

SECOND
CHANCES

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AT LIFE AND LOVE, WITH HOPE

SHIRLEY RUDBERG GRAYBILL

REDEMPTION  PRESS

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THIS BOOK IS dedicated to my dear children: Todd, Erika, Greg, and Jonathan, and of course my son-in-law Trent, and daughter-in-law, Caytie.

Reading this story may seem odd, for it is a love story of your one parent. Please keep in mind our love for each other never took away from our first loves. The love for your dad or your mom still remains, though we have been separated by death.

Of course, my ultimate love is our Lord Jesus Christ, who gave His life for me—and the best part, was resurrected so that we too will live because of faith in Him.

My hope is that this book will encourage you and your marriages and be a model for you and my grandchildren. I pray we will all have a grand reunion in heaven.

See you at the banquet table!



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CHAPTER 1

PIERCING PAIN

JULY, 2005

HOW'S YOUR HEADACHE?" I asked Bill as we sped down the highway. We were returning home from our fantastic fortieth anniversary in the beautiful outdoors when Bill began complaining of a piercing pain in his left eye.

"It's no better than before," Bill shrugged, looking healthy and outdoorsy in his black fleece jacket. "But, I'd rather drive than ride."

I stared out the passenger window, unable to enjoy the scenic beauty of the Idaho Panhandle. Ten years earlier, Bill had been diagnosed with Chronic Lymphocytic Leukemia, known as CLL. Though his oncologist kept it under control with periodic chemotherapy, this pain could be a sign of the disease getting worse. We knew at some point Bill's immune system would break down and something would make him sick. I had a premonition that this might be that "something."

Instead of stopping for the night in southern Alberta as planned, we drove fourteen hours straight home to Vancouver, Washington. When we arrived at home in the early morning, I stretched out aching muscles and helped Bill unpack the car, then flopped onto our bed.

The next morning, Bill's pain persisted despite mega-doses of ibuprofen. "Let's have a doctor look at you," I suggested. Perhaps a stronger prescription could relieve the pain.

As I sat in the crowded waiting room, I thought about our forty years together. The first twenty were difficult. We were two stubborn people, staying together for the sake of our children. I remembered the slam of a door one day when Bill left the family room and got in the car to go on a hike. This was his way of cooling off after an argument. Meanwhile, I just wanted to finish the argument and go on from there. I slumped on the sofa, frustrated that yet again we were arguing over the same things. Later, after Bill came home, he said. "I can't go on like this. What do you think we should do? Get a divorce?"

"Of course we can't get a divorce. We still love each other. What about the kids?" I said, squeezing my hands with the tension. "I agree with you. Something needs to change. We need help."

We decided on counseling, which was a disaster of its own. Re-tilling difficult ground only made things worse. When the last counselor (and we had several) washed his hands of us, he suggested a couples' communication class.

I secretly didn't think *anything* would solve our problem, but we were diligent students. We learned that our stuck marriage was like a scratched record, repeating the same issues over and over. The class facilitator recommended "planned pleasant activities"—dates for the two of us at least once a week. Every week for twelve weeks, we returned to class with six other couples and reported our homework. This would be going out to dinner or coffee or even taking a walk. Our marriage began to flourish. People who didn't know us would never guess we'd had so much trouble.

Now, the hours ticked by at the clinic. The doctor ordered a CT scan, prescribing something for a diagnosis of "cluster headaches." The next day it was back to work for Bill, a manufacturing engineer. Yet even after taking the prescription, Bill felt the burning sensation and had to come home. He tried lying down, relaxing in the family room, even geo-caching—scavenger hunting with clues from the Internet. The nagging pain only got worse. We made several trips

those three months to the emergency room during the evening, since daylight brought on excruciating pain.

“Ten being the worst, what would your pain number be?” asked one doctor.

“I don’t want to play the numbers game,” Bill said in frustration after hearing this question for the umpteenth time. “It’s *bad*.”

“But sir, that’s how we can determine what might be going on.” The doctor peered at Bill’s forehead, noticing a rash above his left eye, and at last there was a diagnosis: Herpes Zoster Ophthalmicus, shingles of the eye.

“Your eye doesn’t seem to be damaged at this time,” the ophthalmologist announced. “But this will take a long time to heal. Probably months.” We thought, *Surely, it won’t take that long*.

The rash increased and soon burgundy-colored lesions covered Bill’s head like a helmet, spreading from his eye to the back of his scalp. His eye was swollen shut as if he’d been in a fist fight. Though we asked for different analgesics, we were told that nerve pain doesn’t respond to most medications. Bill lay in the darkened bedroom, calling out to me with every pain surge. “Ice. Ice!” I would rush to rub an ice pack on his head until the pain subsided and he groaned in relief.

Finally the pain pushed Bill to another trip to the emergency room, where he was admitted to the hospital. An anti-seizure medication seemed to help. Thankfully, Bill’s oncologist was at the hospital all week.

“How do you think Bill is doing?” I asked him.

“He has always seemed so vigorous,” he answered, “but his color is off. His countenance isn’t the same.” The doctor’s words made me tremble within.

Even Bill’s primary physician told us he had never seen a patient whose shingles pain went beyond six months. What was this strange and terrible illness destroying our lives?

Bill couldn’t watch television or read a book. Extra noise or movement caused distress. It was terrible to watch my strong mountaineering man so weakened by the virus.

I patted Bill's hand as he sat up in bed. "We have to hold on," I told him.

"I think we can take it a little at a time," he answered. "Let's give it three months."

"Three months," I agreed. It wouldn't be the first time we'd faced a terrifying challenge together. "Remember Rooster Rock?"

Through his pain, he smiled. "How could I forget?"

I thought back to that clear, spring day. The weather was perfect and the Columbia Gorge winds were calm. Bill and I sat on top of the 325-foot monolith, enjoying the view from our perch. The bright blue sky contrasted with the newly sprouted lime-green colored leaves and dark green firs. A soft breeze, smelling of honey from the blossoming fruit trees below, ruffled my hair. All too soon it was time to go back down.

I looked nervously at Bill. Going down meant rappelling off the rock. I dreaded rappelling, though I had forced myself to do it numerous times. If there was a way to walk down off a climb, I would. But it was extremely dangerous to climb down from Rooster Rock, a double-roped cliff, my longest rappel yet.

Bill set up the rope for the rappel down, hooking it carefully into my harness until I was ready to go.

"Just lean back, sweetheart. You'll be OK. Trust me. Trust the rope and protection."

"I can't do this! I'm too scared!" I choked, trying not to cry.

"You *can* do it; I know you can. Put your right hand behind your back and keep the brake on."

I knew Bill's advice was sound. He was fastidiously careful in everything he did. I wanted Bill to be proud of me and knew I had to do it, had to lean back. I had to trust him. I held my breath and tilted backward. *Clunk!* The sound of the chain adjusting itself to the rappel rope gave a jolt. My heart jumped and then I began to ease myself down, talking out loud the whole time. "Okay, okay, honey. I'm doing it. Here I go."

Brake hand back, I reminded myself. *Legs straight to the wall*. I moved one foot down, then the other and eased the rope through the figure eight apparatus. While most climbers will relax and go

down quickly, mine was a slow descent. I wanted to get there safely and didn't care how long it took. A few moments later I was at the foot of the rock. I called up to Bill at the top. "Off rope!"

I took the rope out of my harness, waiting for his descent in his black climbing shorts and much-used fuchsia-colored rock shoes. The well-defined muscles of his legs moved with confidence as he rappelled down. He took off his leather gloves and with his large right hand, gave me a high five. "Good job, Shirley! I'm proud of you!" In a playful growl, he added, "You mountain woman, you!" It was his term of endearment, filling me with me a warm glow.

Later, long after we were both down, Bill and I would share that story with others. Bill would relate how he wasn't sure he could convince me to rappel off the rock. He wondered if he'd have to rappel beside me and wasn't sure how he would do that. He didn't realize the power of his persona though, and my need for his approval. The next time I rappelled off Rooster Rock, it was a little easier, though not much. But my encourager was there and that's all that mattered. Now it was my turn to encourage him. As I held his hand in mine, I willed him to feel the love and comfort I had for him.

An elementary school music teacher, I was home for summer break. I drove Bill to his appointments, brought him drinks, fluffed his pillows, played music to soothe him. One morning during devotions, I read James 5:14-16: *Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord.* I went into our bedroom where Bill lay and read the passage. "Would you like me to call Paul?" I offered, unsure. Bill rarely expressed a public need for prayer.

Bill gripped my wrist, his hazel eyes earnest. "Call him."

An hour later, two elders, our pastor Paul Jackson, and Bill's good friend, Al, arrived. Bill sat on the couch in his pajamas with a blanket over his legs. I sat beside him, holding his hand, so hopeful. At last there was something we could do. At last Bill could be healed.

Bill talked about his failures. "I've judged others so often in my life," he said, looking up with tears in his eyes. "I've been harsh on

people. Many times, I haven't been the best Christian." He shook his head.

I sat with my hand holding his, grateful for the way he was opening his heart. I had to admit it was the truth. After all, I had lived with him for forty years!

He looked at Paul sadly. "I have a hard time with my mouth," he continued. "When I get angry, I say things I know I shouldn't say." There was an accepting silence as the men listened, nodding in compassion. Bill bit his lip. "And sometimes my eyes look where they shouldn't."

"Well, Bill," said Paul. "We all struggle with our eyes, with our mouths, with our thoughts. I'm so glad you can be honest about these things. You are right to confess and can be assured God *will* forgive you."

Bill took his hand from our clasped hands and gestured to me. "I want what she has." I could hardly believe my ears. For so long, I had been praying that my beloved would know the length and breadth of God's love, as I was beginning to know it. And yet, in a burst of anger, Bill would often accuse me of being a terrible Christian. I bowed my head, amazed and grateful for the kind words.

Orville lifted a small bottle. "Don't worry. I won't hurt you." He gently dabbed the oil onto Bill's forehead, careful to find a place without sores.

"Let's pray," Paul said. Bill prayed for forgiveness. Then one of the men prayed for healing. Another prayed for strength. Lastly, one prayed for God's comfort and presence. Afterward, the men stood, each hugged me and reassured me their prayers would continue.

I expected instant physical healing. Instead, I saw a change of a completely different kind. "Shirley," Bill began to tell me daily, "I am so grateful for you." He called his mother. He laughed and listened to Erika, our daughter. I would read aloud to Bill—the Bible, biographies of great Americans, and our favorite author, Chuck Swindoll. We prayed often together. Each time I left the house Bill said, "Drive careful. I need you and love you."

One evening, Bill felt strong enough to meet my mother and two sisters for dinner. As we took our places in the festive Mexican restaurant, Bill greeted his sisters-in-law warmly, then leaned over and kissed my mother on the top of her head. I was surprised at this sweet gesture, for he had not done that before.

Bill was hospitalized at least once in each of the six following months. We grew closer. We were fighting for our marriage, but it was a far different fight than our emotional battle twenty years earlier. This time it was physical. The prospect of one of us losing the other was unthinkable.

It was soon time for me to return to work. But how could I leave Bill? Fellow teachers offered to prepare my classroom and bulletin boards. The principal graciously allowed me to miss several faculty meetings.

Bill was still weak, having trouble remembering his medication doses and feeding himself, even with what little he ate. Most of all, he needed companionship. Willingly, Bill's mom began to visit during the day to make lunch, read to him, and talk about old times.

"I don't want to simply say the blessing," Bill announced at the table, looking from my face to his mom's one night when she stayed for dinner. "I want all three of us to pray together."

Back at school, the beginning of the year was marked with a prayer labyrinth of scriptures and inspirational thoughts. While walking the maze, I picked up a card that read, "Grieving. Please help me stay present to this pain. Support me as I move with it." I was puzzled and scared. What did it mean? What would I grieve?

"I'm really scared," I told my friend Connie, who had been my prayer partner for nearly thirty years.

"What are you scared of?" she asked, leaning toward me through the steam of our coffees.

"I'm afraid Bill will not get better. That the message about grief was somehow prophetic."

"It'll be okay," said Connie, clasping my hand across the table. We bowed our heads. "Lord, help Shirley to be strong. Help her to

depend on You to get through this. Help her sense Your presence, no matter what happens.”

SEPTEMBER 30

Baby Emily Ruthlynn Sagert was born to Erika and Trent. Bill slowly made his way down the hospital corridor. When he took his grandchild in his arms, the lines of pain and weariness lifted from his face. He traced a finger over the downy head. “I haven’t missed this moment with any of the grandkids, and I won’t miss it now,” he said, his voice cracking with emotion.

Over the next few weeks, Bill began taking less pain medication. He emerged from the bedroom during daylight hours to talk with his grandchildren. He grew stronger, went deer hunting with son Todd, and before long returned to work. It seemed our prayers were answered.

We dared to hope that Bill could return to his favorite activities—climbing Mount Hood, (as he had done with his son-in-law, Trent, on one Father’s Day), taking his grandchildren clamming, shooting, or dog training, flying Todd’s plane, the *Hot to Go*, and enjoying a family outing at Dairy Queen.

One afternoon Bill and I went for a short hike. Bill took huge, satisfying gulps of Pacific Northwest air. An airplane wheeled through the sky. “Looking forward to the day I can fly again!” said Bill, squeezing my shoulder.

In early November, about four months after Bill got sick with the shingles, on a weekend visit with my sister and brother-in-law, Bill asked for medication. “I need it. I’m feeling that pain again! Would you find it for me?”

The nightmare had begun again. Bill couldn’t sleep. Nor could I. *Oh, Lord. Please, take this pain away*, I prayed.

The doctors told us that some patients experience “post herpetic pain,” though there is no longer a shingles rash. The neurologist prescribed a different medication which came with troubling side effects. Todd jumped in to help, spending hours on the Internet researching drug interactions. Still, there was no solution.

On November 21, our grandson Caleb's fifth birthday, Bill was admitted to the hospital. The hours crawled by. We hardly knew what day it was. Then two familiar faces appeared at the door to the hospital room. "Thought you needed a real holiday meal," grinned Erika, as she and Bill's mom brought in a steaming basket filled with turkey and all the fixings from their Thanksgiving dinner.

On Saturday morning the female hospital chaplain prayed with us and read Scripture. I wept as she read and prayed. "Our Father, please help Bill and Shirley as they cope with this illness. Be their strength and song during this difficult time."

Late that Saturday night, I sat by his bedside while my husband slept. I felt the darkness of the room closing in around me as despair clenched my heart. Then, note by note, I caught the sounds of singing.

*Precious Lord, take my hand. Lead me on, through the night. I am tired, I am weak, I am worn; Thro' the storm, thro' the night, Lead me on to the light—Take my hand, precious Lord, lead me home.*¹

The rich alto voice continued to lift old hymns. I stood, amazed, and followed the songs down the hall. A few doors down, I glanced into a darkened room and saw a black woman wearing a black and white dress, sitting in a bedside chair. She would never know the comfort she gave a neighbor that evening. I tiptoed back to Bill's room, knowing I was not alone. Sunday, Bill was sent home with an armload of medications.

A few hours after going to bed one December night, I was awakened by Bill coming into our bedroom. "Honey?"

Illuminated by the hall light behind him, his lean face had a haggard look, and there was fear in his eyes. I sat up with a sudden panic, squinting. "What's wrong?"