

Chapter 2

My Darkest Hour...

When my brother and I were teenagers, mom drove the family station wagon into the driveway of a yard sale of estate proportions. The man of the house had passed away and his surviving widow was selling all of his stuff. Well, little did we know at the time how much of a gold mine two teenage boys in Kentucky had happened upon. They had freshwater and salt water tackle boxes, fishing rods and reels, and over in the corner was the golden grail itself. A yellow scuba tank with a Jacques Cousteau Aqualung regulator, and a lead diving belt all sat there waiting for their new owner. You would have thought that the two of us boys had just gone and picked out a new puppy at the kennel. We were ecstatic and couldn't wait to get home and try it out in Mr. McCurdy's farm pond. After all, isn't that where all young boys should attempt to scuba dive for the first time? At least we thought so.

Because scuba tanks are "supposed" to be full of air, they will make you float if you do not have on a heavy lead diving belt. This tank was so advanced that it even had a reserve chamber in case you ran out of air. You could pull a rod down on the side of the tank if your air ran out, and it would give you a couple minutes of reserve time in order to get to the surface. What I am about to tell you can only come from observing the situation from the surface. I would like to think that I wouldn't do something so stupid, but it just turns out that my big brother Michael was older than me and got first dibs at the treachery that was about to befall him.

Michael strapped on that tank, lead belt, and diving mask. He was all set to go in that little farm pond. Doggone it; he was going to set some kind of scuba diving record for a 16-year-old boy. He was going to show that farm pond and all the snapping turtles that he was king, and that he was able to survive under water with them. So he JUMPED into the water, and quickly sank in about a foot of mud on the bottom of the pond. I know that this sounds like something Bo and Luke would have done on the *Dukes of Hazard*, but there was no Uncle Jesse to help us out of this mess. Michael stood there as

the muck sucked around his boots, and wouldn't let go. Not only was he consumed by the bottom of that farm pond, but his visibility was zero. He couldn't see anything around him and didn't know what to do. Well, at least he had oxygen... As he took his next breath, he realized that the tank was empty. No problem he thought to himself, I will just pull the reserve, and it will give me enough time to go the twenty feet to the surface. Little did he know that when he jumped into that pond, the tank was empty, and the reserve was already pulled.

How many of us feel that way in life? We are gung ho jumping in with two feet, totally oblivious to what is around us, and conceptually have no inkling of what is about to befall us. Michael was naïve, and a little ignorant that day, and it assuredly was not bliss. I can tell you with all assurance that what happened next has changed my life forever. My brother could have remained down there on the bottom of that pond with the muck and pull of this world holding him down. No way! He had a decision to make. He could stay down there and drown, or he could fight the pull and break free. Little by little he eased his feet out of his boots. He couldn't figure out in the panic of the situation exactly how to undo the lead belt that held him down or to release the tank off of his back. What he did next is quite possibly the biggest miracle that I have ever seen. He chose to walk right out of that situation. He didn't try swimming to the top, because he was weighed down. He walked... every step that he took was consumed by the mud. His bare feet at this point were able to slip down into the mud and up again. He walked all the way up that shoreline until his head was above water.

Can you imagine the look on my face when I saw my brother walking up from the depths to the shallow part of the pond? I had no idea that he was out of breath, or that he had lost his boots in the mire. I was oblivious to the fact that the scuba tank was out of air, or that his belt wouldn't come off. Instead, I just started laughing and asking all kinds of questions. I can assure you that I was not sensitive to the life-threatening aspect of this dire situation. I can't remember if we went home and told mom all of the details, or if by then we had learned that some things were best left unsaid. I do know that it made a lasting impression on me and all of those snapping turtles that day. I can just imagine one saying to the other, "Man what an idiot. Does this moron not realize that he can't breathe underwater?" Michael sure showed them that day what it took to overcome

trials, tribulations, and testing's that come your way. I find it ironic that my brother Michael has been a Police Officer for 18 years, serving for awhile on a Dive Team. This was black water diving that entailed looking for bodies in the Ohio River, as well as sweeping boats for bombs. I don't know about you, but I know that the majority of us would have been scarred for our lives and wouldn't have gotten back in that water with a scuba tank on their back. Not my big brother. Michael learned a lesson that day that helped him in the future.

So what event has rocked and shaped my world? I will never forget the storm that started brewing during that hopeless Thursday August 3, 2006. I was sitting in our local police department's Citizens Advisory Board meeting at 3:00 p.m. when my phone started vibrating. Little did I know at the time how that little vibration from a small mechanism attached to my belt would rock my world for the rest of my life. It was as if the Titanic was heading straight for an iceberg and I was the night watchman oblivious to the sudden crunch that inevitably was about to impact my hull. Although I didn't sink that fateful afternoon, I sure felt like I was struggling for oxygen.

As the phone vibrated, I knew that I was to take this call. I politely excused my presence from Chief Schutte, and walked out of the room. I answered the phone as the caller id had notified me that it was my wife. Amy and I were college sweethearts that had been married for 10 years at the time. Along that path we had three young children that were the joy and inspiration in our lives. We had faced typical rough spots of life as most people do; however, that day was one we had never encountered. As I pressed talk, I heard my wife on the other end of the phone sobbing that the test results came back that she was positive for cancer. I almost fell to my knees in that little hallway. I didn't know what to do. One minute life was grand and I was jumping in with two feet, and all of a sudden I was stuck in the mud without oxygen. *"How can a moment change so rapidly"*, I thought to myself? I didn't know why God was doing this to me and I was a little angry. I was, after all, a Deacon at my church and the Men's Minister. This kind of thing was not supposed to happen to those that were walking close to Him, and following His way. Or so I thought...

Amy quickly pulled over in a parking lot as she was talking with me, so as to avoid an accident. She was crying so much, that she couldn't see where she was driving.

I remember the fear that gripped my life that day of, “What if...?” I was distraught, confused, depressed, angry, sad, hopeless, etc. all in one split-second of time. My Titanic had hit the iceberg. I was taking on water at a fast pace, and didn’t know what to do. I remember hanging up the phone and poking my head back in the room. My pastor was also on that board, so I had him come out and pray for me. Why was it that I didn’t feel any relief after that prayer? Why is it that all things were not just wiped away? I was stuck in the mud, had pulled my reserve valve and realized that I was completely out of air. I had a choice to make at that point. Do I abandon God and expect the worst, or prepare for what He wants to perfect in my family’s life. I chose to surrender to His Will at that point.

The next day Amy’s parents and sister came in from out of town for support. Since Amy’s sister Holly is a nurse, we asked her to accompany us to the doctor’s office. They sat down with us and said that Amy had advanced Thyroid cancer and that she would need surgery. They referred us to a surgeon that we were to meet with that next Wednesday. I remember walking out of the doctor’s office that Friday feeling like my world had come to an end. I went home that night and sat on a porch swing just weeping. *“God, why is this happening to me?”* I asked.

I got an answer that I wasn’t looking for. My phone starting ringing... It was a friend of mine who had been trying to reach me for a couple of weeks, and we had played phone tag. I was not in the mood to talk. All of a sudden, God spoke to me and said, *“It is _____. You need to talk with him. He has had an affair with a woman with the last name that starts with the letter ___ and I want you to call him out on his sin.”*

WHOAAAA... back the train up. I was in no place to minister. I had just found out that my wife was dying of cancer, or so I thought.

I answered the call and the first thing I said is what the Lord told me. He just started weeping over the phone, and I did as well. I will never forget that day. As soon as I hung the phone up, God reminded me of what Paul said in II Corinthians 12:10(NIV) to me *“...for when I am weak, then I am strong.”* I knew at that exact moment in time that although I was weak, I was strong in Him. I knew that He still had a plan for me and wanted to use me in order to minister to others in the Darkest Hour of my Life.

That next Wednesday we went to the surgeon and he told us that the cancer had spread to her lymph nodes, and that he would have to cut Amy from ear to ear in order to lay her neck open. At this point in our lives, Amy was a music teacher, singing and speaking was her life. Now they were talking about very delicate surgery directly on top of her vocal cords, her source and emphasis of her teaching ability. He went on to say that most thyroid patients don't die from thyroid cancer. I was not thinking of the possibility of my 32-year-old bride and mother of three not growing old with me, until that moment. We walked out of the doctor's office and I dismissed myself from Amy in order to go to the restroom. I will never forget walking in that empty room of marble, and just losing it. Here I was a 6'6" strong man, brought to my knees in this bathroom. I got up and leaned over the sink. You would have thought that I had turned the water on, the tears flowed so freely. After composing myself, I knew that I was embarking on a new chapter in my adult life. I walked out of that room and just held my wife on the three-story-elevator ride down to the parking lot. Things were different now, and we knew it.

Before her surgery both of us had people invest into our lives that made a lasting impression. John and Joy Goodman are the first couple that comes to mind, even though there were many. Joy, at that time, was going through treatments for her cancer. They had already been up to life's darkest hour, stared it down, and stuck their tongues out at it. One night John called me up and asked if we could go for a drive. This struck me as odd because John is an introvert and usually not the initiator. That night he obeyed the calling of God to minister directly to me. I was able to see his heart that night as well as some of the battle scars of what he had and was currently going through. Neither of us had any assurance that our wives weren't going to be removed from the face of this earth. As he vacuumed his truck at a local car wash, John shared with me the emotions I was about to face as a care giver. He went on to share how it was so important for both spouses not to be down and discouraged at the same time. He said that I needed to be strong for my kids in the days ahead. He went on to say the things that upset him the most is when people came up to him and said, "It was going to be okay." Neither of us had that assurance or knew what to believe. What I experienced that night was a man that was a straight shooter with me and didn't sugar coat it. He didn't tell me everything

was going to be okay, or that God was going to heal Amy. Instead, he told me what emotions I was going to go through, and how I had to learn to lean on Jesus like I never had before. This made all the difference in the world to me.

My wife went in for a five-hour surgery on August 29, 2006. Not only did the doctors have to take out the entire thyroid, but also 26 lymph nodes, 19 of which were cancerous. That first night Joy came to the hospital and volunteered to stay all night with Amy, so that I could go home with our three children. That meant so much to Amy and me, because it wasn't just another friend saying they were going to pray for us, but rather they put it into action. Joy was an oncology nurse at the time, and was able not only to pray for Amy through that night, but to get up and help her when she needed help. I remember watching Amy during the four days of recovery in the hospital. She was so graceful and optimistic during this time and knew that God was in control. I had the hardest time with this, and couldn't understand why my wife wasn't upset or mad at God. I was torn and discouraged and had suffered from anxiety and depression for several weeks leading up to this event. Amy would sit up in her hospital bed when visitors came, and be as gracious as can be. Even with her neck all stapled together and her throat very sore, she was determined to return to work in two weeks, and she did. I think if it were me lying there, I would have milked it for all it was worth. The way I was feeling I probably would have thrown a pity party for myself, and would have taken off work at least 3-4 times more than she did. She wanted to overcome this and put it behind her. She was bound and determined to get back out there and face the world head-on. I just wanted to crawl under a rock somewhere and not be seen for a while.

Through this I learned how we are going to have ups and downs in life. I was fully aware of that going into marriage. However, I didn't realize at the time how important it is that both spouses not be discouraged and depressed at the same time. When I was going through my darkest hour, Amy was upbeat and positive. When she came out on the other side, she started into a depression and went into her darkest hour. At that point in time, I had already emerged and saw the sun shining through the clouds. It is very important and crucial that there always be one spouse willing to encourage, uplift, and admonish the other spouse at any given point in time. It is very ironic how

Jesus will allow this situation to transpire so that we might be able to put utter faith and trust in Him.

Although it is tough for a woman to carry a scar around on her body the rest of her life, I have had to remind Amy of the doors that it has opened. Amy has ladies come up to her out of nowhere and ask about her cancer. She has then been able to turn right back around and express God's love and grace to them. Would she have been able to do this otherwise? Now I am not suggesting that God allowed her to overcome the dreaded disease of cancer in order to minister to others, but it is amazing how you can turn something so vile into a ministry tool.

It has been almost three years since this occurred and I am happy to say that Amy is cancer free. Just as Michael had a choice to make as he was stuck in the muck without oxygen, I also had a choice that I had to make. I can honestly say it was my darkest hour, but God walked me through every minute of that time. I have grown so much in wisdom and valor through that circumstance, and I even learned how to walk up the shore bare foot underwater...