

Joy From Unexpected Sources

☒ You're on the path you've prayed about—the path God's been leading you down for ages. The fruits of your ministry are evident. Then wham!

Everything changes. What once seemed so simple and clear becomes incredibly difficult.

Where is God, anyway? Weren't you doing what He told you to do? How do you go on when your beautiful, smooth path takes a sudden turn, and you find yourself on rockier terrain than you've ever faced before?

I was on that beautiful, smooth path. With my family's support, I had accepted God's call into music ministry. I recorded my first album in 1981; and although life on the road was certainly not easy, I knew I was where God wanted me to be.

My certainty increased when I married my husband, Jack, and he became my manager. Our plan was to travel together as husband and wife and work side by side.

For a while, everything was terrific. God blessed our marriage and ministry, and we could see we were making a difference in people's lives.

But one problem kept cropping up.

Jack had always been a healthy guy. But in the months before we were married, he seemed to get sick quite a bit. He'd get the flu, get over it, and then get it again.

After we were married, the pattern not only continued, it got worse. Jack seemed to get sick more and more often.

Having the flu isn't really that bad—unless you have it most of the time, month after month!

Despite not feeling well, Jack managed to travel with me for about five years. But then, before one particular two-week trip in 1990, he decided he couldn't go. For the first time we loaded up the bus without Jack—my manager, my ministry partner, my husband, my friend!

What I didn't know is that it would be years before Jack would be able to go on tour again. We were heading into a 10-year stretch during which he couldn't travel with me—a time we'd also spend searching for a viable diagnosis for his illness.

It was years before we found out that Jack had Hepatitis C. How or where he got it, we don't know. But we realize now he'd probably had it for years.

The night before I left on the two-week tour, my mother-in-law prayed a special prayer for me. I'd never heard a prayer like it before. "God," she said, "I pray you would give Twila joy from unexpected sources."

At that moment I felt anything but joyful. But during the days and weeks that followed—and beyond—God answered that prayer. He opened my spiritual eyes and ears to receive His joy when and where I least expected it.

JOY IN THE CALLING

The first night of the tour, I sat in the back of the bus, sad, depressed and missing Jack. I turned to a stack of mail I'd brought with me. The letters were from people who had listened to my music—not so much fan mail as messages from brothers and sisters in the Lord who were responding to something they'd heard in my songs.

As I read the letters, God used the encouraging words of people I'll probably never meet this side of heaven to infuse me with His grace. My heart was lifted by the words of a pastor from Topeka, a housewife from Memphis and so many others. I found joy in remembering once again why God called me to do what I do.

Moses was called to do a special work for God, and he was given everything he needed to do the job. Still, the journey to the promised land was tough. Moses often found himself on rocky and unfamiliar terrain.

But in the end Moses could look back on that tough road without regret. From the top of Mount Nebo, he could see the big picture. And he knew that what was ahead for the Israelites was worth every difficult step of the journey.

Right now, in your current circumstances, it may be hard to see the big picture. But the truth is, your calling is only a fraction of a much bigger plan God has in store. The rough road you're traveling is part of a greater purpose.

Look at the faces of those around you. Think of the lives your ministry is touching.

Do you regret a single moment? Joy will come as you remember the reason you have been called!

JOY IN FAMILY AND FRIENDS

When I was on the road, I missed Jack so much that I single-handedly supported the phone company with all my calls home. But thankfully, God blessed me with unexpected joy by creating a family atmosphere around me. I don't think the other people on that first trip without Jack—that long list of drummers and guitar players, background vocalists and lighting directors—will ever know how much their love and support buoyed my spirit.

God blessed Moses by placing a special group of family and friends around him. The Lord chose Aaron, Moses' brother, to be Moses' spokesperson and right-hand man. He gave him Joshua to help lead the Israelites into battle against the Amalekites. And he gave him Hur, who, along with Aaron, helped hold up Moses' arms over the battlefield to ensure victory.

Never forget the power of family and friends! They are your

strongest supporters in every way.

God put them in your life for a specific reason. Don't be afraid to lean on them when you need encouragement, support and joy.

JOY IN GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY

As Christians we often say: "I gave that situation to God. I placed it in His hands."

But one day when I was saying that very thing, I realized: The situation is in His hands, whether I acknowledge it or not. It has been in His hands all along. If only we would acknowledge this truth and make peace with it, we would be much happier!

In Psalm 18:16-18, David writes: "He reached down from on high and took hold of me; He drew me out of deep waters. He rescued me from my powerful enemy, from my foes who were too strong for me. They confronted me in the day of my disaster, but the Lord was my support" (NIV).

What a wonderful picture of a God who literally runs to the rescue of His people! That doesn't mean we can say, "Hey, Lord, I've got this problem," and expect Him to respond, "Sure, I'll fix that right away"—as if He were a genie in a lamp.

Rather, it means that when we have more on our shoulders than we can bear, we need to lean—really lean—on our heavenly Father. We need to trust Him as an infant trusts a loving parent.

Your situation is already in the Father's hands. Lean on Him! You'll find an unexpected source of peace and joy in the acknowledgement of His wonderful sovereignty.

JOY IN LIVING THE MOMENT

Jack and I married when I was 26 and he was 29. (I laugh now as I remember thinking that I was awfully old to be getting

married.)

Because of Jack's physical limitations, certain doctors recommended that we hold off on having children for several years. Once Jack's health began to improve, however, we were told it was OK to try and have a baby. But by that time I was 41!

Battling feelings of bitterness and fear, I determined to leave my family's future in God's hands. For the next several months I worked on a lullaby project, all the while knowing that I might never hold a child of my own in my arms.

To my surprise, when the project was done, Jack and I found out I was pregnant. That's when God spoke these words to my heart: "Remember, Twila, My calendar is bigger than yours, it's more accurate, and it never gets behind." What a message!

I tend to be a planner and a worrier; I think a lot of women are. But I've often made my burden heavier than it needed to be by projecting my thoughts 10 or 15 years down the road. I used to do that a lot—trying to bear the weight of a whole lifetime in one moment!

The truth is, you and I can only see what's right in front of us. We may try to project our own ideas of what we want onto the future, but only God sees what's ahead.

And maybe that's for the best because, you know, 10 or 15 years' worth of life may be more than we can bear emotionally at this moment. But this moment is not more than we can bear at this moment!

When Peter stepped out of the boat and began walking on the water, he did great as long as he focused on Jesus and kept putting one foot in front of the other. But once he got ahead of himself—once he looked beyond the moment and saw the wind and the storm around him—he began to sink. That's when Jesus reached out and grabbed his hand and said, "'You of little

faith, why did you doubt?'" (Matt. 14:31).

I'm glad God didn't reveal, the first time Jack couldn't go out on the road with me, that I'd be taking many, many more trips without him. God knew I could take only one step at a time. The struggle of that moment was enough to handle.

JOY IN LEARNING LIFE'S LESSONS

I always believed that if I worked hard enough and put my mind to it, I could do just about anything. Jack's illness was the first time in my life that I came up against a brick wall. No matter how far I backed up, how fast I ran, and how hard I bashed my head against that wall, it would not move.

My sense of self-reliance died hard. There are still embers of it in me. But through our struggle, I learned how to lean on God—how to rely on His wonderful grace.

My dad, a pastor and a natural teacher, says: "Sometimes we suffer because we bring it on ourselves. Sometimes we suffer because God is allowing some temporary hardship in order to bring us to where He needs to bring us.

"Sometimes we suffer for the sake of Christ—for the kingdom of God—and that is the greatest honor and trust God can give us.

"But sometimes we jump past the first two reasons and assume that we're suffering for Christ—when we're really suffering because we're dumb!"

I know that some of my suffering was my own doing. I was slow to accept God's grace, and I projected my own calendar onto God's. I made myself suffer more than necessary some days.

I also believe some of our suffering was about what God was doing—in me, in Jack, in us as a couple, and in the lives of the people around us. God was bringing us to the place we needed to be.

Beyond that, I believe God used our suffering for the benefit

of the kingdom. I found myself writing songs that I never would have written if I hadn't been on that rocky road—songs that have ministered to many other struggling hearts.

I'll be honest: At times I wished the road was easier. At times I wished I could close my eyes and forget about the journey. But now I can look back and see how much I learned and changed along the way.

When you're tempted to close your eyes and wish that everything around you would go away, don't. Open them wide! What you learn may just bring you unexpected joy.

SHARING GOD'S GRACE

Eventually the Lord did give us some wonderful physical answers to Jack's problems. Jack isn't completely cured, and he does struggle a little more with his health than the average person. But he is so much better now.

Getting to this point has been a long, rocky road. I asked a lot of questions along the way—and sometimes it was a while before I really understood the answers.

Today I can look back on the journey and see God's hand. Would I want to take back the experiences that have allowed me to write songs that have touched people's lives? No way!

I understand the privilege God has given me—the privilege of sharing His amazing grace with others. And I accept that privilege with joy.

Will you accept the privilege God is giving you?

I can't promise that the road ahead won't be rocky. The journey may not get easier any time soon. But I can pray this special prayer for you:

May God give you joy along the way—from unexpected sources.

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