

Walking Alongside a Soul Surfer

✖ Reflecting on the journey that brought her from ministering to kids on the North Shore of Kauai to a New York City movie premiere, youth leader Sarah Hill said she feels a sense of awe—but not surprise.

“I really believe that the Lord painstakingly prepares you for things in your life so that you can have a greater testimony to bring Him glory,” she says in an interview after the April 6 premiere of *Soul Surfer*.

For Hill, that preparation involved tragedy and pain.

“I was raised in San Diego by a single mom with five kids who has fought a long battle with cancer,” she recalls. “My dad was in and out of the picture, in and out of jail. He was abusive—physically and verbally—and he abused drugs and alcohol.”

In addition to enduring emotional pain, Hill experienced physical trials. “I had several surgeries growing up and a lot of illnesses,” she says. “I became very insecure. I didn’t ever question if He was real or not, but I did ask, ‘How can a God of love allow so many bad things to happen?’”

Things seemed to be looking up when Hill received a scholarship to play water polo in college. But two weeks before she was supposed to report to campus, she broke her neck and back in a surfing accident, and lost the scholarship. She was one sixteenth of an inch from being paralyzed.

“It’s a total miracle that I survived,” says Hill. “But all of that added to a feeling of despair, and my future and my dreams crumbled right before me.”

Three months after breaking her neck, Hill sank into a deep depression and wanted to give up. "I was tired of all the trials and tribulations," she says.

Something made her hang on.

"I remember asking the Lord to speak to me," says Hill. She opened her Bible and found 2 Corinthians 12: 9-10. The red letters jumped off the page: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

In the next verse, the apostle Paul writes, "I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in trials and tribulations because when I am weak, then I am strong."

As soon as she read those words, Hill recommitted her life to the Lord. "That's when my journey really began," she explained.

Not long afterward, Hill completed her Associate's Degree in theology from Calvary Chapel Bible College, returned to surfing, and became a missionary on the island of Kauai.

Describing the call of God, Hill said that at first she laughed. "God doesn't call people to Hawaii. But I had this radical dream one night of kids perishing on a beach and someone elbowing me and saying, 'See Sarah, because you weren't going to go, people are dying without the Lord.'

"It was awful," says Hill. "I woke up with a sense of urgency: 'OK, Lord, you really are calling me there.'"

In Hawaii, Hill met a young surfer named Bethany Hamilton. And on Oct. 31, 2003, she received a disturbing phone call that seemed at first to be a joke.

"I got the phone call from her brother Noah on Halloween morning and I thought it was a nasty trick," says Hill about

Hamilton's shark attack. "But then I could hear the panic in his voice and picked him up."

As Hill sped to the hospital—actually beating the paramedics there—Noah was so upset he thought he might vomit and stuck his head out the window. "And I am driving and praying, 'Lord, how do I minister to this family? I am not OK with this.'"

That is when the Lord reminded Hill of Jeremiah 29:11 — "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."

"I felt like the Lord spoke to my heart," says Hill. "I had a peace that she would survive. I shared that verse with Noah and her mom. When Bethany first came out of surgery that was the first thing her mom told her. And Bethany grabbed on to that."

Hill sat with Hamilton every day in the hospital. By day three, they started to talk about Bethany's return to surfing. "I told her, 'The Lord hasn't allowed this to take away your gift of surfing. He is going to use it in some way.' All along, I felt that God was going to get her through it."

He did. Less than a month after the attack, Hamilton was back in the water. A year later, she was awarded both an ESPY for "Comeback Athlete of the Year" and a "Teen Choice Award" for Courage.

By 2010, Hamilton was ranked No. 20 on the Women's Tour of the Association of Surfing Professionals.

Hill—whose role in Hamilton's life is interwoven throughout *Soul Surfer*—never worried about her young friend's faith during her recovery—or now in the spotlight. "She was always a standout girl in her relationship with the Lord," says Hill. "In my youth group, she was one of the most dependable kids."

✖ According to Hill, Hamilton has “always been a light in a dark industry—and surfing is a tough industry. After the attack, I knew He was going to use her as a voice. I didn’t know what that meant then, but the Lord did. He has really done that through her story.”

God is also using Hill in a powerful way, but she maintains a humble perspective. “I was just being faithful to what God had called me to do,” she says of her ministry to Hamilton.

“Now to see what God is doing, it’s exciting,” she adds. “I know my heart and I know Bethany’s as well is to see God use this movie beyond measure and to reach tons of people.”

She also sees how the trials she endured in younger years prepared her for this moment. “When the Lord spoke to me, I just decided that I would not whine and complain. I am not going to say that I have answers for all the things that happened to me, but I am going to say that I am a stronger person because of those trials and tribulations.”

Hill concludes with a word of advice for young people: “I would tell kids to be inspired and to know even when the road looks difficult it doesn’t mean you’re at the end. God brings purpose to every life. I pray through this film you are touched by His love and inspired by His daughter.”

Reprinted with permission from the Bill Graham Evangelistic Association.