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Out of Darkness



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Out of Darkness



by Stormie Omartian*

Once you recognize the darkness for what it is, it is possible to walk out of it and into the light for the rest of your life. I desperately needed restoration, and I found transformation! If I could find it, anyone who wants it can find it too!

Escape to Nowhere

In 1969, I worked in television

as one of four female singers and dancers on *The Glen Campbell Goodtime Hour*. Glen was the best, but the work was challenging—and I suffered from chronic doubt about my abilities. Besides two TV series a week, I crammed every spare hour with recording sessions and commercials. I was obsessed with working. It helped me minimize my deep feelings of inadequacy

and enabled me to keep a tighter rein on the depression and fear that always threatened to control my life. Depression was something I dealt with daily. For most of my life, at least as far back as age 13, I awakened every morning to the thought, *Should I kill myself now or can I make it through another day?* Unfortunately, I believed I was only as good as my last performance, so when a job was over, so were my good feelings about myself and my life.

Despite the frightening aspects of the occult, I was irresistibly drawn to it. I was desperate for anything that could possibly fill my emptiness inside, soothe the intense emotional pain I felt, and quell the unreasonable fear that threatened to control my mind. There had to be an answer for me. From Ouija boards to horoscopes, to seances, no matter how I tried to think good thoughts, the fear, depression, anxiety, and panic in me grew worse. Peace eluded me.

After two close-death encounters from drugs and alcohol, I knew I had to correct my lifestyle or I was going to self-destruct. Every day I entertained suicidal thoughts, but I didn't really want to die. Wishing that I didn't have to live alone, I resolved that I *would not* live alone. Marriage was the answer, and Rick was the most likely candidate. I had known him the longest of all the

fellows I had dated, and we were somewhat compatible. Despite pleas from a friend and Christian musician, Michael Omartian, that I not marry Rick, I was getting married. I had to settle for some amount of security and reprieve from my intense loneliness and fear.

After marriage, my loneliness actually increased daily, along with my fear and self-doubt. I needed more from Rick than he could give, and I resented him for not being able to give it. And the growing bitterness toward Rick was taking its toll on my body. I was frequently ill. I felt ugly and old. All the choices I had made for my life that I thought would save it were killing me.

Living in Darkness

One day, a friend who knew I was struggling called to give me the name of a psychologist. My emotional affliction had been affecting my work! With the assurance that the doctor gave "good advice," I made an appointment. Not being able to hold in my emotions any longer, I blurted out all my problems to this man. With reassuring words, Dr Foreman suggested that I open a few doors from my past to see that what was once so frightening no longer posed any threat to me.

I took a deep breath and slowly began

with my earliest recollection. *I was four years old, sitting cross-legged on top of the large laundry basket that was filled to overflowing with dirty clothes. I waited in the darkness of the small closet beneath the stairway of our old, two-story ranch house, not daring to get down from my position because of the mice that frequently scurried across the floor.*

My mother was always angry with me. Her bitter anger was so frightening that I had frequent nightmares about her. When she told me that I was ugly, stupid, bad, and would never amount to anything, I realized I was a very undesirable person. Feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, futility, rejection, abandonment, sadness, fear, and self-hatred settled heavily on me. These were words too big for me to fully understand or verbalize at age four, but they were genuine feelings I experienced every day.

Throughout my adolescence and high school years, Mother's behavior was erratic and volatile. Her behavior made no sense. I was always aware of the fact that I lived in a crazy house—not like the homes of normal people. There was no laughter, no fun, no peace in our lives, and no hope for it ever being different. My last year in college I learned that my father had consulted a doctor who diagnosed my mother's mental illness with a string of medical terms of which "schizophrenic" and "paranoid"

were the only ones I understood. So, it was officially confirmed: There was something definitely wrong with my mother, something that had a name.

It was during this time too that I learned that I was pregnant. The news devastated me. Marriage was out of the question, and suicide was a solution to my terrifying dilemma of being pregnant and unmarried. The weight of the world was on my shoulders, but I knew that my dad and younger sister needed me. There was just one place left to turn. I drove to Tijuana, Mexico, for an abortion. I knew the risks. I had wanted to die so many times in my life, and now the thought frightened me. I prayed silently, "God, please let me live and I'll be good."

For years I had dreamed of doing the things I was now doing, but all of the modeling, commercials, television shows, and acting could not convince me I was attractive or talented. I still saw myself as ugly and unacceptable—a failure who would never amount to anything, as my mother always reminded me. And all my grasping for love caused me to end up in the same situation that two years earlier I had promised God would never happen again. I got pregnant. Getting pregnant was definitely a bad career move, and without my career, I would cease to exist. In contrast to the last abortion, when I felt relieved to be alive, this

time I felt depression, failure, and disgust. It had been so ugly.

Finding the One True Light

Dr. Foreman listened to my story unfold over a number of months and helped me gain some perspective, but neither of us could understand the origin of my mother's hatred toward me. Then one day, Terry, a Christian friend who knew I wasn't doing well, asked me to come with her to meet her pastor. "What have you got to lose?" she insisted. I looked at the devastation of my life and clearly saw that she was right—I certainly had nothing to lose.

Pastor Jack listened intently as I shared about my depression and fear. Then he asked, "Have you ever heard of the term *born again*?" He explained that being born again is a spiritual birth, not a physical birth. It's the opportunity to not only secure your eternal future, but your future in this life as well—to begin life anew, with your past forgiven and buried.

Pastor Jack gave me a reading assignment, including the Gospel of John, which gave me something tangible to do while looking forward to our next meeting. Later, meeting with Terry and the pastor, I confessed that I didn't believe in the devil. Pastor Jack calmly explained that the devil wanted me to believe that he didn't exist, that Jesus wasn't the

Son of God, and that the Holy Spirit wasn't working with power in my life right then. "That way," he said, "you are rendered totally powerless."

The book of John was making things a little clearer for me. Jesus said, "*I have come as light into the world, that whoever believes in Me should not abide in darkness.*" I didn't fully understand, but I recognized that the light had been there all along, but I couldn't see it. My spiritual eyes were so blinded that I had chosen darkness over His light, and I didn't even know it. "*In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not comprehend it.*"

When Pastor Jack asked if I wanted to receive Jesus and be born again, I said, surprisingly without any hesitation, "Yes, I do." It was simple and easy. I was born again, and according to the Bible, I was the Lord's and His Spirit lived in me. And that is how I knew the Lord would change me from the inside out. I sensed a supernatural presence of love so powerful that it permeated the air and washed over me. *There's life here*, I thought to myself. *And this life is real.*

Delivered!

All that remained between Rick and me was resentment. When I told Rick that Jesus had changed my life, he demanded that the name of Jesus

never be mentioned in our house again. That, plus the fact that Rick was becoming even more critical and cruel, pushed me to the edge. I couldn't take it after that. I moved out the next morning. I had nothing much left, but I had the church and the Lord. I had received the Lord into my life, and, at this point, I gave Him mine.

After a year of dating and going to church together, Michael Omartian asked me to marry him. We prayed together and sought to discover God's plans for our lives. Good things were happening in my career, but I continued to struggle with depression. Thoughts of suicide still plagued me. With Michael's encouragement, I made an appointment with the church counseling office.

Mary Anne knew the Word of God and had great faith to see people set free from emotional pain. She explained that through our sin, evil spirits influence our lives and bring about oppression and torment in the form of fear and suicidal thoughts. She instructed me to pray and fast during the following week.

When I returned to the office the second time, I renounced all my occult involvement and alignments with the realm of darkness. I listed my failures and confessed my sins, particularly unforgiveness toward my mother. Then Mary Anne and another

pastor's wife prayed over me. They addressed the spirits that had an oppressive hold on my life: spirits of futility, despair, fear, rejection, and spirits of suicide and torment. She told me that Jesus had the keys to unlock the places in me where I had been held prisoner all my life. As they prayed, I felt the physical manifestation of my depression leave, like an enormous burden lifted off my shoulders.

I left the office dazed and almost numb. The next morning, I awoke without any feelings of depression whatever. No thoughts of suicide, no heaviness in my chest, no fearful anticipation of the future, no anxiety. I never again experienced those paralyzing feelings. Though depressing things happen in life, depression never controlled me from that time on. I had gone into that counseling office knowing Jesus as Savior; I came out knowing Him as my Deliverer.

A Word About Deliverance

Deliverance from darkness happens in different ways at different times. Sometimes it happens simply by spending time in God's presence and walking in obedience to Him. Sometimes it happens by crying out to God in prayer and exalting Him in praise. Sometimes it happens in the counseling office with the

guidance of trained and qualified Christian counselors. But no matter how it happens, it's only Jesus—the Deliverer—who can truly set us free. He is the One True Light who comes to burn away the darkness that tries to separate us from all God has for us.

“The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light. And upon those who sat in the... shadow of death, Light has dawned” (Matthew 4:16).

That was me. I had been living in the shadow of death and thought I could never escape it. That was the big lie I had accepted. But the Lord Jesus—the One True Light—dawned on me and I have never been the same. I felt it! I knew it! ■



Stormie Omartian has shared her story of deliverance with millions through her speaking and writing ministry. Her books

in the series “Power of a Praying...” have been top on the bestseller list and earned many prestigious awards. She is a sought-after media guest and has been featured in many Christian publications and magazines. Stormie and her husband, Michael, have been married more than 45 years, have two married children and two granddaughters.

Keys to Unlocking the Kingdom of Light

Jesus holds the keys to life—to being born again and experiencing eternal life in the present and in the future. He gives us keys to unlock doors to a richer life on a daily basis—doors to peace, wholeness, fulfillment, love, abundance, growth, ongoing deliverance, fruitfulness, restoration, purpose, and total wholeness.

The Key of God's Word – Inscribing God's Word on our heart and in our mind helps to shape our actions and thoughts. It is spiritual ammunition to stand against lies from the realm of darkness. *“God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind.”* Reading the Bible first thing in the morning gives us a solid foundation on which to build our day.

The Key of Prayer – The Psalmist said, *“Early will I seek thee.”* Spending time every morning in prayer doesn't leave our day to chance. Taking our concerns to Him and listening for His guidance gives us a more peaceful and productive day.

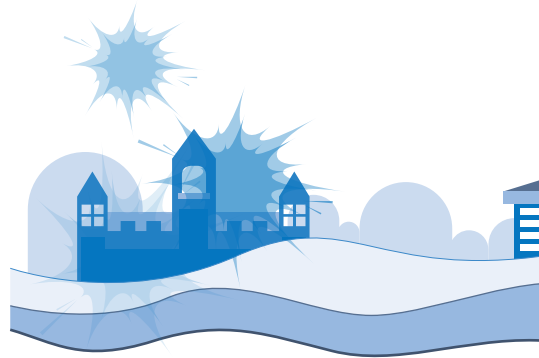
The Key of Confession – “Sin” is anything less than God's perfect will for our life. Critical attitudes, doubt, self-hatred, white lies, selfishness—all are sin in God's sight. We can pray as King David did, *“Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.”* God always quickly answers a prayer of confession.

The Key of Forgiveness – Forgiveness doesn't make the other person right—it makes us free. When we've been wronged, not forgiving can be a persistent sin. Just when we think we've forgiven, old feelings of resentment, bitterness, and anger come rushing forth like a flood, along with their partners—defeat, discouragement,

and sadness. Until I learned that my mother was a victim of her past and had a mental illness, I was never able to see her misery—only mine. God answered my prayers about forgiving my mother so that I was eventually able to see her as God made her to be and not the way she was. Unforgiveness can also be repressed, as with the unforgiveness I had toward my dad for never rescuing me from my mother's insanity. After I forgave Dad, I could see that he really did love me. Forgiveness allows us to focus on the good rather than the bad.

The Key of Saying 'Yes' to God – God calls us to trust Him in all things. Our dreams need to be His dreams. Jesus said, *"If anyone loves me, he will keep my word; and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him."* There is a clear link between obedience and enjoying the presence of God in greater measure. The more we obey God and live His way, the more we move into the light of His blessings. We can choose every day to live in His light.

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by Thomas Ho

My Parents Died

In 1949, the year I was born, my homeland of Vietnam—though divided into North and South—continued to war against each other. I was born in the South, in Phuong Dinh Province. Shortly after my birth, my mother passed away due to complications from childbirth, and when I was nine, my father was killed in a gun battle with the North. At that time, I went to live with my grandmother.

Grandmother lived with my dad's sister and her husband in another province. She lived to be 95, crediting her long life to the fresh air

The Oldest Orphan



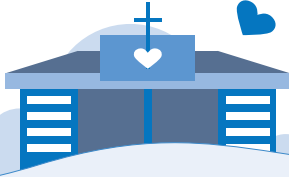
of the countryside and hard work. After her death, I stayed on with my aunt because the area was somewhat secure. During the daytime, South Vietnamese militia patrolled the area, but at night, North Vietnamese guerrillas (known as Viet Cong) would sometimes come and ask for food and money—which they said was tax. If we did not give to them, we faced trouble.

If the South Vietnamese military detected movement in the villages at night, they would drop bombs on the villages. To protect ourselves from the bombs, we built bunkers for shelter to sleep in at night. Once a shell hit the bunker our family was

in. As smoke filled the bunker, my aunt grabbed her twin baby boys and began running to a neighboring bunker for shelter. She was hit by a fragment of the bomb and died within the hour. It was horrible to see! Miraculously, the babies survived. After that fateful night, I stayed on with my uncle, helping him work the rice paddies and tend to his five children. But with me, it was just too many mouths to feed. There was never enough food for all the family.

On My Own

At age 14, I needed to find a way to live on my own. A wealthy family



Thomas with older orphan boys



hired me to tend their cows and watch their house when they were gone. The elderly parents had been killed, and the adult children were happy to have my help. But the area was becoming more controlled day and night by the Viet Cong. And every night the ground shook as South Vietnamese bombs hit their targets. I needed to go south to find freedom, but I didn't know which way to go. My mind was filled with much apprehension.

One day an opportunity arrived. I was given permission to accompany one of the daughters to the city of Danang to buy supplies for a wedding. As we traveled through a small town, I slipped away and found a bus terminal. Approaching the bus driver and explaining that I had no money, I asked if he would take me to Quang Ngai, a province farther south where I knew a relative lived. He looked hard at me for a moment, then agreed, saying, "You'll have to sit on the bus floor." At the end of the long bus ride, the driver realized

that I had no idea the direction I should go. He took my hand, walked me to the other side of the town, and helped me find my relative's house. This man—a total stranger—was like a guiding spirit to me. Up to this point in my life, I had had no religious experience. My parents had been Catholic. I remember the picture of Jesus we had in our house and an altar where we placed incense and kept a picture of a relative who had passed away. Through this man's kindness, I sensed that God was guiding my path.

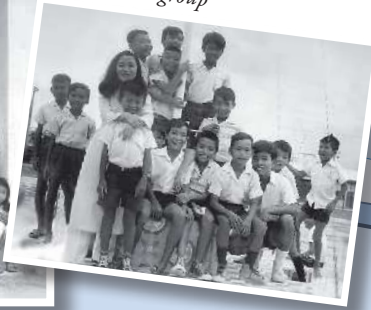
A Friend's Help

My aunt let me stay only a few days before buying me a bus ticket and sending me to an uncle who lived in the town of Cam Ranh. Because I was his nephew, my uncle was willing to take me in, but his wife resisted. They had nine children, and times were hard! They let me sleep on the floor and provided some food for me. I knew I was not welcome, and that was an unpleasant feeling! I was an

Thomas holding the flower on the back row with the other orphans



The orphan group



orphan with no one who really cared for me.

Then—like a miracle—a man who had known my father invited me to stay with his family. They had five children, but the man and his wife worked on the American military base in Cam Ranh and had steady incomes. I worked hard to help pay for my upkeep, and this friend offered to let me go to school in the afternoons after I finished my work. This was the first time in my life that I was able to go to school. I entered the fifth grade!

Then one day, I saw a truck I had never seen before—a flatbed military truck coming down the street, loaded with children and boxes. It stopped in the middle of an open park in the town, and the children got down and began giving out all kinds of gifts to the local children— toys, school supplies, clothes, and food packages. I was told that every month the truck came and gave out gifts to the village children. When I

asked where the children came from, I was told that they came from the Cam Ranh Christian Orphanage. I asked my dad’s friend to take me to the orphanage.

The Oldest Orphan

When I got to the orphanage, I was met by a lady named Miss Xuan. I told her I didn’t have a father or mother and all my relatives had too many children to give me a place to live. I boldly asked if I could come live at the orphanage. Miss Xuan looked at the man with me who explained that he was a friend of the family and verified that what I said was true. Then I was given some papers to fill out telling my history, parents’ names, where I was born, etc. The following week I entered the orphanage.

The year was 1969. I had just turned 20 years old—the oldest of all the children. Life at the orphanage was a new beginning for me. We were taught the Bible, had prayer meetings



Thomas with a friend, on the way to school



every night, and gave thanks before we ate a meal. I learned about God—that He loved me enough to die on the cross for my sin. In 1970, I surrendered my life completely to Christ and was baptized. In my heart, I felt that God had chosen me for a purpose—to spread His love to others in need.

My greatest desire had always been to get an education. In school, I struggled but was eager to learn. Every evening after dinner, the children would sit around a table and do homework. We were tutored by dorm leaders in math, English, history, or anything we had a problem with. Sometimes even the teachers at school came and helped us. Within a year, my grades improved. I became a leader in my class and was chosen with four other boys to study Kungfu. Sometimes, because we had nice binders, backpacks, and even some bikes given by American military, the orphan children were attacked on our way to school or church. So,

being skilled in Kungfu helped keep us safe. (I still practice Kungfu today and have taught it to my daughter.)

My main job at the orphanage was to tend the chickens, making sure they were fed well, and guarding them from being stolen at night. I was in charge, but a team of younger boys was assigned the task of helping me. We built a fence around the chicken house and buried the posts two feet deep to keep people from stealing the chickens. One night someone dug beneath our fence and stole 35 chickens. We not only lost our chickens, but it hurt our pride that the bad guys had outsmarted us!

Life at the orphanage was the most normal life I had ever experienced. There were no bombings and no VC taxes to pay. Then in January 1975, we heard that towns in the north were being lost. By the second week of April, the leadership of the orphanage decided we needed to evacuate. Miss Xuan chartered

Thomas building the chicken house



two buses and one van, and all the orphans and workers traveled by land and sometimes by boat to Saigon and eventually going farther south to the coastal city of Rach Yia. We fitted out an old boat and escaped to an island on April 29. Then, on the morning of April 30, the very morning South Vietnam was taken over by Communist North Vietnam, we escaped into international waters. Miraculously, our boat made it to Singapore where the US State Department agreed to receive us as refugees. After being processed at Fort Chafee military base in Arkansas and a short odyssey at a ranch in Houston, we were welcomed at Buckner Children's Home in Dallas, Texas.

High School and Beyond

During the three months of our first summer in Dallas, the orphans were given cassette tapes in English to listen to. When the fall school semester began, I entered 10th grade

at Skyline High School—and I was 26 years old. The teachers gave the Vietnamese orphans lots of help, as did the American students. Even though I was much older, they were happy to have me as a fellow student. The way of life in America was so totally different! Even if you were old, you could go to school, and people even admired you for it. There was no prejudice. I felt welcomed.

After graduating, I attended Eastfield College, thinking I would become an electrical engineer. But when the semiconductor industry opened up, I was hired by a company where I worked for the following 30 years. Then in 2009, the company moved their business to Singapore, and I was laid off. Through the years, I had worked through my church to help Vietnamese immigrants settle well into life in the Dallas area. Now I was free to do mission work in Vietnam.

In 2010, 74 former orphans and staff, family members, and representatives

from Buckner gathered in Vietnam to visit the site of our old home and to bring gifts to orphan children. The event was covered by the *Dallas Morning News* and media in Vietnam. Later, the orphan group set up a charity called Cam Ranh Orphans (CRO) to provide scholarships for needy children who want to go to school but don't have the opportunity.

At Age 70

Amazingly, nine years after being away from the semiconductor field, I have recently been rehired by a new company, Qorvo. I never thought about going back to work in this field, but when I was offered the job, it seemed that God has a purpose for me there. The hiring supervisors only took five minutes interviewing me. They checked everything: my background, drug use, passport, consent of military—but not my age! Being hired back at age 70 is truly God's doing!

Throughout my life, I have been the recipient of much kindness. People helped me who didn't even know me! Now, by helping needy children receive a Christmas present or have school supplies, I hope to pay back in a small way. When I see the faces of the children, I remember how joyful I felt as an orphan to receive

something given out of love. The Bible teaches that God cares for the orphan and that He is a Father to the fatherless. I praise Him for His great love and protection of me as an orphan, and for giving me the privilege today of blessing others as He has blessed me.

"The Lord protects the foreigners. He defends the orphans and widows, but he blocks the way of the wicked" (Psalm 146:9, NCV). ■



Thomas Ho lives in Garland, Texas, with his wife, Trina, and daughter, Grace. They are 30-year members of Vietnamese Baptist

Church of Garland. Thomas does charity work in Vietnam and has served as interpreter for a medical team from Arizona which goes to Vietnam every year to train doctors at children's hospitals. He has joyfully been reunited with some of his family in Vietnam and is helping them with their medical needs.



The Long Road Home

by Mary Eckstein

Becoming Catholic

Somehow, as a child, I knew there was a God. My Methodist parents did not practice their faith, so I went to church with my best friend, who was Presbyterian. The first time I heard the whole church sing “Onward Christian Soldiers,” I was overcome with emotion. To this day, I still have the book we studied in Vacation Bible School.

When I was nine, my mother died of cancer, and my dad remarried a widow with two sons. Because my stepmother and all her family were Catholic, it was decided that my two younger brothers and I would become Catholic converts. What a powerful experience it was to walk into a huge church with soaring walls and stained glass windows! I loved art and was drawn to the imagery of the statues and the rituals.

In those days, there were certain things you had to do to be a good Catholic: never, ever miss Mass on Sunday; never eat meat on Friday; always make the sign of the cross before praying. Another rule at my church was to never eat anything before going to communion. As a result, once when it was very warm, I fainted at Mass. We also had to go to catechism classes after school—taught by nuns at the church. The classes were to prepare us to be confirmed. We lived in fear that the bishop might ask us to answer one of the 100 questions we had to memorize from the Baltimore Catechism.

But going to Mass faithfully didn't keep me from sinning. My teenage years were particularly difficult, as a stepbrother was molesting me and my stepmother really didn't want to deal with an opinionated, stubborn stepdaughter. But I managed through, and in 1983, met and married my husband. He was born and raised a Catholic, and when we moved to Maine, we started going to the local Catholic parish.

Becoming Very Catholic

By this time, the reforms of Vatican II were in full force and, to me, the whole thing just looked fake. No

stained glass, no fancy altar, no Latin Mass, no ritual. I became quite an outspoken conservative Catholic, complete with rosary, scapulars (images of Mary worn under your clothing), an expert on relics and saints, and well-versed in Catholic theology and history. I thought Protestants had it all wrong, that it was the sin of presumption to think you were saved by just believing in Jesus. I had a lot of conservative Catholic friends, and we reinforced each other's beliefs.

Within the Catholic Church, there is a large, very orthodox movement—and I became part of that movement. I made my kids all wear scapulars. I wore only dresses and skirts and covered my head at Mass. I prayed the rosary every day and read my kids stories about the saints. Some of the doctrines of the church were troublesome to me though. I never felt a huge devotion to Mary that many of these orthodox believers did. I could not believe some of the doctrines: Mary's immaculate conception (she was conceived without original sin), her assumption into heaven (her body never corrupted here on earth), and her crowning as Queen of Heaven. She was regarded (and still is by many) as Co-Redemptrix and Co-Mediatrix with Jesus, which means that praying



to Mary will gain you what you need. She can intercede for you with God the Father because, it is reasoned, she was the perfect mother, and what son can refuse his mother's wishes?

Still Hungering

Though I adhered to conservative Catholic doctrine, my local church did not feed me from the Word. When the priest molestation scandal broke out, I was really disappointed in the church. We as a family quit attending regularly. My husband, too, lost faith in the church he was born into.

During this time, I was teaching piano and all the stringed instruments in my home. A pastor's family contacted me for lessons for their two girls. They had moved here from Alaska and planted a church in the next town. The mom told me they were independent Baptists. I was surprised to learn that they didn't consider themselves Protestant. I started researching the Baptist faith and learned so much that contradicted what I had learned through the Catholic Church.

I still had the habit of sometimes going to Mass on my own. One day, I was headed to church and drove by the Baptist church of my students. I turned in, got out, and walked right into a Bible study class. I was

really blown away. The teaching filled my hunger for truth. And the preaching was simple, which I could understand.

My Road to Faith

When I went home, I told my husband what I had done. He was not happy. I think he feared I might leave him. But with a wonderful marriage and six children together, I would certainly never consider doing that! I reminded him that he was the one who suggested I read the Bible, and that I was doing what the Bible told me to do. When I told the pastor that I wanted to join his church, he started me on a discipleship course—one in which I had to really study and read the Bible for answers. I also started attending Wednesday evening prayer services.

Again, my husband wasn't too happy about it, but I was gently persistent. I wouldn't go against his specific order not to go, but he didn't forbid it. I started attending this church in the spring of 2012, and in August of 2012, I truly repented of my sin and accepted Jesus as my Savior. In August of 2016, I was accepted for membership and was baptized (immersed) in a river near the church. Imagine my joy in having my husband and all my kids there to watch! My





husband doesn't attend church with me but often asks questions about the faith. I pray every day for the salvation of him and my children.

I firmly believe in God's Word, that whosoever has faith and seeks Him will find Him (Hebrews 11:6). When I think back on all the sins I have committed over my lifetime, I am indeed so grateful to God for His salvation in Jesus Christ. My whole worldview has changed, and I see more and more each day that the only answer to everything is belief in Christ. ■



Mary Eckstein is the mom of six grown children and the happy wife of Tom, for 37 years. She is a member of Northside

Baptist Church in North Windham, Maine.

(Continued from back cover)

programs. Alex and I were good friends, always there to listen to each other's problems.

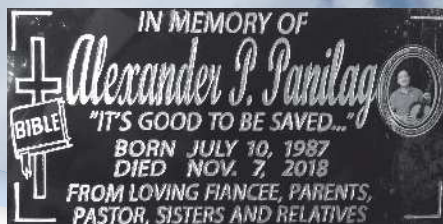
After a time of working together at the church, Alex told me he was praying for me and that he would wait for me until I graduated. I hesitated over this, since I considered him my "brother-in-law," but I knew I was falling in love with him as well. When I told my sister and pastor, they didn't take it seriously, saying it was just a crush. But by that time I was 17 and knew my own mind. Alex began to officially court me, and our courtship went on for two years. We were both very happy.

But our relationship was not always harmonious because when Alex got his first job, I felt insecure. We were six years apart in age, and now that he was working around girls his same age, I felt threatened. Also, as boyfriend and girlfriend, we wanted to hug, hold hands, and kiss as lovers, being tempted by "too much intimacy." But knowing that God had called us into ministry and not wanting to do anything that was against His will, we decided to break off our relationship and focus on ministry. The disadvantage of this arrangement was that we both got jealous when we saw the other talking friendly with the opposite sex. So, after a few months, we went back together. We would sing our favorite songs, with Alex playing the

guitar and looking me straight in the eyes, and the words reminded us that we should not do anything that would not please God.

When I graduated college in 2015, Alex and I both had jobs. Then in 2016, Alex became a fulltime worker in the church. His salary was just enough to cover his weekly needs. Once he asked me if God were to call him into the ministry as a pastor, would I be willing to go with him. When I told him that we could serve God together, he smiled. Alex had a burden for souls. He once formed a basketball team and invited the players to come to church, but most of them refused. It made him sad, and I felt sad for him.

In 2017, Alex took a new job and was even issued a car by the new company. It was while driving this car that Alex proposed to me. He suddenly said, "Will you marry me, my love?" I was overwhelmed and said, "Of course!" We were both so happy because there would be no



more goodbyes, only goodnights. This was February 2018. According to a tradition in the Philippines, parents should meet and agree to their children's plan to marry and to make plans for the wedding. This happened on my birthday, September 7, and Alex gave me my engagement ring at the end of the day.

On Wednesday, October 31, with permission from my family and pastor, Alex and I made a 10-hour trip together to visit his hometown, attend his parents' church, and give wedding invitations to his relatives and friends. I was so happy to be introduced as Alex's bride-to-be. The following Monday, we returned home, cherishing sweet memories of the fun things we had done on our trip.

On Tuesday evening, Alex drove me home after my music practice, and we shared some deep thoughts about life. I wondered what death was like when our soul separates from our body. Would an angel call us? Would we see heaven's gate open? Alex said, "One thing I know for sure, if our soul separates from our body, we will go to heaven and it will be the happiest day when we meet our



Savior.” That was our topic! Then he told me goodnight and “I love you,” with neither of us imagining that he would soon experience the very thing we had talked about.

On Wednesday, November 7, 2018, I woke up early with a heavy heart for no reason. I got ready to go to my job as assistant nursery teacher at my church. Alex lived at the church, sleeping on a cot in a small room off the school canteen. The two of us always had breakfast, lunch, snack time, and dinner together. When I arrived at the church, I looked at the clock and it was already 7:25—so rare for Alex not to be up since he was usually ready by 7:15. I went to his room, knocked softly, and called, “Love?” I knocked again louder, without getting a response.

My heart began to beat fast and heavy. I ran to get the spare key from the church, returned, and knocked

louder. With trembling hands, I managed to unlock the door, ran to his bed, and there he was—lifeless!

I ran to get the pastor even though I knew deep inside that Alex was already gone. So many things raced through my mind: “This can’t be! We still have our wedding, our dreams, our soon-to-be family. We already had picked out names for three children. When I touched Alex’s hand, I felt the softness of his skin and the hardness of his bone. I just held his hand and cried. Our dreams were shattered! I felt like I was drowning in a deep ocean. I was broken!

Within the hour, my pastor and sister and I went to the funeral home to pick out a coffin. I chose a silver one, and we chose a blue long-sleeve shirt for Alex—the one he had worn in our pre-nuptial pictures. Later, when his body arrived back at the church, my mind was in denial. I asked God why He hadn’t taken me with Alex or why not me instead of Alex. My sister stayed beside me all the time because I was so afraid. I hugged Alex’s clothes to me and cried.



It was so hard, not just for me, but for everybody—the church family, friends, and especially Alex’s family.

On the second day—the day of the funeral—I still had not been able to sleep. Every time I closed my eyes, I could see Alex’s lifeless body. I kept asking the pastor, “Where is God?” And my pastor lovingly enlightened my mind through God’s Word. I was strengthened enough to play the piano at the funeral. I also played “Amazing Grace” on the violin—a song Alex loved and the first song he had heard me play on the violin. I gave my best at the funeral. Despite my grief, I felt happy because at the service some of Alex’s workmates accepted Jesus Christ as their personal Savior. That was an answer to one of Alex’s prayers.

On the third day, I was beginning to slowly understand what was going on—but still my eyes overflowed with



Angelie and Alex

My Beloved Alexander: A Life Cut Short

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tears. Our wedding was to take place on November 29, just three weeks away. But now there was nothing! Then on the fourth day, the day for interment, I never took my eyes away from the coffin until it was covered with dirt. At last my tears were silent, and I was able to pray, "Dear Lord, Thy will be done."

Like so many other people, I never imagined that something like this would happen to me. Life is uncertain, and losing someone you love is painful. My response to those who ask is always: "Alex is happy now; he's in heaven." And Alex would want to ask, "How about you? When you die, are you sure you are going to heaven?"

I love to tell people about Alex, even to talk about our wedding plans. From his death, I've learned a lot of lessons, especially to have a heart for souls. Every day I miss him, but Christ is the source of my strength. I go to my Bible and devotional books for daily encouragement. Even though I know that Alex will never exist again in this world, I'm excited about heaven. One day I will see my beloved Alexander again! Right now, it may be months or even years before I feel normal again and my smile returns, but I know God will show me the way. His ways are higher than any of my own. He makes no mistakes.

I am 25 years old and back again at my work. In the mornings, I teach in



the preschool ministry of our church. In the afternoons, I teach piano and violin at an international Christian school. I also serve as church pianist, playing for services and choir and orchestra rehearsals. Life is going on by the grace of God. I thank the Lord for all the Christian prayer warriors who have stood by me and fed me God's Word. Jesus is my Anchor—my only Anchor!

"Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth: Yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labours; and their works do follow them" (Revelation 14:13, KJV).■



In Memory of Alex



Angelie Taala lives in Cagayan de Oro City, Northern Mindanao, Philippines. She attends Bugo Bible Baptist Church where

she serves as pianist. Like Job in the Old Testament, Angelie knows that "the Lord gives and the Lord takes away." She is trusting the Lord's plans for her future and holding on to His promises for her strength.

My Beloved Alexander: A Life Cut Short

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My Beloved Alexander: A Life Cut Short

by Angelie Taala

Alexander was 21 when he moved to my town and started coming to my church. I was 16 years old, studying for a Bachelor of Music in piano performance. Alex was from another province in the Philippines and was the brother of my pastor—and my sister was my pastor’s wife. So Alex and I had seen each other many times, and we considered ourselves as brother and sister-in-law.

Alex immediately got involved in doing the Lord’s work in the church. He became a leader of the youth, song leader, and computer consultant—a graduate in the I.T. field. His skills, even of riding a motorcycle in the Philippine traffic, were very useful in the ministry. I, too, was involved in ministry at the church, serving as the church pianist and teaching in the children’s and Sunday school

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