

# Even There

## The Story Behind the Song

*O LORD, thou hast searched me, and known me. Thou knowest my downsitting and mine uprising, thou understandest my thought afar off. Thou compassest my path and my lying down, and art acquainted with all my ways. For there is not a word in my tongue, but, lo, O LORD, thou knowest it altogether. Thou hast beset me behind and before, and laid thine hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high, I cannot attain unto it. Whither shall I go from thy spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there: if I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there. If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea; Even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me (Psalm 139:1-10).*

On Sunday evening, May 16, 2004, I felt an unusual burning in my chest as I preached. *It's nothing serious*, I told myself. At age 57, I had never experienced any major health problems. Less than 24 hours later, I lay on an operating table as doctors opened my chest for bypass surgery.

### **God knows each step I take when darkness nears.**

Signs of trouble started several weeks prior to my heart attack. I had not been feeling the best. Our church had been going through difficult times with the unexpected passing of Heidi White in childbirth and with the loss of Curt and Linda Piercy in the plane crash. I was feeling run down, but I thought it was to be expected.

A few days before my heart attack, on Wednesday, May 13, I went home at noon to mow the lawn. I felt a burning in my chest for just a few seconds. I assumed it was a persistent cold I'd contracted about six weeks before, and that it might be spreading into my lungs. Thursday the same sensation hit three times throughout the day. So on Friday I purchased a personal vaporizer. It seemed to help. Saturday I began mowing the lawn, and I felt it again. I stopped and used the vaporizer for 10 minutes, and the sensation quit for the rest of the day.

Sunday morning I took a few breaths from the vaporizer before I preached the morning service, and I made it through the service fine. I was greeting people afterwards when someone in our congregation handed me a business card with a handwritten Bible verse that said, "As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you" (Isaiah 66:13 NIV). This person had no idea I was having chest pains and had never handed me a verse

before. I had mentioned my mother in the sermon, so Mom had been on my mind that morning. She died of cancer when she was 58 after she'd had two heart attacks in her 50s. I wondered briefly at the verse, and then I went out to lunch with my family.

On the way home from lunch, the pain resumed, and I felt worse than ever. About 4 p.m., my wife, Sydney, said, "Why don't you call Jerry and have him preach tonight in your place?" Jerry McCorkle is a good friend and associate pastor who leads the college ministry at our church. I answered, "Oh, I can't do that to the people . . . I mean I can't do that to him," and so I preached, only to find out later that I was in the midst of a heart attack.

We went home after the evening service and Sydney said, "Let's go to the hospital." I am accustomed to visiting people there, but the prospect of becoming a patient made me mentally slam on the brakes. I replied, "No, I can work through this thing." But I couldn't get comfortable, and so about 9 p.m., I finally relented and said, "We'd better go."

One of the first things the nurse did was take my blood pressure. It was 178/119. I told her, "Well, you know I am just excited to be in the hospital, it's nothing real big." They took me into an examining room, did some tests, and about 1:00 a.m. they told me, "You've had a heart attack." They explained that dead enzymes were in my blood and that they would try to work me in later that day for a catherization, and perhaps perform a stint or balloon procedure.

Throughout the night, things gradually worsened. The pain increased and the nurse they'd posted by my bed told me, "If it doesn't quit we are going to call the Cath Team in." At 5:00 a.m., the nurse called them in. By 6:00 a.m. I was moved to a room filled with monitors, and I was prepped for catherization. During the procedure, I could see a picture of my heart on the screen, with a dark, black line coursing through the center of it—the blocked artery. "Can you stint it?" I asked. "No," the doctor said. "It's 100% closed. I'm glad you came in last night for treatment, because otherwise you wouldn't be here this morning." I replied, "I'm kind of glad I came in, too."

They immediately prepared me for bypass surgery. I remember Sydney walking with me on the way to surgery. She kissed me goodbye as they rolled me onto the elevator. I closed my eyes and the thought dawned upon me, *I wonder if the next person I see will be my wife or my Saviour*. I was in the hands of surgeons, but I was utterly alone. Alone with God.

### **And when fear surrounds my soul, I know You're in control.**

A few seconds later, it seemed, I opened my eyes in the recovery room. After a short time in there, I was wheeled to the intensive care unit. My wife was waiting there along with my son Ralph and his wife Glennie, and son Jason and his wife Christi. Friends Jerry McCorkle and Max Foster were there, too. I tossed a smart remark at

Jerry—I can't even remember what—but I knew I must be ok if I could trade wisecracks with him. Six hours after surgery, the nurses had me standing and walking to a chair where I'd rest for 10 minutes, then return back to the bed again. After 24 hours in ICU, I was moved to a step-down unit, and was home by Friday.

At home, I received many cards, gifts, and words of encouragement. They were a tremendous blessing to me, but I still had a long way to go.

I felt so weak that I could do little more than think. I became very emotional with my family after surgery—something I was warned that heart patients are to expect. A day or two after surgery I was sitting on our couch, and I started to cry. “What’s wrong?” Sydney asked. “I’m just miserable,” I said. “I can’t do *anything*.” And I just cried. Sydney, with every ounce of compassion she could muster, replied, “That’s just pride, Ralph. Get over it.” And that ended that emotional binge!

But kidding aside, the adjustments were difficult. I couldn't accomplish even the simplest tasks that most of us take for granted every day. The fourteen stairs from our living room to the bedroom became an Olympic challenge. I could climb them once a day, only to collapse in a chair for 5 minutes until I could catch my breath to take a shower. After 36 years of preaching, I couldn't even read Scripture without losing my attention span. I could do nothing but pray in short statements between mind drifts.

Helplessness can be a dark place. There is a gripping fear in the prospect of becoming useless. As the pastor of a large church, I was suddenly stripped of every outlet to serve God. I was accustomed to ministering to others in my situation, but I found myself in a place where I couldn't even minister to myself. It is a humbling experience to come to the end of yourself.

At the same time I was trying to recover, I received word that Tom DeVilbiss had died. Tom was a missionary pastor supported by our church, a brother in Christ. And yet he slipped out into eternity at a younger age than I. “Why?” I asked myself. “Why is one saved and one taken?” The reality of death surrounded me with a heaviness difficult to bear.

For 36 years of ministry, I had dealt with death. I'd counseled others, preached about death, and presided over funerals. But until my heart attack, it had always seemed one step removed.

During this dark time, my daughter-in-law, Glennie, showed me an entry from *Streams in the Desert*, a classic devotional book written by Mrs. L. B. Cowman in 1925. The entry on May 17<sup>th</sup>, the day of my surgery, said:

Often the Lord calls us aside from our work for a season and asks us to be still and learn before we go out again to minister. And the hours spent waiting are not lost time. . . . Quite often God will ask us to wait before we go, so we may fully recover from our last mission before entering the next stage of our journey

and work.

Glennie wrote in the margin, “Dad found out that he needed open heart surgery, May 17.” The words were soldered and sealed to May 17<sup>th</sup> as if they had been planned specifically for my need eighty years beforehand. God was teaching me, giving me a spiritual sabbatical. In the midst of my circumstances, He was in complete control.

## **Even there I learned of You.**

In the stillness of helplessness, I took a fresh look at what God was teaching me.

Why did God allow me to go through this heart attack? Why did He allow my family to go through it? One day when I was feeling sorry for myself, just as sure as day, the Lord leaned over the edge of my bed and wiped my brow and said, “Ralph, why *not* you?” Boy that was simple! Why *not* me?

Colossians 3:23 says, “And whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men.” Nothing regarding my heart attack was really about me. It was not about me when I went through the catherization, or when I was wheeled into surgery, or when well-wishers visited and comforted me in the hospital after surgery. Nothing in my life ever has been or will be exclusively or foremost about me. God may one day choose to reveal His purposes to me, or He may not. It’s His business—not mine.

Our sovereign Lord is not bound by mortal purposes or by a man’s 70-year life span. His plans are epic, woven over generations, too excellent for me to grasp in their infancy or intricacy. Job never knew why God allowed him to lose his family and possessions, and to sit in the dust covered with boils. Mary and Martha didn’t understand immediately why Jesus didn’t arrive on time to save Lazarus from death. But it all worked out for God’s glory, and ultimately Mary & Martha and Job were blessed in abundantly greater measure than if their trials had never arisen.

So what about Tom DeVilbiss? Why did he die, and I didn’t? I don’t know. But one thing I *do* know. There is a greater miracle than healing. It is called resurrection. True, we all dearly miss those who are called away from this Earth and the heartache can be more acute than physical pain at times, but it is somewhat ironic that Christians spend such an inordinate amount of time praying their family and friends out of Heaven. Isn’t Heaven better than the best destination a travel agent could arrange? Isn’t it the abode of the best Friend and Relative we could ever possibly choose to visit? How broken do you think Tom is today? From God’s standpoint, I lost out—at least temporarily. Today Tom is in the presence of God. Yet, both Tom and I are still getting to do what we long to do. We are both glorifying God. The difference is that I’m glorifying God on Earth, and Tom is glorifying God “on location.”

Have you ever selfishly wondered, “What do I get out of the glory of God?” May I say that the Glory of God is the Home of all Homes. God doesn’t leave us outside the door and say, “Look at my glory.” He draws us to His breast and includes us in an

embrace of His all-consuming glory. He overwhelms us with a love that is greater than the most beautiful human love we've ever experienced or longed for. That is the glory of God, and He invites us into it.

We all admire the eagle as she soars. She is not destroyed by the storm because she flies above it. She makes the climb through turbulent air, and though she may not know it, she soars closer to the presence of God. She uses the storm to explore uncharted territory.

Whenever a trial approaches, we sometimes privately wonder if God is really on the other side of the cliff we are meant to soar over. We may believe intellectually that He's there, but it has not yet been branded upon our souls. Is God *really* there when you lift your foot to take that step into vacant space? Is He there when no other human stands between you and death? Is He there when no one can change the doctor's diagnosis? Is He really present in the vortex of dread? Unless you have been there, it's a frightening place. But ultimately, it is not such a bad place. It is one of the most holy places you will ever go. And once there, you *know* He is there. Fear will never again claim such a hold on you.

### **You're on the road ahead.**

My doctors have warned that because of the heredity factor, my heart problems may eventually recur within a decade or so. Occasionally I experience brief spells of breathlessness, as if God purposely is reminding me of my mortality. Nothing has changed about my day of death—it remains the same as it was before I was born—and I believe I'm invincible until God calls me Home. Yet my heart attack has awakened me to a new sense of living on "borrowed time."

As I ponder the fleeting days of my service, I am conscious that now is my "time at bat." Now is my golden opportunity to show my love for the Lord. Now is my time to learn of Him here. Now is my time to tell others about a Father who loves me enough to hand me a verse of comfort on the day of my heart attack. After all, how hard will it be for me to prove my love to Him when we are standing face-to-face in Heaven? Now is my time—now when it costs me something.

God bestowed many gifts upon me as a result of this trial. I am more conscious of the sky when I step out the door. I listen to the birds, appreciate the breeze. I pause to cherish the special moments with my grandchildren. The songs we sing in church are more vivid, the words more meaningful. My mind desires to linger on them. There is a unique sweetness about the pain of having been embraced by the Lord. I don't ever want to lose this new tenderness I've gained for Him. I desire to live each new day in breathless awe.

Job 35:10 says that God "giveth songs in the night." During this time, God blessed me abundantly. He blessed me with the love of family and friends. He renewed

my love for my ministry. He even gave me a poem and a song. But most of all, He blessed me deeply with the knowledge of His love. His love is bigger than life, bigger than death, all-consuming and sufficient.

### **You're by my side.**

There is one particular moment I will never forget. On the night of my surgery after family and friends had gone home, the nurse injected morphine into my IV line, and I knew I'd be fast asleep in a few moments. It was after midnight, and I lay alone in the dimly lit hospital room, acutely conscious of every fluttering heartbeat beneath my hospital gown.

As the muted conversations of nurses drifted in from the hallway, the knowledge of having narrowly passed death's door flooded over me in a sweet thanksgiving too great for me to hold. With all the strength I could muster, I lifted my hands, feeble as they were, and I thanked God for my family, my friends, and my church. And then I thanked Him for His character, especially for the love that had guided me through the biggest storm of my life.

As I lay there trembling, hands raised, I knew as only the Holy Spirit can convey, that God was visiting me amidst the sterile sheets and plastic basins and tiled floors. He was more real than anything I could touch in that room. His quiet presence astounded me. His love overwhelmed me. Joy filled me, spilling over. He was there, even there.

I knew then, and I know now that He is worth it all, He is All in All, and His character surpasses every atom of existence. I'm glad it was *me* in that operating room that day. My Heavenly Father touched my heart and gifted me with the knowledge of His Presence. May I desire each day to know Him better. May He be glorified through me in all that I do.