

Light In My Darkness

Musician Tammy Trent lost her husband three years ago in an accident. But the power of praise pulled her out of despair.

He smiled and waved, sank beneath the surface and was gone. Christian recording artist and speaker Tammy Trent will forever remember the last moment she saw her husband alive.

Young, athletic and strikingly handsome, Trent Lenderink loved water sports and was making a routine free dive—a short dive without an oxygen tank—in the crystal blue waters of a lagoon on Jamaica's sparkling coastline. After just celebrating their 11th wedding anniversary, the couple was on a much-needed getaway to pray about the future of Tammy's career.

When Trent didn't return to the surface after almost 15 minutes, Tammy frantically began to look for him. As more minutes ticked by, she became increasingly panicked, fearing that something was very wrong. At nightfall, after three hours of unsuccessful searching, Tammy made tearful calls to the couple's family back in the United States to ask them to pray and to beg them to be with her if her worst fears were confirmed.

Shortly after the search resumed the next morning, divers found Trent's lifeless body, and Tammy suddenly found herself alone, facing an immeasurable loss.

In tragic irony, all of her family members received the news of Trent's death on their cell phones while they sat in jetliners grounded in Chicago, St. Louis and Los Angeles. They all also learned, almost simultaneously, that the entire country had just experienced a terrifying tragedy. It was the

morning of September 11, 2001.

A Woman of Faith

Taking her stage name from Trent's first name, Tammy Trent had led a successful career in Christian music since 1995. Ever upbeat, she delivered joyful pop-styled songs to which she often danced on stage, with Trent always watching from the back of the house as her manager and sound technician.

She had released three albums and garnered two No. 1 songs and nine top 10 hits. In the summer of 2001, the Lenderinks were prayerfully seeking where God would lead them next.

The thought of having to make that decision on her own never crossed Tammy's mind. "My plan changed in a moment's time ... and I never saw it coming," she admits. "But God's plan never changed for my life."

Though the pain of losing her husband may take a lifetime to heal, Tammy has not let the tragedy destroy her. Instead, she has chosen to embrace the difficult path God has set before her, believing He is beside her every step of the way, teaching her of His love for her and being her strength when Tammy's own strength fails. At times God has wrapped His arms around her, she says, through the hug of a kind stranger, or He has spoken hope to her broken heart through the words of family and friends.

Today, Tammy's miraculous story inspires thousands of women. She travels with Women of Faith ministries, speaking and singing at churches and conferences around the country. By sharing about her experience and God's love through her

ordeal, she has brought hope to untold numbers of people who face loss and devastation in their own lives.

Reaching a point at which she could breathe deeply of life once again took time, however. In the dark days, weeks and months after Trent's death, Tammy realized she needed to focus on allowing God to rebuild her shattered heart.

"I knew I needed a year away from everything. I asked God for that," she says. "I felt strongly about the fact that we, Jesus and I, needed a year together—no music, no speaking, no platforms—just to put my life back together again."

Tammy had to make a determined effort to take the year off. Offers for album contracts, speaking engagements and interview appearances were flooding in. Apart from one emotional appearance on The 700 Club in 2002, Tammy waited before stepping forward to tell her story. During that period, she says, God taught her that He would never leave her or forsake her, that she could always rely on Him for every need.

"Being raised in a Christian home my whole life ... I took so much for granted," Tammy says. "I never had any moment where I had to absolutely depend on God. I was the kind of person that depended on other people first ... and Trent was one of those people. I depended on him so much. He was my comforter; he was my rescuer. He'd save me."

Today, although she still wears her wedding ring as a source of protection, as a "spiritual covering," Tammy says it's important for people to see that God, not a man, has rescued her.

“God is healing me and supplying all of my needs,” she says, “and it’s important for me to look in the mirror and say, ‘Tammy, you have to rely solely on Jesus.’”

An Angel With Tears

She first experienced God’s provision in the hours just after she lost Trent. Because of the flight lockdown in the wake of the September 11 attacks, none of her family had been able to reach her in Jamaica, except her father-in-law, who remained stranded with her on the island. Though he graciously handled all of the difficult legal arrangements that accompany a death, Trent’s father could not provide the solace of a shoulder to cry on as Tammy’s mother or sister could have.

Collapsed and alone in the bathroom of her hotel room, exhausted from weeping, Tammy cried out to God for someone simply to hold her. She told Him: “If heaven is real, lay it on the line, God! I’ve told people my whole life to believe, to hang on in the middle of your circumstances, and now I’m here.

“I know all the right answers, but I’m asking You, ‘If You’re such a big God and You’re there for everybody else, can You be here for me?’ I’m not asking for a thousand angels—I’m just asking for one angel to hold me.”

At that moment, she heard a voice in her heart say, “Get up and move.” Forcing herself to her feet and clinging to the wall for support, she stumbled into the next room. A Jamaican hotel maid was standing there. Seeing Tammy, she exclaimed: “I’ve been trying to get to you! I could hear you crying. Could I just come in and hold you?”

The two women wept in each other's arms as Tammy revealed her heartbreaking story. The "angel," neatly dressed in a Hilton housekeeping outfit, prayed passionately over her. "That was the first time I knew it was the Holy Spirit and He was taking care of me," Tammy says. "That 'angel' was sent to me as a gift from God in that moment, just to remind me that I wasn't alone, that God was very real. He did hear me and was there for me."

From that moment on, God continued to send numerous people into Tammy's life who brought comfort, strength and compassion. She returned home, and her mother and sister stayed with her almost constantly.

Others, including former acquaintances and caring strangers, reached out to her with encouragement and hope. Most important to Tammy was the sense of God's peace that pervaded her house. She felt it even in the absence of her husband's love and laughter.

"I can remember walking into this home the first time we were handed the keys, Trent and I, and we prayed that people would feel the love and peace of God," she recalls from her living room.

Today the room looks much like it did three years ago. Happy pictures from the couple's wedding and vacation photos—even the last shot Tammy snapped of Trent, moments before he entered the water for his final dive—adorn the walls. "Sometimes you think those are goofy little prayers, but who would have known that God had a greater plan—that I would need to come into this home two years later and feel the peace of God in my life?"

Learning to Live Again

Tammy has found much joy and healing in the friendships she has built with other women, many from her work with Women of Faith. These relationships also are an answer to Trent's own prayer for his wife before he died—that she be surrounded with women who could help her continue to grow in faith.

Tammy confesses she would trade everything to have Trent back, but she is allowing herself to laugh again. She doesn't try to explain why the tragedy happened.

Instead she has decided to honor the life she and Trent shared, and to honor the life God has for her today. That decision is a vital part of what she shares from the stage.

"I still cannot call myself a widow," Tammy admits. "I've accepted it, I'm not in denial, but some of those words are tough for me."

She is able to show people there is joy on the other side of tragedy, that despite her loss she is still on the journey of life. She tells people: "I'm still where you're at ... but I'm choosing life, and you have that choice today, too."

Tammy is careful to add that choosing to embrace life again after losing a loved one is not the same as a decision to forget that person. She enjoys talking about her husband at conferences or with friends and family every chance she has.

She also wrote a book about her story titled *Learning to Breathe Again* (W Publishing). It traces their romance and

marriage, the black days after Trent's death and her journey back to life.

"Life and death are going to happen," she says. "It's all temporary, and you are just passing through. What really matters at the end of the day is how your life's example is played out this side of heaven. That's why it's so critical that we realize how fragile life is, and we are reminded to speak life into those we love. Trent spoke life into my spirit every day."

Tammy receives e-mails daily from people whom her story has touched. Despite the growing volume, she takes the time to respond to every one.

"I read those e-mails and I just weep because I know what they're about to go through," she admits. "When people ask me what to say or do, I don't know what to tell them because I'm still trying to figure that out myself."

She attempts in her discomfort to speak comfort, in her woundedness to share healing. "Sometimes just knowing someone is listening and having someone tell you: 'God is with you. You'll make it. Just keep breathing,' may be what they need to hear," she says.

Tammy has encouraged others to trust God's goodness through the lyrics of her songs, but today the words are profoundly more poignant for her and her audiences.

"It was very hard for me to lift up my hands the first few Sundays going to church.," Tammy recalls with tears in her eyes. "It wasn't a form of anger or not accepting all that God

had for me at that moment. It was just hard for me to listen to the songs and what they had to say—of life and hope and salvation and worship, no matter what your circumstances.”

As she forced her heart to obey the call to worship, the words began to ring true in her again. “The more I do, my heart believes it. God is good all the time. Just because bad things happen doesn’t mean He’s a bad God. We just don’t understand His hand. Trust His heart when you can’t see His hand.”

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