



Devotions

by Berta Dickerson

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A Crown of Thorns

On the way to visit friends the brakes on my car failed and my daughter, Kari, and I went under the trailer of a semi. After being thrown out the other side of the truck, I noticed that Kari was in the floor board. She had blood running down her face and I reached out for her. Nothing happened. I tried again but my arm would not move.

About twenty minutes later my cousin, Bob, came along. He got Kari out then crawled inside with me. He asked me what he could do. I told him to pray. He stayed in the car with me and prayed while the paramedics cut the car from around me.

At the hospital a CT scan revealed a cervical neck fracture. I was paralyzed from the neck down. I was taken to surgery where four screws were placed in my skull, two in my forehead and one behind each ear. A HALO brace was attached to the screws and to a leather vest to immobilize my neck.

I had never seen or heard of a HALO brace. Looking upward all I could see were the two screws protruding from my forehead and the black circle the brace formed around it. I called it my “crown of thorns.”

When I first saw myself in a mirror I gasped. I could see the wounds where the stark, black screws were entering my forehead and the long, cylindrical post's were disappearing into my t-shirt. I cried.

After three month's my crown of thorns was removed on Good Friday, the day Jesus' crown of thorns was placed on His head.

On Easter Sunday I attended a worship service. I knew most of the songs by heart. I couldn't sing out or raise my arms in praise, but my heart rejoiced. I cried and thanked God for my life.

Take Up Your Mat

Mark 2:3-12

“(Jesus) said to the paralyzed man, "I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home." Luke 5:24 (NIV)

After my automobile accident, my husband, a pastor, was challenged: Let me live as a quadriplegic, bedridden, ventilator dependent, brain-damaged person or let me die. My doctor's gave little hope for my recovery yet my husband held out hope in Jesus Christ. Our Christian brothers and sisters loved, visited and prayed for me.

After months in a local hospital, God cleared the path for my transfer to a well-known rehabilitation hospital.

The choice was now mine: Live or die. I was given hope and encouragement. I was responsible for my progress. I was taught and trained to care for myself through the hands of care-givers.

It has been many years and God has touched my body, restoring much to me. I'm no longer on a ventilator, I'm able to use my arms, and I have no brain-damage. Though I'm still paralyzed, I don't regret my injury. It has changed my life, yes, and I am better for the challenge. I have taken my mat, gone home, and answered God's call to ministry in our Church and community.

I would not go back to the life I had before. I embrace each new challenge and sometimes forget I have a disability.

Train Yourself In Godliness

Train yourself in godliness, for, while physical training is of some value, godliness is valuable in every way, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come. -1 Timothy 4:7-8 (NRSV)

After my spinal cord injury, my only thought, my only desire was the healing of my body. Paralyzed, I could not walk and had limited use of my arms, I thought, “I can’t do anything.” I lived my life in a drug induced haze. Waking only to eat and take more medicine.

Many years went by without relief. One day my Sunday School teacher invited me to teach our class one Sunday a month. In taking this step of faith I began to take less medication and spend time exercising my faith. Study time was looked forward to and teaching was exhilarating. I actually bought a shirt that said, “Exercise your faith. Walk with Jesus.” For which I was mercilessly teased.

I learned later that I had been severely depressed all those years. My family had done all they could to draw me out, and sometimes for limited amounts of time, they succeeded.

It wasn’t until I let Jesus in to heal my devastated heart that I decided I would live and serve Him. He not only healed my heart but restored my mind and healed my spirit. He made me His own and gave me confidence to minister in His name. It isn’t easy but the challenges have made me stronger and my prayer is always for Him to bless me and use me to His glory.

Will You Pray For Me?

What do you really mean when you say “I’ll pray for you?” Do you follow through? Too often we hear of someone’s need and say those few words “I’ll pray for you” without slowing down and actually focusing on the situation. We might say a quick “get it done” prayer and move along with our busy lives. It seems all we do is remind God of a situation He is already aware of. What are we to do?

As Christians we have a duty to pray for others. Their situation deserves serious attention. Biblical examples abound: Moses spoke to God on behalf of the Israelites’ sin regularly (Numbers 21:7). Esther asked her people to fast for three days before she went to King Xerxes to tell him of Hamon’s plan (Esther 4:15-16). How many times did Paul request prayer from the early Church members? Jesus spent most of His longest recorded prayer interceding for us (John 17),

Intercession means to intercede between two parties toward the goal of reconciliation. We are invited by God to intercede for each other. In Ezekiel 22:30 the Lord said, *"So I sought for a man among them who would make a wall, and stand in the gap before Me on behalf of the land, that I should not destroy it; but I found no one."* Are you willing to “Stand in the Gap” for a person in need?

You don’t need the correct posture, the eloquent words or the lengthy prayers. Simply lift up your concern and desire for God’s touch in some persons life. Remember that we are never alone in intercession.

Christ Jesus interceded for my sin and yours in death. He continues to intercede for us “*at the right hand of God*” (Romans 8:34).

As years have past and God has “grown” me I have learned that, in most cases, if I take a moment to hold a hand and say a verbal prayer with the person in need, we both receive a blessing. Is there someone in need that God has laid on your heart? A visit or telephone call with prayer for whatever is going on may be just the ticket.

Perilous Times

But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come: For men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having a form of godliness but denying its power. And from such people turn away! . . . so do these also resist the truth: men of corrupt minds, disapproved concerning the faith; but they will progress no further, for their folly will be manifest to all

(2 Timothy 3:1-5, 8-9).

“*Perilous times will come.*” They are here and are growing stronger! Our scripture lists several sins, and yes, that was in Paul’s day. But have you looked around lately? Do you see a resemblance? Paul instructs Timothy to “turn away!” He’s not saying to ignore the sins but to not take part in them.

Paul pointed out Timothy’s following Paul’s “*doctrine, manner of life, purpose, faith, longsuffering, love, perseverance, persecutions, afflictions . . .*” (Verse 10).

We will all suffer persecution if we live for Jesus. The enemy won’t give up. So, what are our chances? Study the Word. For: “*the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus*” (Verse 15). And, “*All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may*

be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.” (Verse 17).
Don't deny God's ability to intervene in our affairs.

How did Jesus combat Satan? By quoting scripture! (See Matthew 4).

How will you fight for home? For children? For marriage? For your country? For what you believe?

Recently in a message, Earl quoted Matthew 24-25a, “*A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master.*” “*It is enough for a disciple that he be like his teacher, and a servant like his master.*” As Jesus was a servant, so are we. Be strong. Be bold. Be faithful.

Nothing Before

When my nephew, Michael, was four years old he asked his mother if he could call Aunt Berta. When we got on the telephone he began to ask questions:

“Aunt Berta, you can use your one hand, right?”

“No, I can't use my one hand.”

“Well, you can use the other hand can't you?”

“No Michael. I can't use my hands.”

“Aunt Berta, when God heals you will you ride in my car?”

“Yes Michael. I will.”

Then he asked, “Aunt Berta, did you have your accident a long, long time ago when I was a little bitty baby because I don't remember it?”

As I tried to explain to Michael that it happened before he was born he just couldn't understand. You see to him everything started when he was born and there was nothing before.

“Nothing before.” It's that way with God. When you repent of your sins, die to self and give your life to Christ you are “born again” and God only sees your new self. Nothing before.

Psalm 103:10-12 says: *He has not dealt with us according to our sins, Nor punished us according to our iniquities. For as the heavens are high above the earth, So great is His mercy toward those who fear Him; As far as the east is from the west, So far has He removed our transgressions from us.*

Jesus died for you that you may have eternal life. Gone are the sins of your past. Your future is “In Christ Alone.” Berta

P S You may have wondered why I sign everything with the phrase “In Christ Alone.” A contemporary Christian artist named Michael English has a song by that title. It says: *“In Christ alone, I place my trust, and find my glory in the power of the cross. In every victory, let it be said of me, my source of strength, my source of hope, is Christ alone.”*

Paul's Witness

When was the last time you witnessed to someone? Have you ever seen a person witnessing to someone? What did they do or say? What does it mean to witness? It is to share your faith story with another person.

We make witnessing complicated. We believe we have to say the right words while we hold our mouths the right way. It has to be just the right time and be in the right place. We think “Who am I to tell them what to believe?” “What if they get angry?” “What if they ask me a question I can't answer?” We allow ourselves to doubt our ability to share the Good News of what Christ has done for us when the truth is so easy.

In Philippians 3 Paul gives his testimony. He does in fact “*write the same things*” (vs 1) to the Church at Philippi Not just once but repeatedly for their safety. He was zealous in persecution of those who followed Jesus and then zealous for Him.

What did Jesus do for you today? Yesterday? Last month or last year? Has He blessed you? Provided for you? Healed you? Protected you? Saved you?!

You can write out your testimony just as Paul did. Keep copies with you and hand them out like tracts. (I began doing this two years after my injury.) Practice telling it. About five minutes is good timing. I don't tell the same story every time I speak because my audience varies. Age. Gender. Vocation. Lifestyle. Situation. Let God be your guide.

Speaking of God, what does Jesus say about witnessing? In Matthew 28:19,20 Jesus gives us The Great Commission: *Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age."*

"Go and make!" He didn't say we were to wait for them to come to us. This is an action statement. A command! Being in Church is not enough. Be the "Church" everywhere you go. Billy Graham once said, "You must be a Christian 24 hours a day. You should bear the fruit of the Spirit which the Holy Spirit supernaturally produces in you when you come to Christ." Be bold. God won't let you fall. *"I am with you always!"*

Paul's Defense

In Acts 21:28 Paul had been teaching in the temple when he was accused by the Jews, *“Men of Israel, help! This is the man who teaches all men everywhere against the people, the law, and this place; and furthermore he also brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place.”* From there he was seized and taken out of the temple. Though the people were calling for him to be taken away, Paul request to speak to them.

He begins, *“Brethren and fathers, hear my defense before you now”* (Acts 22:1). Paul recounts his credentials, *“I am indeed a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, taught according to the strictness of our fathers' law, and was zealous toward God as you all are today. “I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering into prisons both men and women, as also the high priest bears me witness, and all the council of the elders, from whom I also received letters to the brethren, and went to Damascus to bring in chains even those who were there to Jerusalem to be punished.”* (Vs 3-5).

Next, he gives a testimony of his conversion, *“Now it happened, as I journeyed and came near Damascus at about noon, suddenly a great light from heaven shone around me”* (vs 6). You know the story but if you need refreshing please open your Bible.

Paul used his history to teach and encourage others to believe that Jesus was the Christ, the long-awaited Messiah. When I came to Christ, I lost so-called friends. As I reached out to them, they pulled away. I

had done that and more to others as they reached out to me. The “Jesus Freaks.” Now I am one!

My defense is faith. In Hebrews 11:1 Paul says, “*Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.*” How do you grow in faith? Well, in Romans 10:17 Paul says, “*So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.*” What is the “word?” God’s spoken word. What is “hearing?” Study. Personal time in scripture reading every day. A life of prayer and meditation. Collective Bible study. Sitting under authoritative teaching and preaching. Church.

I not only believe in God but I believe God. Psalm 119:160 says, “*The entirety of Your word is truth, And every one of Your righteous judgments endures forever.*” Numbers 23:19 proclaims, “*God is not a man, that He should lie, Nor a son of man, that He should repent. Has He said, and will He not do? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?*”

What is your defense?

In Christ Alone,

Berta

Magnificent Messenger

One Sunday morning as I read over my Sunday School lesson it referred to Joni Eareckson Tada calling her accident and subsequent spinal cord injury a ‘glorious intruder.’ What would I call mine? After much contemplation I became aware that it was a “magnificent messenger.”

Before my injury I wasn’t happy where I was in life and I couldn’t bring myself to admit it. God wasn’t happy with my place either. I couldn’t see through all my nursing degrees, certificates and experience to see God’s new calling in my life. I had a desire for more of Him and His word but couldn’t see a way to do it.

God took away my ability to be a nurse and I still couldn’t let go. Since I couldn’t nurse any longer, I did nothing. The rare conscious thought was usually trying to figure a way to get back into nursing. After years of denial I began reading Christian novels. I became hungry again for His word. As time slowly passed and I cried daily for “my life back” I ate more and more at His table. You know, what I wanted wasn’t really what I wanted. My deepest desire was LIFE. Sitting and doing nothing was destroying me.

I have continued to feed my soul and spirit with His word. I grow daily, if not always willingly. Are you struggling with life? Are you simply not happy in what you’re doing? Maybe God is calling you to something new. The prophet Isaiah records God saying: *Behold, I will do a new thing, Now it shall spring forth; Shall you not know it? I will even make a road in the wilderness And rivers in the desert* (Isaiah 43:19).

There are still times in my life that I cry out for life. This cry is for more. More ways to bless God. More opportunities to share the Word. More chances to study and learn about Him. More love to give. More control of my mind, heart and tongue. In John 10:10 Jesus says: *“The thief does not come except to steal, and to kill, and to destroy. I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly.”*

Dead Tree

Well, here it is. Spring, in all its glory. A new beginning. A new birth. Chrysalis. As a butterfly battles to leave its cocoon, I had my own fight for life after my accident. And the struggle, the trial, has made me stronger. God is so good!

In April of 1990, after four years as a pastor's wife, I finally accepted the forgiveness Christ, my Savior provided by His death and resurrection. I became an active member of His Church and as I grew in Him I rejoiced.

All was well and good until eight months later I was in an accident with a semi. I was admitted to an intensive care unit with a spinal cord injury. For three months my life was simply "maintained." My body was rotting and my mind was shut down.

One day my doctors began talking about how if I lived I would have brain damage, be bedridden and ventilator dependent. They told my husband, Earl, that he was too young to be saddled with an invalid wife and offered to let me die — comfortably, of course. Earl instantly recalled his wedding vow's, "*. . . in sickness and in health . . . so long as you both shall live.*" Earl chose life for me and arranged for my immediate transfer to Shepherd Spinal Center, a rehabilitation center in Atlanta, Georgia, that specializes in spinal cord injuries.

Because of a respiratory infection, I was kept in isolation for most of the month of April. Day after day all I could do was sit in my wheelchair and stare out the window. In that time, I watched the trees

grow tender, new shoots and looked on as buds appeared on those tiny limbs. It was comforting somehow to look at these signs of new life.

But there was one tree that didn't grow new branches or buds or anything. Each day it was the same. I decided that it was dead. Useless and ugly. I told everyone who would listen that I wished someone would cut it down so I wouldn't have to look at it.

Then one bright sunny morning as I looked out my window, I saw tiny little signs of life on that "dead" tree. I cried as I realized that what I had said about that tree was what the doctors had said about me. "Better off disposed of." "No useful purpose." "Unappealing to look at."

That's when I knew that God was with me. He was telling me that my life wasn't over. This was my new beginning.

It was a true fight to get well and now, almost two decades later, I can honestly say my life is better than ever. I have a closer walk with my Lord and a much better relationship with my family. And I know that God's not finished with me yet.

(Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus (Philippians 1:6).

In Christ Alone,

Berta

Forgiven

As a child I had been exposed to the Bible at various Vacation Bible School's and even attended Church each Sunday morning for the sixteen weeks I was in basic training, but I didn't know the Lord. I lived my life day-by-day and thought of no one but myself.

I was on duty as a nurse at a local hospital when I saw a man walking down the hall. I shared with a co-worker that I would like to go out with him. As he came back to the nurses station we were introduced and I learned he was a chaplain. I instantly became angry. It was apparent in my lifestyle that I didn't know the Lord and I felt dirty in this chaplain's presence.

For a year we met several times a week, sharing meals or break times at the hospital cafeteria. We talked about our lives. He was a seminary student and I was a free spirit, living one day at a time. I regaled him with my wild adventures. He never preached at me or even pointed out my sinful ways. He was my friend.

It wasn't long before I saw a change in my life. I still went out partying but drank less. Then one day he asked me out on a date. I was shocked that he, knowing about me, would consider taking me out. I was baptized a few months later and we married in December.

When we arrived at our first Church appointment I was a pastor's wife with very little understanding of Christianity and lots of guilt. I was afraid of what the congregation would think if they knew my past.

I avoided Sunday School and Bible Studies for fear of being called upon to answer a question or give an opinion.

Several years into our marriage I went on my Walk to Emmaus. I listened to testimonies and cried as I accepted God's merciful forgiveness. Jesus' blood cleansed and set me free. I came home a new person and began a new life in Christ.

God's Gifts

After an automobile accident left me paralyzed from the neck down in 1991, the doctor offered to free my husband of the burden of a bedridden, ventilator dependent, vegetable. He declined. My ICU room was prayer-walked and oil-anointed. Blessed and protected. A banner was pinned to the wall: *(B)eing confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus* (Philippians 1:6). I didn't believe it.

In rehab I was evaluated for a sip and puff power wheelchair. (Like the one Christopher Reeve used years later.) My husband insisted I could drive with my right arm. He was right, although that was about all I could do.

At home, people would talk about me, not to me. I cried and depression seeped in. I was alone everywhere we went. I slept, or pretended to sleep, in my wheelchair so that people would leave me be. I was angry, both at my injury and the people who surrounded me. I was called "a poor thing" while being patted on my head. I was stared at, ignored, and yelled at. Mothers would drag their children away from me as if I were contagious.

It took several years, much patience, and a lot of Christian love for me to get past my anger. As I couldn't stay home alone for many years, I attended more preachers' meetings, spiritual retreats, and pastors' conferences than I can count. God had words for me at every one of them once I began to listen and heal.

I continue to listen. The more I do, the more I can do. God's gift has made me stronger spiritually, emotionally, physically and mentally. I wouldn't change a thing.

Remember that verse from Philippians--I believe it now!

Hope

As I'm wheeled into Shepherd Spinal Center, I feel a spark of hope. The nurses, technicians, everyone here acts in sync. These people know what to do with me. After radiology and the lab I'm taken to intensive care where a nurse cultures my tracheostomy and respiratory therapy begins.

Coughing is impossible for me. "But not so," says James, my personal respiratory therapist. "When I tell you to cough, I want you to try." I take a deep breath and James pushes on my chest and I cough. It sounds horrible but it helps.

Next we tackle sitting. My blood pressure drops every time and I don't want to try. But, the nurse says, "With an abdominal binder on your blood pressure won't fall."

"What do you know, it works?"

The physical therapist says, "Now, about a wheelchair . . . let's try a sip and puff."

Earl argues, "No. She can drive with her right arm."

Again, "I Can."

Now I go to the gym on my own for physical and occupational therapy. I am responsible for every appointment. I learn to feed myself in the gym among people like me. We don't really have food fights, the floor just looks like we do.

I have to keep up with my stuff. What medicine I take, what it looks like, how much I take and when. How much I drink and how much I urinate. How often I do weight shifts to relieve pressure off my bottom. Where things are in my room and how to do everything I need done for me.

This environment makes life easy. We're all alike with our spinal cord injuries even with different levels. We laugh and encourage each other day after day. We reluctantly share our fears, too.

Leaving here is frightening.

How I Feel

I'm tired all the time. I can't focus on what I'm involved in. I have thoughts and ideas that escape me before I can act on them. I try to remember anything that led up to the thought but can't recall that information either.

I go to bed and can't go to sleep, then wake up around two or three in the morning. When in bed I can do nothing. I can't turn. I can't cover or uncover myself. I can't hold a book. I can't feed myself. I lay there bored until an aide arrives to get me up.

I'm so confused it takes forever to understand where I am in my studies.

Dreams meld into reality and I give false information to others. My days get mixed up. I forget conversations and repeat things I've already said.

I feel like I'm losing my mind, yet I deny vehemently that anything's wrong.

"God, I want to be made whole!" I scream, as tears run down my face.

I Will Walk Again

As I lay here in this tiny room with filtered sunlight coming through the eastern window, I see my youngest sister. She's curled up in a chair that is not big enough to curl in and her silent tears penetrate my being.

"Bobbi," I say.

There is no response.

"Bobbi, it's ok. I'll walk again."

No one hears me and it's no wonder. My room is a small intensive care unit isolation room. My bed "whirrs" and "pulses" as air chambers fill and deflate in my mattress. A ventilator adds more music to the sounds of air, blowing oxygen into my lungs through the plastic tube in my mouth. The cardiac monitor's steady "beep, beep, beep" speaks the rhythm of my heart.

Steady as she goes.

I lay still in my paralyzed body but I know I'll walk again. God told me I will be healed when I'm 34.

(I wasn't healed of my spinal cord injury at 34 but the healing of many issues had begun.)