

A NEW KIND
of
NORMAL

HOPE-FILLED CHOICES
WHEN LIFE TURNS
UPSIDE DOWN

CAROL KENT



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

NASHVILLE DALLAS MEXICO CITY RIO DE JANEIRO BEIJING

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Prologue

FACING SHATTERED DREAMS

*T*he day was swelteringly hot. Humidity lurked in the house like an unwanted guest that refused to leave. The air-conditioning couldn't keep the temperature down with so many doors open to the outside. Sweat dripped down our faces in dirty little streams as my husband and I directed the movers to place furniture and boxes in the appropriate rooms in the house we had just purchased in Florida.

I found myself speaking out loud to no one in particular: "Anyone who moves to this state has definitely not visited here in the month of July. I have been here less than a day, and I miss the Great Lakes. I miss changing seasons. I miss my friends. I miss my beautiful home along the St. Clair River. I do not want to be here. I hate this weather! I hate this stinking humidity! I hate the reason I had to move here! I want my old

life back. I want my peaceful, comfortable, convenient, normal life back!"

"Hey, lady," the mover shouted, "where does this table go?" Wiping away a stray tear, I suddenly realized that the people who were assisting with this move didn't know the difference between a tear and another stream of perspiration. Ah! Something to be thankful for! I didn't want pity. I didn't want compassion. I didn't want to be vulnerable in front of strangers or with anybody else, for that matter, including some relatives who had come to assist with the move. I wanted to be alone in my misery. But that wasn't possible on moving day. So I did what I had done so often before. I sucked in my grief, turned up the "denial" dial on my emotions, wiped my grimy face with a dishtowel, and started directing traffic.

After several interminable hours, the last piece of furniture was off the moving van, and the final box had been piled in the kitchen. What a disgusting mess! *Kind of like my life*, I thought. I was teetering on all-out morbid. Moving across the country was not my idea of fun. I was especially unhappy about being within driving distance of Disney World—that undesirable place where smiling parents brought their perfect families to see Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, and Snow White. I certainly didn't want to be reminded of fairy tales and happily-ever-after endings.

My life was no longer tidy and unfettered. It was messy, sad, difficult, and unwanted. No one would be selling tickets to advertise my idyllic life. Those days were over. Another chapter of my life had begun, and there was nothing I could do to change it, alter the direction, or manipulate more favorable cir-

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cumstances. Life as I had known and enjoyed it had turned upside down. My disappointments were gigantic. My hopes were buried in the rubble of recent developments that were so shocking that I was still trying to find any meaning in the fractured pieces of reality that remained.

In one moment in time, everything about the future changed.



If you have read *When I Lay My Isaac Down*, you know about the startling event that shaped my reaction to this move. Gene and I are the parents of an only child—a son named Jason Paul. While still in the womb, we called him Thumper because his activity was constant and his prebirth antics were a precursor of the black belt he earned in karate at the age of eighteen. I was the eldest of six siblings, and as the firstborn grandchild, our son had a personal cheerleading squad surrounding him from earliest days—three sets of grandparents, along with aunts and uncles in abundance. Eighteen first cousins would join us after J.P. was born, and they all adored him. He was as close as a brother to some of them. Our expectations for our son's future were high, and Jason did not disappoint.

He was a witty, high-energy child who endeared himself to anyone who took the time to know him. While in high school, he became president of the National Honor Society and tutored younger students. Jason went on mission trips with his church youth group and volunteered for Habitat for Humanity. Long before graduating in the top twenty in his class, he set his sights on getting into the United States Naval Academy. He received an early invitation to become a cadet at West Point

but held out for his heart's desire—becoming a midshipman at the USNA in Annapolis.

The next four years flew by—blood, sweat, tears, exercise, military drills, focus, discipline, more exercise, mental challenges, Commandant Sailing Training Squadron, U.S. Army Airborne Jump School, Midshipmen Leadership Training, U.S. Air Force Combat Survival Training, an Israeli internship program, Search and Rescue Swimmer School, and MINI/BUDS SEAL training on Coronado Island, California. Our son's schedule made my head swim.

Then came the week of graduation in May 1997—complete with color parades, a formal ball, multiple course dinners, and all of the pomp and pageantry a USNA celebration of this magnitude could contain. The fanfare was euphoric. The graduating midshipmen tossed their hats in the air on national television. The diploma was earned, and Jason received a bachelor of science degree in political science while being commissioned as an ensign in the U.S. Navy.

The next year and a half flew by as Jason began nuclear engineering school in Orlando, Florida. Navy Scuba School, U.S. Navy Nuclear Power School, and a lateral transfer to Special Operations—all were accompanied by academic and physical training to become the best defender of freedom the U.S. had in its military human resources arsenal.

There was little time to think of dating. However, J.P.'s involvement in a local church introduced him to the love of his life—and along with this charming woman came two precious and precocious children, aged six and three. Jason and his future wife fell in love over a six-month period of time, and when his orders changed

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abruptly, sending him to Surface Warfare Officers School in Newport, Rhode Island, they wanted to go together.

We helped plan a wedding that took place in a picturesque suburb of our hometown of Port Huron, Michigan, three weeks later. On the day of our son's marriage celebration in September 1998, Gene and I become grandparents on the same day we became in-laws—and our joy was effusive. The ceremony and reception were followed by a one-night honeymoon before this new family packed up and drove to the East Coast.

Within a short time, there were challenges. The biological father of Jason's stepdaughters was seeking unsupervised visitation, despite allegations of abuse against him that had led the judge during divorce proceedings to require another adult to be present during his visits with his daughters. Jason and his wife sought legal counsel, but they left the attorney's office feeling helpless after being told they might not have enough provable evidence of abuse to keep the court-ordered supervision arrangement intact.

In retrospect, we began to see our son unravel mentally. His fear for the safety of his young stepdaughters consumed his thoughts. Later, our daughter-in-law told us she found him curled up in the embryo position on their bed, pounding his fist into the mattress, repeating, "I don't know how to protect the girls! I don't know how to protect the girls!"

On the morning of October 25, 1999, a phone call shook our life to its foundation. Our son had been arrested for the murder of his wife's first husband—and he was being held in the county jail in Orlando, Florida.

In that one shocking moment, everything changed. That

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phone call became a defining moment in time—a marker that has forever divided our past “normal” life from a life we never expected and certainly didn’t want. This book is for anyone, like us, who has ever faced an uncertain future because one of those “marker moments” will not let you return to your former definition of “normal.”

Mary, the mother of Jesus, faced a defining moment when an angel announced her pregnancy. Little did she know that becoming pregnant before marriage would not be the worst moment of her life. Just over three decades later, the Cross would change everything for Mary. She would discover there was no going back to the former days of nurturing and protecting her young son. He was grown now, and He had to face torture and death *alone*.

For all of us who watch a friend or loved one in the crucible of a life event that, on the surface, is wrecking his life, the agony is palpable. My son is no savior. Mary’s son was the Savior of the world. My son is a military-trained young man who believed he was protecting his stepdaughters when he committed his crime. His sentence was not the Cross, but it is life without the possibility of parole.

In a very personal way, I identify with Mary’s need to release control of her grown son. I live every day waiting for a miracle of mercy that may never come in this lifetime. The waiting is hard. Painful. Crushing to the spirit. It smashes hope for a better future. It’s ugly. Resistant to laughter. Unforgiving. It’s an invisible tattoo on my forehead that reads: MOTHER OF A MURDERER. I am living in a new kind of normal.

I invite all of you who are living in circumstances that are dif-

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ferent than you expected to read the words of Jerry Sittser. Try to “hear” the voice of a husband and father who received news that his wife, baby daughter, and mother were killed in a car crash by a drunk driver:

I had no power to control the circumstances that altered the course of our lives . . . But I discovered soon after the accident that I still had power to determine the course my life would take, however limited that power seemed at the time. I had the power to choose how I would respond and whether or not I would trust in God.¹

This book is about choices—not the kind we place on goal charts, but the choices we all need to make when our carefully developed life plan takes a U-turn or comes to a sudden halt. It’s about discovering fresh hope and renewed courage when we would rather give up. It’s about willfully choosing to make the future better, even if we don’t receive a tangible benefit for making the effort. It’s about choosing not to waste the sorrow. It’s about giving hope to others in the middle of our brokenness and tears, because it is all we have to offer. And because it is all we have to give, it is enough.

I think Tim Hansel says it best. Following a mountain-climbing accident that resulted in continuing physical challenges, he wrote, “I had a choice. I knew by now that the damage was permanent, and that pain would be a companion for the rest of my journey. I had to learn a whole new way of living or fold up my cards. The deck was stacked. The life I’d always known was never to be again.”²

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Perhaps you're feeling like folding up your cards. Making hope-filled choices may be the furthest thing from your mind right now. But I challenge you, as I have been challenged, to consider your life from some different angles. Are you willing to take the chance that your "new normal" might offer benefits you never expected? Perhaps even joy? I realize that may sound like a big stretch—but, really, what do you have to lose?

I don't promise easy answers. In fact, you might wind up with more questions than before you began this journey to a new normal. There will be frustration, hurt, and more bumps in the road. But your movement can be purposeful—in the direction of hope.

Take the risk. Join hands with me on this journey. It is all we have. And it is enough.

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SYMPATHY CARDS AND RAZOR WIRE



When Despair Tries to Take Me Under . . .

I CHOOSE LIFE

LIFE ISN'T LIKE A BOOK.
LIFE ISN'T LOGICAL OR SENSIBLE OR ORDERLY.
LIFE IS A MESS MOST OF THE TIME.
AND THEOLOGY MUST BE LIVED
IN THE MIDST OF THAT MESS.

—CHARLES COLSON¹

*I*t was Christmas morning, and my husband, Gene, and I were standing in line at the prison, waiting to get through the razor wire so we could visit our son. The stark buildings were not decorated with colored lights, evergreen wreaths, and holiday bows. There were no Christmas carols amplified over loudspeakers, and there was nothing celebratory in sight that would remind a passerby that December 25 was the most notable holiday of the year.

Actually, even the idea of a “passerby” was remote. To find Hardee Correctional Institution on deserted State Road 62, we routinely scanned the landscape from the highway and looked for the prison water tower. Once it was identified, we knew we were getting closer as the image grew larger against the rough and undeveloped landscape on this little-traveled road. The driveway from the road to the prison was a quarter mile long, ending with the cement lot where visitors parked while they spent time with their family members inside this maximum-security facility.

How different this Christmas was from my growing-up years! It was also considerably unlike the last holiday season Jason spent at home. My mind flashed back to December 1998. Jason had married just three months earlier, and he brought his family to our home in Michigan for what was sure to be a joy-filled holiday. We were eager to make lasting memories with our new stepgranddaughters.

The girls burst into the house with eager enthusiasm and rushed to the Christmas tree. “Wow!” our six-year-old said. “It’s so beautiful!” The three-year-old was already chasing the cat, hoping for a little nose-to-nose intimacy with our furry Himalayan feline. I saw both girls scanning the brightly wrapped gifts that had been placed with love under the Christmas tree.

“Some of those gifts are for you, girls. We’re so glad you are here!”

Their faces beamed, and I could see them evaluating whether they knew us well enough to risk an abrupt move. Gene and I must have given the right signal, because they dove into the pile of gifts, checking to see which packages had their names on them. The love I felt for these gorgeous little girls and the

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delight we experienced in having Jason and his new family join us for the holidays is beyond words.

That Christmas is like a treasured mosaic of giggling children, turkey and mashed potatoes, strawberry ice cream Jell-O, and homemade, decorated cookies—lots of cookies and hot chocolate (with marshmallows, of course). Our son and his wife were in the throes of young love, and I enjoyed watching them hold each other by the fireplace. Their love was deep and wide and tender and compassionate. I found myself wiping tears of joy, knowing my son had met a woman who was ideal for him. On Christmas Eve other relatives joined us, and the little girls were loved by all as their high energy ignited the house with the extravagant hope that should belong to every child.

None of us knew it would be our last Christmas to celebrate with such reckless abandon and with an unencumbered sense of “normal.” Never again would our family conform to a standard holiday experience or to the type of Christmas celebration we thought we would enjoy for the rest of our lives. Jason’s incarceration changed that picture forever.

I suddenly lurched back into the reality of where I stood in the prison visitation line, now six Christmases later. Three women were ahead of us in the line, and their conversation was loud enough that I could easily overhear what they were saying. They, too, were relatives of inmates—and I had instant respect for these women who chose to come to the prison visitation yard on a day that is normally spent on feasting, merriment, and gift giving in the comfortable surroundings of home, family, and friends. However, I wasn’t prepared for the wave of emotion that engulfed me as I heard their banter:

"This is my last Christmas to stand in this line. My son is getting out in eight months."

"Oh," another mother said wistfully, "we have eight more years before we'll be spending Christmas Day at home with our son, but we're going to make it."

Another voice chimed in: "My husband will be home for Christmas in four more years. The kids and I can't wait."

Despite bursting into completely unexpected tears, I managed to smile at the three women in front of me. We were strangers in a social club we never expected to join—women from completely different backgrounds with a shared bond: a family member who was incarcerated.

"I'm so happy for all of you," I blurted out in a gesture of forced enthusiasm. But the tears rolling down my cheeks told the truth. My heart was broken, and I could no longer pretend that everything was going to be fine. My son was *never* coming home for Christmas dinner. He would be behind razor wire for the rest of his life—and today he was only thirty-one years old.

Inside, my heart felt pangs of anger and jealousy. All of the joy-filled comments I heard from the women moments earlier were drowned out by an ugly voice inside me that taunted, *Your son will never walk in freedom again. All of the rest of the Christmases of your life will be spent standing in the visitation line at the prison. You'll be patted down as you go through while a stranger looks into your mouth to see if you are hiding an illegal substance and runs hands around your bra, looking for contraband. You will be scrutinized as if you are a criminal every time you visit your son for the rest of your life. You are a loser.*

One thing was crystal clear. I had "a new kind of normal" that had nothing to do with the life I envisioned for myself, my only

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child, my family, and my ministry. The son of my womb, the boy-turned-man I loved so much, was not coming home—*ever*. I was running out of hope—hope that any of the appeals would result in a favorable court ruling, hope that our son would ever walk in freedom again, hope that we would ever be together in our home on a Christmas morning, hope for the happiness that everyone else appeared to have. I felt all alone in my despair.

BRIGHT BEGINNINGS

Jason Paul Kent was born on a crisp fall day on a picture-perfect Sunday morning. To make the story even more idyllic, we were living in Fremont, Michigan, the town that was built on the success of the Gerber Baby Foods Corporation, and we were in the hospital “built by Gerber.” Jason weighed in at 5 pounds, 14 ounces, and he measured 17 inches in length. A tiny bundle to be sure, but a genuine Gerber baby. After nine hours of painful labor, our long-awaited firstborn child, a son, was placed in my arms. Had I known ahead of time how painful childbirth is, I would have pleaded for drugs (or at least requested an epidural), but I was a mind-over-matter kind of woman and never asked for help if I could muscle through the pain. Our baby boy was worth it!

To make the day even more spectacular, my next-door neighbor, Mary, gave birth to a baby girl on the very same day in the same hospital. What a celebration! Family members and friends joined us in spreading the good news. “Gene and Carol have a boy!” This birth took place five years after our wedding day, and the grandparents had been waiting a long time for their first

grandchild. To say that Jason was instantly enveloped with love is the understatement of the century.

The gift of life—a tiny infant wrapped in a flannel blanket, with ten tiny toes and ten delicate fingers, a wobbly head attached to a scrawny, exquisitely gorgeous pink body. A cute button nose and cherry-colored cheeks. That small bundle held all of the promise Gene and I needed for the assurance of a bright, purposeful, and joy-filled future. With God's help, we were determined to be great parents.

As Jason grew older, we got him a "big-boy" bed. It didn't take him long to realize that Gene and I would stay at his side longer at bedtime and stroke his head and hair if he kept talking. There were many conversations and prayers, along with questions and answers during our tucking-in ritual.

I often reminded him, "J.P, always remember God has something very special for you to do with your life. You can be anything He wants you to be. I can hardly wait to see what God has planned for you. I've been praying for you since before you were born."

One of Gene's early activities with our son was to read aloud to him. As soon as Jason was capable of listening to an entire chapter of a book, Gene decided to introduce him to C. S. Lewis. Over a period of several months, Gene read all seven books in *The Chronicles of Narnia* to a very animated and energetic listener. I once caught Jason searching for Narnia in the back of an antique wardrobe closet. If the mind could conceive it, he could believe it. He was ready to join Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy in the land of Turkish Delight. "Adventure" could have been Jason's middle name.

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As Jason entered his teens, “my guys” loved running together—and they would often challenge each other with physical exercise goals. When Jason was in his senior year at the U.S. Naval Academy, Gene and Jason trained for and ran a half-marathon together. They challenged each other to physical and intellectual excellence. I loved listening and joining in as they bantered back and forth about global events, politics, and controversial issues. No matter what the topic, they would find a place for humor—both appropriate and irreverent. I would shake my head in mock disapproval, but my mother heart held those moments with tender gratitude to God for giving our family such a close and caring relationship. There were occasional conflicts, especially over teenage bedroom décor, but they were short-lived. Gene and I quickly decided to only make a big deal over things that were immoral or illegal. Most other issues were not worth a major conflict.

Between Jason’s sophomore and junior years of high school, we heard about an academic Christian camp in Manitou Springs, Colorado, called Summit Ministries. They combined an aggressive academic program in Christian worldview studies with a rigorous athletic program. It sounded like a custom fit for Jason’s growing desire to make a difference with his life. He couldn’t wait to go, and during the two weeks he was there, he had a “defining moment.”

One evening soon after his return, I found him journaling in his room. His Bible was open, and he was deep in study. As Gene and I talked more with Jason about his time at Summit, he said, “Mom and Dad, I really believe God wants me to serve in military, or maybe even in political leadership, and I believe the best

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place I could get prepared to do that would be at the U.S. Naval Academy."

FROM ANNAPOLIS TO ORLANDO

The rest of the story is history. Jason's nomination came from Congressman David Bonior, followed by an appointment from the Academy. On a hot day in late June 1993 we packed up the car to drive Jason to the next season of his life—"plebe summer" in Annapolis. With more than a few nostalgic tears, I marveled at how fast his high school years had gone by, while simultaneously anticipating his future that was sure to be filled with international travel and a wide range of opportunities to use his mind, his faith, and his determined focus to make a positive difference in this world.

Four years later, the whole family gathered in Annapolis for graduation week, and only two years after that, our son was married and enjoying being a father to two beautiful girls. Whenever our granddaughters visited us, they hunted for dress-up clothes. My closet was ransacked as they turned "flowy" skirts and silk scarves into ballroom attire. They found my high heels and jewelry and transformed themselves into regal princesses. The music was turned up, and our dancing girls tirelessly entertained us for hours on end. I had no idea being "Grammy" could be so much fun!

Gene would take the girls out for breakfast and call it "having a date with Grampy." As soon as they were invited out, they would rush to dress up in their favorite attire so they would look smashingly gorgeous at Perkins Restaurant or Bob Evans. Those eateries had never known such glamour—and Gene was in his glory!

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I think God, in His mercy, doesn't let us see the future because we wouldn't be able to enjoy the present.

THE PHONE CALL

We were looking forward to watching this young family of four thrive—but everything changed on a Sunday afternoon in the parking lot of a Sweet Tomatoes Restaurant in Orlando, Florida. We didn't get the news until 12:35 the next morning when the familiar ring of the phone pierced the darkness and startled us from peaceful sleep.

Gene picked up the receiver, and the newspapers, television reports, and court records bear witness to the defining moment we were about to experience—one so very different from our son's just seven years earlier at summer camp. This moment turned out to be the pivotal one between our "old normal" and the life that would never be the same again.

Jason had been arrested for the murder of his wife's first husband, Douglas Miller Jr. I was immediately overcome by nausea. Disbelief. Sobbing. Heart palpitations. Sick waves of reality mixed with despair. A nightmare of gigantic proportion. Impossible facts—that Jason shot the gun, four bullets in the back of the victim. A stray bullet hit a van with children inside. No one was hurt, but the possibility was devastating. Not our boy! "No-o-o-o-o! Please, God, let this be a horrible dream!" I felt as if I'd been kicked in the gut by a horse. I could not walk. Doubled over on all fours, I crawled to the bathroom to vomit.

The events that followed were surreal. Jason's mug shot on the front page of the *Orlando Sentinel*. Attorneys. The prosecutor.

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Necessary legal procedures. Then deep waves of sadness for the father, stepmother, and sister of the deceased. While we prepared for a trial for first-degree murder, their family was planning a funeral. Our thoughts were a jumbled mess.

How did this happen?

Where did we go wrong?

What distorted our son's sense of righteousness in such a bizarre and unthinkable way?

Where was God? Why did He let this happen?

I'm going to be sick again.

WANTING TO DIE

Gene and I stumbled through the next forty-eight hours in much the same way other people live one second at a time when their lives fall apart without warning. I literally gasped for air as I thought of my son in a maximum-security jail surrounded by rapists and thugs. The thought was more than my heart could bear. In between my sobs, I tried to help Gene make a long list of people who needed to be contacted.

Almost ritualistically, I went through the house, closing the blinds. I didn't want reporters at my door. I didn't want sunshine falling on my tears. I wanted to curl up and die. Breathing came with difficulty. Moaning cries choked words. I wondered if anyone had ever actually died of a broken heart.

Gene left for Florida to move our daughter-in-law and the girls from Panama City, where Jason had been in dive school with the navy, to Orlando, where he was now incarcerated. Soon after, a call came from Jason. I accepted the charges for the tele-

phone call from the 33rd Street jail and listened while my son told me he had just been beaten by ten inmates who jumped him when he walked into his cell.

I could hardly breathe as I heard him describe the beating—in the eyes, constant kicking in the face, both of his front teeth broken. As he told me the details of the attack, he was choking back sobs. Then as suddenly as it began, the call ended with an automatic cutoff through the phone system at the jail. I later found out the beating happened while corrections officers looked on, apparently enjoying the entertainment.

I was alone in the house when the call ended. I raised my hands toward heaven and could identify with Jesus as He said, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34). I flashed back to hearing a pastor say that those words, uttered by Christ on the cross, really meant, "My God, my God, why are you so far from the words of my guttural groaning?" I now understood what Jesus meant. *Guttural groaning* was the only way to describe the sound coming out of me. I wanted to die. Quit. Leave the agony behind and skip the rest of life.

And then the "mama" part of me kicked in. I realized our son needed his parents more than he had ever needed us. The next day, I left for Florida to see Jason. As he rounded the corner and faced me behind a Plexiglas window in the visitation area, he was in wrist and ankle shackles, connected by chains to each limb, and he was fresh from the beating that could have taken his life. As our eyes met, I noticed the jagged front teeth of my broken and bruised son.

Through fresh tears of my own, the words tumbled out. "Jason Paul Kent, nothing you could ever do would stop my unconditional love for you, Son." That meeting was mostly

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about tears. Being there for each other. Knowing we couldn't fix what had already happened. Realizing that nothing about the future would be normal. The fifteen-minute visit ended far too soon. I walked to the parking lot and sat in my car for a long time, weeping, unable to see enough through the torrent of tears to drive away. A piece of my heart stayed at the jail—a part I felt was vital for my heart to continue beating at all.

Nothing about this emerging journey was familiar, comfortable, or desired. It was like a trip to another country—to a foreign land where our family didn't belong. I wanted to return to my old normal. But there was no going back.

ANOTHER MOTHER'S STORY

Mary, the mother of Jesus, certainly knew what it was like to see her son in a worst-case scenario. Her son was the Messiah, the promised Savior of the world. One day, many people were crowding the streets of Jerusalem for Passover. There was an ominous tension in the air. Mary probably stayed close to the Galilean women.

On Friday, as they gathered in the temple area, the women noticed a crowd of people heading toward Golgotha, on the edge of town. Someone in the group must have yelled, "What's going on?"

Another responded, "They say Jesus is being crucified. Let's follow the crowd and find out what's happening."

My son can never be compared to the Son of God, but I can identify with the panicked thoughts that must have been in Mary's heart at that moment. She was a mother in pain.

SYMPATHY CARDS AND RAZOR WIRE

But He's my son. No! No! No! Surely you can see His pure motives.

This is happening too fast. You don't understand why He did what He did.

Please let me get through to Him. I must be near my boy. He needs His mother. I want Him to see my love. It will give Him strength.

By the time Mary saw her son, it was obvious Jesus had been severely beaten. They called it a scourging. According to historical facts, the whip used for such torture was constructed of nine strips of leather with bits of bone, metal, or glass attached to the ends. When the beating was done, often the straps would reach all the way around from the back to the abdomen, tearing away the flesh and creating deep wounds. No wonder Isaiah the prophet said that "his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man and his form marred beyond human likeness" (Isa. 52:14).

At the crucifixion scene, Mary viewed the unthinkable. Her son's broken body was nailed to a tree. She saw Jesus endure raw, torturous agony, while people stood by and ridiculed Him. The combination of seeing His physical pain and hearing the taunts from the crowd as they reviled her now thirty-three-year-old son must have crushed her spirit.

The Bible tells us that Mary stood by the cross. "Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, 'Dear woman, here is your son,' and to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.' From that time on, this disciple took her into his home" (John 19:25–27).

For Mary, choosing life at that moment meant going to live with John, because she would never again have her son to live with. In the culture of that day, a widow normally would have

been cared for by one of her children (perhaps one of the brothers of Jesus mentioned in Mark 3:31). It is significant that Jesus, the oldest son, asked the loyal friend who stayed with Him during His final hours, John, to provide comfort and provision for His mother. (Some Bible commentators suggest that Salome, the wife of Zebedee and the mother of James and John, was Mary's sister. If this was the case, then John would have been Mary's nephew.)

Following her son's wishes by going to live in John's household was not Mary's first challenging choice in life, but it may have been her most difficult. Perhaps she felt like dying alongside her son, but she chose to go on without Him. She was no doubt beyond bereft, even if she had a clue about God's bigger plan. One thing is certain—she didn't curl up in the fetal position and give herself over to despair. When all the disciples except John gave up all hope and abandoned Jesus, Mary, His mother, stood as close to Him as she could get until He took His last breath.

IDENTIFYING WITH MARY

My son was not dying—but after two and a half years and seven postponements of his trial, he was convicted of first-degree murder and sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole—ever! That is my new normal. Gene and I have to decide every day that we will choose life in the middle of devastating circumstances instead of giving in to emotional death, depression, discouragement, and defeat.

There are many kinds of crucibles in life that forever alter the future some of us thought would be ours: