

God Gave Beauty for Ashes

Paul and Betty Neff lost four children in a fire just days before Christmas. Six years later, their only remaining son was killed. Yet through it all, they've watched God turn  their grief into something beautiful.

Betty Neff was 23 and a first-time mother when she dreamed she visited heaven:

"I was a young girl, running barefoot through a soft grassy meadow. I came to a small hill and immediately recognized Jesus standing at the top. He wore a long, white robe with a blue sash draped over one shoulder and wrapped around His waist. I couldn't see their faces, but there were four children on Jesus' right side and a person the size of an adult on His left."

The week before Christmas in 1983, Paul and Betty Neff's youngsters were pleading with their dad, hammering away at his refusal to attend their Christmas play at church that afternoon: "Please, Daddy, oh, please! It just won't be the same without you there," they exclaimed.

Paul, a 37-year-old, 222-pound ex-Marine who had fought some pretty tough battles in Vietnam, realized that in this case it would be easier to surrender. "OK, I'll go," he announced.

Standing nearby, Betty, 36, watched and smiled. Her children—Gabrielle, 7; Amanda, 8; Christiana, 10; Jon, 11; and David, 13—were special; people around their small town of Grove City, Ohio, often said so. Each had accepted Christ and been filled with the Holy Spirit at an early age.

But Betty's pride was tinged with sadness. It had become more difficult explaining to the children why Daddy wasn't going to

church. Her own understanding was wearing thin.

Just two weeks ago Paul had been out drinking again—this time coming home with his forearm in a cast from busting out a car window during an argument. Yet he remained a loving father. His favorite time of day was when he came home from work to play with his kids.

That Sunday afternoon, he and Betty sat in the back of the small country church and watched their youngsters help portray the Christmas story. Paul's fatherly pride was soon replaced with an overwhelming sense of conviction. There, amid little shepherds in bedsheets and wise men in bathrobes, he wept silently and asked for God's forgiveness.

At home that night, Betty handed out homemade cookies and mugs of hot cocoa while Paul strung lights on the Christmas tree and led the kids in Christmas carols. Betty couldn't decide which were brighter: the lights on the tree or the sparkles in her children's eyes. They were so delighted—Daddy was back in church!

After they had been sent upstairs to bed, the girls sneaked into their brothers' room. They listened to Christmas stories on the radio until they all fell asleep lying across the big double bed.

Paul and Betty had decided to live in the country so their children "would be one another's best friends." Their two-story, five-bedroom farmhouse, about 15 miles outside Columbus, sat on three acres of farmland and had a barn for the animals.

Waking Up to a Nightmare

Now that winter had set in, it wasn't unusual for the furnace to act up. So in the early-morning hours of Monday, Dec. 20, when the home's smoke alarm jarred Paul and Betty out of a deep sleep, Paul set out for the furnace room as he had done

on other nights.

This time Paul discovered a healthy fire and instinctively tried to put it out. He soon realized it was beyond his ability. Flames were shooting up the walls, ferociously consuming the room's wood frame.

He ran upstairs, yelling at Betty to get outside while he went for the children. He would drop them to her from one of the second-story bedroom windows.

Thick black smoke and the unbearable heat already permeating the house made it nearly impossible to see or breathe. With his face buried in his pajama sleeves, Paul scrambled upstairs and found Jon sitting on the top step, screaming in fear.

Paul grabbed his son and headed into the first bedroom, slamming the door behind them. He sat Jon down just long enough to smash through the thick storm glass window and yell for Betty.

Reaching out the window, Paul held Jon in a cradled position. "Daddy, don't let go of me!" Jon screamed into his father's face.

"Son, your mama's gonna catch you," Paul said. "You gotta let go!" To this day, Betty doesn't remember catching her son—who was dropped to her from a distance of at least 20 feet.

Paul didn't realize until later that he had glass imbedded in his stomach from leaning out the broken window; that his right wrist was partially severed from the glass, causing every pump of his heart to spurt out more blood; that he had second- and third-degree burns all over his body.

All he could think about were his children. He had to rescue them.

He headed back to the hallway, but the second bedroom door wouldn't budge. "God, help me! Help me get my babies!" he

cried, even though he could barely breathe. His throat and lungs were burning from the acidic smoke created by burning vinyl wallpaper.

Paul felt himself losing consciousness, but he kept begging God: "Don't let my sin cause me to lose my babies. Help me!" He rammed the door with his shoulder, then his whole body.

The door gave way. At the same instant, an explosion hurled Paul across the room and out the bedroom window. He fell head over heels, his feet and ankles crashing into the frozen ground and his back breaking in multiple places.

Speeding to the hospital, paramedics worked feverishly to stabilize Paul's plummeting vital signs. The bitter cold air intensified the pain in his body.

He could hear the medics assessing his condition: "Too much blood loss—his veins collapsed. I can't get an IV in anywhere."

"Have you found a vein yet?"

"No, we're losing him."

Paul could hear other voices, taunting him: *You're to blame that your children are dead. How could a man be awarded two Purple Hearts yet not be able to save his own children? How can you live with yourself?*

Suddenly the pain subsided. Instead of shivering from the cold, Paul felt a comforting warmth. The paramedics' voices grew distant.

Paul then felt the Lord's presence as God spoke to his heart: "Paul, I took your children when they were sleeping. They never felt any pain. They're with Me. There's no need to worry."

"Thank you, God," he prayed. A heavy burden lifted. Paul now

felt weightless, like he was floating. "Lord, I know I'm dying."

He could still just barely hear the paramedics: "How's the mother doing?" "She's burned, but she's OK. The boy probably won't make it."

Paul continued: "Dear God, my wife—I don't want her to be alone, not with all of us gone. Oh, Lord, if it's Your will, let me go back and help her." He barely finished the last word of his prayer when he felt a jolt of excruciating pain. "I got it!" the paramedic shouted, inserting the needle and the flow of crucial intravenous fluids.

Never Alone

When Betty wasn't at Paul's bedside she was across town at another Columbus hospital with Jon, who had suffered burns and smoke inhalation. Paul, she was told, would probably never walk again because of his broken back and crushed ankles and heels. He would be in the hospital for at least seven months.

Her other four precious children were gone. Their bodies were found lying next to one another on the boys' bed. The coroner said they died from smoke inhalation and never felt any pain. "They went to sleep and woke up in heaven," he told Betty.

The cause of the fire? Faulty wiring.

Away from the doctors, nurses and concerned loved ones, Betty was thinking, remembering her dream from years before: four youngsters standing next to Jesus. *That was my Gabey, Chrissy, Mandy and David*, she realized.

Only now it was more than a dream. It became Betty's solace, her source of comfort for the days, months, even years ahead—her assurance that her children were never—are never—alone.

Today, 14 years later, Betty tells *Charisma*: “If it hadn’t been for that dream, I don’t think I could’ve made it. I know where my children are. I’ve never had to wrestle with the ‘what ifs.’”

Paul insisted on attending his children’s funeral three days after the fire, despite doctors’ orders, frigid temperatures, and IVs, wires and monitors. Accompanied by a nurse, he was transported by ambulance, wheeled in on a gurney and stationed down front in a side aisle.

He could turn his head just enough to see four little white caskets lined up parallel to him a short distance away. To Paul they seemed to be enveloped by the mounds of flowers that had arrived.

What Paul couldn’t see behind him were the hundreds of people crammed into the funeral home and spilling out into the parking lot where speakers had been erected. Betty had insisted on no somber funeral—she wanted uplifting songs and an altar call.

“My children, even in their deaths, won souls to the Lord that day,” she said. The Neffs heard from many people who wrote that they had accepted Christ after hearing about the funeral.

Paul’s recovery was nothing short of miraculous. He was released from the hospital just 11 days after the fire and was walking with a cane six months later.

But little did he and Betty know that more heartache lay ahead.

As the years went by, their remaining son, Jon, grew strong in the Lord. He loved to evangelize, telling others about the morning of the funeral when God gave him a comforting vision.

In it he saw his siblings in heaven, waving to him and assuring him they were OK. Gabey had yelled: “Jon, we’re with

the Lord! We'll see you soon!"

It was in June 1990 that the second accident happened. Jon was driving his dad's tractor on their 13-acre farm in McConnelsville, Ohio, where they had moved after the fire. The 18-year-old was planning to study electrical engineering at Ohio State but was killed instantly when the tractor, while going up a hill, hit a bump and rolled over on top of him.

Betty then fully understood her dream: The young man standing on the other side of Jesus was Jon. Now he too was in heaven.

Having It All

The one question Paul and Betty get asked the most: "Why did God allow this to happen?" They don't have an answer.

But, Paul says: "It once hit me that the incredible pain we felt from losing our children is similar to what our heavenly Father feels every time one of His children turns away and leaves Him. That realization devastated me—that God feels this depth of pain all the time."

Betty added: "I don't believe God chose the method of our children's deaths. But I believe He is an opportunist—the devil thought he had gotten their souls and could get ours. But God turned it around for good.

"I know my children have it all ... in heaven—just as it was shown to me before most of them were born."

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