

# When a Christian Man Meets the Killers of His Family

No one knows the exact number of Cambodians that were executed in the infamous killing fields between 1975 and 1979. Estimates range between 1.7 million and 2.5 million innocent men, women and children who were mercilessly slaughtered at the hands of the Khmer Rouge regime.

But for Reaksa Himm, the only relevant number is 13. That number represents how many family members he personally lost in the killing fields. Among those 13 family members were his father, his mother and nine brothers and sisters. To compound the tragedy, Himm witnessed the brutal murder of 10 of his loved ones just outside a small village called Thlok.

That Himm survived the mass execution is nothing less than a **miracle**. But no less incredible is long trek he took from **revenge to forgiveness**.

**Journey to the Killing Fields** Himm's road to spiritual revelation was paved with unfathomable pain and heartache. But it didn't start out that way. In 1975, Himm and his family were living a peaceful life in the city of Siem Reap despite an ongoing conflict between the ruling democratic leadership and the Khmer Communists led by brutal warlord Pol Pot. When the Khmer army defeated the American-backed government, Himm's world was turned upside down.

After systematically executing all leaders sympathetic to the previous government, the Khmer Rouge regime began rounding up the Cambodian people and sending them to work camps. They were told they would only be gone three days to allow the army to root out American soldiers they suspected were still in hiding. But days turned to months, and months turned to years.

For the first two years, Himm's family tried to conform to the

new government's policies. They never dared say anything against the leadership.

"If you opposed them, they would usually come in the night and tell you they wanted to send you to school so you could change your behavior," Himm says. "But to be sent to school literally meant execution."

By the age of 14, Himm was working in the fields tending to cattle and water buffalo. Each morning he would take some rice and dried fish wrapped in a banana leaf for lunch and head to his post. But one afternoon, he met an older man who was a stranger. The man asked if he would share his lunch. As part of the Cambodian culture, Himm had been trained to respect his elders, so he gave the man half his lunch.

"Before I knew it, he had eaten all of my lunch," Himm recalls. "I was so angry. I had nothing to eat after that. But then he wanted to tell me a story. So I sat down and listened to him."

"In the next six months," the man said, "all of your family is going to be killed, but you will not die. You will have to go through a lot of suffering."

**Out of the Grave** A few weeks later, three Khmer soldiers came to the family's house and arrested Himm's father. When asked what he had done wrong, one soldier barked these ominous words: "Today we will destroy you! If we keep you, we gain nothing! If we kill you, we lose nothing! You are serving the American government! You are CIA!"

Himm had no idea what "CIA" meant, but he did know what happened to those faced with that accusation.

"That person became dead meat," he says.

Himm ran back to his house and tried to gather his younger brothers and sisters. Suddenly the soldiers busted through the

door, dragging Himm's father behind them. At first the soldiers put Himm's hands behind his back, but then they released him so he could carry his 2-year-old brother.

And then they took them all to the jungle.

"When we finally arrived, the soldiers began digging graves for us," Himm says. "For the next 15 minutes, we just stood there and waited for them to kill us. I tried to hug my father, but his arms were behind his back. Then I told him goodbye. My father responded by saying something I will never forget. He said, 'I love all of you.' In Cambodian culture, we rarely show affection. That was the first and last time I heard my father say those words."

Himm stood there as the soldiers made his father kneel down in front of the grave. His father was clubbed from behind and fell into the pit. Then came the screams.

"I saw every single ax fall as they butchered my father," Himm says. "It was my turn, and I laid my baby brother beside me. Someone clubbed me from behind, and I fell on my father. Then I heard my baby brother scream so loud. Then I heard the chopping and the screaming."

As the soldiers descended into the grave, they miraculously passed over Himm. When they noticed he was not yet dead, one of the men went back down and hit him again. Blood came through his nose and mouth. Himm began to suffocate and could hardly breathe.

"But no matter what, I didn't move," he says.

The soldiers left to find Himm's mother and older sisters who were working on a farm back at the village. For the next 30 minutes, Himm struggled to climb through the bodies on top of him.

"At that time, I was just beginning to understand what had

happened," he says. "I couldn't imagine how I could go on with my life. I was just lying there with the dead bodies and waiting for the soldiers to come finish me."

Somehow he mustered the strength and courage to climb out of the grave. Had he stayed a few more minutes, the soldiers would have found him. Instead, he hid in the weeds and watched them drag his mother and sisters to the grave where they, too, were executed and dumped into the pit.

"After the soldiers left, I crawled back to the grave and knelt down and put my head to the grave," he says. "I saw my mother's face. I cried and screamed until I lost consciousness. When I woke up, it was about to become dark. I was by myself in the deep, dark jungle. That night, I decided to climb a tree and hold on to the tree the whole night. I couldn't close my eyes. I was so scared."

**Three Promises** For the next three days and nights, Himm stayed there and cried. He survived by eating bamboo shoots and wild fruit and drinking dew squeezed from his blood-soaked shirt. After serious thoughts of going back to the village so the soldiers could put him out of his misery, the traumatized 14-year-old headed away from the gruesome site in search of help.

Before he left the killing field, though, he made three promises to himself. First, he would take revenge on his family's killers. If he couldn't do that, he would become a Buddhist monk to pay respect to his family. And if he couldn't keep his first two promises, he would go far away from Cambodia.

Over the next two years, Himm migrated among a succession of refugee camps that at times proved anything but safe. He also reunited with the only other surviving members of his immediate family—his older sister Sopheap and her husband, Chhounly. When neighboring Vietnam overthrew the Khmer regime in early 1979, Himm returned to the city and lived with his

aunt.

By 1984, Himm decided to join the police force. His purpose in doing so was simple: It would help him get back to the village where his family was killed so he could “eradicate every single person in that village,” he says, to pay honor to his family.

But when Himm finally had the chance to arrest one of the men who had helped kill his family, he couldn't go through with it—despite dragging the man into the forest and aiming a gun at the man's head. Having broken his first promise, Himm then faced the harsh reality that he couldn't keep his second promise, as the current regime did not allow young men to become Buddhist monks.

“Finally, I tried to fulfill my last promise,” he says, “which was to escape from Cambodia.”

**Free Indeed** Leaving Cambodia was both illegal and very dangerous. But Himm was desperate to leave his problems behind. He headed for Thailand, facing numerous life-threatening situations along the way, and eventually landed in the notorious Khao I Dang refugee camps. While there, he exchanged letters with a cousin who was living in California. Himm shared his desire to come to the United States, and his cousin, who was a Christian pastor, shared stories about his faith.

“He kept telling me about Jesus,” Himm says, “and I told him, ‘I need money, not Jesus!’”

Himm stayed in Thailand five years. His attempts to move to the United States were rejected by the Immigration and Naturalization Service. Undaunted, he started a vigorous letter-writing campaign to the Canadian embassy. He also decided prayer wouldn't hurt either.

“I felt hopeless,” he says. “One night I knelt on my knees and

prayed, 'God, if you take me to Canada, I will start a new life and live for You.'"

About 90 letters later, in 1989, Himm gained entrance to Canada. He accepted Christ a year later. Then he enrolled at Tyndale College in Ontario and earned a bachelor's degree in religious studies, followed by a master's degree in counseling and Christian education from Providence Theological Seminary.

Yet even as Himm was growing in his new life of faith, he still struggled with bitterness and hatred for his family's killers, in addition to the depression and guilt he privately held on to because of his failure to avenge their deaths. The journey wasn't easy, but gradually, as he studied God's Word, passages such as Hebrews 12:15 ("See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many," NIV) helped him realize that his failure to forgive was blinding him from seeing the grace of God in his own life.

As the Holy Spirit healed his deep wounds, Himm gained a revelation of both God's justice from passages such as Romans 12:17-19 ("Do not repay anyone evil for evil. ... 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord") and God's forgiving grace ("Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more," Heb. 10:17).

"I had failed to allow God be the righteous judge," Himm says in his book *After the Heavy Rain*. "Vengeance is the Lord's, not mine. ... God does not remember my sins anymore. God had cancelled all my sins, but I had failed to let go of the sins of my family's killers."

By 1999, Himm felt God calling him back to Cambodia. He returned to lecture on psychology at a Bible college but stayed to plant churches, including one where his family was killed. And while he had already forgiven the killers from abroad, he knew the time had come for him to take the process

one step further.

Himm located the man who killed his father and siblings, the man who had clubbed him from behind, and the man who had killed his mother and older sisters. He came prepared.

“I offered each of them a camel scarf as a symbol of my forgiveness,” he says. “I offered my shirt as a symbol of my love for them. And I gave them a Bible as a symbol of my blessing for them.”

As Himm reflects on those powerful encounters, he is reminded of Jesus’ words found in John 8:36: “So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.”

“To say ‘I forgive you’ from Canada to Cambodia was easy,” Himm says. “But to actually travel back and meet those killers and look into their eyes and say, ‘I forgive you,’ that was tremendously difficult. There’s no way in my own humanity I could have done that. It was only the power of the grace of God in my life that gave me the strength to do that. It was only God’s grace that set me free.”

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**Chad Bonham** *is a journalist, author and broadcast producer who has worked in mass media for more than 20 years. A regular contributor to Charisma, he recently published Life in the Fairway.*

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Watch Reaksa Himm tell his story of surviving the “killing fields” of Cambodia at

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# Faith in the Games

**These Olympic athletes are boldly proclaiming Jesus in London**

## **Dawn Harper – Track and Field (Hurdles)**

When Dawn Harper shocked the world with her gold medal performance at the 2008 Beijing Olympics, questions about race favorite Lolo Jones (who knocked down a hurdle and opened the door for Harper's victory) and a reporter's suggestion that she lacked credibility made Harper realize no one had given her a chance of winning.

Growing up in a rough East St. Louis, Ill., neighborhood, Harper knows something about overcoming the odds. But her natural leaping ability and speed put her on the proverbial fast track to follow in the footsteps of another hometown hero: Jackie Joyner-Kersey.

Ironically, Harper's defining moment as a young athlete was also a turning point in her relationship with God. After injuring her knee as a high-school sophomore, her doctor said she was unlikely to run as fast after she fully recovered. With God's help, she not only got back to full speed, but ultimately pulled off one of the biggest upsets in recent track history.

"From this big ol' globe, God chose this little girl from East St. Louis out of all the kids who have said, 'I want to go to the Olympics,'" Harper says. "He knew that I could handle this—the knee surgery and all of the things that come with being an Olympic champion. He took the girl that no one thought would win. He chose me. He entrusted me with this."

## **Kevin Durant – Basketball**



There are plenty of temptations lurking around the average

professional athlete, but perhaps none sneakier and as potentially devastating as pride. Kevin Durant knows this to be true. Arguably one of the top five players in the NBA, the Oklahoma City Thunder forward says it's a daily struggle to remain humble in an ego-building environment like professional sports.

In London, Durant will get his first shot at Olympic glory since his initial baptism into major international competition at the 2010 World Championships. There, he led the U.S. squad in scoring with 22.8 points per game and a team record 205 total points and 38 single-game points.

He makes sure to keep the words of Jesus at the forefront of his mind: "For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted" (Matt. 23:12, NIV).

"I always kind of pinch myself and say that any day this can be gone. When people tell me I'm great, I [remind myself that I] can always be better. I always work on what I have now. I've got to be thankful to the Lord for the gifts He's given me. My gift back to Him is to always be humble and to always try to work as hard as I can."

#### **Brady Ellison – Archery**

Brady Ellison asked Jesus into his heart when he was a young child. But it wasn't until God saved him from dying in a horrific car accident that the native Arizonian took his faith seriously. Now the avid hunter-turned-Olympic-archer prays that God will use him and other Christian athletes as "vessels for His glory."

Ellison has been just that as one of the most prolific Americans to pick up a bow and arrow. He has won gold medals at three Pan American Games (including team and individual honors last year) and three gold medals at the World Indoor Archery Championships (including top marks in this year's

individual competition). Ellison was also ranked No. 1 at the end of the 2010 and 2011 seasons.

He says Philippians 4:13—"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (NKJV)—has been instrumental throughout his career. "Once I put winning in God's hands, I stopped worrying about it. Since then, I've gone to these tournaments and I've shot with no fear, doing only the best I can do and leaving the rest up to God."

### **Kendrick Farris – Weightlifting**



When Kendrick Farris was 14 years old, he had aspirations of eventually becoming an Olympic weightlifter. Having no idea how hard it was to qualify, and thinking athletes made the team simply by representing a weight class, he experienced a harsh reality when he fell short. Instead of competing in Athens in 2004, Farris found himself bussing tables at a restaurant while going to college full time. While at work one day, the Olympic weightlifting competition was on TV when a co-worker pointed up and asked Farris, "Isn't this what you do?"

"It was like God was showing me where I was supposed to be, and it wasn't bussing tables," the Louisiana native says. "So I said: 'Yeah, that's what I do. I'm going to be on the next Olympic Team.' That's when I knew I was supposed to be an Olympian."

Farris worked hard and qualified for the 2008 Olympics, where he placed eighth in the 85-kg weight class. Two years later, he won gold at the 2010 Pan American Games. It was during that time frame when Farris' faith became real to him and helped guide him down his destined path.

"In 2008 I was living the lifestyle when it was convenient for me, but by the end of the year I had rededicated my life to Christ and I haven't looked back," he says. "I've truly

humbled myself over the past couple of years and I've learned about the power we have as Christians. Jesus said we would do greater works and I believe that."

### ✘ **Brittany Viola – Diving (Platform)**

Brittany Viola was an 8-year-old gymnast when she was captivated by the American women's gymnastics team known as the "Magnificent Seven" during the 1996 Summer Games in Atlanta. She had no idea her own pursuit of the sport would ultimately take her to the Olympics 10-meter diving platform.

"In a sense, diving found me," Viola recalls. "In eighth grade, I was enjoying a free day at the pool and decided to play around on the diving boards. Doing a few of my old gymnastics tricks into the water to my feet, I caught the attention of the high school swimming coach. Not knowing that diving was a sport, I talked to my parents and experienced my first diving session a couple of days later."

Viola narrowly missed qualifying for the 2004 Olympic team and struggled in her bid four years ago but has since become a steady force within the U.S. diving program. She won her first national championship in 2011.

As the daughter of former Minnesota Twins pitcher and World Series MVP Frank Viola, the Orlando, Fla., native has learned much about athletic excellence. But it was a serious battle with bulimia six years ago that deepened her relationship with God.

"As I struggled with my eating disorder, I would be reminded that God still loved me even when I did not love myself," Viola notes. "His forgiveness helped me to forgive myself. His truth allowed me to replace the many lies in my head. He saw me as fearfully and wonderfully made—His perfect creation, chosen, holy and dearly loved."

### **Tobin Heath – Soccer**



When the U.S. women's soccer team won the gold medal in Beijing four years ago, youngest team member Tobin Heath was surprised at how moved she was by seeing her country's flag raised and hearing the national anthem played. Her usually mellow personality gave way to a wave of unexpected emotion. Now older, more experienced and spiritually stronger, Heath is anxious for the chance to help the Americans defend that top spot on the podium. But there's a greater goal that drives her quest for athletic greatness.

"It's not about that worldly outcome in terms of winning or losing," she explains. "It's about Jesus being known—not in a way that forces it upon other people, but in a way that lets people know how He's transformed my life and how He's given me purpose and meaning and love and satisfaction."

#### **✘ Bryan Clay – Track & Field (Decathlon)**

Bryan Clay is quick to admit that he didn't know he could be an Olympian until the first time he actually qualified for the 2004 American track and field squad in the decathlon: "For me it wasn't much different than a kid saying, 'I want to be in the NFL.' It was just a dream."

Not only did Clay's dream come true, he scored the second-highest number of points (8,820) ever by an American and won the silver medal. That's when he realized he just might be one of the best decathletes in the world. At the 2008 Beijing Games, Clay bested his effort and joined a notable list of American gold medalists such as Bruce Jenner and Dan O'Brien. Along the way, Clay's steadily growing faith has been a significant part of the journey.

"Without my faith, I think it would be very easy for me to have a family that's in disarray, to have my priorities out of order, to make decisions that could derail my path to success. But because I have this foundation of faith, I like to believe that it's my compass. It keeps me on the path that I want to

be on. It allows me to make good decisions that bear good results. Without my faith, I think that I'd be lost and I don't think that I'd be as successful as I am today."

### **Ryan Hall – Track and Field (Marathon)**



From the very first day Ryan Hall started running at age 14 he instinctively knew it would require everything he had inside himself to be successful. It took him a little bit longer, however, to fully understand God's role in the arduous process of becoming the fastest American-born marathoner.

After briefly dropping out of college during his sophomore year at Stanford, Hall realized the results-based lifestyle he was leading was nothing but a recipe for self-loathing and depression. Since that time, the All-American long-distance runner has scored three top-four finishes at the Boston Marathon and a 10th place finish at the 2008 Olympics in Beijing.

Though he hasn't captured that elusive high-profile victory yet, Hall stands firm on one of his favorite passages of Scripture, Proverbs 24:16: "For though the righteous fall seven times, they rise again" (NIV).

"I have found that it's not the ability to never fail that makes an Olympian, but the ability to get back up. I have found that the ability to get back up comes from my ability to stay close to God and to see myself as He sees me," Hall says. "God has always given me the grace and strength to get back up after I have fallen. I have found that He has given me everything I need to accomplish what He has created me to be and to do."

### **Jonathan Horton – Gymnastics**

If prescribing the attention deficit hyperactivity disorder drug Ritalin had been popular when Jonathan Horton was a kid, he might not have found his affinity for gymnastics. To help

control their 5-year-old's chaotic energy, Horton's parents enrolled him in a training program instead of medicating him, and a future Olympic medal-winner was born.

After watching the 1996 Summer Olympics in Atlanta Horton was hooked, and his top goal became making it to the Games. He qualified for the Olympic Trials in 2004 but finished seven spots out of a place on the team. In 2008, however, Horton would not be denied. And not only did it make the team, he came home with a silver medal in the horizontal bar event and a bronze medal in the team competition.

Most recently, Horton has dealt with two broken bones and a torn ligament in his foot that he injured at the 2011 World Championships. It's been the biggest test of faith for a young man who was raised in church, but didn't get serious about God until attending college at the University of Oklahoma.

"Without my faith, I think I would be panicking," Horton says. "But sometimes I think that this could be a blessing in disguise. This could be something He's put in front of me to see how strong my faith really is. Sometimes I question if this was really necessary, but then I realize that this is God's plan and I have to overcome it and keep my faith in God. His plan is always greater than my plan."

### **Jesse Williams – Track & Field (High Jump)**



Jesse Williams likes to joke that his Olympic journey started as a baby. In an ironic sense, it's true. He attended the 1984 Los Angeles Games with his family at the young age of 7 months. It wasn't until 1992, however, after watching the Barcelona Games on TV that his dream truly took hold.

That's also about the time Williams discovered he was a natural jumper—so much so that he would make up games where jumping was a key component so he could win. Williams gravitated toward the high jump event, for which he has

captured 2010 and 2011 USA Outdoor Championships and most recently claimed his biggest prize yet with a gold medal at the 2011 World Championships in Daegu, South Korea.

Williams says that his youthful commitment to Christ has helped him deal with the inherent ups and downs of competition and the lonely moments that accompany international travel.

“I know that God has a plan for me and no matter how many times I fail I know its in Gods plan,” he explains. “I never let myself get down when I have a bad performance. I use it as inspiration to work harder. I always fall back on the Word when I am feeling lonely or when something is not going well.”

### **✘ Tamika Catchings – Basketball**

It's been an eventful 12 months for Tamika Catchings. Last season she was named among the top 15 players in WNBA history and later league MVP for the first time in her career. Catchings is also making her third appearance as a member of the USA Women's Basketball Team and hopes to claim a third gold medal.

“The Olympics is one of the most exciting things,” she says. “It's almost one of those things that even when you talk about it, you can't fully describe the feeling—just being able to be considered one of the best in your nation.”

Catchings has overcome many adversities to get to this point. As a child, she faced hearing and speech problems, and her parents' divorce during the sixth grade. Those struggles have given her an opportunity to share a message of hope with young people through her Catch the Stars Foundation, based in Indianapolis.

“God has taught me about patience and about accepting myself for who I am and knowing that He formed me and made me unique,” she states. “He made everyone uniquely wonderful. Every single cell, every single muscle, every single thing

about my body, He created and He formed—even my personality. I never thought I'd be able to speak in front of hundreds of people and have a story and a testimony. I'm extremely blessed to have all of these opportunities."

### **Missy Franklin – Swimming**



Ever since her mother took her to a "Mom and Me" swimming class when she was 6 months old, Missy Franklin has proved to be a natural in the water. Now, at the ripe age of 17, Franklin can already point to her name in the U.S. and world record books. Most noted as a freestyle and backstroke specialist, she says her faith has steadily grown since attending Regis Jesuit High School.

"God is always there for me. I talk with Him before, during and after practice and competitions," the Pasadena, Calif., native says. "I pray to Him for guidance. I thank Him for this talent He has given me and I've promised him that I will be a positive role model for young athletes in all sports."

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# **The Gospel According to the Olympics**

**How athletes and evangelists are combining to make London's Summer Olympics about more than just sports**

Madeline Mims has served as an Olympic chaplain for 24 years. When she travels to London for the 2012 Games, it will be her seventh time to fill that role. But strangely, as experienced as the former gold medalist is, she has no idea what to

expect.

“Each Olympiad has its own unique personality,” Mims says.


One thing is for certain. The Summer Olympics in London, being held July 27 through Aug. 12, will provide much more freedom for ministry and a wider variety of evangelism opportunities than its Beijing counterpart from four years ago.

“With England being an Anglican nation, that door has been opened to make sure the religious services are filled,” Mims says. “They’re making sure they cover all the bases.”

Mims is one of four American chaplains—two men and two women—who will minister to the entire U.S. contingency. They will join 15 international Protestant chaplains to facilitate daily chapel services, one-on-one counseling and team-specific ministry. She created the United States Council for Sports Chaplaincy (USCSC) to help support American sports chaplains as they travel to the Olympics, Track & Field World Championships, U.S. Olympic Track & Field Trials and other events.

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## Speed Racer

*NASCAR driver Michael McDowell is still behind the wheel  after walking away unscathed from one of the worst wrecks in the sport's history. His faith tells the story.*


**The world of stock car racing** can be summed up in one word: *speed*. Everything happens fast. From the shop to the garage to the pit to the track—time (measured in hundredths of seconds) is literally money for those aspiring to NASCAR

greatness. So, for rising-star driver Michael McDowell it's no surprise that his spiritual transformation has been as rapid as his rise to prominence in the sport he loves.

In 2003 McDowell was balancing his desire to drive full time and trying to make a living as a newlywed when he lost a close friend—Ron Huber—who was also his employer and mentor. Huber's passing served as "a reality check," McDowell says, for what he was doing with his life. He was suddenly reminded by his friend's death of the impact that Huber, a devoted Christian with strong ties to motorsports ministry, had quietly made in his life. Then, another employer named Tom Barnett brought real life into focus for McDowell.

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## A Generation in Revival

*Jesus Culture aims to raise up young adults given  wholeheartedly to Christ*

In charismatic circles, the term *revivalist* often brings vivid memories of past and present evangelists such as Kathryn Kuhlman, Oral Roberts and Benny Hinn. But Banning Liebscher, founder of the Jesus Culture movement, hopes to bring that concept to today's generation of teens and young adults.

"For us, a revivalist would be someone whose life is completely His," Liebscher tells *Charisma*. "Our message is whole-hearted consecration unto the Lord. It's not that we're just Christians, but we've really given ourselves to see revival in the earth. We believe that God is looking for entire cities to be saved, and He's looking for nations to turn to Him."

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# Beauty From Ashes

**God is turning sorrow to joy in China through Maria's Big House of Hope.**

When Steven Curtis and Mary Beth Chapman's 5-year-old daughter, Maria, died in a tragic accident two years ago, pastor Greg Laurie of Harvest Ministries was one of the first people to reach out to them. Laurie, whose adult son, Chris, died in a car crash less than three months later, told Chapman: "Maria is a far greater part of your future than she is of your past."

Laurie's statement has had a profound impact on Chapman, though he has come to understand how much his little girl remains ever present as well. He has seen much of this in the way Maria's life has influenced Shaohannah's Hope, also called Show Hope—a nonprofit founded by the Chapmans and named after their oldest adopted daughter.

Show Hope () helps families offset the high costs of international adoption. To date, Show Hope has awarded 2,000 grants.

"To watch what God has done through [Show Hope] has been amazing," Chapman says. "All over the country ... children have been brought into Christian families. We get to have a front-row seat and be a part of it."

Maria's lasting impact on the world was further solidified in July when the Chapmans opened Maria's Big House of Hope in Luoyang, China. The facility is a 60,000-square-foot, six-story, blue-and-white building equipped to care for orphans 5 years old and younger with special needs. It includes 140 beds and a surgical floor.

Maria's Big House of Hope was conceived when Chapman met a Christian physician and her husband who ran a special-needs foster-care facility as a ministry.

"We saw this work and fell in love with it and just asked if there was anything they dreamed of doing beyond this," Chapman says. "They told us about some property the government had given them in the Luoyang province, but they didn't have the resources to build a building."

Chapman helped raise the money, and eventually the dream was realized. Now even the Chinese government sends people from its state-run orphanage to Maria's Big House of Hope to learn how to better run its own facilities.

"It's had this cool effect in China, and we've gotten to tell our story every time, that this is in honor of our daughter who's with Jesus now and that's why we can do this," Chapman says.

"At the opening, I got to sing, 'Yours.' I literally declared in China, 'God, China is all yours.' Those opportunities and seeing how God has opened those doors has been an amazing thing."

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## Surprised by Grief

**Four years later, Steven Curtis Chapman can't shake his daughter's death. That's not a bad thing.**

Biblical principles sometimes read more like clichés or fortune-cookie messages rather than life-affirming truths. Take Romans 8:28, for example: "And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are

called according to His purpose” (NKJV).

Those words penned by the apostle Paul sound good on paper. They provide comfort and hope to people dealing with sickness, a job loss or any number of challenging circumstances. It’s when the severest storms of life come blowing through that the decision must be made to believe it or not, to stand firm on God’s Word or let despair take control.

Such was the case with Steven Curtis and Mary Beth Chapman when they were suddenly thrust into the most devastating tragedy of their married lives—the death of their child.

### **‘Let Her Go’**

May 21, 2008, was an otherwise normal afternoon at the Chapman house. Sure, there was a recent wedding engagement in the family to celebrate and a graduation to attend in a few days, but when you have six children ranging from preschool age to young adult, “normal” means there’s really no such thing as down time.

It was during such a usual afternoon that the unthinkable happened. At about 5 p.m., the Chapmans’ teenage son Will accidentally struck his 5-year-old sister, Maria, with his SUV while parking in the driveway.

LifeFlight transported her to the nearby Vanderbilt University children’s hospital in Nashville, Tenn., but rescue attempts proved futile. Maria was gone.

“When they told me that our daughter hadn’t made it, I had already determined in my mind that I was going to pray until God breathed life back into her,” Steven Curtis recalls. “I was going to bar the doors and make them carry me out. I wasn’t giving up. But it was my wife who spoke to me, and the Spirit through her, to say, ‘Let her go.’”

It took a long time before Chapman, a platinum-selling and

multiple-award winning recording artist, was able to share his grief with the world. Even after he reluctantly resumed performing, he remained silent on the topic of Maria's death for almost three months.

After he and Mary Beth found the strength to tell their story, the invitations for them to share it were mind-boggling. Everyone wanted to know how this high-profile family had survived such a horrendous tragedy.

They appeared on *Larry King Live*, *Good Morning America* and *The 700 Club*, and granted an interview to *People* magazine.

Chapman suddenly was caught up in a perplexing dichotomy. He was grieving immense loss while also attempting to accept, even embrace, these opportunities to reveal God's love and grace to a world that wanted to hear from him.

Chapman also knew he couldn't give people pat responses laden with Christianese. There was nothing he could do but lay his heart on the line and convey uninhibited honesty in the process.

"We couldn't give all the answers," Chapman says. "I think that's part of the way God has used it.

"People who would normally be very skeptical and cynical now might go: 'OK, I don't care to hear about your religion and your faith and all your God talk, but if you're surviving this and you're making it through this, I want to hear about that. Because that isn't religion as I know it. That's something different.'

"Almost not having the answers, in and of itself, was in a way a pretty profound answer," Chapman adds.

The interviews were especially tough on his wife, Chapman says. He admits there are still occasions when his desire to help others cope with loss is overtaken by a streak of

selfishness.

“All of these wonderful things, and us getting to share our hope and comfort with others who are hurting, we’re thankful for that, and we see God using that,” Chapman says.

“But in my humanity and in my flesh, I’d do anything to turn the hands of time back and say: ‘As good as all that is, I don’t care. I want my daughter back.’”

## **Unanswered Questions**

The journey that led Chapman to becoming Maria’s father is well-documented. Ten years ago, when the adoption bug hit him and Mary Beth, he was best known as the face of contemporary Christian music. Over his 23-year career he has amassed more than 10 million album sales, 45 No. 1 radio singles, five Grammy Awards and an astounding 56 Dove Awards.

First came adopted daughter Shaohannah (pronounced sho-HAN-uh). Three years later, the Chapmans adopted Stevey Joy. Then in 2004, after performing at an Easter service in Beijing, a missionary couple introduced him to a 1-year-old orphan named Maria. Chapman instinctively knew he had possibly just met his newest daughter.

By then, Chapman was already more than the most awarded Christian artist of all time. He was unofficially acting in a new role as the face of international adoption. The Chapmans became a tailor-made illustration for others of how God adopts believers into His family.

And perhaps it was the unique nature of the Chapman family makeup, coupled with the artist’s very public persona that made the inexplicable tragedy so much more difficult to comprehend.

“There’s a very large part of us as a family that really doesn’t understand and wouldn’t begin to say that anybody

understands the theology of why God allows these kinds of things,” Chapman admits. “The closest we’ll ever get is to read Job. That’s about as close as we’ll get to understanding how God uses suffering and ... why He allows it.

“I’ve heard some amazing messages and done some pretty incredible studies of Job over this last year and a half, and I’ve come to understand, I think, a lot more about what God is revealing about His heart and His character through that.”

### **Entrusted With a Story**

Chapman believes that God has, for whatever reason, entrusted this tragic story to him and his family. Despite his understandable reluctance at times, he will tell it “over and over again” and “in a public way,” he says.

But first Chapman had to ask God some intense questions. And the best way he knew how to convey his feelings was through music. The songs that came out of his grief eventually turned into an album, *Beauty Will Rise*—although, according to Chapman, it is still “really weird” to refer to the processing of his emotions that way.

“I didn’t set out to make a new record or a new album based on a theme I thought God was giving me,” he says. “I call these my psalms. It’s just me crying out to God with many of the same questions David had.

“Now I know what he meant when he was saying, ‘How long, O Lord?’ or ‘How long is the enemy going to beat the tar out of me?’ or ‘How long am I going to feel so separated from You?’”

Music has long been the way Chapman has processed his life. “It’s a real natural thing,” he says. Some of the songs on the new record, such as “Questions,” were literal examples of his dealing with the unknown and grappling with the unthinkable.

“God, are You serious?” he recalls asking. “My own son driving

a car and not seeing his sister, and then my daughters in the yard watching it happen and running up? There's just too many wrongs to make any sense.

"But through those kinds of questions, I think God has given me not so much answers but places of resolve to say I don't have to have the answer to that, but I really need to have Your presence and a sense that You're walking through this with us."

Eventually it became apparent that Chapman needed to share these musical stories with the world, and the CD released. Even without the music, his fans and supporters felt the need to reach out to him—many with similar stories of tragedy and loss. The outpouring was strangely both a comfort and a burden.

"People feel that need to connect," he says. "There's a fellowship of suffering that you become a part of, and there's a connection there and a family of sorts. But it's also the reason why I've done a limited number of interviews and meet-and-greets—because one of my real concerns, in my humanness and in my flesh, [is] there's only so much that I know I can hear and even tell."

### **'Cinderella' Reborn**

One of Chapman's most popular songs is "Cinderella," inspired by his oldest daughter, Emily. Ultimately it became just as much about his three adopted girls and imagining the bittersweet moments of seeing them grow up and eventually start their own lives. After Maria's death, Chapman resolved never to sing "Cinderella" at his concerts.

"I just thought it would be too painful," he says. "But with time, I began to realize that if I believe God's Word, and if I believe that there is a resurrection from the dead that Christ led the way into and that He's overcome death and the grave, and that to be absent from the body is to be present

with Christ, then I'm going to be with Him and Maria's with Him; therefore, we're going to be together. I'm going to see my little girl again. I'm going to dance with her again.

"So what would be unthinkably sad all of a sudden has become this hopeful declaration."

Chapman says that epiphany led to an "insatiable hunger" to learn as much as he could about heaven. It also inspired a new song, titled "Heaven Is the Face," which came out of a moment in which the songwriter—even though he'd been taught that heaven is about being with God—confessed: "Right now, heaven is about being with my little girl."

"And then God led me to the thought that it's not just that," Chapman adds. "Every nook and cranny of heaven is full of His glory and His goodness and His perfection. There are no more orphans. There are no more goodbyes. There's no more loneliness. That's heaven."

## **Living Hope**

As Chapman has gingerly navigated through his family's new normal, one of his biggest fears has been any appearance of embracing opportunism spun from his family's tragedy. With management companies, publicity firms and record labels involved, he is ever aware of that possibility taking root.

"You could so easily throw the baby out with the bath water," Chapman says. "There have been moments when I've just said: 'I can't do this. I can't let this get turned into an iTunes cover shot, or whatever.'"

But inevitably he is always brought back to the concept of purpose—whether fully understood or not. Since that tragic May 21 afternoon in 2008, purpose has been an ongoing process that has led him to live in the moment and faithfully follow the path that has stretched out ahead.

“We just have to remember that this is the story God has entrusted to us,” Chapman concludes about the family’s loss. “We’ll go wherever we can to tell it to His glory and to honor our daughter’s memory and more importantly to honor the God who’s given us the hope that’s just kept us alive to this point.”

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*Chad Bonham is a journalist, author and producer based in Broken Arrow, Okla.*

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Learn more about the Chapmans’ organization created in memory of Maria at

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## **Longer Life?**

Will biotechnology stretch our legacies out longer, or are the ethical implications too damaging?

Although escaping mortality is out of the question, stretching its boundaries may not be, according to new discoveries in genetic research.

Geneticists discovered how to lengthen the life span of animals and insects by the alteration of a single gene. Though companies form to benefit from any future application to humans, some are raising questions about the ethical

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## **Talking the Walk**

After heart trouble nearly claimed his life, FOX News Radio host Todd Starnes.

From the time he was a kid, Todd Starnes wanted to be a journalist. At 13 he became the staff cartoonist for a small weekly paper outside New Orleans where his family lived.

His journalism career eventually led him to the West Coast, where he became a news anchor and senior reporter for KFBK in Sacramento, Calif.