

Pastor Miraculously Defies Death After Horrific Accident Because of One Major Habit

Pastor Mary Bangs' ultimate athletic dream is to compete in an Ironman Triathlon, a nonstop swim, 112-mile bicycle ride and run. A mother of four and grandmother of nine, and athlete from her youth, this Holy Spirit-energized competitor believes anything is possible with God. She's born to compete, she says, even when disease or a near-fatal accident conspire to take her out of the running.

Married to Pastor Steve, Bangs manages an adrenal gland disease, Addison's, alongside intense athletic training and competition nearly year round. Almost two years ago, her SUV was struck by a car traveling 65 miles per hour through a red light as she waited for two motorists to complete left-hand turns. The driver, a 16-year-old on his way to school, swerved enough to avoid head-on impact with Bangs, who was on her way to work, where she and Steve lead the children's department and adults in ministry school, which prepares students to lead future churches. The carnage of metal that was her car stopped only at the tall, metal light pole it wrapped around.

A broken neck, scapula, ribs, punctured lung and crushed knee were the only casualties on that February morning in 2016, despite doctors' predictions that other women Bangs' age would not have survived the impact and injuries. Mary's saving grace, according to doctors, was her physical fitness and weight training, which she had incorporated into training for several planned endurance challenges and national sprint competitions in the spring and summer.

"A doctor told me, 'Little did you know you were training to survive this accident,'" says Bangs, who endured three months

in a leg cast, neck brace and crutches she used only when Steve wasn't home to carry her from bed to the bathroom. Intolerant of "doing nothing" during her recovery, Steve began timing his wife—for entertainment really—when she was strong enough to hobble on crutches to their mailbox. "Yeah, I have a little competition in me, so we made the best of it," Mary says with a laugh that defies the adversity she's endured.

Steve, on the other hand, intentionally ignored the question of whether his wife would compete again. "I tried to stay focused on helping her get better," he says. As Mary recovered, he saw glimpses of hope. "When she was cleared by her doctor to go the gym—still wearing a neck brace—I knew she would compete again."

Someone who loves to teach the Word of God, Bangs applies Scripture to her own life as manager of a chronic condition and as an athlete who competes with screws in one knee. She also helps the children and students she loves as pastor to see the Bible's relevance to their lives. "We've had enough stuff happen in our lives to know that God uses it for our good, and to encourage others who are facing adversity or challenges themselves," she says.

An endocrinologist who helped Mary keep Addison's under control during her training for and competition in a Half Ironman in 2015 himself turned to his patient for help after he, too, was diagnosed with Addison's. "Isn't that crazy? He called and said, 'I don't know if you remember me but I need your personal advice.'"

"I'm like are you kidding me? You helped me prepare for the biggest event of my life," says Bangs, who still communicates when needed with the 70-year-old doctor after he contacted her by phone last year.

In August 2017, Bangs chalked up one of her greatest athletic accomplishments since the accident, setting a personal, best

record in a 10K by shaving nine minutes from a previous time. Two months later, on Oct. 10, she found in the mailbox—the one she “raced” to during rehabilitation—a letter from the organizers of the 10K. Inside was a medal and note of congratulations for finishing in the top 10. Turning over the medal, Bangs saw the 10th place inscription.

“So I got a 10th place medal in the mail on 10/10 for finishing among the top 10 which, to me, is like Jesus saying, ‘I love you and I’m with you. I want you to keep doing this,’” she says, chuckling.

Not coincidentally, a Bible verse from the Gospel of John has guided the Bangs since 2000, when they began to see the No. 10 everywhere they looked—on the clock, in Scripture and on the calendar. In the 10th chapter and 10th verse of John, Jesus tells His disciples that He’s come to give life, abundantly, but that the enemy of souls has come to kill, steal and destroy.

“All through our lives and, specifically since the year 2000, the Lord has used John 10:10 to speak to us,” says Bangs, who believes the medal and 10th-place finish represent—not only a personal best time—but also a sign that she’s to continue training for the full Ironman Triathlon.

In a Sprint Triathlon 18 months after the accident, Bangs proved to herself she could compete, despite personal doubts, poor performances and an Addisonian crisis, an acute failure of the adrenal glands. “I ended up winning and—not just winning—but standing on the podium a full 10 minutes ahead of the next finisher,” she says. In another competition, an Olympic-distance Triathlon, a flare up of Addison’s left Bangs powerless; her daughter sadly carried Mary to the bathroom.

In losses and victories, Bangs turns to the Lord, her source of physical and spiritual strength. On one occasion, He told her to stop supplementing her diet with all vitamins except a

B Complex, calcium, magnesium and protein. Symptoms that previously dogged her immediately disappeared.

This past summer, Bangs completed a Metric-Century Ride (62 miles), an Olympic-distance Triathlon and a Sprint Triathlon. On Tuesday, she qualified for the Olympic-distance race at the 2018 USA Triathlon Age Group National Championships on Aug. 11 in Cleveland, Ohio.

Bangs has written *An Accidental Testimony* in which she shares raw emotions that surface when she talks about the fateful winter day her morning commute to work took a detour in an ambulance to the hospital. “None of this should have happened. But God is faithful. His miraculous power was at work in my body. He is the God of the impossible in any and every situation. Choose to believe Him and His Word. His love never fails. I don’t believe He was the author of that accident, but I do believe He caused it to work for good, because He is good,” Bangs writes.