

Captured But Not Crushed

When terrorists took me and my husband hostage—and killed him after 376 days—I learned to love my enemies.

A few short years ago, I was perfectly content to live in a small barrio in the Philippines with my jungle-pilot husband, Martin, and my three children. My daily tasks at that time were simple:

1. Keep Martin going so he could fly for our co-workers who labored in the tribal areas
2. Home school our kids so we wouldn't have to send them to boarding school, which was several days' travel away
3. Provide meals and housing for visitors and colleagues who passed through our area.

We loved our ministry and our life overseas. We loved each other and our Lord Jesus.

Then came May 27, 2001. Martin had to go to the southern island of Palawan to fill in for another pilot working for New Tribes Mission, our mission organization, and I decided to go with him. Before we left our kids with the neighbors, we told them that we would have a heavy flying schedule but would be gone only a week.

But life does not always go as planned. My husband and I did not return to our children as we promised. We were taken hostage by militant Muslims while on Palawan.

For the next year, we lived with the Abu Sayyaf in the jungles of Basilan—running from the military, sleeping out in the open, starving, bathing in rivers, and watching the atrocities that this group of men inflicted on others—all the while wondering if we would ever see our home and family again. It was a hard year—physically, emotionally and spiritually.

Lessons Learned Physically, I learned that a woman in her 40s can hike with guys in their 20s and keep up if she has to. Mind you, I am a city girl. I do not even like to camp! But I just did what I had to do, and God gave me the strength I needed.

Emotionally, Martin kept my spirits buoyed. Some days I felt as if I was going to lose my mind from the stress of being in a hostile environment for so long—especially during and after the gun battles between our captors and the Philippine military.

Those battles were terrifying. Bullets would whiz past our heads and embed themselves in trees around us as we hugged the ground. Each time the shooting started, we wondered, Will the bullets find us this time? We were “lucky” and avoided injury during the first 16 gun battles.

Several times during that year, I decided I’d had enough. I was done being a hostage! I would not move another inch. Our captors could kill me if they wanted, but I was finished.

Martin would ever so gently encourage me. “Gracia, what would the kids say if you could pick up the phone and talk to them right now? They would say, ‘Keep going today, Mom, because tomorrow you might get to go home.’” What would I have done without Martin’s encouragement? God only knows.

Spiritually—I learned my roughest lessons in this area. I think the hardest thing about being held hostage was that I saw what I really am. In one swift moment of time, everything I had—except Martin—was taken away from me. And when everything is gone and you are in an uncomfortable position, you see what is really in your heart.

Face to Face With Me I was born into a loving family, had lots of friends growing up, became a believer in Jesus at an early age, never gave my folks any problems and married a terrific guy. Together we decided we wanted to make a difference in the

world, so we joined New Tribes Mission.

After our training, we packed up and left the American dream to go to the Philippines where Martin flew food, medicine, cargo and people into some of the most primitive places in the world. Only a “good” person has a bio like that, right?

I was a pretty good person—or at least I thought I was. But in the jungle I came face to face with a Gracia whom I really did not want to see, a me who I did not want to believe existed.

I saw a hateful Gracia. At times I really hated those Muslims for what they had done to us and for the pain they were causing our family. I saw a covetous Gracia. When we were starving and I saw someone with food, I would covet what they had. I saw a despairing Gracia: “Nobody cares about us anymore. This has gone on for so long that everyone has forgotten us!” I saw a faithless Gracia. Here is a journal entry that I scribbled on some borrowed paper one day. It is not very pretty:

“This was a very hard day for me. Why does God keep me here to suffer day after day? I got almost hysterical in the afternoon. Martin tells me not to give up. I’ve tried to be a good hostage and be patient and where has it gotten me? Eight and a half months and still here. God is pleased to have me suffer and I’m tired of it!”

Hebrews 4:12-13 says, “The word of God...exposes our innermost thoughts and desires. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God. Everything is naked and exposed before his eyes” (NLT).

We may look like we have it together on the outside, but God sees what we truly are on the inside. And God is so good. He knows our frame. He remembers that we are dust, and He loves us when we are weak and needy. God did not wait for me to get my act together in the jungle. Even as I complained at Him for allowing me to be there for eight and a half months, He began working in my heart.

One day I asked Martin: "Where is the love, joy, peace and contentment that believers are supposed to have? I look at myself and I see bad and worse. Where is the good?"

Martin said, "Those are gifts from the Holy Spirit. Let's ask for them."

I had tried and failed to find those things in myself for months, so we began to pray and ask God to work those good things into our hearts.

And He did. God, ever faithful, ever good, began to work into our lives those things that we so desperately wanted to see.

The Greatest Challenge One of the biggest changes I noticed was my response to my enemies. Jesus told us how to handle the problem of dealing with enemies. He said, "'Love your enemies...do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you'" (Matt. 5:44, NKJV). He also said that if a soldier asks you to carry his stuff for a mile because he has no horse, carry it for two miles. If someone asks for your shirt because he is cold, give him your jacket also.

When I read those verses I remember Achmad, one of the guys holding us captive. He was about 14 years old. Yep. There were kids there as well as older guys. And Achmad was a cute kid.

Most kids were the water boys—they just carried the loads—but Achmad was different. His uncle is the No. 2 leader of the Abu Sayyaf, so he had a weapon—an M-14—to carry, and that gave him status even though he was just a kid. He was very proud of himself.

Now, I was considered the lowest hostage. I was an American, and I was a woman. And Achmad decided that I was someone he could boss around.

When we were walking through the jungle, he would follow me

repeating one of the few English words he knew: "Faster, faster." I could not go any faster. I was in a line and keeping up well with the person in front of me, but he would still follow badgering me with, "Faster, faster."

One day our captors allowed Martin and me to go to the river for a bath. They asked Achmad to be our guard. He did not want to. He wanted to be out scouting or in his hammock doing nothing, but instead he was sent to guard us.

While I was in the river taking a bath—which consisted of standing in the water in my clothes and getting wet and soaping up underneath my clothes and rinsing off—Achmad started in with his favorite phrase, "Faster, faster." I thought I was bathing fast enough, just not fast enough for him.

He picked up rocks and threw them at me, all the while saying, "Faster, faster." I got mad. I was not used to being bossed around, especially by a 14-year-old. So I told him off in English. "Hey," I said, "if you don't cut that out, I'm really going to go slow and you will be at this river all afternoon!" Of course, he couldn't understand what I said, and the rocks and taunts kept coming until Martin sternly told him to stop.

A few weeks later, we were in a gun battle, and Achmad was wounded. Because the military was closing in, our captors could not transport Achmad to the medical help he needed. He became feverish and started saying things as if he were out of his mind. We carried him on a makeshift stretcher for weeks.

Love Beyond Reason One day I could see that Achmad was very upset about something, and I found out that he had messed his pants and gotten his clothes dirty. I thought to myself, If this were my son, I would want someone to help him.

So I went over and asked Achmad if I could wash his clothes for him. I took them to the river, and as I washed them, God completely changed my heart toward that boy. He gave me a love

for Achmad. I can't explain it.

Achmad eventually went mad—ranting and raving crazy. The last time I saw him, his fellow captors had him tied down so he could not move. They had stuffed a sock into his mouth to keep him quiet and had pulled a cap over his eyes so he could not see.

I wonder where Achmad is today. Dead? Recovered and walking through the jungle with another set of hostages? Still crazy somewhere?

I am so glad I had the opportunity to be generous to that boy. I can look back on him with no regrets, and it is because God changed my heart and gave me the capacity to love my enemy.

But my story does not end there. After a year and a week as hostages, during gun battle number 17, Martin was killed and I was wounded. I was rescued a little later that day. I have recovered from my wounds and live with my three teenagers in the States. We have learned to trust God with our lives. We believe that God is faithful and good!

God continues to use my story to encourage others who find themselves in struggles in their own lives. It never ceases to amaze me that God can take even the most horrific experiences we go through and—if we let Him—change our hearts, give us His love, and use it all for His glory.

Read a companion devotional.

Gracia Burnham is an award-winning author and the founder and director of The Martin & Gracia Burnham Foundation, which supports the work of missions around the world.