensure delivery. On the way, we went through the little town of New Athens. I saw an office chair just sitting on the sidewalk with what I thought was a piece of paper on the sidewalk beside the chair. I immediately thought that it was for me. If that was true, it would still be there later. With only a few minutes to spare, the chair would have to wait. After we paid for the package to go to North Carolina and were leaving, I saw the delivery truck and worker gathering boxes outside. We had made it just in time.

Now for that chair! As we approached New Athens on the return trip home, I told Desi what I'd seen when we had gone through earlier. She didn't know what I was talking about. I told her that if a chair was on the sidewalk, I wanted to check it out. We drove by. It was there. I told

Desi that I thought that it was free, but she doubted because it looked nice and there was no sign.

We made a loop onto back alleys because there was no parking available in the front, and it was on the main street going through the town. I waited in the car on a side street so that we weren't blocking traffic while Desi ran to check out the chair just sitting by itself on the sidewalk. A piece of paper laying on the ground beside the chair said, "Free." The wind must have blown the sign to the ground. She wheeled the chair to the car. It is more than what I had hoped for and fits me perfectly. I stuck a thank you note on the door of the house behind where the chair had been. It is doubtful they have any idea how much it means to me.

God gave me a gift that I have used for over two years to teach every single online class since that day. It has been very useful and is a great reminder of His blessings. When I had heard, "If you need something, I will give it to you," I had no proof. Now I do. No search was needed. Because we were helping Isaiah, it was along my path. If we wouldn't have helped, I would've never seen it.

You may be wondering why the title is "Free Chairs." I've only talked about one chair. I didn't even connect the dots of the following events until over two years after the fact. As I type this, I'm not sitting in the free office chair. I use that one when I'm online in front of a camera. I'm sitting in a plush colonial styled armchair. Yes, it was free.

After my grandma passed away, my aunt asked if I wanted a couple pieces of Grandma's furniture. I was excited for the chance to have a bit of family history, but for the first time in a long time, we had no truck to move anything. One day my aunt, uncle, and some other people just showed up at my house with a truck and trailer full of furniture. The furniture was dispersed throughout the house or to Isaiah's apartment. There was a chair that I don't ever remember seeing at Grandma's house, but it landed in my room.

I sit in it to read, write, think, pray, reflect, and type. It might be the most comfortable chair on the planet. My mother-in-law had already given me an adjustable TV tray that works perfectly with it. Now, I realize that God may have sent this chair to provide a cozy, relaxed space. In a sense, my security blanket had been taken. God gave me a different one. I had been concerned about making a job atmosphere more comfortable to work longer hours. Without even asking, He gave me a comfortable place to work on spiritual matters. It was a bonus blessing that I would have considered too extravagant and would have never bought or even considered.

To me, this story is about so much more than chairs. The package we had just hurried to put in the mail would fail to get the Buick running. Our efforts were in vain, but God showed me how He could provide not just what I needed, but what I wanted... and more.

LOONEY'S GARAGE

As Isaiah and his friend Owen drove up a six-lane divided highway going up a mountain, the transmission went out of his car. He looked up local garages and found a local garage that he had just passed one mile ago at the bottom of the mountain. Isaiah was able to turn around and safely drive the car to Looney's Garage. By then, Isaiah was in Virginia. Because of my bail agreement limiting me to three states, I couldn't help him. Fortunately, Owen's dad drove the six-hour round trip from North Carolina to pick up the two.

The next two days we had video visits scheduled. They were the last ones before Roman hopped on a plane for Alaska. To help Isaiah with transportation, Roman drove another vehicle and dropped it off in Charleston, WV. We couldn't meet Isaiah in person because of a scheduling conflict, but he would be able to drive after work to pick it up so that he would only have to drive about 300 miles to pick it up instead of all the way to Ohio. This time traveling with two friends, Isaiah picked up the car and headed south. About 2 hours into the trip back to Durham, the vehicle Isaiah was driving stopped shifting. He was stranded AGAIN one mile from Looney's Garage. Isaiah piled back into the car with his two friends who were following him.

The next day, Looney's towed the second vehicle to their lot. Because we were short on cash, Looney's agreed to keep one car in exchange for the other one getting back on the road.

When I think back to these times, I just shake my head. Synonyms for looney are crazy and foolish. I know there is a lesson here. I have several ideas. What do you think?

YOU ARE NOT ALONE

Through a series of strange events, Mary suddenly entered our lives. Roman met Mary at an earth gathering about a week before he was to go to Alaska. Because Roman wanted the family to meet her, Roman and Isaiah had traveled from North Carolina to her home in Kentucky and brought her to our house in Ohio. We were crunched for time because we had video visits with Brent, Roman departing on the plane and Family Court in Kentucky all within a few days.

Isaiah had to go back to work. Roman had to get on the plane. Mary, Desi and I camped together since Family Court was scheduled for the next morning. Brent and I were the only ones without a specific job title related to the case allowed in the courtroom. For previous court dates, Desi at least had her brothers to sit with for emotional support. This time, she had Mary.

Desi was spared the heartache of being alone. Mary jumped into our lives just at that critical moment. It was kind of ironic. When we adopted Emma Mae, her name was changed to Mary Emma. It may not mean much to you, but it left us with the impression that even though one Mary was slipping away, another Mary had been brought to us to soften the blow.

After the court proceedings had finished, we drove Mary west until her dad met up with us. Giving Mary hugs, we parted ways.

A DEAD BATTERY

Desi and I decided to go to Grandma Grace's house for a Bible study. She lived about 20 minutes away and I had a gap between online commitments. We planned for enough time to drive home and about 15 minutes to spare. After our Bible study, we went to our car. It wouldn't start so we popped the hood and saw that the battery was corroded. Grandma donated a toothbrush for us to clean the terminals. It made no difference.

We went back to Grandma's house and used her phone to call for Darrel, my brother-in-law. He lived about 5 minutes away and said that he could be there in about 15 minutes. It was evident that I would not be able to be online accepting calls. Fortunately, I was able to cancel in advance so that my delay did not affect anyone else.

Darrel arrived and jumped our car. Once it was running, we left immediately and went to Advanced Auto. Our battery was completely dead. It didn't even register on their machine. We bought a new battery and they installed it for us in the parking lot. We made it back to the house with 20 minutes before my next online session would start.

At the time, we were traveling at least once a week, five hours away for video visits with Brent. Many times, we drove or camped where cell service is unpredictable at best. We had used our last AAA benefits when the Scion met the deer. It was the very most convenient place for us to discover that our battery needed replaced. We were able to get a new one safely and with minimal inconvenience. Praise God for His protection and timing!

AN OIL CHANGE

With all the traveling, we needed an oil change. There was an approximate two hour wait at Walmart. Since we had no plans until Brent's visit, we waited in the car. We always bring reading or other projects, so we weren't bored. About 2 and ½ hours later, a worker came out to get our keys. At that point we went inside. We didn't need to buy anything, so we sat on the bench by the automotive area. I brought my Bible to read. Desi and I had been talking for about 30 seconds. Then, out of the corner of Desi's eye she saw a man and woman walk inside. Desi said to me, "I think that woman was in drunk tank with us."

We both looked at each other and stood up instantly. In the process of us getting up, I asked if she thought we should go talk to her. If not, why had we both instinctively been set into motion? Desi affirmed my suspicion.

Walking quickly, we found her two aisles down at the end. We went to get a better look to see if it was the same person. Whispering to each other we assured ourselves that we had the right lady. We had little time to think. Now what?

We approached the woman and I said that I thought we were in drunk tank together. Not very smooth... Fortunately, it didn't matter. She remembered us and was happy that we recognized her from more than five months earlier. We reintroduced ourselves to Ashley. She said that she had to get a new nose because of her accident and feared that nobody would ever recognize her. Desi had recognized her eyes.

When we had been in drunk tank, she had feared that her relationship would end because of the DUI. Everything had worked out alright. She asked how we were doing and if we ever made it out that night. We had been the last three remaining together that evening. She worked as a guard in a different facility. She knew that some counties submit paperwork as near to closing time as possible so that if there is a mistake it won't be fixed until the following Monday. An overnight stay becomes a weekend stay because offices close. We said we were fine but still dealing with the court system.

After chatting a bit, we left with best wishes and returned to the bench. We were only there for about 30 seconds when the mechanic walked by and told us that our car was finished. With nobody in line, we paid for the oil change and left. How many times do you walk in at the automotive area of Walmart? Most people go in the front doors. It was perfect timing. I don't know the reason for it, but I would call that a divine appointment.

It was only as we walked out to the car that I noticed the Bible in my arms. I never got to read it. God had other things for me to do. Studying and reading is important, but we need to be

careful that we don't study and read so much that we forget to implement. Jesus did not spend all His time studying the scrolls. He lived the example and taught others to do the same.

I'LL NEVER SEE YOU AGAIN

This may not make sense to a lot of people, but I determined that God wanted me to take a big step and act in faith. He wanted me to give up something that I had depended on for a long time. Something that I had worked very hard to keep when my body had left me in so much pain. Something that gave me security for my future and for hard times ahead. I had resisted a different job to maximize retirement benefits. My mind didn't see another option. Now, with the financial demands of the legal battles and extra expenses incurred trying to keep Brent sane, it was apparent. My job and promised retirement had been my gods for too long. James 4 warns against boasting in tomorrow. There is no use in a retirement fund if you don't make it past today.

I really struggled with this decision. There is no logic in it. Everything I had ever learned from the time I was a child told me to prepare for my future. Plan wisely so that my family and I would have a more secure future. There was a problem. I was only depending upon myself for security... not God. Society taught me to be independent. God says to be like a little child... dependent on Him.

I drug my feet. Finally, I typed up a letter of resignation and looked for an excuse not to do it. Maybe God would give me a sign. I prayed earnestly, asking God that if there were any way possible for this not to be part of the plan, that this task be kept from me. Because of my issues with printers and ink, I finally went to the library to print out my letter.

If He were just testing my faithfulness, He would send someone with a message telling me not to do it. In the library, I saw one of my former students. He was watching SpongeBob via the internet on one of the computers. After checking with his mom, I went over to greet him. As Desi printed out the letter of resignation on a nearby computer, he asked what I was doing. I said that I just had some errands to run.

In response, he said, "I'll never see you again."

That was my answer. It wasn't what I was looking for. In fact, it was the opposite. We left the library and went directly to the brand-new school. Officially closing that chapter of my life, I turned in my resignation. A new door would open. My faith would grow as I continued to learn how to live with no fear, just love.

AN INDEPENDENT CONTRACTOR

I put in long hours preparing for a very successful online teaching service. I had passed various stages of the interviewing process and continued rigorous training to meet company objectives. They had high standards and had been ranked by Forbes magazine as the third best online company for employees. Including bonuses, the company offered more than twice the pay to teachers than their competitors. Sounds great, doesn't it?

The number one problem for me was that I didn't know if I could pass the background check. There were many variables that I could control. That one was out of my hands. I was hopeful but had my doubts. Again, I found myself asking God for His help.

At first the estimated wait for a background check was two days. That turned into a week. In reality, it took about a month. While I waited for the company with the best reputation and highest pay, I applied for two other similar independent contracting jobs. They paid half as much. One followed a specific curriculum. The other was basically teaching English through general conversations. The day after I was approved from one of the other companies, I was approved by the leading company. Because of pending charges, I couldn't pass the overall background check for employees but did pass as an independent contractor.

Perhaps I needed to be humbled. I needed to be thankful for the job that paid half as much. When I mentally accepted the lowest paying position and was grateful, that is when I was handed the job that paid twice as much. It's crazy, but after just a short time, I realized that I really preferred the company paid less.

The job that paid twice as much had a lot of unpaid prep time, fierce competition, and a scripted curriculum. Life is not scripted, and I really disliked the idea of teaching specific sentences. To get established with the company and attract new students, I had to market myself and opened my schedule to all hours of the night to accommodate the peak hours wanted by students halfway around the globe. It interfered with my sleeping schedule, and I found myself drinking caffeinated pop to wake up and be enthusiastic. To get paid the most, you teach students only from the very richest families. It was just not my style. I couldn't relate.

I could have been disappointed that so much time preparing for a company that didn't suit my personality. On the other hand, the company offered extensive free professional development. A great deal of knowledge was gained that could be applied in a variety of different ways. God took that knowledge and has used it for His purposes.

Because I had taught only children for over twenty years, I had imposed that restriction on myself. By exploring different online companies, I began to realize that there were different options. I just needed to adapt. Trust that God will open the right doors.

I finally opened an email that I'd been ignoring. I prayed continually that God orchestrate in the background and only connect me to the ones that He wanted me to talk with. In the past two years, I've been able to talk with over 2,000 people from around the world. I've been enormously blessed by the insight into various cultures. They have been gracious and given me encouragement. With their words of life and counsel, I should have paid them. It was the opposite.

God gave me a world where I could flourish through simple conversations with complete strangers. In this unique setting, it was easy and enjoyable to talk with even the ones sitting in what looked to be like palaces. The majesty of living in a spacious dwelling with marble floors is contrasted with the empty echo and daily boredom with no goals for tomorrow. Bank accounts may be swollen, but spirits are bankrupt. On the other hand, some are putting all their hope in their own knowledge. The pressure for academic achievement, for future security, is a great burden. They can't see the folly of their thinking. Man's knowledge vs God's wisdom...

With a click of two buttons, and 10 seconds I've gone from talking with people with opposite perspectives and life experiences. The spatial distance gave a short cut to hearts, enabling me to have honest, thought-provoking conversations from others in Saudi Arabia, Hong Kong, Taiwan, China, Korea, Japan, India, Turkey, Egypt, UAE, Brazil, Iran, and many other countries. Tensions between different nationalities are almost entirely based on governments or a few people wanting power... NOT what individual people in different countries want.

People around the world have voiced their many fears... and every single one needs love.