

In Fires and Floods, Sickness and Health

Phil and Pam Rhodes haven't taken a vacation since 2005.

The Tracy, Calif., couple has spent the last eight years ministering to people in the aftermath of fires, floods, tornadoes, and shootings.

"We've been in some situations we probably shouldn't have been in," said Phil Rhodes. "The Lord said, 'Be strong and courageous.' "

And Phil and Pam know their strength and courage doesn't come from themselves.

"It's not us," said Pam Rhodes. "It's not any man or woman that brings fruitfulness to this ministry. It's the power of the Holy Spirit."

Working in that power, Phil and Pam have traveled coast to coast with the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association's Rapid Response Team (RRT), witnessing God's love and faithfulness during humanity's darkest hours.

Hurricane Katrina. Virginia Tech. Joplin, Missouri. The Haiti earthquake. The Aurora, Colo., shooting.

These are a few of the tragedies Phil and Pam have confronted together.

It would be easy to praise the husband and wife chaplain team for having the faith to stare evil and despair between the eyes, time and again, but Phil and Pam say that would be a big mistake. They insist on giving every ounce of glory to God.

"We are just very, very, very common folk with nothing special about us," said Phil. "I used to rely on my own strength and

have since come to realize that it's God who provides everything."

Inside Prison Walls

Phil and Pam's ministry didn't begin in the flooded streets of New Orleans or the rubble of tornado-ravaged Joplin. It began within the thick walls of the California prison system. The couple spent a combined total of 57 years working for the California Dept. of Corrections—experience that served them well once they discovered their calling as RRT chaplains.

Pam says the truth of Ephesians 2:10 is evident in their lives. It reads, "For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (NIV).

"He did have it prepared in advance for us to do," said Pam. "It's been such a blessing."

Working in the prison system put Pam and Phil in contact with people from all walks of life. They met individuals of different races, religions and socio-economic backgrounds. It all prepared them for future encounters in the mission field.

"There's no doubt that way back with the department of corrections, God was working on us," said Phil.

Hurricanes and Earthquakes

Jack Munday, International Director of BGEA RRT and Specialized Ministries, recruited Phil and Pam to the RRT after he saw them volunteering with Samaritan's Purse during Hurricane Katrina.

The first word that comes to his mind when he thinks about them is "servant."

"Phil and Pam are a couple that has an incredible compassion for people," said Munday. "They make themselves available to serve whenever the need arises."

When a magnitude 7.0 earthquake wreaked havoc in Haiti in January 2010, Phil and Pam received a phone call from Munday. They still remember the question that followed.

“Would you be willing to go to Haiti and pray with people before they die?”

Phil and Pam had their answer ready.

“Send us.”

“They said, ‘We’ve already been praying, and God has given us a real burden for the Haitian people,’” said Munday.

The Rhodes stood in the epicenter of the disaster ten days after it happened. Through various deployments that followed, the couple spent a total of six months in the devastated country, witnessing “miracle after miracle.”

“Thank You for Being There for Me”

Other deployments have taken Phil and Pam across the U.S. to minister to communities grappling with the heartbreak and evil of mass shootings. One such deployment took the couple to a small Wisconsin town reeling from violence.

“I stood in a mortuary,” said Phil. “There were five coffins all open with people ages 14 to 19. Standing next to the wall was a 70-year-old grandpa. I didn’t say one word to him. I held his hand.”

Phil’s voice filled with emotion as he recalled the man’s reaction.

He just said, “Thank you for being there for me.”

Battling Cancer, Saving Souls

After years of being there for strangers, Phil and Pam are going through a season that requires them to be there for each other more than ever.

Phil is battling cancer. Times are tough, but they will not be moved. They say their marriage of 42 years isn't perfect. They just choose to rely on Jesus as the glue that holds them together.

"Coming through this walk that we've had, God has called her to stand by my side," said Phil. "Now that's incredible, because that's her call. She has so much to offer. She could do a lot of things. She could speak at conventions. She can sing. She can do all these things, but God has called her to stand by me. It just blows me away."

Phil and Pam continue to serve the Lord, wherever He leads them, even if it's to a hospital bed.

"I called Phil one day," said Munday. "He was in the hospital, and his voice was so weak. I could hardly hear him. And he said, 'I've gotta tell you, God is so good.'"

Munday says Phil went on to explain that he had been asking the same question to everyone he met at the hospital: "What must a person do to see heaven?"

Phil has listened to many different responses before sharing his own: Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.

"My message is very simple," said Phil. "It's that Jesus loves you. That he knows your name. And he desires a personal relationship with you."

That message has led to new beginnings in Christ for multiple people, right there in the hospital room.

"It doesn't matter where they are or what they're doing," said Munday. "It's about proclaiming the name of Christ. They do it in such a gentle, humble way, and the Lord draws people."

Better Than a Vacation

As Phil continues chemotherapy, he and Pam enjoy spending time with their two daughters and seven grandchildren. One step at

a time, they wait on the Lord. Sometimes they're scared, but they cry out to God and never stop trusting Him.

As for a vacation, well, that's not really on their minds.

"There's no vacation, there's nothing on this earth that can compare with loving the Lord," said Pam.

Phil echoes his wife's words.

"True joy comes from loving God, which is the greatest commandment, and serving others," he said. "That is our cruise ship. That is our Disneyland."

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