

# Victory Over Death

Sharon Daugherty's tears came freely as the dim light of dawn began to break over the MD Anderson Cancer Center in Houston. She hugged her four adult children and her mother-in-law, Iru Daugherty, who were gathered with her in the hospital room that had for many hours been the site of her faith-filled vigil. Outside, the Texas city was stirring, shaking off the night and rising to meet a day Sharon had prayed would never come. It was 4:19 a.m. on Sunday, Nov. 22, 2009, and Sharon's beloved husband and ministry partner of 36 years, Billy Joe Daugherty, had just died of cancer at age 57.

Indescribable grief welled up in Sharon upon realizing the only man she had loved since they became high school sweethearts was gone. *O God! O God! O God! Help me!* , was all her broken heart could cry. *How can our life together be ending? We were a team—what will I do without Billy Joe?*

She and Billy Joe had always been a team—in marriage and in ministry. It was the way Billy Joe had always seen their calling in God. They had worked together, not separately.

Together they'd raised their four children, who had joined Mom and Dad in ministry. Together they'd launched their church, Victory Christian Center in Tulsa, Okla., on Easter Sunday 1981, happily surprised by the 1,600 people who followed them from a previous church and attended the first service at a rented location. They'd prayed in faith for their own place to meet, and God had answered, ultimately providing 151 acres in Tulsa and a main campus directly across the highway from Oral Roberts University (ORU). For the last 28 years, they'd pastored Victory together and seen it grow to 17,000 members while spreading the gospel worldwide.

In 1973, as new graduates of ORU, they had determined together to live by faith in God's Word, build their ministry on faith

and reach the lost for Christ. Billy Joe had become renowned worldwide for his teachings on faith, health and prosperity (the late Word-Faith preachers Oral Roberts and Kenneth Hagin Sr. were among his mentors), but he'd been equally well-known for his commitment to global missions and church planting.

*And now ... all of this is ending?* Sharon ached to understand. *God, where are You in this?* Within hours, the Holy Spirit began to address her tearful questions, beginning with a word of clear direction that has powerfully altered Sharon's life and set Victory Christian Center on course to new ministry fruitfulness.

"The day after Billy Joe died, I heard the Lord say to me Philippians 1:21: 'For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain,'" Sharon explains. "He then said: 'Billy Joe lived for Me, and now he is dead. He has gained, but you are still alive on earth, and your life does not stop. The enemy would like to paralyze you, the church and the vision of reaching the harvest. Your response is vital to overcoming the enemy. You are the one who must rise up, stabilize the ship—which is large—and move it forward. Rise up and steady the ship.'"

With that call to move forward, God had suddenly shed new light on what Sharon knew so deeply already: The days when she and Billy Joe were a team were over. She was being called to finish the race they started together. "Our purpose doesn't change when someone we love moves—like to another city," she says. "Their loved ones do not stop living and doing what they had been doing before. It's the same when someone we love dies."

Sharon also knew what it would cost her, personally, to steady the "ship"—

Victory Christian Center and its numerous ministries. It would mean enduring the deepest sorrow she'd ever felt while bearing the greatest responsibility she'd ever carried.

## **The Good Fight of Faith**

But before she could sort out her life and chart a new course for Victory, a second major storm hit. Three weeks after Billy Joe's death, Sharon's father died. The retired Methodist pastor had been one of her greatest influences.

She knew Victory would have to wait. She wasn't ready to return to the pulpit. "It was two months before I went into my church office. One of the first things I did was visit Freda Lindsay in Dallas," she says.

Lindsay was co-founder with her late husband, Gordon, of Christ for the Nations Institute (CFNI) in Dallas, where Sharon and Billy Joe had attended as students in the summer of 1976. Freda had weathered the same major storm Sharon now experienced—in 1973 when Gordon died unexpectedly at age 66. She had led CFNI ever since and had turned it into a prominent world-missions ministry.

"[Freda] and her daughter-in-law Ginger spent three hours with me and prayed for me," Sharon says. "I knew the Lord put that in my heart, to go see her. I wanted to hear her story." Lindsay died the following year but always exemplified leadership that inspired her, Sharon says.

Meanwhile, fiscal challenges were mounting at Victory. The need to revamp the church's budget prompted employee layoffs. Associate Pastor Bruce Edwards stepped in for Sharon, making sure the church stayed on solid financial ground and remained true to its long-standing conviction to operate all ministries debt-free.

"Bruce has an amazing business mind and guided us through the business transition that came after Billy Joe's death," Sharon says. "He helped us to stay debt-free. We operate that way. We do not go into debt."

Sharon's two sons and two daughters stepped up as well, each

shouldering key administrative and pastoral responsibilities for their mother in the first year after their father died.

Determined to get back up after being knocked down, Sharon needed to stabilize herself too. She found strength in God's Word and the teaching she and Billy Joe had built their lives on for more than three decades.

"God spoke to me and reminded me of His Word—that He had deposited it in me and was going to make a withdrawal from that deposit," she says. "If people have been developing their relationship with God for years, they'll get back up if they are knocked down. I was trained in the teaching of Word-Faith to live by the Word, not by feelings. As Christians, we feel of course, but we don't let [feelings] lead our lives. We let faith lead."

Every time Billy Joe preached, Sharon took notes because she always felt like she was in training. "The teaching of the Word over the years that the Holy Spirit had put in me was like a spiritual muscle that had grown strong for the future—for the days ahead of me," she says.

Her dedication to continue living by faith in God's Word is what ultimately quieted her heart over Billy Joe's death. It didn't directly answer her *Why* questions, but it gave her peace. Because she lived by the Word, Sharon had believed her husband would recover. After all, he'd been supernaturally healed in 1989 from what seemed to be a throat virus but what one specialist said may have been leukemia. When he was hospitalized in the summer of 2009, doctors again suspected a virus. In October, he announced he had been diagnosed with lymphoma and told his congregation he was standing in faith for healing while cooperating with medical professionals.

Sharon vigilantly stood in faith with him, which made his death weeks later even more of a shock to her and many others. "We didn't plan on Billy Joe dying," she says. "We had

expected him to live much longer.”

How then did Sharon make peace with the fact that things turned out differently than she believed they would?

“There’s a Scripture in Deuteronomy that says the secret things belong to the Lord, but those things that are revealed belong to us,” she says. “Sometimes experiences happen, and we don’t understand why. Sometimes experiences happen, and God shows us why. Each of us faces things ahead that we don’t see. I don’t base my faith on experiences. I base it on the Word of God.”

Some people questioned Billy Joe’s personal integrity—whether he had an unresolved issue in his life. Sharon disputes it.

“I know Billy Joe had no unforgiveness,” she says. “He would not speak against people, even when people tried to get him to. They talked it out. Billy Joe fought the good fight as he finished his course, and he was prepared for eternity. I believe his glimpse of heaven drew him over.”

Since that morning in 2009 when Billy Joe finished his course, Sharon’s trust in God has been resolute, but her life hasn’t always been easy. “I’m not a spiritual giant,” she says. “I’m a regular person. I have my moments. I allow my emotions to be released, in those times, then to go forward.”

## **Victory Moves On**

Today, with her faith strengthened and her hope renewed, Sharon is steadying the ship, keeping Victory on the course she believes the Holy Spirit has charted. Under her leadership, the church’s ministries are growing, the congregation is expanding with new people, and Victory as a whole is moving full-steam ahead to broaden its outreaches.

Now in her third year as senior pastor, she leads a staff of 288 full-time employees and more than 400 part-time employees.

"I don't feel like I'm by myself in this transition," she says. "I'm so thankful for an understanding staff who have servant hearts. They are committed to the vision, and each one carries a major part in this."

Ron McIntosh, who directs the church's Bible-training school that operates a staggering 1,200 campuses in 101 countries, says it was easy for the staff to stand behind Sharon when she needed them most. "We stood amazed at the courage Sharon demonstrated in the midst of what was obviously the profound pain of her loss," he says. "[It] rallied the troops and brought stability to the church."

Membership stands at more than 17,000, making Victory one of the largest congregations in the U.S. The church currently has between 900 and 1,000 active "Connect" small groups, and 80 percent of the new people joining Victory are "unchurched," according to church records.

For many, part of the draw is the church's remarkable ethnic diversity. Victory represents an astonishing 120 nationalities, holds services in Spanish, Burmese and Iranian languages, and employs an international pastor who is Chinese. "We don't look like what you'd think a church in the Heartland would look like," Sharon says. "We're very multiethnic."

Whether to internationals or locals, outreach has always been a core part of Victory's vision. An 11-acre tract of land given to the church in the 1970s is now the site of the Tulsa Dream Center—a citywide outreach to the poor with a free medical clinic, spiritual mentoring, a food distribution center, clothing and furniture outreach, child and adult education classes, jobs ministry, and spiritual and legal counsel.

Victory's teen outreach, called "99," is a dramatic presentation held in a huge traveling tent and reaches teenagers with a message focused on the dangers of alcohol,

drugs, gangs, violence and suicide. To date, 99 has traveled to 27 cities and reached 360,073 people—of whom 104,811 have made decisions for Christ.

The church also supports at least 200 missionaries a month, operates the 1,300-student Victory Christian School and 100-acre Camp Victory campground and retreat center, and conducts ministry in prisons across the U.S. and world.

“We’re like a bumblebee,” Sharon says of the church. “It’s impossible for a bumblebee to fly because its wings are too short to hold it up. Yet it flies. At Victory, we’re doing so many things. We’re really spread out. We’re not streamlined like many churches. It looks like we shouldn’t be able to fly, but we do.”

Edwards says that as senior pastor, Sharon “has continued to provide the same Spirit-directed leadership as her husband and maintain the vision and stability of the church in this time of transition. She has continued to challenge us as a church to stretch our faith and expand our reach [for] the kingdom of God.”

Evidence of this is the church’s recent announcement of a three-pronged multimillion-dollar growth plan called “Momentum.” It calls for 18,000 square feet of new floor space for Victory Bible Institute and 20,000 for the Dream Center. Both projects are expected to significantly increase the number of people each ministry accommodates. A second 99 team launches in October and will likely double the number of teens reached in a year.

John Daugherty, who oversees Victory’s youth ministry, observes what his mother’s leadership has meant to the church: “[Victory’s] vision has not changed, but the methods have.”

## **Prophetic Vision**

As a result of Victory’s local impact on the city of Tulsa,

especially through the Dream Center's ministry, the Tulsa Press Club recognized Sharon this year at its 2012 Headliners dinner, honoring her for her "unselfish contribution to the growth, welfare and culture of Tulsa."

Such recognition doesn't surprise Tulsa-based Bible teacher Kenneth Copeland, who describes Sharon as a person of "character and quality." During her husband's memorial service in 2009, Copeland told her that her best years and those of her ministry were still to come. "You thought you've seen something in the past. You haven't seen anything yet," he said. "The greatest things are in your future."

His words rang prophetically true for Sharon. She had seen a glimpse of that future in a vision, shortly before Billy Joe died, though at the time she didn't fully understand what she was seeing. She had seen a hammer, raised and ready to strike a bubble. It appeared the bubble would be destroyed, but when the hammer fell the bubble burst and multiplied into many more bubbles.

She now believes she was seeing the devil's foiled plan to destroy Victory after Billy Joe died. Thinking the church was fragile, he would strike it with force. "The devil thought he had knocked us out," she says. "But it was actually a vision of how we were going to multiply."

The vision foreshadowed the great change coming for Sharon after her painful morning in Houston in 2009, but it also signaled God's commitment to Victory.

"I knew that God and Billy Joe would not want me, my family or our church to stop moving forward," Sharon says. "It's easy to lean on strong people. But when they're gone, *you* must rise up.

"I miss Billy Joe. But I know we must keep moving on."



---

**Jimmy Stewart** *is a freelance editor and writer based in Orlando, Fla.*

---

To hear Daugherty explain her church's vision and history [click here](#).