

POLISHING  
GOD'S  
MONUMENTS

PILLARS OF HOPE FOR PUNISHING TIMES

JIM ANDREWS



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# Contents

Acknowledgments	9
Introduction	11
Prologue: <i>From the Cradle to the Crucible</i>	15
1. Mystery and Monuments	37
<i>YEAR FIVE</i>	54
2. The “Peninnah Factor”	65
<i>YEAR SIX</i>	83
3. Is This God for Real?	91
<i>YEAR SEVEN</i>	111
4. Life in the Tower of Terror	123
<i>YEAR EIGHT</i>	143
5. Anatomy of a Spiritual Break-in	153
<i>YEARS NINE THROUGH ELEVEN</i>	170
6. Everything for a Reason	181
<i>YEARS TWELVE THROUGH FIFTEEN</i>	201

CONTENTS

7. A God Who Wrings His Hands?	211
<i>YEAR FIFTEEN</i>	228
8. The Next Right Thing	239
<i>YEARS SIXTEEN THROUGH SEVENTEEN</i>	253
9. God's "Now"	265
Epilogue: Update from the Furnace of Affliction	289
Notes	295

# Introduction

A sober reality in the life of faith is that “through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22b). In these ordeals God’s people are buffeted in two ways: sometimes we suffer *for the faith* and other times we suffer *with* faith. Either way, our faith remains a work in progress. In the midst of troubles, our emotions can oscillate between hope and despair, our wills vacillate between submission and rebellion, and our understanding alternates between moments of comprehension and times of total confusion.

Right here, “Houston, we have a problem.” Whenever faith is in the grinder, it may *seem* that God is not living up to his billing or performing as advertised. In times of distress, especially periods of prolonged suffering, his character may not *seem* to us to measure up to his biblical résumé.

So how do we keep the faith, sunny side up, in the face of this maddening mystery side of God? And how can we “recommend” a walk with God when, frankly, he *seems* to have abandoned us to wallow in our pain, to have shut his ears to our pleas, and to have heartlessly left the scene of the

accident? What is an *honest* saint to do when God appears either indifferent or impotent?

This book confronts these issues head-on and offers believers in despair biblical perspective and practical direction that should reinvigorate the spirit of all who will regularly heed and apply them. It is about walking with God in times of trouble, about being tested to our socks, about what to do when extreme pressure threatens our very faith. And for illustrative purposes, it is about the multi-layered afflictions of a young woman, my younger daughter, and her devoted husband, who have faced it all (and then some) as a baffling, mind-boggling illness hijacked their youth and shattered their dreams.

A friend reminded me of that small figurine depicting a man sitting under a tree branch, looking up at a bird, which is about to do that dirty little deed all birds do. If you have ever felt like that fellow about to get dumped on, then this book is for you. When life circumstances make you want to say, as this ill-positioned victim does, “Go ahead, everybody else does,” then this story will resonate with you.

This book aims to provide you with spiritual perspective and insight in suffering that will lift you above the destructive forces of adversity and help your faith survive any pounding on the anvil of tough circumstances. Equally important, whether you are physically ill or spiritually debilitated, burned-out, burned up, depressed, or distressed, this volume about faith under fire will arm you with a thoroughly biblical and absolutely critical coping strategy that I call “polishing God’s monuments.”

Now here is a caution. Our message and its interwoven story are for serious-minded Christians (that ought to be a redundancy!) on such intimate terms with serious pain and suffering that they sometimes feel like pulling out their hair, if not throwing in the towel.

## INTRODUCTION

The message unfolds between edited pastoral letters, mostly written to my congregation during some of the worst of our agony, recounting for them limited details of our plight, as well as insights we have gained—the light of God’s Word illuminating harsh circumstances.

The first letter begins five years into Paul and Juli’s illness, which was near the beginning of my ministry at Lake Bible Church. In a few cases the original letters were expanded to give you, the reader, the same context the first recipients had, and in other instances they were condensed. However, the intent, names, and events have remained unchanged.

# Prologue

## *From the Cradle to the Crucible*

Imagine peering into a kaleidoscope, twisting its barrel round and round, and then being asked to describe clearly and succinctly what you saw. There you have some idea of my sense of inadequacy in attempting to convey a cohesive account of what my daughter and son-in-law have been through for the past twenty years. I feel about the same frustration as a tourist trying to compress his vista of the Grand Canyon into a single snapshot—it won't come close to doing it justice.

Remarkably, it has only been within the last year or so that we have begun to see, at least from a distance, some of the physiological causes for my daughter's suffering. Medical science at last seems to be getting a small handle on some of the "whys." Unfortunately, we still have not identified a cure, as some of the major components of Juli's condition are in the research stage. However, at least understanding part of the problem gives us hope that eventually a solution will become available.

Symmetrical as well as strategic considerations require me to gut their story unmercifully. In fact, if I were to give you the whole nine yards, the litany of their pain and suffering would blow your mind to the point of incredulity.

I hope that what remains will suffice to paint this tried-to-the-bone couple in poignant, living color, accentuate the mystery of their plight, and set up a compelling platform for our perspectives on suffering. Most particularly, I want their story to sell you on the habit of monument-polishing as a coping strategy. This vital discipline, so thoroughly and profusely biblical, has reinforced our faith through many bitter, stormy passages of life

Juli is the younger of our two daughters. The older, Kristi, is married to a pastor, and she and John presently live in Spokane, Washington, with our grandchildren, Alex and Ashley. Juli, now thirty-nine years old, and her husband, Paul, live near us in Tigard, Oregon. Sadly, her health issues thus far have denied them the joy of a family.

From the womb, struggle and narrow brushes with death have strangely dogged Juli's life. In retrospect her breech birth seemed almost an omen of things to come. In fact, my wife Olsie and I have wondered if that irregular delivery played any role in her eventual troubles.

Early on Juli betrayed hints of musical talent. For Christmas when she was only three, she received a miniature piano with only one octave . . . the kind of toy usually quickly forgotten. Not in this case, as Juli spent hours plunking away on that little tuneless keyboard.

Around that same time, someone gave us a recording of international children's songs. Juli was so enthralled with the music that Olsie soon found she could put on the record and clean the whole house almost before the child moved a muscle.

Before long the little tyke could sing along with every single track in every language.

When Juli was five, something confirmed her musical gift. Our family was returning from vacation to our home, then in Lakewood, Colorado. Just as the car crossed the state line into Colorado, Juli lit up and exclaimed, “Oh, goody, I can’t wait to get back to my little piano!” That did it. When we got home, my wife, a piano teacher, decided to let Juli take a crack at the real piano, which up to then had been forbidden territory to curious kids looking for something to destroy. But now Olsie just wanted to see what would happen. That day I’ll never forget. Within a half-hour Juli was picking out tunes! Mom then knew she had a musically gifted youngster on her hands.

Olsie immediately took charge of Juli’s piano training and did not relinquish that role until just a couple years before she entered the conservatory. In 1981, Juli began studying with Don Lehmann, an exceedingly talented pianist, performer, and teacher.

Practice discipline was never a battle. The child loved the piano, and had a fine ear and an uncommon feel for the instrument. In those tender years, schoolwork, however, was another story. Somehow, Juli just didn’t come together academically. It seemed that when she had a teacher who thoroughly explained concepts, Juli rose to the top of the class. While our older daughter Kristi could thrive under any instructor, Juli couldn’t. She had trouble following instructions, and her sense of direction was always so bad, I was amazed the kid could find her way to bed at night! (By the way, nine years ago neurological testing confirmed that Juli had a learning disability that made following instructions akin to solving a mental jigsaw puzzle. It was suggested that oxygen deprivation during her breech birth might have damaged the part of the brain that controls

this process.) From grades three through five Juli became so discouraged that she gave up trying altogether, describing herself retrospectively as a “lazy slough-off.”

Then at age ten everything changed—in one fell swoop. Juli had just finished fifth grade when we made our annual trek back to West Virginia to visit family. While we were there we ran up to New Martinsville to visit Olsie’s sister, Barbara, her husband, Don, and their twin girls. One warm, sunny day we all decided to take the kids for a picnic and recreational outing at the famed Olgebay Park in Wheeling.

Somebody suggested we let the four girls go horseback riding. Seemed like fun, though Juli was just barely tall enough to qualify as a rider. For some reason, the trail guide put her last in line before the group set off on their English-saddled horses down the steep, wooded terrain for a long ride. Little Juli looked so elfish on the back of that big mare!

The moms sauntered off to a nearby park cottage to wait, while Don and I killed time chatting in an adjacent parking lot, stopping now and then to jab and poke aimlessly at loose gravel with the nose of our tennies.

About an hour later, the late afternoon stillness gave way to a commotion emanating from down in the woods, approximately where we supposed the horse trail ascended toward us. At first I didn’t think much about the hollering except that finally the wait was over and we could go home. I just assumed everybody was having a jolly good time and yelling back and forth in the typical kiddish way.

No sooner had that thought crossed my mind, than out of the woods and into the parking lot bolted a big white horse charging at speed, straight for the barn. It was dragging, as though a sack of feed, a limp youngster whose foot was still snagged in the stirrup on our side. Her head and upper torso were bumping along on the ground, plowing through the loose

gravel like a speedboat knifing through water. Instantly I recognized that small, dangling body. It was Juli.

From the point where she had apparently fallen off the horse and the spooked animal tore past the other horses with their stunned riders, the beast had dragged the child some three hundred ninety feet over rocky ground.

Who can describe the horror of a scene like that for a parent? Ironically, only the previous afternoon, as Don and I were chatting in his living room, Juli just happened to prance past us. For some reason, as my eyes followed her happy steps, the thought had flitted across my mind, “My, how I love that kid! I could never bear to lose her.” Now almost exactly twenty-four hours later the threat of that very nightmare was unfolding before my eyes.

One thing I knew instantly. Virtually no one, especially a child, could survive an accident like that. To tell the truth, I pretty much gave her up for lost the minute I saw what was happening. Yet never-say-die parental instinct took over and I knew I had to stop that horse . . . cut it off . . . grab that tangling bridle . . . restrain the dumb animal . . . somehow save her—if she was still alive.

As a former athlete, I knew something about cut-off angles and by natural instinct took the best one available. The horse, however, already spooked, and now even more frightened by my sudden movements, stepped it up and took off at full gallop toward the barn. That sudden lurch and change in the horse’s gait altered the position of Juli’s dangling body, and somehow pitched her tiny head like a fragile egg shell underneath one of its back hoofs. Right before my very eyes that hoof clomped down on her diminutive skull.

Nevertheless, the very finger of God was in the moment and I have often wondered if a holy angel intervened. Amazingly, the horse’s hoof struck her skull just lightly enough not

to crush it, yet with just enough physical force to break her foot loose from the stubborn stirrup, and *a la* Jacob, leave a calling card in the form of a half-moon “hoofprint” permanently imprinted in her skull. Once her small body and the charging horse parted hostile company, her limp figure went skittering across the gravel, landing in a seemingly lifeless heap near a clump of weeds between the parking lot and the adjacent woods.

Frantically I raced to her, instinctively gathering her battered, bloody body into my arms. Her eyes were set, her face and head all cut up and bleeding, and her teeth clenched so tightly one couldn't have pried them apart with a crowbar. With no experience in such emergencies, I feared from her appearance that she was either dead or dying.

Jumbled thoughts ricocheted in my confused mind. “Oh, Lord, she looks so bad! What do we do? Need an ambulance quick . . . teeth are clenched . . . is she swallowing her tongue? . . . do I need to pry her mouth open . . . how? Has anyone called an ambulance yet? Olsie? Where is she? Does she know this has happened? Can't let her see Juli in this condition . . . Juli's probably not going to make it . . . or is it over already . . . have to prepare Olsie . . . can't leave Juli . . . but gotta get to Olsie . . . those clenched teeth . . . is Juli strangling on her own tongue? . . . don't know what to do . . . gotta leave Juli with Don . . . gotta find Olsie.”

Leaving my mangled child with my brother-in-law, I tore off for the cottage where Olsie and Barbara were, and broke the awful news. “Honey, Juli's been hurt. I don't think she's going to make it,” I explained, trying to prepare her for the worst. As you can imagine, Olsie became distraught and fought her way through Barb and me to the scene.

Meanwhile someone had called an ambulance. After forever it finally arrived. Not paramedics, just a rude ambulance. In

the back I accompanied Juli to the Ohio Valley Hospital . . . the toughest trip of my life. Every moment I feared the imminent prospect of watching my own little baby expire before my very eyes.

Obviously and thankfully, she didn't. As in all such cases, the next seventy-two hours were nail biters. Juli was in a coma, had multiple brain contusions, a broken arm, perhaps a broken facial bone, that ugly head wound, plus other cuts, abrasions, and bruises from her waist up. The child was so battered, so swollen, and shortly turned so black that no one on earth could have identified her for almost two weeks. She was unconscious for about fourteen days, and in the hospital for a total of twenty-three.

About two weeks after the accident, Don and Barb's pastor visited us at the hospital just after Juli emerged from intensive care. "She is looking so much better," we informed him with considerable relief. Later, I was told, the pastor just shook his head and told my brother-in-law, "Amazing! Those poor people . . . they think that child is looking *better!*" That comment was some indication of the terrible battering she suffered.

Though petite for her age, Juli was never a wimp. It said something about her tolerance for serious pain that not one time in twenty-three days, conscious or unconscious, did she ever cry out, whimper or complain—not even when the orthopedic surgeon was fiddling around with her broken arm to see if he could set it. In fact with some surprise he commented on her toughness.

Now comes the trigger in the change equation. When Juli finally regained consciousness, she was placed in a hospital room with a pitiful little youngster named Karen. Karen had been the victim—not once, but twice—of savage domestic abuse at the hands of her so-called "parents." One attack was so violent that they literally tore the "hide" loose on one

side of her tiny skull! That second attack had forever reduced the little thing, then about Juli's age, to a living vegetable . . . a sight so pitiful it would tear your heart out and turn your stomach. There she lay day after day just existing; her somehow still tender, almost smiling, big blue eyes the lone residue of her original beauty.

Let any who blanch at the prospect of "sinners in the hands of an angry God" stand at her bedside day after day as I did and tell me the cruelty of mankind does not cry out for the retribution of a holy God.

Unknown to us at the time, none of this tragedy was lost on Juli. When she was alert, she was taking it in at every pore. Only later did she relate to us the impact. In that hospital bed adjacent to Karen, God imprinted forcibly on Juli's pre-adolescent consciousness what could have happened to her. After being dragged over Hell's half-acre behind a runaway horse, she, by all rights, should have been killed, disabled, disfigured, or mentally incapacitated from the appalling abuse her body suffered. Yet for some reason God spared *her*.

God used this impression and little Karen's plight as a providential foil to imprint upon Juli's ten-year-old mind that He spared her for some greater purpose than just extending time on her life meter.

I should insert right here this important notation about the strange and terrible medical complications that have ensued for the past eighteen years. Her current doctors all agree that this severe brain trauma is undoubtedly a major player in her ongoing medical problems. For one thing, they believe her brain is impaired, so it does not send the proper signals to her immune system, thereby allowing pathogens to thrive in her weakened body. We were warned at the time of her accident by her treating physicians to expect serious complications from the brain injury, including seizures, well into her twenties and thirties. But

we were too overjoyed to have our daughter back to pay much attention to these ominous predictions.

And we were further amazed to see the positive changes in our daughter resulting from this tragedy. From that time on, Juli seemed to undergo a personality transplant. Right there in the hospital she vowed to us, even as her lucidity was still coming and going, that she would never again slough off in school. She never did. From that day she morphed into a disciplined, purposeful, and single-minded child. In fact, if memory serves, she later graduated thirteenth in her high school senior class of about 500 and earned membership in the National Honor Society. That is not too shabby for a kid whose second grade math teacher thought she might be a mental turtle rather than an intellectual rabbit.

Some kids are precocious intellectually, some athletically, some artistically, but once in a while one is precocious spiritually. From an early age their level of seriousness about the things of God, even their understanding of spiritual things, their spiritual discipline, and their devotion to Christ run considerably ahead of most of their Christian peers. I think it is fair to say that Juli fits that description.

Juli, however, would be embarrassed if I failed to acknowledge that she too is a daughter of Eve and a full partner with the rest of us in the whole scandal of human failure. She knows her own sinful heart, her flaws and foibles, warts and sharp edges well enough to understand that God still treats her, like the rest of us, far better than deserved.

Growing up, Juli and Kristi had their catfights over the usual sister things, and it certainly didn't help matters that emotionally Juli was strung higher than a power line. Though as an adult she changed radically, in her early years it was a chronic battle to get her to clean her room and maintain order (though she did "scrape by" with a few domestic chores). Over those

types of things we had wars and rumors of wars. Sometimes Kristi, with occasional justification, believed strangulation was the only final solution.

To top it off, Juli possesses a fiery, almost Latin spirit and a temper to prove it. (The painful disease process that now rages in her body hasn't mellowed this "personality trait" with age, to say the least.) And, except in the matter of perseverance, she can become unglued faster than a dry stamp.

Those flaws conceded, Juli is, and always has been, a serious-minded Christian to whom lip service and half-heartedness are perfect strangers. She has always been serious about her walk with God.

Her intensity about spiritual things came to the fore at a very early age. In our Lakewood neighborhood, Juli was the self-appointed leader of a little pack of kids, mostly boys. When she wasn't force-training them in gymnastics or rallying them for some other kiddie enterprise, she would gather them like a little hen on the roost (front steps) of one house or the other and proceed to teach them Bible stories—a kind of VBS home school.

One summer evening when Juli was nine, she explained the plan of salvation to her next door neighbor and best friend, Kenny Johnson. Afterward, she invited him to attend VBS. He liked it so much that his parents, Earl and Sandy, asked if they could attend church with us. Soon the whole family received Christ and was deeply involved in church life at Riverside Baptist Church, before they eventually moved away. Years later, when Kenny learned how sick Juli was, he wrote her a letter to encourage her that he, his wife, and his children were all walking with the Lord because of her witness.

Through the years, Juli also maintained a serious and potent prayer life. Let me illustrate.

All my women lose things—everything but their heads. Drives me bananas. At Columbine High School her freshman year, Juli had misplaced her math book (bad enough) and was forced to borrow a friend's (worse yet). Then she lost that one, too! Not only did she face the wrath of her friend, but worse by far, possible summary execution by her parsimonious mom, who entertained neither the desire nor any intention of restocking the whole annual supply of Columbine math texts. We're talking crisis here and Juli well knew it. She did not dare break this dire news to Mom! Olsie guarded her pennies like a Roman soldier guarded prisoners—let one escape and you pay with your life.

Knowing I was a safer confidant than Olsie about such economic-impact revelations, Juli told me about “the problem” before I left for work at the Bible college that morning and implored me with great passion to pleas-s-s-e pray that somehow, after these several weeks, she would find that missing math text in cavernous Columbine High School.

Truthfully, I could pray for this outcome with about the same confidence as asking the Lord to help me find a \$10 bill dropped in the school hallway a week ago—except, admittedly, stray textbooks are hardly in the same demand as ten spots. This, I thought, was pushing it. But that honestly did not deter her simple faith. So, I linked arms with her petition and dutifully prayed with all the thin faith I could muster.

Later that day, at Western Bible College (now Colorado Christian University) where I was teaching, I received an ecstatic phone call from Juli. She had found the book! During an English class, when she was distracted and pleading earnestly with the Lord about that math text, she suddenly spied a familiar-looking book in a window well of the classroom. Jumping up spontaneously, she raced to the window, picked up the text, and lo and behold it was her friend's missing math book.

After high school graduation, Juli's piano skills earned her a place in the Wheaton Conservatory of Music as a piano performance major. The very first day on campus she spotted Paul, who was a piano performance major also.

Here again was the invisible hand of God. With her woman's intuition Juli sensed right off the bat this was God's man for her. She was so sure that she even gave her mom and me a heads-up. Olsie, after visiting Wheaton for Parents' Weekend, was duly impressed with the tall, dark and handsome young man who had a winsome personality and a smile like sunshine. Meanwhile, with time-honored feminine wile, Juli baited the hook, waited for Paul to bite and shortly reeled him in before he knew what hit him. Here Paul thought all along that it was his own idea!

Paul is a brilliant young man with near total recall. He was co-valedictorian in high school. At Wheaton he graduated summa cum laude with a double major. A gentleman in every respect, Paul grew up in a pastor's home. Both his parents, Gordon and Elaine, had been Wheaton grads themselves. Elaine, like her son, graduated summa cum laude. Gordon had gone on to take a master's degree at Brandeis and his doctorate at Boston University.

Paul himself was cut from the same soldierly cloth as Juli. The only difference is, to this day I honestly could not tell you what *his* warts are. The guy is a gem.

If ever a marriage was prearranged in heaven, this was one. God reserved for Juli a special companion with a rare, but utterly necessary, combination of intelligence, recall, meticulousness, patience, unstinting love, and unwavering faith in the most baffling circumstances. Besides these virtues, he also has the persistence of a yellow jacket at a picnic. Any lesser combination of attributes, and their love boat would have been swamped long ago.

Ironically for a conservatory student, Paul's goal was missions, not piano performance *per se*, which tells one something about him right there. With that in mind, he took a double major, combining ethnomusicology (study of non-Western music) with piano performance. His vision was to help indigenous believers create culturally authentic Christian music for worship instead of borrowing the hymns and choruses that Western missionaries had imported.

He prepared for his mission endeavors by doing overseas missions trips in two entirely different countries and cultures. Paul's command of the French language allowed him to share Christ personally with nationals during two trips to Haiti. He also spent one summer in Papua, New Guinea, doing ethnomusicology research as part of his major.

Pastor Jess Moody once wrote, "There is no use to carry a lamp to Malaysia that won't burn at home." Well, *their* lamps burned at home. Virtually every Friday night for four years Paul and Juli joined a group of other Wheaton students doing street evangelism in downtown Chicago near the Water Tower. This story will give you some sense of Paul's heart for people.

At some point on his Friday night evangelism forays, Paul had struck up a friendship with a Chicago bag lady. For weeks he had been sharing Christ with her. One particular Friday some school obligation prevented him from coming in with the rest of the evangelism team. She missed him that week, and the next Friday she told him of her disappointment. Paul was so pleased that his absence mattered to her, that he was intent on making up for it. He apologized and offered to buy her an ice cream. However, *she* wanted to do the honors. So the bedraggled lady walked over to the nearby ice cream stand and ordered a cup (not cups!). Then she came back, plunged her unwashed hand into one of her soiled bags and pulled out,

like twin rabbits from a tattered hat, two used plastic spoons, whereupon she invited her honored guest to dig in. Loath to injure her feelings, even at some risk to his health, Paul smiled, thanked her, and without hesitation lit into their common cup. That's vintage Paul. For someone in the performing arts, I have never seen such a selfless and ego-free zone.

After her sophomore year in college, Juli spent the summer among the Meru tribe in Kenya where she duly impressed the nationals with her ability to pick up their music, rhythms, and even language. "You do it just like us!" they would tell her with admiring surprise.

Juli returned from Kenya mysteriously ill, the first manifestation since her accident of bad things to come. In retrospect, we understand she picked up some parasites there that for a long time went undetected. These, among other ailments, have contributed to her problems, though it is impossible to allocate primary and secondary causes. Thus, what is behind the tapestry of ensuing trials remains a mystery except for the one common thread that largely explains the breakdown of Juli's health—her earlier brain trauma.

Back at school for her junior year, she struggled with walking pneumonia. However, it wasn't until the last semester of her senior year that things started to unravel.

Ironically, the catalyst that set her troubles in motion was her participation in a communion service during which the partakers shared a common cup of grape juice. Apparently two young women seated near Juli had recently contracted mononucleosis, though it was unknown at the time. Shortly thereafter, when Juli returned from the Wheaton College Concert Choir annual spring tour, she was diagnosed with a bad case of mono and had to be put up in the college clinic. The severity of her case stemmed, I presume, from the fact then

hidden from us—that her whole immune system was on the verge of implosion.

Though mono itself is hardly the end of the world, this sickness could not have been more ill-timed. Her particular case was so debilitating that everything became a big struggle, again a cameo of things to come. Besides, her senior recital was originally scheduled for two weeks after her eventual diagnosis, a nightmare for any piano performance major.

Still, with Paul's constant help, she battled through it. Even though he was beginning to show signs of becoming sick himself, the poor fellow was her tireless and ever trusty pack animal. In the end somehow, Juli managed to rise from the dead. At her rescheduled senior recital she gave the performance of her life—a monument of God's timely grace.

Complicating matters even further was the fact that their wedding was set for Saturday, May 16<sup>th</sup>, the day before graduation! This was going to be an elaborate ceremony with a large reception at a local hotel. How does a sick girl coordinate all that on top of attending to her studies? It was enough to devastate anyone's health.

On her wedding day, the fragile bride (mouth full of painful canker sores) was a living lump of walking exhaustion. As Juli and Paul repeated their vows, "in sickness and in health," both sets of siblings, who were bridesmaids and groomsmen, as well as all the wedding guests, laughed at the irony. At that moment, none of us had the slightest inkling how applicable those words would be for them. Nor did the families realize the supportive and sacrificial roles they would have to play in the years to come.

Through sheer adrenaline, Juli mustered enough strength for the "Big Day" and even managed to walk for her commencement Sunday afternoon. But how would a girl in these circumstances find the time to pack and ship all her belong-

ings in preparation for her honeymoon trip immediately after commencement? She couldn't do everything, even with Paul's help.

Dad and Mom never even made it to graduation exercises. While J. I. Packer was regaling faculty, students, family, and friends with what I am sure was an eminent commencement address, Olsie and I were abruptly detoured to Juli's house in our graduation-best. Shortly lathered in sweat like two plough horses, we frantically lit in to sorting and boxing her possessions for shipment early the next day before our flight back to Portland. At least she received her diploma! Little did we know then that this disruptive mini-crisis would be a metaphor and regular feature of our lives for the next eighteen years (and counting).

After their marriage and graduation, Paul and Juli flew to Florida for an extended honeymoon and a desperately needed rest. Paul's grandparents offered them the use of their ocean-view condominium for a month so they could do nothing but relax and enjoy themselves.

With Wheaton and the stress of the last few months behind them, Olsie and I thought our worries were over. Juli and Paul would return refreshed, ready to start their new lives together and prepare to carry out their vision abroad.

Their future for the next couple of years was mapped out. They had enrolled in Western Seminary here in Portland, where I taught, with the intent of starting work in the fall on master's degrees in intercultural studies. They both planned to attend seminary while teaching piano to support themselves. After graduation they would head off to some third world mission field. This was a well-formulated plan and a beautiful dream, but the Lord had other ideas.

Upon her return to Portland, Juli had not revived nearly as much as we had hoped or expected. Fighter that she is,

she attempted to “keep up with the program,” but after just a few weeks, she had to drop out of Western. She still taught piano part-time, as her energy allowed. Then, as Juli’s energy level continued its free fall, Paul too came down with mono! To ration his strength, Paul dropped two of his classes, but managed to continue teaching piano part-time. His condition eventually worsened to the point where he had to drop his seminary studies altogether. (By March 1989, they both had to terminate their piano teaching—a heart-wrenching decision for all of us.)

Desperate to find relief, they reached in many different medical directions, but found no help. Like so many others with baffling afflictions, they were waved off with that exasperating cop-out so familiar to frustrated patients, “There’s nothing wrong with you,” or “You’re just depressed.” I guess blaming the victim is a universal human evasion tactic when the person responsible for answers has none, and refuses to admit it.

Finally, in December of 1988, a viral disease specialist at Oregon Health Sciences University (OHSU) diagnosed the health monster they were facing. Since they both became debilitated after contracting mono, he concluded that they were suffering from Chronic Epstein-Barr Virus (EBV causes mononucleosis). The recently discovered manifestation of this post-viral syndrome was labeled this way at the time. Shortly thereafter, the disease was renamed Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (CFS), a name which belies the seriousness of the disease.

Unfortunately, taming this beast has proven almost impossible. Although there have been some advancements in this area, there is still no cure for CFS, also known by its more recent name CFIDS (Chronic Fatigue Immune Dysfunction Syndrome). At the time of their diagnosis, much of the medical community was still skeptical of its existence. For those who

did acknowledge it, understanding this condition was still in its infancy. So even when the CDC officially recognized the disease in 1989, there was little any doctor could do to alleviate it. We were all facing a dead-end street.

When you're that deep in calamity, things can only go up from there, right? We had no idea back then that we had much further to go before hitting the bottom. With no treatment on the horizon, both of them continued to worsen, especially Juli. The specialist at OHSU had predicted that she would fare worse than Paul, due to the complexity of the female hormonal system. Now the dead had somehow to care for the dead.

Before long, however, Juli was beginning to suffer from another condition CFS patients are prone to. Whatever the underlying cause of this affliction, Juli was soon developing what would become a horrifying, out-of-control, and totally mystifying disease called Environmental Illness, now known as MCS (Multiple Chemical Sensitivities). In lay terms, MCS is a condition that varies in severity from patient to patient, and causes some people to react to certain chemicals that would never affect the average person.

A rough analogy would be to compare the varying degrees to which different people respond to prescription drugs. Some people have side effects, others have downright allergic reactions, and some poor souls even die. When neither you nor anyone you know has ever experienced reactions to any substance on the planet, you tend to think condescendingly, "Oh, you've got to be kidding!" This is the typical skeptical response that I, or even Juli, would have projected prior to our nightmare. As you will soon see, during the first years of Juli's CFS, she gave no more thought than you or I to chemical sensitivities. She had never heard of them.

However, though there are few who are as acutely sensitive as Juli became, other currently enigmatic phenomena, like

the mysterious Gulf War syndrome, have raised the profile of this problem. Occasionally stories appear in the media about doctors and medical workers becoming hypersensitive to latex rubber, commonly found in many medical supplies. As a result, they can no longer tolerate any exposure to everyday items such as paint, tires, etc. Some people become so “sensitized” to any form of rubber that they become housebound. Also, there are scattered reports of churches setting aside “safe rooms” for attendees who are hypersensitive to perfumes and scented lotions. Increasingly, carpets and glues in new housing and office complexes have caused devastating health effects for some. The bottom line is that we live today in a chemical-intensive world that for a growing number of people is toxic. In the future, my guess is that what is strange today will become more commonplace.

What we believe triggered our journey through this new health nightmare was a treatment Juli started for suggested “hidden allergies.” A naturopathic physician explained that these “hidden allergies” might be behind her CFS. Since she was beginning to experience a minor skin sensitivity to makeup, Juli and Paul thought this was plausible. Because traditional medicine was offering neither hope nor help for her CFS, she agreed to this treatment. His alleged approach was to desensitize the immune system by administering a series of chemical allergy drops containing small amounts of key chemicals to which her body was presumably reacting.

It did not take any time for this “treatment” to further wreck her already fragile health and impose an odorless, colorless, cheerless lifestyle that would devastate her pride of appearance. The day Juli walked into that misbegotten excuse of an office, though extremely ill, her father can assure you she arrived as a very pretty, petite, well-groomed young lady with hair tastefully coiffed, and all the right cosmetic touches in

all the right places. To this point she had refused to allow her growing debility to steal her desire to look her best (or conceal her native good looks).

Within two days of beginning the “allergy drop” treatment, she had to drop her beauty regimen like a hot iron. Her body was suddenly unable to tolerate hairspray and makeup— even regular soap and deodorant! This was nothing compared to where things would eventually go, but that development was a major crisis. All her natural feminine vanity was still intact, even if her immune system was not. After just a few more days things had deteriorated to the point where a mere whiff of any ordinary household cleaner now caused shrieking pain like she’d never felt before.

Incidentally, we learned much later from a medical assistant who had worked for this naturopath, that his method of testing and treatment was highly inaccurate due to the almost continual malfunction of the machine used to formulate the drops. She related that they often just mixed these concoctions by hand, simply guessing about the dosage. It finally got so bad that the poor woman couldn’t live with herself, so she quit her job in protest. We also heard from another one of his patients that a group of five clients was filing a lawsuit against him alleging medical malpractice.

Despite her well-established high threshold for pain, these reactions became unbearable. The excruciating symptoms she experienced when exposed to chemicals felt like burning acid was being poured into her veins and muscles. The list of offenders seemed to grow with each passing day. She eventually became so reactive to who-knows-what that she was almost totally isolated from mainstream life.

Unfortunately Paul himself was caught in this vortex of isolation for two reasons: 1) Juli required virtually constant care, and 2) the more he ventured outside, the more he increased the

risk that he would become a carrier of things she reacted to. If this happened, her body would go into orbit. An even greater risk was that he would import something on his person into the house itself, rendering her very dwelling unlivable to her. So Paul kept his head down, as much as circumstances permitted, taking a chance only on a pick-your-poison basis.

Of course this meant that Olsie and I could no longer enter the house for fear of being contamination camels ourselves. The ways we improvised for dealing with this problem imposed on all of us lifestyles stranger than a box of bugs. Eventually the well-traveled story of the Bubble Boy would become all too real to us.

Over the past eighteen years, we have been far more intimate with darkness than light, felt far more pain than pleasure, and seen more mysteries than miracles. Still, this God of ours, who seems to hide himself, as Isaiah said, has here and there dramatically broken his silence and rescued us in stunning ways. The very discipline of rehearsing these monuments has again and again strengthened our faith.

That is why we begin our message with the story of Juli and Paul. It is bewildering to know these two kids, their spiritual timbre, their passion to serve Christ, their gifts and capacities to make a difference, and then to see them put on the shelf. At the same time, others their age enjoy perfect health and life under the sun, while being spiritually tepid, wasteful of their endowments, and unfocused regarding their purpose in life. One has to wonder, “Where, oh where, is God?”

That tension is why we bring this message to you.



# Mystery and Monuments

**W**e rightly boast of a God of miracles. What we must remember is that he is also a God of mysteries. This mystery side of God's ways is precisely why the monument-polishing habit is so vital to a stable faith.

Many years ago, this lesson was forever branded on my consciousness. In 1980, I was invited to take a new position at Western Seminary in Portland, Oregon, while still teaching at a Bible college in Denver. After agonizing over the decision, the Lord made his direction clear to us. I accepted the appointment, and we put our home on the market. Nice place, choice neighborhood, fair price. Unfortunately, the housing market had slowed, and to my dismay there were few prospective buyers.

Several months later I found myself backing out of my driveway alone. It was the pits to leave behind my wife and two teenage daughters to fend for themselves indefinitely. Under cover of darkness I wept intermittently all the way to Fort Collins. I had never dreamed when I accepted the job that our family wouldn't make the move together.

At worst I figured our Denver home would sell soon. Week after week passed. The loneliness was oppressive for all of us. Absolutely nothing was happening on that house. I had not imagined that when I left in August, I would be flying back to Denver for Christmas break to visit my family. Still, I returned in hope, not because of any real prospects, but because of my own romantic notions about the way God works.

After Christmas break, I boarded the plane and headed back to Portland alone with a big lump in my throat. Bubble burst. Home not sold and husband wondering, how long, O Lord? How long? This is the mystery side of God.

As weeks passed, my situation evolved into something of a *cause celebre* around campus. The attention was both welcome and tiresome. I needed prayer desperately, but asking for it meant having to answer the same old questions the same old way. I was constantly reminded that heaven was brass, and the Lord, so far as I could tell, was doing absolutely zero to fix the problem.

Maybe it wasn't God's will for me to be at Western after all, people had to be wondering. In fact, a few of our friends in Denver did question whether the Lord was sending me a signal. One well-meaning student was really troubled by my situation because it blew his paradigm.

"God doesn't separate families," he offered.

Could have fooled me! I guess he overlooked Matthew 19:29 where the Lord Jesus speaks of the reward of any dis-

ciple “who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or farms for my name’s sake.”

After a couple of months my wife flew to Portland. During this brief visit she was able to observe me ministering in my new academic environment, meet my faculty colleagues, and talk with some of my students. Her visit coincided with the issuance of faculty contracts, renewed annually. Was I going to return next year with the housing situation still unresolved?

My wife has always been a tower of strength, one of those all-too-rare, battle-tested, whatever-the-Lord-wills spouses that every soldier of Christ needs at his side. God’s will has always been her will and her heart has always been fused with mine. If Olsie had second thoughts about an open-ended commitment to this teaching ministry, it would cause me to revisit the issue. Under the circumstances, I needed to reconfirm God’s will and her affirmation was critical.

Her answer did not surprise me. “Jimmy, I have sat through your classes and talked with students. It is clear to me that God wants you here,” she responded with tears welling up and a slight tremor in her voice. “It just kills me to be separated like this, and the girls miss you so much, but you have to sign that contract and we just have to wait on the Lord.”

With that bold step I hoped our resolution to follow wherever Christ leads was sufficiently established. Way down deep, I felt that this decision was the final bridge we needed to cross before the Lord intervened and blew the whistle on the trauma.

Fat chance. Time marched on relentlessly and days added up to weeks. Then one day, out of the blue, it happened—a phone call from my wife. Since long distance calls between us were strictly rationed, I knew this was either very good or very bad news. She informed me that there was a serious buyer,

with cash, who said he would be coming back in the morning with his wife for another look. Mentally he was already remodeling the place and that was an auspicious sign.

The next day passed slowly. Distraction soon started biodegrading into a surly impatience. Late in the afternoon I convinced myself that this qualified as an emergency and called my wife.

“Olsie, what’s going on back there?” I asked impatiently. “How come you haven’t called?”

“Oh, Jimmy, I don’t know what is happening,” she explained sadly. “The man came back this morning with his wife, then left with no explanation.”

Well, the potential buyers never returned.

Now that was a biggie, but by no means our first tribulation. And nothing compared to what lay ahead, which would include our daughter’s strange and horrifying future illnesses. If we hadn’t learned through experiences like this the “secret” of what I call monumental faith, I for one might have been a spiritual casualty. The Lord taught us a spiritual discipline known and practiced by God’s people from time immemorial, but widely overlooked and neglected today.

Without it, the storm waters of adversity would have swamped our spiritual boats, and we would have found our faith too small to cope with those rogue waves of incomprehensible affliction that seem unyielding to any amount of prayer, and even appear at times to intensify with every breath of supplication. Without the ballast of a monumental faith it is likely that faith will capsize in the giant swells.

When that anticipated sale fell through, I lost it for the better part of a day. Call it my day of spiritual infamy. Thank God for his mercy that passes understanding, for I was very angry with the Lord—something I had never done before.

Why? Some of us are wired so that we cope better with flash floods than with slow, dripping, water torture. Another factor was my faulty preconception of the way God was supposed to operate. This trial violated my paradigm. It was something of an “out of the box” encounter with the mystery side of God.

In our walk with God we tend to elevate precedents, biblical and personal, into “laws.” We get these neat little models in our heads of the way God is supposed to do his business. The effect is to put him in a mold. We like to have it so, because it furnishes us a comfort zone. We like predictability. We want to be able to anticipate with some accuracy what the Lord will or will not do. We like a God whose ways fit almost geometrical patterns. Therein lies a problem.

The plain truth is that sometimes it would be quite a challenge for us to go into court, unroll the recent tapestry of our experience with God, and convince a jury of our peers, based on what is going on in our lives, that we are the certifiable objects of divine favor or the beneficiaries of his power or wisdom.

When that long-awaited “buyer” left us stranded, I was exasperated with God. The previous day I had been running around campus singing his praises. Now it felt as though my premature thanksgiving had embarrassed even God himself. I just couldn’t believe he would do such a thing.

He shattered my little paradigm like a rock smashing a clay pot. Everything had come together and the Lord so cruelly, it seemed, pulled the rug right out from under my joy and embarrassed my praise. What is one to say about such a thing?

Never before, despite many hurtful and harsh experiences in my life, had I experienced this feeling of anger toward God. Previously I would have been unable to relate to this emotion,

but now I was so angry I could spit nails. The next day it was all I could do to collect myself to teach.

Between classes, uncharacteristically, an anti-social inclination came over me. I would stride angrily back to my office, slam the door to shut out the stupid world, and just sit there with almost clenched teeth, glaring defiantly at my hateful surroundings.

“Lord, I have served you faithfully. I have put you first and it just seems like you have put me last. Here, for your sake, I’ve burned my bridges behind me and you refuse to build any before me. Instead of helping, you seem to be teasing. Do I deserve to be jerked around like this? For two cents I’d just jump in my Datsun and head back to Denver.”

That day I was a fool percolating foolish thoughts, a man reminiscent of Jonah himself. In the displacement of my irrational anger, I was mad at everything and anybody who might dare to violate my little spatial boundaries.

Let’s face it. There are times when the Christian life doesn’t seem to live up to its billing. God doesn’t seem to perform as advertised. His behavior is maddeningly mysterious and He doesn’t seem to be operating according to blueprint.

Never imagine that you are immune to a spiritual knockout. “Let him who thinks he stands beware lest he fall” (1 Corinthians 10:12). In dark hours of prolonged crisis, I have heard the finest of Christian men and women cry aloud, “Where’s God? I don’t understand. Where *is* God?”

Didn’t the Psalmist say, “Why dost Thou stand afar off, O Lord? Why dost Thou hide Thyself in times of trouble?” (Psalm 10:1).

Wasn’t a great saint totally mystified by the ways of God when he asked, “How long, O Lord? Wilt Thou forget me forever? How long wilt Thou hide Thy face from me? How long shall I take counsel in my soul, having sorrow in my

heart all the day? How long will my enemy be exalted over me?” (Psalm 13:1–2).

Wasn’t Job exasperated out of his mind by his falsely accusing friends when God wouldn’t step forward and answer for him in the immensity and mystery of his sufferings?

Are we stronger than they are?

Once in a while that old philosopher’s dilemma gnaws at our faith like a dog on a bone. If God is totally good, one ponders; he cannot be all-powerful since he isn’t stopping the trouble. Then again, if he is all-powerful, he cannot be totally good and wise or else he would put a stop to all the misery and trouble we go through.

It’s neither mentally nor spiritually healthy to be in denial. We must be honest with ourselves, but most of all with God about our thoughts and feelings. He knows them anyway. No use to hide them, so let’s just agree to put away those phony “who, me struggling?” faces and get real. Before we go any further, let’s just admit to ourselves that sometimes in our distresses such thoughts flit across our minds.

We may not like to admit it, but it is good for us to realize that in this flesh, our faith, however real, is a fragile thing and easily rattled. Otherwise, if like Peter (Matthew 26:33) we are too sure of ourselves, our faith is apt to get mugged in the alleys of reality. Moments occur when our theology blushes or bristles at the realities of our experience. We don’t know how to reconcile the two. Times arise when God is thunderously silent in the face of our impassioned prayers and he seems unaccountably unresponsive to our predicaments. The operative word here is *seems*. The ways and works of God never deviate from his revealed character and promises. Never. In our human frailty and limited understanding, it sometimes seems that God is not measuring up to his résumé. How are we supposed to deal with that?

Is the answer just to trudge on in blind faith? No. Blind faith is not biblical faith. Biblical faith is rooted in revelation, which is grounded on historical testimony and evidence. The internal witness of the Holy Spirit confirms its truth.

No—blind, unthinking faith is not the answer. Blind faith is just another expression for gullibility, and this has nothing in common with Christian faith. Biblical faith is conviction built on facts, not irrational superstitions pulled mindlessly out of the air. The alternative to blind faith is what I term “monumental” faith.

What is meant by “monumental” faith? I do not mean “great” faith or heroic faith. No, this is a faith that has trained itself in the midst of adversity to *look back* at God’s *past* demonstrations of his character and confirmations of his promises. These monuments are a testimony of what he will do in the present, regardless of the difficult things that are happening.

Sometimes our faith may be under such heat from the friction of affliction that we may find ourselves at risk of spiritual meltdown. Long before that happens it is time to practice preventive maintenance.

How? Whenever you pray, polish your personal monuments. Our tender faith often requires shelter. That shelter is the active memory of those demonstrations and confirmations of God’s goodness, wisdom, power, and faithfulness that we have stored up from our past.

Whenever the mystery of our present experience of God obliterates any sign on our immediate horizon that God is who he claims to be, we need to hunker down under the umbrella of those trophies in our past. A “monumental” faith is able to look forward with confidence because it looks backward to the past. It discounts the baffling mysteries of present circumstances because it finds reassurance in his historical works,

his uncompromising character, and his unchanging promises. Therein is strength and hope for the future.

The logic of monumental faith is simple. If God loved and cared for me in the past; if God displayed his power and wisdom for me in the past; if God in his essential and moral being is the same yesterday; today, and forever; if I myself am on the same spiritual page as before when the Lord showed his glory on my behalf, then nothing in this baffling instance has changed except his secret purposes.

God has not changed, and you have not changed, but his purpose is different this time around. Be still, rest in the shade of his monuments, and wait patiently for him to finish his work. In the end he'll be there just as he was before.

“God has said, ‘Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.’ So we say with confidence, ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?’” (Hebrews 13:5b–6).

As Alexander Maclaren once put it, “Memory passes into hope, and the radiance of the sky behind throws light onto our forward path . . . [the] past reveals the eternal principles which will mold his future acts.”

Monumental faith is a faith trained to look away from the confusion of the moment to find security and confidence in the past evidences of God's character and faithfulness. The scriptures are replete with illustrations of monument building and polishing in the midst of the travails of God's people.

In Joshua 3, we find the armies of Israel poised at last for the impending invasion of the Promised Land. Their encampment lay near the banks of the swollen Jordan River, opposite Jericho. They were awaiting marching orders.

In front of them was a formidable obstacle. The Jordan and surrounding plain were in flood stage. But all this was providentially timed for God's purposes. One reason was to pro-

vide a miracle that would serve to accredit Joshua as Moses's divinely endorsed successor.

However, there was another important reason for the wonder God was about to perform. In chapter four we read that the Lord wanted a monumental memory that would be a foundation on which to trust him in the future.

On the previous day the people of Israel were given preliminary instructions. The first directive had to do with the order of march. The priests carrying the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord would move out first. Then the armies of Israel would follow. However, those following the priests and their sacred burden would at all times maintain a reverential distance of about 3,000 feet between the ark and the army.

The second instruction had to do with spiritual preparation. The next day God was about to perform a wonder that would link what he had done when their fathers crossed the Red Sea. At a specified point God was going to create a dam with his invisible hand so Israel could pass over to Canaan on dry ground. Note the word "dry" and marvel at the perfection of God's monument.

Such a close encounter with the presence and power of God calls for a consecrated people. Orders appropriate to that preparation were issued. The priests were instructed in their forward march to advance no farther than the spot where their feet touched the water's edge. There, in awe, they were to stand with everyone else while the power of God took center stage. Once the river basin cleared of passing water, the priests' orders were to take up their stations along with the ark in the middle of the riverbed, while the hosts of Israel passed by to the other side.

Joshua declared the Lord's intent to the people. God wanted to etch on their national consciousness an awareness of his presence and power among them. He did not want them to

forget. In the future, he knew times would come when they might imagine he had deserted them or they might forget his grace and power.

He erected a monument, physically and mentally, to keep hope and confidence alive in their hearts. Whenever doubt cast its shadows, this monument would be a reminder in perpetuity that the God of Israel was the same yesterday, today, and forever.

Once Israel crossed over to the west bank, and before the priests withdrew from their positions in the middle of the river bed, Joshua ordered one representative from each tribe to return to the spot where the priests were standing. Each was told to pick up a big stone and bring it back to camp, where they were to pile up these rocks as a memorial to the miracle they had witnessed that day.

The import of this act is mentioned twice in chapter four, a repetition underscoring its importance in the divine scheme of things. This mound was created for all God's people to take note and learn the wisdom of memorializing God's past works.

Remember how Jesus' disciples, when confronted with the problem of finding resources to feed the 4,000, had already forgotten the earlier lesson in his feeding of the 5,000?

We are too lax about preserving the memory of God's mighty acts on our behalf. Those monuments need to be polished! Otherwise, our faith languishes under the load of affliction at those times when God, for his own good reasons, seems to be in silent retreat.

Let me share a personal example of how failing to polish my personal monuments created an unnecessary crisis of faith. It was on that day of shame, the day when I was so angry that God was allowing our family to remain separated.

However one wants to explain it, when I was having my little hissy-fit with God, the Holy Spirit broke into my space uninvited and seemed to force me into an internal dialogue. It was as if he said:

“Jim, do you remember a few years ago that you had a problem with your home in Lakewood, Colorado?”

“Yes, I remember.”

“Do you recall the predicament you were in at that time?”

“I had forgotten.”

The Lakewood house was a significant monument of the grace, power, and faithfulness of God that I had totally obliterated in this most recent trauma. How could I have lost sight of it? The Spirit of God was using my recovered memory to restore me to spiritual health.

You see, three or four years previous to this recent crunch, Olsie and I had decided to build the home we were now trying to sell. It was a similar situation. Our realtor, when the market was white-hot, had advised us to go slowly and avoid putting our old house on the market too soon. Otherwise it might sell while our new home was under construction, and we would have to move out long before we were ready. Seemed like good advice.

As things turned out, by the time we put it up for sale, the market had buckled considerably. Now we faced the grim prospect of owning two houses, having bridge loans, and other problems. On my Bible college instructor's income, that would have posed a severe hardship, if not a calamity.

But just as our realtor's contract expired, it came to the point where we, on our own, had one weekend to sell our house or face the ugly alternatives. If the pros couldn't sell this house in three months, what were our chances of moving it in a single weekend? With major prayer (but I must confess,

scant confidence, for we had been praying all along) we ran an ad in *The Denver Post* and hoped for a miracle.

Saturday evening we were entertaining some missionary friends when the phone rang. Somebody had seen our ad and was interested in looking at the house. Great! The fellow wanted to come by on Sunday. I told him that Sunday would be fine, but it would have to be in the afternoon, since we were in church Sunday morning.

“I’ll come by tomorrow afternoon. Hey, by the way, you mentioned attending church. What church do you attend?” It turned out that he was a member of the adult class I taught at Riverside Baptist Church. Unbelievable “coincidence”!

Sunday afternoon he signed on the dotted line. Done deal. Problem solved. The Lord saved the bacon. How could I have forgotten an act of God like that—the same way the disciples forgot and puzzled over how to provide food for another, yet smaller, crowd.

Now, a few years later, as I sat there stewing in my office over being separated from my family, the Lord gently coaxed my memory and brought to mind the fact that he had nothing to prove to me. In the past he had amply demonstrated his faithfulness, his goodness, his power and wisdom. How many times did he need to validate himself to me? Wasn’t there a point where in the mysteries of the present I could fall back on the monuments of the past and trust his character and his promises?

If we have walked with God for any length of time, if we are veterans of the Christian life, then there must have been along the way some dark passages and deep valleys where God has created some rocks of remembrance. It is those monuments we must keep front and center in our consciousness for the stormy days.

When the Lord brought the sale of our former house to mind, perspective came into focus. Even through my emotionally blurred vision, I could clearly see the answer.

“Jim, have I changed?”

“Of course not, Lord.”

“Have *you* changed? Are you still with the program? Have you stayed the same course?”

“Lord, you know *I* have not changed. If anything, your grace has improved and strengthened my walk. I know of no reason why, if you covered my back then, you would abandon me now.”

“Then what do you suppose the difference is?”

“The difference must be your purpose. You had one design then, and another now. You are always the same. Your character is fixed. There is no moral variableness or dark shadow in it (James 1:17). What does change is what you are doing in my life at a given time, how you are training me. There may be some barnacles you are beating off my spiritual hull and this pounding is what it takes.”

“There’s your answer, Jim. Don’t forget it. Polish your monuments for a rainy season when you can’t see the Son shining.”

Now, I did not have that literal “conversation” with God, but the Spirit did prompt an internal dialogue in approximately that vein.

All of a sudden my spiritual grip returned. Ashamed and humbled by my extreme immaturity and irreverence, I repented in sackcloth and ashes, as it were, resolving never again to forget God’s monuments.

In a devotional by W. Glyn Evans, entitled *Daily with the King*, the following is written, “I will not demand that God explain himself to me at any time, for this is characteristic of the unregenerate man. I must be willing to let God be unreasonable, in my view, if necessary, because he is not concerned

with my understanding, but with my faith. The unregenerate man sees contradiction in the world and demands that God justify himself before him; the believing man makes no such demand, but believes God supremely.”<sup>1</sup>

That was a change point for me—one of those monumental illuminations that marked an important spiritual understanding. Right then and there I developed a little higher threshold for the mystery side of God. Since then it has gone even higher as we’ve experienced the horrifying and prolonged ordeal with Juli and her mysterious illness.

Exactly one week after losing our potential buyer, my wife called again. This time it was for real. A retired colonel and his college professor wife showed up at our door. They loved the house and offered us a higher price than we had been asking when we were so desperate to move. Is that amazing!

What God did back then still astounds me. That is why I regularly memorialize God’s monuments of faithfulness. I store up in the “seven plentiful years” the great acts of God in my life, to feed my soul during those inevitable “seven lean years.”

As you read about Juli and Paul’s sufferings and what our family has endured, be assured that this habit of polishing monuments has played a large role in sustaining us. On many occasions when we were just about to lose our grip, this monument-polishing discipline was the difference between spiritual stability and utter calamity. For us it has been polish or perish.

So when, in the mysteries of God’s inscrutable purposes, life turns into a monster, don’t camp in the present. Take refuge in the past. Run to God’s monuments. Lock your arms of faith around their testimony. Like the ark of Noah, they are there for you to ride out the raging floods and the deafening silences of God. Whatever the pounding, pummeling present may seem to say, he will never leave you or forsake you, even if he seems at times to hide from you.

In Isaiah 50:10 we are told, “Who is among you that fears the Lord, that obeys the voice of his servant, that walks in darkness and has no light? Let him trust in the name of the Lord and rely on his God.”

Does polishing monuments bring a quick end to life's stressful circumstances? Hardly. Sometimes when snow falls, it piles up.

I remember in 1992 when we were about five years into my daughter's illness. Life at that point was very stressful. What significantly sapped our strength was that Olsie was needed to care for Juli, as her circumstances caused Paul to be a virtual housebound prisoner. At this point her illness began taking ugly new turns and complications just kept multiplying.

One morning at the church office where my wife served as our bookkeeper, she literally came apart. Suddenly she could no longer add simple figures—literally. Right there this blind man opened his eyes and saw that his wife, overwhelmed by more than any one woman could handle, was sinking fast and needed rest. I told her I was taking her home immediately. The very fact that she didn't object was a huge clue that she was not herself.

Once in the car, Olsie's rubber bands just snapped. For fifteen minutes solid she was irrational: writhing . . . kicking . . . screaming . . . and bouncing her head off the dash. I felt helpless and totally bewildered. I had no idea what to do and fear seized me.

I got her home, put her to bed and for the next six weeks or so she was in a state of classic clinical depression, staring into a black hole so deep she thought she would never again see the light of day. In the months leading up to her breakdown, she had gradually lost twenty-five pounds and was so heartbroken and drained at Juli's pitiful condition that all her fountains were dried up. She could no longer even cry. Now at

last she collapsed emotionally in a fetal position on our bed. Occasionally she was tormented by literal voices taunting her and urging her to “Curse God and die!”

This happened to the most unlikely candidate on earth. Olsie has to be one of the strongest, most even-tempered, stable women alive. But even steel can bend and break under enough pressure. In fact, the doctor found her so anemic that she was near the point of needing a blood transfusion. How she stood up as long as she did is a wonder.

Thankfully, Olsie’s sister Barb and husband Don flew out to assist us in the nick of time, because just when she needed less anxiety and my full-time attention, I had to undergo surgery for a herniated disk. And I thought all the usual pastoral pressures, including a new church building program, were enough. Yet, every new trial is an opportunity to establish a new monument.

Neither my wife nor I have ever been very good about asking for or receiving help—a streak of that hillbilly independence we grew up with in the mountains of West Virginia. Now this had to change somewhat. When Olsie went down for the count, it literally took twenty-three volunteers, in rotating shifts, to cover all she had been doing. Suddenly church people came out of the woodwork to fill in the gaps, as they poured out their love and care for our family.

Though Juli was unable to be with church helpers physically, the emotional vacuum for Juli and Paul was filled in such a way that the two of them ironically experienced a sense of family they had otherwise missed in our previous go-it-alone mode. This significantly alleviated their sense of total isolation.

How wise are the unexpected ways of our God! Yes, he is a God of miracles, but he is also a God of mysteries. When the God of mysteries shows up, just take refuge in the shadow of his monuments.

Y E A R  
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*July 30, 1992*

*Dear Friends,*

Many of you have heard about the fiery trials my daughter Juli and son-in-law Paul have endured since 1987, as they both struggle with the debilitating illness known as CFS (Chronic Fatigue Syndrome) and my daughter with MCS (Multiple Chemical Sensitivities). We deeply appreciate your concerned questions and I'd like to explain the situation for those of you who are new to our church.

For the past few years Juli and Paul's life has been sinking like the doomed Titanic. Previously, they could each sit up for approximately two hours in half-hour increments, though Juli sat less than this. But they tried to keep their chins up and "the band played on." Unable to attend church or practice

piano, they devoted their small portions of energy to decorating their rented house where the bed was always nearby. Juli and Paul have always been perfectionists—sticklers for color, order, and coordination. Before Paul became ill, he had already done the more extensive work of painting, wallpapering, laying linoleum, and carpeting. The small decorating tasks they undertook brought them a sense of normalcy and cheer.

Now even that is gone. Her chemical sensitivities worsened to the point where we had to strip the house down to everything except their bed. Just as we see in Job chapter one that Satan wanted to destroy Job's very life, God's protective hand allowed Satan instead to test Job by destroying his possessions, his family, and finally his own health. In Juli and Paul's case, the stripping of their house and other human comforts has become a metaphor for the Spartan existence forced upon them in every area of their lives.

Because of her CFS, Juli has become completely bedridden. With her energy descending down to minus zero, she can barely lift her head off the pillow and walk to the bathroom. She needs help even to take a bath. It's so hard to watch such a high-spirited, life-loving girl wasted by a total vacuum of physical energy. It's also heartbreaking for Juli, who loves sunshine and pretty flowers, to be imprisoned in her bed and to have no energy for a single creative outlet.

I'm often asked by well-meaning folks eager to understand Juli's plight, "Chronic Fatigue Syndrome? Is Juli just tired all the time?"

That is a natural question, given the name of the illness. This, by the way, is as cruel as naming Parkinson's disease "Chronic Shaking Disorder," or paraplegia "Perpetual Sitting Syndrome." Unfortunately, the symptoms she has in no way resemble the typical use of the word "fatigue." Let me try to explain.

Juli describes the sensation as a kind of “temporary painful paralysis,” where every movement bathes her muscles in what feels like a paralyzing poison-causing pain, heaviness, and intense pressure. Continued exertion increases the symptoms until she has no alternative but to lie still and rest until the toxins break up and leave her system. Only then can she attempt another movement, which starts the whole process over again.

No, Juli is not simply “tired.” Imagine for a moment having the strength literally drained from your body so that the slightest exertion leaves you utterly exhausted and unable to move for hours or days. Imagine living in constant pain, where every movement you have the energy to make is agony. Add to that a devilish sleep disorder, which makes it impossible for you to sleep, sometimes for weeks at a time. Mix in the pain of being misunderstood, labeled a malingerer, lazy, or simply depressed, making this whole nightmare somehow your fault and something you could fix if you simply had the will. Don't forget the pain of seeing your dreams for the future vanish like smoke, as year after year, instead of growing stronger, your situation grows more desperate with each passing day. Ponder well these things and you will have only a glimpse of what Juli and Paul have been enduring.

As if all that weren't enough, things have intensified with Juli's chemical sensitivities. She is now sensitized to almost any type of chemical (especially phenol and formaldehyde, which seem to be in almost everything). She detects and reacts severely to odors that only animals can smell at such distances. It is now at a point where she even reacts to Paul if he has one of these chemicals on his person.

Her condition and required care is almost beyond belief. It is a wonder that she, Paul, and my wife are in their right

minds. If something doesn't give soon, one of them may go over the edge.

As I've told many of you, the burning and searing pain in her veins and muscles that these reactions incur is out of this world. Psychosomatic? Try to fool her system and her body immediately reacts from any place in the house. Although skepticism remains in the medical community, other people have reported the same phenomena, though it is something we had never heard of or could have imagined before this.

Here are some examples of the situation we face daily.

A few months back, she experienced a severe reaction to a shirt I was wearing. I had removed my sport coat but the shirt, undetected by me, contained a residue of dry cleaning fluids. Within minutes, with a barrier between us, she had a reaction. Who could believe such a thing?

On another occasion, Olsie bought some earplugs from a girl who was wearing perfume. When Olsie was approaching Paul so he could give them to Juli, he could smell the aroma. Since those earplugs would have thrown Juli into a painful tailspin, from which she wouldn't be able to recover, they had to be returned and exchanged for new, fragrance-free replacements. Unfortunately, this has become an all-too-familiar routine. To do anything for them, Olsie must go a hundred yards to take one step, so to speak.

Not long ago, Paul accidentally dried his hair with a stray towel that had fabric softener on it. For days he was unable to enter Juli's room, except to run her food in, then beat a hasty retreat. Trying everything, he finally cut off all his hair and resorted to coating his scalp with tomato paste, since he knew it worked on skunk odor. It dulled the "fumes" to a degree, but what a humiliating price! Eventually another patient shared the secret to finally neutralizing the phenol/perfume smell: Heinz Apple Cider Vinegar! Nobody but Paul is "safe" enough

environmentally to be with her. He only leaves the house on a very limited basis, being extremely careful to avoid contacting any materials or odors.

Nevertheless, God's staying hand is in their midst. Even though Juli's condition has worsened, Paul has recently begun to make some major strides so that he is able to care for her and tend to their basic needs. However, he needs prayer. He is still not strong, very underweight, and afflicted with chronic infections that cause his eyes to get red and swollen.

People have trouble relating to the circumstances of this illness. They ask if we should hospitalize Juli. Are you kidding? The kind of environmentally protected unit that Juli needs is not available to us locally. The chemicals within a typical hospital could kill her overnight. Can we get help someplace else? Juli is so incredibly fragile that we would jeopardize what little health she has by taking her out of state.

On the other hand, if help could come to her, the "detoxing" procedures alone would be a challenge. They would involve purchasing special clothing, bathing to eliminate perms, deodorants, perfumes, lotions, and so forth. Who would be willing to go through all these contortions just to get near enough to examine or help her? So we are in between the proverbial rock and hard place. Now that we're in this situation, all sorts of horror stories come out of the woodwork. We confront the reality that there is an underworld of human misery and broken health that medical science is virtually ignoring. "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God" (2 Corinthians 1:3,4).

As for our plight, God in his goodness has enabled us to complete construction on an environmentally safe home close

to the church. This way Juli and Paul can receive help with errands from Olsie and Paul's folks, who moved here from New York. This building project was very complicated, extremely labor-intensive, and included many expensive materials. But Juli and Paul are now moved into their "safe" house. While they still have no furniture, their bed is placed near the French doors so she can look out into the pretty backyard with its abundance of trees and friendly squirrels.

For months Juli rarely sees or talks to any human but Paul. Both are almost totally cut off from the outside. Juli doesn't even have the luxury of reading, as she is allergic to the print and chemicals in the paper. For Olsie and me, all direct communication has been cut off for months. What an agony! She can't talk on the phone or see pictures of the family, so we communicate entirely through Paul. We miss her terribly. It's killing Olsie inch by inch to feel so helpless, knowing that Juli's frail body has dwindled down to eighty-nine pounds. God only knows how Olsie maintains her strength.

I have no idea how Juli and Paul keep their mental sanity. With every diversion cut off from them, they have taken to memorizing whole chapters of scripture. He memorizes a few verses when he is far enough away from her to read, then returns and repeats them to her. Yet, to this hour I have never—and I mean never—heard a word of complaint. There are wimps and there are warriors; Juli and Paul definitely fit the latter category. Their fight and endurance constantly astound me. However, there have been many tears of pain and confusion. There seem to be no answers—no way out. Believe it or not, I've only told you about sixty percent of their ordeal.

Still, their faith holds strong. How are they coping through it all?

Juli finally had an occasion to explain their spiritual perspective. The following are some excerpts taken from a letter

she wrote for her mother, who at the time had succumbed to the inevitable and had an emotional and physical collapse. To give you some idea of the demands of this disease, every word was “dictated” by Juli from inside the house to Paul, who wrote them down on paper in the garage:

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I wanted to write and let you know how I'm doing spiritually and about the extra measure of grace that God has given me to cope emotionally. I'm praying that the Holy Spirit will use my letter to give you that same grace. I emphasize Holy Spirit because only he can break through the darkness, gloom, and depression that you feel. I know this from personal experience.

A few days ago, Paul and I were talking about our ordeal. I was crying and he was trying to help me spiritually, because I had said to God in my prayers “How do you expect me to cope with all this when I can't see my parents, fellowship with your people, or pick up my Bible like everyone else and get perspective?” Paul said, “But that's exactly the enemy's strategy, to cut off your spiritual supply lines.” Then the Holy Spirit brought to my mind a passage that we had memorized in 1 Peter 5:

*Be of sober spirit; be on the alert. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour, but resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same experiences of suffering are being accomplished by your brethren in the world. And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself perfect, confirm, strengthen, and establish you.*

Somehow just knowing Satan's strategy strengthened my resolve to fight the good fight, but I still needed to know that God cared about what I was going through. Then the Spirit brought the prior verses in 1 Peter 5 to my mind:

“Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you at the proper time. Casting all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.”

He cares for you! At this point the Holy Spirit turned back on my spiritual light and gave me the extra measure of grace that has lasted me until now. Along with this I received the following insights:

How was Satan trying to devour me? By trying to convince me that God did not care, and therefore I would never be able to cast all my anxiety on him. He also tried to convince me that God would never exalt me and bring me out of this situation. Then Peter says to resist him. How?

By humbling myself under the mighty hand of God. I had to admit that I could not take care of myself, that God was in control and that he could bring me out any time he wanted.

I also resist Satan by being firm in my faith. How do I do that? By knowing that other Christians are undergoing the same kind of suffering as I am. That’s what Paul was telling me that night. He reminded me that Satan tries to use isolation from God’s word, from other Christians, or both, to devour believers.

I resist him by knowing that after I have suffered for a little while, the same God whose grace brought me to his salvation will also bring me out of this situation. He *will* perfect, confirm, strengthen, and establish me.

Satan has tried to use my illness and isolation to devour me. He is using your physical and emotional exhaustion to try to devour you. He is attacking your mind because it is chemically imbalanced with severe depression. I know that Luther and Spurgeon went through similar bouts with depression. Other men and women of God throughout time have gone through extreme torment with depression and it is this very point that I want you to see. Satan is attacking you because you belong to God and are valuable to his eternal cause.

When Satan asked God's permission to test Job, God said that Job was upright and blameless in his sight. Job went through severe depression for dozens of chapters, but God eventually delivered him. We all need to remember this. James 5 says, "You have heard of the endurance of Job and have seen the outcome of the Lord's dealings, that the Lord is compassionate and is merciful."

A few months back Paul told me that a verse you were hanging onto was, "My grace is sufficient for you." It is! But we also need to remember that, "My power is made manifest in weakness." It takes little perception to conclude that God wants our whole family, between my illness, Dad's surgery, and your depression, to be in a perpetual state of weakness.

I am reminded of the passage where Jesus was told that Lazarus had died. When he went there, Mary was so consumed by grief that she could only cry and say, "Lord if you had been here, my brother would not have died." That's where I was a few months ago, and that may be where you are now. Jesus never chastised Mary for weeping, but wept alongside her.

Jesus, the very God of very God, experienced every kind of human suffering. He doesn't ask us to go through anything that he did not go through himself. This is one of the few perspectives that helps me.

While my earthly mother is limited in her ability to care for me, my Heavenly Father is not. Every time I look out at our pretty birdbath, the Spirit reminds me of how little the birds do to care for themselves. They don't sow, reap, or gather into barns, and yet God feeds them. How much more does he care for you and me.

God continues to provide for my needs. Just when I think, "I'm getting allergic to everything on my plate; I won't have anything to eat," he provides a new type of food I can handle.

I've also begun to notice a slight increase in energy over the last few weeks. Even my ability to dictate this letter to Paul

is proof that I have the mental energy to focus my thoughts. I feel like I have more and more strength to function.

And he has faithfully provided members of our church to take care of our ongoing needs. They are incredibly caring, consistent, and committed. We literally have a small army to help—and it takes one to keep our lives going. When the burden is spread over dozens of people, it is not only easier, but more efficient. Now you can spend all of your time caring for me in the way only you can, as my emotional support and sounding board.

Because we have so many people helping and coming by the house, I no longer feel so lonely and isolated. Even though I can't go to church, I feel like I have a church family. Just knowing that someone is running an errand for us or is out on the corner praying helps us hang on emotionally.

Please don't worry about my loneliness, Mom. It's still really hard, but not only are church people there for me but also God has provided me companionship in a way few women experience: the unconditional, undivided love and devotion of the godliest man I could have ever asked for. God may not choose to give us a family, but Paul is always by my side, loving me as Christ loves his bride.

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As you can imagine, such wisdom and concern for the well-being of her mother, amid the swirling vortex of her own afflictions, evoked in me no small measure of joy and wonder.

*Thank you for your prayers,*

*Pastor Jim*