

Chapter 8

Separation from loved ones.

In the summer of 1982 the Barber family had a family reunion in Rocky Mountain House, Alberta. My mother's mother was a Barber. Well over 200 attended. My mother's 75th birthday was to be on Dec. 31st that year. As the reunion was wrapping up our immediate family got together and had an early birthday party for her.

Two months later I received news that mom was in the hospital with severe abdominal pain. X-rays showed kidney stones, which had to be removed very quickly. However, she was very weak and the doctor feared she might not survive the operation.

I contacted our church prayer chain and caught a plane, back to Saskatchewan, to spend time with her. I only went for a couple days as I had to get back to work. The operation was a week later and I took the day off to be in prayer. Early afternoon the phone rang with the news she was in the recovery room and there were no kidney stones. I was elated. God had removed the kidney stones and I immediately phoned those praying for her with the good news. However, an hour later I got another call with the truth. There were no kidney stones but her intestines were full of cancer, far too advanced to operate.

I was devastated. I had been prepared for the worst, but now I went from elation to depression. I felt betrayed and violated by the nurse who had not told me the whole truth. Obviously the nurse did not want to be the bearer of bad news, so left that to others.

Our family all wanted to go and spend precious time with her. However our son, Chuck, who had just had a son of his own, had been laid off from the pulp mill where he was working. They decided that they could afford one ticket, but Joni and Carl would stay home. Then we got another lesson in God's provisions. Cousin Ken Lund was flying for Saskatchewan Air Ambulance service and a month earlier his plane had been struck by lightning. It was in Vancouver having the engines rebuilt. Ken phoned that it was ready to fly back to Saskatchewan and there were 5 spare seats. Thank you, God.

Joni, Chuck, Carl, Illa and Marjorie flew back with Ken. It was a great moment when they walked in and mom beamed and said, "The baby" and got to hold her great grandchild. After the visit they rented a car and drove back to Edmonton. ZoAnn, Pat, son Mike and I met them there. We drove the rental car back to Saskatchewan, in what turned out to be a terrible blizzard. We arrived in Birch Hills well after 10:00pm on a Saturday night. Mom had expected us earlier and was worried so, in spite of the time, I went to see her. We both knew the diagnosis and the hurt formed a barrier between us that neither of us could breach that night. I went to bed in a deep depression.

Marjorie phoned me the moment she got home from church. That morning our home church had a guest speaker, Dudley Ritchie, a man we both love. His sermon started with twins, in the womb, nearing birth. The one twin was explaining to the other how they were about to go through a very trying experience, but on the other side they would experience life much fuller than their present experience. The second twin was in complete disbelief. He was warm and comfortable and wanted nothing more.

Dudley went on to relate this to physical death and how future life, for a believer, is so much more than we experience here on earth. Marjorie reiterated the sermon to me and I went to see mom. I repeated the sermon to her and what a difference. We entered into 3 days of deep sharing of memories and faith like I had never experienced, before or since. It was truly a blessed time. God gives us exactly what we need at the moment we need it,

When our planned time to leave arrived I was very tempted to stay. However something told me it was time to leave. ZoAnn, Pat, Mike and I went to say our final goodbyes. 7 year old Mike was the last, he didn't say a word. Just threw his arms around his great grandmother and cried, as did the rest of us. Watching as the two embraced might well be the most beautiful thing I will ever see. After that we left without another word. That hug and tears were all that needed to be said.

While our family from Vancouver was there the hospital allowed no non family visitors. However there was one exception. I was standing by the bed while mom was asleep. As I watched her laying there in peaceful the words to "Have You Seen Jesus My Lord" were going through my mind. As the words, "Have you ever stood in a family" were in my head, a local pastor's wife stepped up behind me singing the exact words I was thinking. Tears flow as I write this. This will be a song at my funeral.

We left Tuesday night and on Wednesday mom woke up refreshed and that day all of her best friends came and had a glorious visit. That night she went into a deep coma, which lasted till her death. God had allowed her to say all her goodbyes, and then peacefully took her to a place where there is neither pain nor sorrow.

Mom had family and many friends in Vancouver so instead of going back to the funeral in Saskatchewan we held a memorial service, at exactly the same time, in our home church.

Mom had been a Christian all her life. Like me she had met Jesus on her mother's knee. Her mother who died when I was four had also been a lifelong Christian. Unlike myself there was no time when mom doubted her faith.

As I contemplated her death I wondered how my father would face his own death. My father was a womanizer and shortly after he married mom he was having an affair with a married woman. After my second sister Joyce was born, my mother insisted they move and he took a job, at a printer, at Rock Glen, in southern Saskatchewan. That is where I was conceived. As soon as he knew mom was pregnant he insisted in moving back to Birch Hills. In 1940 he joined the army and never came back home. At the end of the war he filed for divorce and moved to Detroit. He did come back to Birch Hills for one evening after he came out of the army and we three kids had a few minutes with him. I didn't see him again until I visited him in Detroit with 1963.

I was on the way to visit a factory, in Chicago, the company I was working for represented. I stopped in Detroit on the way. I found my father an interesting man. We had some great discussions on race relationships; economy etc. but I felt no father son ties.

He and his wife Edith visited Vancouver in the early seventies and he spent an afternoon at our place. Again I felt no closeness. Edith died and he retired and moved to Florida.

In 1985 Pat and I were attending a conference in Florida and Marjorie, ZoAnn and Pat and ZoAnn's two boys came along for a holiday. ZoAnn wanted her boys to meet their great grandfather. Marjorie and I went first and the others planned to go the next day. When we got there we found he was living with a drug addict who was younger than me. This woman had the foulest mouth I have ever heard. I have spent time at oil camps so am not easily shocked, but this was even worse. Also she hated my aunt Vi who had done nothing but good to our family and we all loved her. Because of this we advised ZoAnn not to take the boys and I thought that was the last time I would see my father.

Just a couple months later dad became ill and the live-in felt the gravy train was running off the tracks and attempted to kill him. He ended up in a senior's home with head injuries and emphysema. He had been a life-long smoker.

I found myself, somewhat hypocritically, praying for him. I also looked for a church that might send a counselor to visit him. Being an Anglican I first tried an Episcopalian church but found no interest. Then I phoned a Church of the Nazarene which was located near the senior's home and struck gold. First the pastor called on him on a regular basis. Then the pastor fell off a ladder and hurt himself quite badly, however loyal parishioners kept up the visits. Dad was friendly but told them he believed the Bible was just a book written by disillusioned men, trying to understand life. If there was a God he felt he was beyond redemption, as he had gone through life burning all his bridges.

During this period Marjorie and I became very interested in the ministry of inner healing and over a three week period we attended one inner healing workshop together and each attended another separately. The one I attended alone was by Joan James, a very saintly lady from Broadway Church, in Vancouver. At one point she was standing in front of a cross and asked us if any of us had unresolved family issues. Over half the attendees indicated they had. She asked us to come forward, cup our hands and imagine our problem was in our hands. Then she asked us to lay our problems at the foot of the cross, to be washed away by the precious blood of Jesus. As I performed that simple act I felt like a great weight came off me as forty years of resentment were released. I had no idea of the load I had carried most of my life.

Now I found myself praying honestly and earnestly for dad. At this time I was doing volunteer work for Operation Eyesight and one of the organizers was visiting Vancouver from Calgary. I arranged several small group meetings, a television interview, two radio interviews, a couple of school presentations and a Sunday morning church service. I also arranged for him to attend Burnaby Christian Fellowship with Pastor Bob Birch. At that time BCF was the place for serious Christians, from all denominations, to meet Sunday evenings. On Sunday afternoon all I wanted to do is put my feet up and relax.

However time after time I found myself sitting at a computer thinking of writing my father. Each time I would resist it and try to relax. Finally about 5:00 pm I did sit down and a letter just flowed onto paper.

We went to BCF and Bob Birch's sermon was called Abba Father and he talked of how often our relationship with God is affected by our relationship with our own father. Every word of that sermon spoke to me. After the sermon Bob gave the congregation the opportunity to talk about any way the sermon touched them. I got up and told of my own relationship with my father and that I had written him that afternoon, seeking reconciliation and telling him of my faith in Jesus Christ. The entire congregation prayed that my letter would make a difference in my father's life.

The first line on my letter was, "Dad, nothing in the past can be changed but everything in the future can be." I went on to describe my faith in a Living Christ and listed a number of ways I had seen Jesus intervene in people's lives.

Two weeks later I received a wonderful letter which, once again, confirmed the power of prayer. It was from a Baptist couple who lived in New York, but spent winters in Florida. They had a ministry to senior's homes and visited the home my father was in every Wednesday. The week before they had dropped in on my dad and after hearing his story and resistance to the gospel, they hadn't planned to go back. However he spotted them as they passed his room and called out to them. He said he wanted to know more about this Jesus his son had written about. They ended up spending more than an hour with him and they lead him to Christ.

They went on to ask permission to make 500 copies of my letter to hand out to seniors who needed reconciliation with family members. God is so good!

My father's health continued to worsen and he was transferred to a senior's center in Colorado Springs. This was a home provided by the printers union and catered 100% to retired printers. A couple of months later my sister Esther went down and spent a few days with him. She phoned as soon as she got home and told me he was dying and if I wanted to see him again I should go right away. I and dad's brother, my uncle Joe, flew down. Esther had warned me of dad's condition and that he had lost close to one hundred pounds and was a virtual skeleton. Joe had seen him two years before and remembered him as being quite large. As we approached the home there was a chubby fellow sitting on a bench and before we got close Joe said, "Is that Leo there?" Before we got to the room I tried to prepare Joe for the reality he was about to face. It was of no use and Joe just sat there stunned, unable to communicate with his brother.

We had arrived early Sunday morning. We had a few minutes with dad and then he slipped into a coma. I had noticed a Church of the Nazarene close by and suggested to Joe we go there and then have lunch before coming back. Joe was a lapsed Catholic and had not been in a church, except for a couple of weddings and funerals, for well over forty years. He stayed for just over a half hour then asked for the keys to the car and went out to sit in it. I stayed for another half hour and then realizing he would be cooking in the car – it was a very hot sunny day – I went out. We went for lunch and he talked about his shock to see his brother in this condition. I suggested he think of some special time in their childhood and tell dad about it. When we went back he told dad about a long time family joke. When dad left home for his first job he gave Joe his very good bike. Joe quickly sold that bike, bought a much cheaper one and blew the rest of the money

When dad came to visit, 6 months later, the cheap bike was long since wrecked and Joe had nothing left from the proceeds. As he heard the story dad had one good belly laugh and then dropped back into a coma.

Just across from dad's room was a common room full of retired printers. It seemed full of joy as a young nurse teased and laughed with them. When she came out I caught up to her in the hallway. I told her I had been listening to her and watching her with the seniors and asked how come she could be in such good spirits. She explained to me that this was the final home for retired printers from all of Canada, USA and Mexico. She had been working there for over five years and many of the men had never had a visitor in that time. She swore she would bring them joy and they would never hear anything but joy from her. As she told me this we arrived in front of a room which housed a man who lay in a fetal position. Before we went in she told me quietly that it was Jim, who had lain like this for more than 2 years. The policy was they would not use extraordinary ways to keep people like this alive, but would cater to their needs. We entered the room and she gave Jim a straw to drink a broth she had brought for his snack. While he was taking the broth in she asked him when he was going to get out of bed and take her dancing. As we left the room she said, "I have no idea if he hears, or understands, anything, but he will never hear anything unpleasant come out of my mouth." That nurse is my idea of a saint.

We spent the afternoon sitting with dad; however he never came out of his coma. We had an early supper, then I left Joe watching TV and I went back to an evening service at the Church of the Nazarene. I dropped back to the home and spent a few more minutes sitting with dad and then went back to the motel. Joe was already asleep so I did the same. I woke up to see Joe by the window trying to get enough light to see his watch. He told me it was 2 am. Joe went straight back to sleep but I couldn't. After 10 minutes I suddenly heard the most beautiful music I had ever heard. It seemed there were many orchestras, on every side, above and below me with music swirling in every direction. I can't begin to explain what I was hearing except that it was absolutely beautiful. This went on for a few minutes then silence. I couldn't sleep and spent the rest of the night in the Psalms and reading a book by Michael Green called "The Day Death Died."

The world bicycle championships were being held in Colorado Springs and it had been advertised that 80 hot air balloons would be going up at 6 am the following morning. Joe and I had decided, at dinner, that we get up to see this. The day was glorious and the whole event was spectacular. Then we went for breakfast. As we started to eat Joe asked, "How do you think we will find Leo this morning?" My answer, "We won't, he died at 2:10 this morning." Joe looked shocked and asked how I knew, thinking I must have had a phone call in the night. I told him it was not a phone call but that I had heard this beautiful music as God welcomed my father home. Joe just went, "humph" and finished his breakfast in silence.

When we arrived at the hospital we found a white ribbon across dad's door and a nurse intercepted us before we could go in. We were taken to the floor superintendent's office and were told that they had checked dad at 2:00 am and he was alive, then again at 2:20 and he was gone. I said, "If you need it for your records he died at 2:10."

She then told me of her time with dad and her own story. She told me that my father was continually witnessing, to everyone, about his faith in Jesus, to the point that some avoided him. Believe me this was not the man I knew previously. He and truly been born again and was a new man in Christ.

She then went on to tell us her own story. She had been attending theological college intending to become a priestess in the Church of the Nazarene, when her mother died in an old folk's home. It was a typical care home where people were just warehoused until they passed on. That day she quit theological college and took up nursing instead. Her aim was to get into a senior's care home and make a difference.

Her first job was at this printer's care home. Her first day she was called into the office and told, "There is only one strict rule here, you are never to speak of death." Her answer was, "Just a moment, everyone who arrives here knows they have come here to die, we know they have come here to die and they know we know. If we can't speak of death we can have no meaningful conversations!"

She argued with the management for two weeks before they allowed her to conduct an experiment in one ward of six. After seeing the tremendous transformation, in that ward, they made her superintendent of the entire floor, with two hundred patients and promoted her philosophy over the entire home. It was the happiest senior's care center I have ever seen.

She went on to tell us that in the past two years not a single person had died, on her floor, as a non-believer. What a wonderful ministry!

Our return flight was not until late afternoon the day after. Joe and I spent the rest of the day visiting the Garden of the Gods and the world famous Cave of the Winds, just outside the city. The next day we drove many lovely back roads in the area. The extra time gave us time to remember dad and discuss life beyond the grave. Michael Green's book, "The Day Death Died" was a blessing. I gave it to Joe and he spent time reading it, on the flight home.

Uncle Joe was also a smoker and he developed lung cancer. He spent time in the Burnaby General Hospital until they said they could do no more. Joe said he wanted to die at home so was discharged. Marjorie and visited several times and he seemed to have stabilized then I got a phone call from Vi that the end was near and Joe had asked to see me. When I arrived he smiled and squeezed my hand and then slipped into a coma. I spent the afternoon reading the Gospel of John to him.

We were shooting a weekly TV program with Rev. Bernice Gerard at the time and it was a shoot night. I still remember the sermon which included a long session on how a camel is exactly designed to live and work in the desert. It was a remarkable talk which put the lie to any concept of evolution. Then Velma came on and read some letters from viewers. One was from a lady who read the Gospel of John to her atheist father while he was on his death bed. She said he seemed to respond and she was wondering if he would be in heaven. I don't think that was a coincidence, but a God incidence.

The moment we finished the shoot I went back to Joe's. I again started reading from the start of the Gospel of John, holding Joe's hand. Every time I let go of his hand, to turn a page, his hand would grope for mine. I finished reading about 3:30 in the morning and said the sinner's prayer. Joe squeezed my hand, and then completely relaxed. I went home to get some sleep. Our phone rang at 11:00 am and Vi told me that Joe had passed. I firmly believe that last squeeze was his acceptance of Jesus and fully expect to find Joe when I get to heaven.

There were other family deaths which hit me particularly hard. I find that it is the hard things in life which make us grow as human beings.

The first was my father-in-law Charlie Stricker. I met him shortly after my 17th birthday and we immediately became best friends. He was far more a father to me than was my own father. In his younger years he had been a rodeo rider, then a homesteader, in Northern Alberta.

He was a strong man right up to the time of his death. The last time I saw him, his two sons and I worked with him to castrate a number of very lively steers. We would back them into a corner; dad would toss a lasso around one of their necks then just picked him up and drop him over on a side. As I say he was strong and at 63 was in his prime of life.

It was therefore a huge shock to receive an early morning phone call from Marjorie's mom, LaVerne. Dad had had a heart attack and was gone. It seemed impossible. Our whole family flew back to Alberta for the funeral. It was the dead of winter and we were greeted with a heavy fall of freezing rain. The call came the day I had planned to fly to Toronto for our annual sales meeting.

The time leading up to the funeral and the funeral itself was a time of great sadness. Any time our eyes met the eyes of any family member we would both break out in tears. I was to catch a flight from Edmonton to Toronto in the early hours on the morning of the day after the funeral. I had to leave about 12:30 am to make the two and a half hour drive to Edmonton, so I went to bed right after supper. I lay there thinking of dad and listening to the others mourning his loss when I heard a sudden change. In an instant the mood changed and everyone started to talk about the good times they had had with dad. I got up and joined the celebration of life that, though it had been too short was full of great experiences.

I stayed as long as I dared then drove as fast as I dared, on a highway which was covered by the freezing rain, to catch my plane. By the time I got to the airport time was getting more than tight and I turned into the wrong parking lot. Worried that I would miss my flight I parked and ran. As I dashed past the empty Budget car booth I just flung the keys in and kept running. I caught the flight, the last passenger on. The next morning I phoned Budget car rentals and told them where they could find their car.

For the next few years mom stayed on the farm, renting most of the land to a neighbor. Then for several more years she would go to either Athabasca or Edmonton and be a caregiver to someone needing help. However soon as spring came she was back on the farm, putting in a large garden. Finally in her mid-eighties she would go into a senior's home, either in Boyle or Athabasca for the winter. But, again, as soon as most of the snow melting it was back to the farm and the garden

Thirty years, to the day, after dad died, she phoned early in the morning and told Marjorie she couldn't urinate. Marjorie told her to get to the hospital. She did but, within hours, she died.

Like my own mom, Marjorie's mom had always believed in Jesus, however, just to confirm her salvation a short time earlier she had spent time with a pastor making a verbal commitment. I thank God for that assurance.

Mom's funeral was truly a celebration of a life very well lived. There were tears but also many smiles and laughs as the clan got together. At ninety Marjorie's mom had lived a full life. My main hope is that she has a garden in heaven.

Marjorie's younger brother Jack obtained a stationary engineering ticket and looked after boilers, in hospitals, in Ponoka, Fort McMurray and Athabasca. His wife and he separated. The Mormon Church reached out to Jack and daughter Lee and they joined the Mormon Church. While I consider both the Mormons and JW's cults, I do admire their zeal for evangelism and their compassion for families in need. Christians would do well to copy these two traits.

Jack left the hospital work and returned home to take over the farm. He was a hard worker and built up a good herd of cattle and a flock of sheep. His daughter had grown up and left home to work. Jack was a large strong man and looked the picture of health; however he developed high blood pressure.

Marjorie and I were visiting the farm and we discussed his health. Jack had reacted very badly to pills the doctor had prescribed. In fact he had passed out while driving after taking them. He was annoyed and had not gone back to the doctor. I explained that it took my doctor three tries before finding a combination that worked for my high blood pressure and he finally agreed to try again. He went to see the doctor, the day before we left, however when he got to the office there were many waiting. He came home without seeing him.

We came home worried about Jack, who was alone, on the farm. It was the dead of winter and he had stock to feed and water. We phoned early every morning and again in the evening. Then one evening he didn't answer the phone and we became very worried. We phoned a neighbor, who often worked with Jack, but he was out. We left a message, on his answering machine, asking him to drive over and make sure Jack was alright.

Very early next morning the neighbor phoned. He had arrived home very late had a couple hours sleep and then went over. He found Jack lying in the snow, on his face, unconscious but breathing. He was taken to the hospital in Edmonton by ambulance. Jack's daughter Lee & Marjorie flew to be with him. While he continued to breathe for two more days the doctors said he had suffered a massive stroke and was brain dead before he reached the ground.

Jack's death was the hardest thing I have ever faced. I had known him since he was four years old. We had become very close. During the last year of his life he had been very open during discussions of Christianity. He is the first one I will be looking for when I arrive in heaven.

Another death that affected me particularly hard was that of my cousin Grant Tilford. Grant was one of mom's brother's sons. He was just a small boy when I left Birch Hills and had only seen him at family gatherings. However, in the summer, before his death, we were both in Birch Hills, at a family reunion. His and my family were both staying at Edith's, his oldest sister's, house, Grant and I were both early risers and had great conversations before the rest got up. He had become an IT engineer and while he lived in Calgary he spent his weeks working in Silicon Valley, California. He had just retired and was enjoying it.

I found Grant a very well rounded Christian who could find the best in anyone and everyone. He could discuss a tremendous variety of subjects with intelligence and he had an amazing ability to appreciate both sides of any argument. I left the reunion with a desire to spend more time with Grant. However this was not to be. Shortly after, we received word that Grant was suffering from a very aggressive cancer. It took him quickly. I will have to wait to continue our discussions in heaven.