

WHEN THE
Miracle
ISN'T WHAT YOU EXPECT



BUT GOD IS STILL WORKING

Helmuth G. Dubón

© 2025 Helmuth Gustavo Dubón

All rights reserved.

No portion of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, scanning, or other—except for brief quotations in critical reviews or articles, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Published in Houston, Texas By NED Vision nedvision.org

Scripture quotations marked ESV are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® (ESV®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked NIV are from THE HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®, NIV® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

Scripture quotations marked NKJV are taken from the New King James Version®. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

This book contains stories based on the author's personal experiences and recollections. Names and identifying details of some individuals have been changed to protect their privacy.

First Edition

ISBN: 979-8-9927779-0-1 (print) ISBN: 979-8-9927779-1-8 (ebook)

Cover design by Rimsha Anwar

Printed in the United States of America

FOR KEVIN AND SOFIA,



Your mother's light continues to shine through you. This is her story—a testament to her unwavering faith, her quiet strength, and her boundless love. May these pages help you carry her legacy forward.

PROLOGUE TO A STORY OF FAITH AND LOVE



In 1998, a group of young people invited me to a meeting in a small house in Santa Tecla, El Salvador. The narrow living room was filled with youth representatives from the geographic districts in which the Elim church was organized. The atmosphere was one of mutual expectation and empathy. It was an initiative to create an evangelistic effort using theater as a communication tool.

Upon arrival, everyone began greeting me one by one. Extending his long hand, one of them introduced himself as Helmuth Dubón. Hearing the Germanic flavor of his name, I couldn't hide my surprise: "You have a German name!"

Helmuth just smiled. Later I would learn that he was the leader of this youth initiative. They had organized themselves a year earlier with the idea of using theater for outreach. They weren't talking about the usual idea of performing to a pre-recorded soundtrack, but about genuine acting. I was delighted by the initiative and promptly showed my support. That's how I got to know "Cristeatro", a group that has not only performed numerous scripts over the years but has also adapted its productions for television and, more recently, for short films.

Upon learning that Helmuth had an interest in theater, literature, and culture in general, we immediately connected. He was a young university student, thin and tall by Salvadoran standards, with a slow and calm manner of speaking. Over time, we transitioned from discussing literature to theology and began sharing our concerns, visions of life, and ideals.

Later, Helmuth made the decision to emigrate to the United States. We stayed in touch through email, which was the most practical and economical way to communicate at the time. I met him again in Los Angeles, California. Although time had passed, we remained friends and, most importantly, continued sharing essential viewpoints.

It was in California that Helmuth told me he had entered into a relationship with a young woman named Erika. She was the sister of Numa Minero, a committed Christian from our affiliate church in Los Angeles, whom I had met during previous visits to that congregation. Upon learning that Helmuth's girlfriend was Numa's sister, I felt as if Erika was familiar to me. I'm not sure if it was on that occasion that Helmuth introduced her to me. If he did, it must have been just a greeting and a very brief conversation at the end of one of the church services.

It was in Boston, some time later, where Helmuth and Erika, now married, had moved so she could continue her studies, that I had the opportunity to get to know her better. Erika was undoubtedly an intelligent young woman, very disciplined and dedicated to achieving her goals. She was pleasant and always smiling, attentive when listening, and confident when responding. What impressed me most was the clarity of her Christian experience. She had fully understood the essence of Jesus' gospel and lived it in her daily practice. She made the most important decisions in her life based on this essential experience of faith. Her marriage to Helmuth further consolidated and grounded the understanding of the gospel that she had glimpsed since her adolescence.

The Lord guided these two young people of deep faith along a path that tested their convictions. In the midst of their trials, they learned that faith is triumphant not only when we receive what we desire, but also when we accept what we do not desire. This profound truth, though simple to state, is difficult to walk out. It demands surrender, self-denial, and renunciation, and even then, it expects gratitude. It's a price that must be paid, and it can be quite painful. Most believers struggle to achieve it.

The journey that they both traveled, and that Helmuth now shares with us in this book is not the traditional story of a faith that obtains

what it asks for, but rather of a faith that transforms us for what God asks of us.

It seems to me that this is the kind of faith we all need to attain. For that reason, upon reading the manuscript of this book, I had no doubt about the great benefit it can bring to many who ask themselves the same questions that this young couple asked during their dark night of the soul.

It is a real story, beautifully written, full of tenderness, and truly inspiring. May God bless you through the reading of this holy experience that Helmuth and Erika lived. It was all so that you and yours might find comfort today.

Mario Vega

“This book is a sacred testimony of faith in the valley, love through loss, and hope that endures. With honesty and grace, the author invites us into a deeply personal journey—one that ultimately points us to the steadfast presence of God. It’s more than a story of sorrow; it’s a story of surrender, strength, and unwavering trust.”

— Leanne Reynolds,
Head of School, River Oaks Baptist School

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE



Translating this book has been both an honor and a challenge. Spanish is a language rich in eloquence, poetry, and metaphor—qualities that flow naturally to its speakers and readers. English, while equally powerful, often requires a more direct approach, which can make certain poetic expressions feel unusual or even unnatural.

In this translation, I have strived to preserve not only the meaning of the words but, more importantly, the depth of emotion with which they were originally written. My goal has been to honor the author's voice, ensuring that the beauty, intensity, and sincerity of the original language are not lost.

While some expressions may read differently in English, I hope that the heart of this story, its raw honesty, and its profound reflections on love, loss, and faith remain as deeply moving as they are in Spanish.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE: Letters That Changed Our Lives	1
This is a story of profound	2
CHAPTER 1: When the Storm Arrives	3
Reflection for the Soul:	12
Chapter 2: Two Miracles At Once	13
An Unexpected Diagnosis	16
Surgery: A Moment of Silence and Faith	17
The Emotional Impact: Recovery and Doubts	18
Chemotherapy and Resilience	19
Kindness in the Midst of Adversity	20
Reflection for the Soul:	21
Chapter 3: Renewal: Body And Spirit	23
Seeds of Faith	25
The Night before Surgery	26
In the Operating Room	26
Waking Up	27
Lessons in the Valley	28
God's Masterpiece	28
Reflection for the Soul	29
Chapter 4: He had to go through Samaria	30
Context About My Immigration Situation	32
The Road to Samaria	33
The Warrior at Home	35
Soul-Sustaining Visits	36
Seven Churches in Thirty Days	37
Return to the Homeland and Waiting	38

The Legal Battle and the Unexpected Miracle _____	40
The Miracle in a Fax _____	41
The Lesson of Samaria _____	42
Reflection for the Soul: _____	43
Chapter 5: When Faith Asks Why _____	44
The Dark Night of the Soul _____	45
The Struggle Between Faith and Doubt _____	46
The Battle for Understanding _____	47
A Respite in Arequipa _____	49
Preparing for the Future _____	51
A Light in the Valley _____	53
In Conclusion _____	53
Reflection for the Soul: _____	54
Chapter 6: NED - When God Speaks in Acronyms _____	56
Spinal metastasis _____	58
God revealed to us NED _____	59
The Breaking Point _____	61
When Medicine Loses Its Magic _____	63
The Search for Alternatives _____	66
Reflection for the Soul: _____	67
Chapter 7: Searching for Healthcare in Other Pathways _____	68
The Path to Natural Healing _____	69
Hope in Houston _____	70
A Year of Transformation _____	71
When Roads Narrow _____	71
The Shadow in the Valley _____	72
In a final note _____	73
Reflection for the Soul: _____	74
Chapter 8: The Heart Behind the Smile _____	76
Reflection for the Soul: _____	83
Chapter 9: WHEN TIME TURNS PRECIOUS _____	85
The Storm in the Cerebellum _____	86

The First Lost Battle	88
The Exodus to New Braunfels	88
The Second Battle	89
The New Normal	91
Whispers of Tomorrow	92
The Weight of Time	92
Dreams Dancing in the Field	93
The Weight of Lost Moments	94
Closing Reflections	96
Reflection for the Soul:	97
Chapter 10: The Last Paradise	98
The Journey	99
Paradise Found	100
The Stolen Moments	101
Reflection for the Soul:	103
Chapter 11: When the Valley Goes Deep	104
Faith in the Dark Valleys	104
The Shadow Lengthens	105
The Stolen Independence	106
The Final Arsenal	107
The Last Change	109
The Homecoming	111
The Threshold	113
Reflection for the Soul:	114
Chapter 12: The Last 21 Days	116
The Solemnity of a Farewell	124
Epilogue: Life Goes On: Embracing the Days We've Been Given	127
A Final Reflection	136
In Loving Memory of Dr. Norbi Erika Dubón	139
Appendix: In Loving MEMORY OF Norbi Erika Dubón	145

PREFACE



LETTERS THAT CHANGED OUR LIVES

NED. Three simple letters that burst into our lives and forever altered our path. Even today, as I write these lines in 2025, their meaning continues to reveal itself in deeper and more profound layers.

When I first heard the letters **NED**, I understood them only in their clinical context. In the cancer world, **NED** stands for No Evidence of Disease—the goal, the promise, the hope that every patient and family clings to. Remission.

But what I never imagined is that, in my life, **NED** would come to mean so much more than that.

When cancer breaks into people's lives, it does not discriminate by age, gender, or circumstance. When it strikes a young family with small children and dreams just beginning to unfold, the impact is particularly devastating. Plans come to a halt, routines are shattered, and the future that once seemed so certain suddenly hangs by a thread.

This book tells the story of Norbi Erika Dubón, who transformed my life. Her fight wasn't just against cancer but also

against fear, hopelessness, and against the notion that life is measured only in years rather than impact. Erika taught me that some victories can't be seen on medical scans and that certain miracles can only be understood with time and perspective.

THIS IS A STORY OF PROFOUND

It's not simply an account of a battle with cancer; it's a testimony of how God can take our most basic expectations—the hope for physical healing—and transform them into something infinitely deeper and eternal. It's about discovering that true healing doesn't always come in the form we expect, and that sometimes the greatest miracles happen within the heart.

Through these pages, you'll journey with us through valleys of shadow and mountains of hope. You'll meet a woman whose faith defied all medical logic, whose love transcended the most intense physical pain, and whose legacy continues to transform lives. You'll witness how our family faced life lessons no one should ever have to learn, yet somehow found joy even in the darkest of times.

Sharing this testimony has taken time. For years, the pain was too raw, the memories too vivid. But now, with the perspective that only time can provide, I can clearly see how God wove every moment, every trial, every victory, and every tear into a beautiful tapestry of His grace.

I invite you to open your heart as you turn these pages. Because although this is our story, the truths God revealed to us are universal. And perhaps, in the end, you'll discover that NED holds special meaning for you as well.

CHAPTER 1



WHEN THE STORM ARRIVES

"Then He arose and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, 'Peace, be still!' And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm."

-Mark 4:39

The passage in Mark 4:39 shows us a moment of profound distress for the disciples. They were caught in a violent storm, with winds and waves threatening to sink their boat. In desperation, they woke Jesus, who stood up, rebuked the wind and commanded the sea, "Peace, be still!" Immediately, the wind ceased, and a great calm fell over the waters.

This story reveals Jesus' power and authority over nature's forces, but it also offers us a profound lesson about faith and trust during life's storms. The disciples, despite being with Jesus, felt fear and despair. Yet Jesus showed them that even in the most frightening situations, He has the power to bring peace and calm.

Similarly, the apparent tranquility of our life in Waco was suddenly interrupted by a cruel cancer diagnosis that blindsided us. Like the disciples in the storm, we found ourselves thrust into a terrifying situation beyond our control. The cancer news brought with it fear, uncertainty, and a crushing sense of despair.

Summer in Waco, Texas, has a special way of awakening the senses. Even now, almost two decades later, when I close my eyes, I can vividly relive that June afternoon in 2006. The air carried the sweet scent of pecan trees, and the sun shone brilliantly over our backyard. Kevin and I were outside watering the lawn and kicking around a soccer ball. The sky, painted in shades of blue that seemed like blessings poured from heaven, completed the perfect scene. Our small family was living what many would call the American dream. After years of hard work and disciplined saving, we had finally purchased our first house: a modest but cozy home in Woodway, a quiet neighborhood, with a backyard so spacious that Kevin, our almost three-year-old son, had his own soccer field where he played under his mother's watchful eye.

Erika and I met in Los Angeles in 1999 through the theater group I led at Restoration Church in Van Nuys. She had arrived from El Salvador at age seven, and although she spent most of her childhood in the United States, she kept her Salvadoran roots alive. I had recently immigrated from El Salvador and found in her that perfect balance between our shared Salvadoran heritage and American life. But most importantly, we shared an unparalleled connection to life's simplicity and the centrality of God in our lives. Everyone knew her simply as Erika, though her first name was Norbi—a detail that would take on special meaning in the years ahead.

The loss of our first pregnancy in 2005 had been devastating, but it ultimately brought us closer as a couple. When we discovered she was pregnant again, joy flooded our home. Kevin couldn't stop

talking about the baby, and Erika glowed with that special radiance that only expectant mothers possess.

Our daily routine was simple but fulfilling. Every morning, after dropping Kevin off at daycare, Erika would head to her job as an optometrist at The Optical Dispensary. Her professionalism and warm treatment of patients had made her an essential part of the practice. I divided my time between my position as a teaching assistant at McLennan Community College in Waco and my nightly radio program, "Momentos de Oración" (Moments of Prayer), which I broadcasted on Radio La Poderosa. The program had become a ministry that allowed me to connect with the local Hispanic community, sharing hope and faith through the airwaves.

Sundays were sacred to us, both literally and figuratively. The church had become our second home, and our family in faith had embraced us as their own. After service, we would often gather at a church member's home to share lunch and study The Bible together. Kevin loved these gatherings, running and playing with the other children while we adults discussed the week's blessings and challenges.

When Jesus told his disciples, "Let us go over to the other side," they climbed into the boat without question. Similarly, we sailed through life with quiet confidence in the future. Our small daily challenges—bills to pay, occasional pregnancy discomforts, Kevin's toddler antics—were just gentle waves on a calm sea. We had no idea of the storm approaching on the horizon.

The first sign that something wasn't right was so subtle we nearly overlooked it. One morning, after praying in her room, Erika noticed a small scratch on her breast. "Must be from the new bra," she commented casually. Days later, a slight discharge caught her attention, but the limited information we found online (remember that in 2006, access to medical information online was much more limited) suggested it was normal due to hormonal changes during pregnancy.

The morning that would forever change our lives began like any other. Erika was at work when she received a call from Dr. Patel. She told me later that the doctor's voice sounded different—tense, urgent. "Norbi, I need you to come to my office. Now." Something in her tone alarmed Erika. "Is everything okay with the baby?" she asked, her mind immediately jumping to our previous pregnancy loss. "Please, just come as soon as possible."

Erika called me immediately. Her voice tried to remain steady, but I could sense the underlying fear. "Gustavo, Dr. Patel wants to see us urgently. She says it can't wait." I immediately left to pick her up from work.

The drive to the clinic was an exercise in mental control. As I drove, I watched from the corner of my eye as Erika gently caressed her belly while whispering prayers in Spanish. Kevin was at daycare, blissfully unaware of the anxiety consuming his parents. The clinic parking lot was nearly empty—it was lunchtime—and the silence in the waiting room felt deafening.

The nurse escorted us directly into the doctor's office, skipping the usual blood pressure and weight measurements. Dr. Patel was waiting for us alongside another doctor we didn't recognize. On her desk lay various medical images and lab reports, arranged like pieces of a macabre puzzle.

"May I introduce Dr. Brenner, an oncologist," the doctor began. The word 'oncologist' dropped like a bomb in the room. "The biopsy results..." she continued, but her voice became a distant ringing in my ears. Erika squeezed my hand so hard her knuckles turned white.

The diagnosis was devastating in its clarity: Paget disease of the nipple that had spread to the breast milk ducts. Stage 4. Pregnancy hormones—the very hormones sustaining our baby's life—were fueling the tumor's accelerated growth.

"Timing is crucial," Dr. Brenner explained, his voice maintaining professional composure yet tinged with compassion. "We need to start with a mastectomy to remove the affected tissue, followed by breast reconstruction."

He leaned forward, intensity in his eyes. "You have to understand, every day we wait gives cancer more of a head start." The implications crashed over us like an icy wave, stealing our breath.

"After surgery," he continued, "we'll need to proceed with aggressive chemotherapy, possibly followed by radiation, a treatment protocol that is fundamentally incompatible with pregnancy."

Erika instinctively crossed her arms over her nearly three-month pregnant belly. When she finally spoke, her voice was barely a whisper, "How long do we have to decide?"

"There's not much time to consider," Dr. Brenner replied. "The type of cancer you have is extremely aggressive. Without immediate treatment..." His voice trailed off, leaving silence to complete the terrible sentence.

The following days unfolded like a slow-motion nightmare. Our home, once filled with laughter and plans for the baby's room, descended into oppressive silence. Constant calls from the hospital and visits from specialists mingled with the sound of our desperate prayers.

Kevin, our three-year-old, seemed to sense something was wrong. His uncertain steps down the hallway and innocent questions—"Why is Mommy sad?" "Is the doctor going to fix Mommy?"—pierced our hearts like tiny daggers. We struggled between wanting to protect him and acknowledging that we couldn't hide the truth. At night, after tucking him in, we would hear him pray in his childlike way: "Jesus, please make Mommy stop crying." Although we desperately wanted to believe his words, part of us was torn between hope and crushing uncertainty.

Erika immersed herself in prayer with an intensity I'd never witnessed before. She would spend hours in our bedroom, her voice fluctuating between pleas in Spanish and English. "Lord, give me wisdom," she implored, though doubt tinged her tone. "Don't let me make a mistake," she repeated, as if uncertain her words would reach their destination. "This baby is yours; I am yours," she would say, even as the fear of failing this test haunted her. "Show me your will," she would beg, struggling between faith and uncertainty.

The pressure from the doctors was relentless. Each day brought new consultations, new opinions, and new warnings about the urgency of starting treatment. "You can have more children later," we were told, as if our baby was somehow replaceable. "The priority now is to save Norbi's life.

The financial burden added another layer of stress. The insurance company refused to cover any cancer-related treatment, claiming it was a pre-existing condition. Suddenly, we faced not only a battle for life but also a mountain of potential debt threatening to bury us.

At night, after Kevin fell asleep, Erika and I would meet in the dimness of our living room. Sometimes silence was our only companion; other times, we would pour out our deepest fears and hopes. "How can I make a decision about our daughter's life?" Erika whispered, her voice heavy with anguish. The words of Jeremiah 1:5 became her anchor: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you." On that particular night, however, everything seemed poised to change.

After hours of intense prayer, Erika emerged from our bedroom with a different light in her eyes, though tear tracks still marked her face, evidence of her inner struggle. There was a serenity about her, but I still felt a knot in my stomach—that feeling of uncertainty that only time can resolve.

"Her name will be Sofia Victoria," she announced in a voice that seemed to come from somewhere beyond herself. I couldn't help but wonder if this decision would bring the peace we so desperately needed. Erika explained the revelation she had received during prayer. The name Sofia, meaning "wisdom" in Greek, was no casual choice. It also honored my Aunt Sofia, who had welcomed us so lovingly when we first settled in the United States as newlyweds. But beyond that, it was a declaration of faith in God's wisdom over human wisdom.

"Victoria," she continued, her eyes shining with an otherworldly certainty I couldn't yet fully share, "because God showed me that this battle is already won. Not in the way the doctors expect, not

in the way we imagine, but it is won." Now, nineteen years later, I can testify how prophetic those words were, though at the time I couldn't help feeling caught between Erika's faith and my own fears.

The days that followed brought a succession of doctor's visits and specialist consultations. Dr. Brenner was particularly insistent about the urgency of treatment: "This cancer is highly invasive." "Time is crucial." "Your chances of survival decrease with each day we wait." "You can have more children later."

But to Erika, every such statement sounded like an attempt to erase the life already thriving in her womb—a life that now had a name and purpose. In 2006, access to medical information was more limited than today, but Erika spent hours at the public library researching everything she could about similar cases, alternative treatments, and survival testimonials. Yet her decision had been clear since that night of revelation: "I cannot base my choice on fear. If God spoke to me, I must trust Him."

The response from our faith community was extraordinary. News spread quickly, and soon we had Christian brothers and sisters from different denominations fasting and praying for us. Our friends in Boston joined in sincere intercession, while our friends and family in El Salvador poured out their

hearts in prayer. Church members brought prepared meals, others volunteered to care for Kevin, and many contributed financially to help with medical expenses. It was like watching Acts 2:44-45 come alive before our eyes: "All who believed were together and had all things in common."

When we finally communicated our decision to the medical team, the tension in the office was palpable. Dr. Brenner shook

his head in visible frustration. "I understand your faith," he said, "but you must understand that you're taking an enormous risk."

Erika, with a calmness that could only come from God, replied, "Doctor, I respect your knowledge and experience. But this isn't just a medical issue for us. It's a matter of faith and obedience. We will wait."

During those stormy nights, while the outside world pressured us to take the "logical" path, we clung to divine promises that had sustained God's people through centuries:

"Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me" (Psalm 23:4). "Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you" (Isaiah 41:10).

Like the disciples in that storm-tossed boat, we were learning that the presence of a storm doesn't mean the absence of God. In fact, sometimes it's in the midst of the most turbulent waters that He reveals Himself most clearly.

That night, as I watched Erika sleep peacefully for the first time in days, I couldn't have imagined we were beginning a ten-year journey. A journey that would take Erika through deep valleys and high mountaintops, that would see Sofia grow to nine years old alongside her mother, and that would transform not just our lives but the lives of countless others.

Looking back from 2025, I can see how each moment of that initial crisis was part of a greater plan. Erika's decision to prioritize Sofia's life would set the tone for her entire battle with cancer: a blend of unwavering faith and sacrificial love that continues to inspire others long after she has gone.

REFLECTION FOR THE SOUL:

In life's darkest moments, when the sky seems silent and circumstances overwhelm us, where do we find our peace? Erika's story reminds us that the deepest faith isn't one that delivers us from storms, but one that enables us to stand firm in their midst.

Are you facing an impossible decision today? Do you find yourself in a situation where human logic clashes with what you feel God is saying? Our family's experience testifies that sometimes divine wisdom appears foolish to the world, but God honors those who trust Him beyond all human understanding.

CHAPTER 2



TWO MIRACLES AT ONCE

"For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for calamity, to give you a future and a hope."

-Jeremiah 29:11

This verse reminds us that, although we may not always understand His ways, God has a purpose full of hope and well-being for our lives. Trusting in this promise can give us peace and strength as we seek to understand and follow His will, even when circumstances seem overwhelming.

At first glance, it may seem simple, right? But it's not. Knowing that God knows what His plans are is sometimes not enough for a desperate soul. We, too, would like to know those plans, to anticipate what's coming. However, God asks us to trust that His plans are for our wellbeing and not for our detriment.

In the midst of uncertainty and pain, it's natural to feel fear and anxiety. We crave clear and certain answers that will give us peace. Yet faith calls us to trust God, even when we don't understand His purpose. This trust isn't blind, but based on the promise that His plans are for our well-being.

Erika learned to live without knowing those plans, trusting fully that if God says He knows them, that was enough. Her faith didn't eliminate her doubts or pain, but it gave her the strength to keep going. In her journal, Erika wrote about her struggles and her decision to trust God no matter what. This choice of faith transformed her suffering into a testimony of hope and strength.

Texas winters, believe it or not, can be surprisingly cold, especially for those of us with tropical blood in our veins. February 2007 was no exception. Although many years have passed since then, I can still vividly recall that frosty morning in the hospital, anxiously awaiting our daughter Sofia's arrival. It was during that time, when God began to reveal His purpose. The little girl, for whom Erika had decided to postpone her treatment—a decision considered reckless by many—was about to join our world

Providence Hospital felt remarkably different from the clinical setting at Scott & White where we had received our initial diagnosis. The warm-toned walls and compassionate staff created an atmosphere that allowed us, at least momentarily, to simply be a couple awaiting the birth of their daughter. Dr. Patel, who had been with us throughout the pregnancy, maintained a calmness that contrasted sharply with the tension of those early days in her office.

At 10:47 A.M. on February 13, 2007, Sofia Victoria's first cry echoed through the delivery room like a victory hymn. "She's perfectly healthy," the doctor announced with a smile that revealed more than just professional relief – it was recognition of a miracle that defied medical expectations.

As they placed our little girl on Erika's chest, tears streamed freely down my wife's face. Her beaming smile lit up the entire room, momentarily erasing the shadows of the previous months. It was an image I will cherish forever: Erika, radiant despite her exhaustion, holding the fruit of her faith and determination.

The room was enveloped in a reverent silence as Erika caressed Sofia's face. Every delicate feature, every long eyelash, and every tiny finger was exactly as she had imagined. The name "Sofia Victoria" came to life in that little girl who breathed quietly against her mother's chest, completely unaware of the battle her very existence represented.

Kevin, then almost four years old, entered the room with cautious steps after being in our neighbor's care. Nearly two decades later, that moment marks the beginning of a special bond between siblings that would endure even after their mother's passing. The wonder in his eyes upon seeing his baby sister for the first time, the tight squeeze he gave the teddy bear he had picked out weeks earlier – these are details that time has not erased.

"She's so tiny!" Kevin whispered, reaching out to gently touch Sofia's little fingers. The tenderness in that scene between brother and sister was like a balm for our hearts, weary from previous battles. None of us could have imagined then that these moments of family bonding would become the foundation upon which Kevin and Sofia would build their strength for the years ahead.

Our first days at home held a delicate balance between celebrating and the being aware of the reality that awaited us. The pink room we had prepared for Sofia became a temporary sanctuary, a space where cancer and its threats seemed distant. During these quiet February nights, Erika rocked her baby while sweetly singing the worship songs that had sustained us through the darkest months. She was aware that every moment was

precious, especially since she knew she wouldn't be able to breastfeed Sofia due to the chemotherapy that would soon begin.

But God had another surprise in store for us.

AN UNEXPECTED DIAGNOSIS

When we find ourselves in the eye of the storm, it's easy to lose sight of the blessings God places in our path. But sometimes, it's in the darkest moments that His light shines brightest. And so it was when, weeks after Sofia's birth, we returned to Dr. Brenner's office for a new evaluation.

The contrast between our joyous family situation, life and our medical reality was jarring. In one hand, Erika held photos of her perfect newborn; in the other, the test results that would determine the course of her next fight. The air conditioning hummed softly in the background, mingling with the distinctive scent of hospital disinfectant. As we sat in those uncomfortable plastic chairs, we held hands, seeking strength in each other.

When Dr. Brenner entered, his expression wasn't as grave as we had anticipated. "The tumor has not grown," he announced with a mixture of professional surprise and caution. Those words echoed in the room like a whisper of hope. Erika and I looked at each other, recognizing in that moment God's hand working in inexplicable ways.

However, our initial relief quickly gave way to a new challenge. Although the tumor hadn't progressed during pregnancy, something that defied all medical expectations—the doctors insisted on immediate action. The plan was clear: a total mastectomy to prevent any chance of spreading.

That night, back at home, I watched Erika sitting beside Sofia's crib. Our little girl slept peacefully, unaware of the battles that lay ahead. Kevin was playing in the living room with his toy cars, creating his own world of adventure with the sounds of

screeching engines and brakes. Occasionally he would pause, look at his mother, and ask questions with that innocence only children possess:

"Mommy, why are you sad?"

Erika always responded with a smile, sheltering our little boy from worries he shouldn't have to carry at his age. But that night, when the children were asleep, she confessed her deepest fears to me:

"Gustavo," Erika whispered, "I'm scared. Not because of the pain or the surgery... but of not being able to be the mother that Sofia and Kevin need during my recovery. Of missing important moments with them."

The aroma of chamomile filled our bedroom as Erika held her cup of tea with trembling hands. I knelt beside her, and we prayed, finding comfort in Psalm 34:18: "The LORD is near to the brokenhearted; He rescues those crushed in spirit."

SURGERY: A MOMENT OF SILENCE AND FAITH

On the day of the surgery, The sun emerged on a chilly and overcast morning in Waco. The fluorescent lights in the hospital seemed harsher and the air colder than usual. In the pre-op room, the rhythmic beeping of the heart monitor marked the passage of time as Erika waited. I leaned close to her, feeling the softness of her hair against my cheek, whispering verses that had carried us up for months.

Kevin was at our neighbor's house with his friend Ryan, but his words from that morning echoed in my mind: "Tell Mom to be brave. I'll take care of Sofia." The simple faith of a child, manifested in that innocent promise, touched me deeply.

The hours in the waiting room felt endless. Every footstep in the hallway, every door that opened, every voice that approached could be the surgeon with news. I opened my Bible to Isaiah

41:10: "Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand." These words, which had been our anchor since the initial diagnosis, took on new meaning in that moment of waiting.

When the surgeon finally emerged, he maintained an air of professionalism, but his words brought the first breath of relief: "The surgery was successful." However, as we would soon learn, this was only the beginning of a long road.

THE EMOTIONAL IMPACT: RECOVERY AND DOUBTS

Erika's first encounter with the mirror after surgery is one of those moments that, nineteen years later, remains vivid in my memory. Her expression contained a mixture of emotions that words can barely capture—pain, disbelief, and a nascent determination that would characterize her battle for years to come.

Her hands gently traced the fresh scar as tears ran down her cheeks. Her quiet weeping mingled with Sofia's soft gurgles from the nearby crib, creating a bittersweet soundtrack to our new circumstances.

"How will I be able to hold my daughter now?" Erika whispered. "How will Kevin see me, and you?"

I embraced her, feeling the fragility of her body but also the unshakable strength of her spirit. "Nothing you see here makes you any less," I assured her. "You are braver than I can express. Sofia and Kevin will see you as the mother who loves them unconditionally. And I... will always see you as the woman I chose to walk beside every day."

CHEMOTHERAPY AND RESILIENCE

Life after surgery took on a different rhythm. Hospital visits became part of our new normal, and the distinctive smell of medicine and disinfectants became a constant reminder of our ongoing struggle. Kevin, with his boundless energy, often accompanied me to pick up Erika after her treatment. Seeing her emerge with her scarf covering her head, he would run to her with open arms, as if his love could chase away any discomfort.

Hair loss was one of the hardest aspects of treatment for Erika. For a woman, hair is often an important part of identity and losing it can be devastating. Erika faced this ordeal with admirable courage, but not without deep emotional impact. Every strand that fell out was a constant testament to the disease she was fighting.

For Kevin, seeing his mother without hair was confusing and unsettling. Although his love for her never wavered, the image of his mother with her head covered by a scarf was a painful echo of the gravity of the situation. Erika tried to maintain a positive attitude, but there were times when sadness and frustration were inevitable. However, the strength of our family and the unconditional love we shared helped us face these trials together.

Meanwhile, Sofia grew rapidly, obviously unaware of the extraordinary circumstances surrounding her birth. Her laughter and babbling filled our home with joy that sometimes seemed at odds with the constant challenges we faced. Erika, though exhausted both physically and emotionally, was torn between wanting to give herself completely to her children and feeling she couldn't give enough. Still, she fought to be present in every moment, singing songs and reading bedtime stories, while part of her wondered if it would be sufficient.

KINDNESS IN THE MIDST OF ADVERSITY

During this time, God placed key people in our path who became instruments of His grace. One such person was Dr. Salganik, the owner of the Optical Dispensary. He was a true gift from heaven—a beacon of light in our darkest hours.

His office became Erika's haven. A cozy corner with the comforting aroma of freshly brewed coffee always in the air. Dr. Salganik greeted everyone with a warm smile that never faded. His gentle personality created an atmosphere of understanding and hope that embraced Erika from the moment she walked through the door.

What made him extraordinary was his compassion. He offered Erika the freedom to work whenever she felt able, however she could, without the slightest pressure. On days when the effects of chemotherapy were particularly harsh, he would simply nod understandingly and tell her to rest. When she had good days, he welcomed her contributions with genuine appreciation.

Even now, years later, remembering Dr. Salganik's kindness fills me with profound gratitude. In a world where business often comes before humanity, he chose to put a person's wellbeing first.

Dr. Salganik's suggestion to establish Dr. Dubon Vision LLC came at our most desperate hour. The insurance company had just denied Erika's coverage, coldly claiming her cancer was a "pre-existing condition" that she had failed to disclose in her application—despite the fact that she had no symptoms or knowledge of the disease when applying. With mounting medical bills and treatments she urgently needed, we were financially drowning.

Dr. Salganik, who understood the healthcare system's cruel loopholes, explained that small business group insurance plans often couldn't deny coverage based on pre-existing conditions.

"Form an LLC for Erika's optometry practice," he advised, "and you can apply for group coverage through the business." This wasn't just professional advice; it was a lifeline thrown to us when we were barely keeping our heads above water.

When the new insurance approval came through, each document bearing the company's name felt like tangible evidence of God's provision. The incorporation papers, the business license, the insurance policy documents—these weren't just administrative formalities but bridges carrying us toward the medical care Erika desperately needed. Through this unexpected path, we not only secured essential healthcare coverage but also found a way for Erika to continue practicing her profession with renewed purpose, even as she battled her illness.

Our faith community showed up for us in extraordinary ways. The church became a support network that upheld us with prayers, prepared meals, and practical help. Every act of kindness, every prayer offered, every word of encouragement was like a small miracle that reminded us we weren't alone in this battle.

REFLECTION FOR THE SOUL:

With the perspective that time has given me, I can clearly see how God wove together every detail of this chapter in our story. Sofia's miraculous birth, the unexplained halt in tumor growth during pregnancy, the providence manifested through Dr. Salganik—all were part of a greater plan that we could only appreciate with the passage of time.

In our darkest moments, when heaven seems silent, God often works in the details we overlook. He reveals Himself in the unexpected kindness of a compassionate doctor, in a child's innocent laughter, in the strength we discover when we think we can go no further.

Are you walking through your own dark valley Remember that God's faithfulness doesn't depend on our circumstances. Sometimes the greatest miracles aren't the instantaneous healings we hope for, but the daily grace that enables us to move forward one step at a time, trusting that He remains in control.

CHAPTER 3



RENEWAL: BODY AND SPIRIT

*"I will be with him in trouble; I will deliver him
and honor him."*

- Psalm 91:15

When facing uncertainty and pain, as we were during this time, questions can seem overwhelming and answers scarce. This verse reminds us that although life brings suffering, we are never alone in our darkest moments. God remains with us, providing support and deliverance.

The long corridors of Scott & White Hospital had become such a familiar labyrinth that we could pinpoint the exact spot in the immense parking lot where we always left our car. The lingering smell of antiseptic permeated the air, mingling with the metallic sound of medical carts rolling down hallways, while the pale beige walls surrounded us like a cold, inevitable embrace. All of this had become woven into the fabric of our new normal. Sometimes we felt that even the receptionists behind their paper-

stacked desks knew us by name and face. This was Erika's third major surgery—the long-awaited breast reconstruction she had anticipated with such patience and hope. Nineteen years later, the memories of those days remain vividly etched in my mind, like photographs untouched by time, every detail as clear as if it happened yesterday.

The surgeon welcomed us into his office that summer morning. His unhurried manner of explaining things contrasted sharply with the urgency we had experienced in our previous encounters with Dr. Brenner. On his desk, a blank piece of paper would become the blueprint for Erika's physical renewal.

"We'll use the DIEP flap technique," he explained, drawing what looked like roads and rivers on a map of my wife's body. His confident strokes were accompanied by detailed explanations. "We'll take tissue, fat, and blood vessels from your abdominal area and transfer them to reconstruct the breast. It's essentially a transplant, but using your own tissue."

The surgeon continued describing the process with a calmness that gave us peace of mind. He explained that the DIEP flap technique (Deep Inferior Epigastric Perforator) is one of the most advanced methods in breast reconstruction, as it uses the patient's own tissue, reducing rejection risk and providing more natural results.

"First, we'll make an incision in the abdominal area to remove the necessary tissue," he said, pointing to his drawing. "Then, we'll connect the blood vessels from this tissue to the blood vessels in your chest, ensuring adequate blood flow for the tissue to survive in its new location."

He discussed the considerable recovery time and the abdominal scar, like that from a tummy tuck. He mentioned potential risks and complications but assured us that his team was highly trained and would do everything possible to minimize problems.

Erika listened attentively, absorbing every word like drops of water in a desert. Although the process seemed dauntingly complex, a spark of hope shone in her eyes, illuminating her face with quiet determination. We knew this was a crucial step in her arduous road to recovery—a journey encompassing not just physical healing but emotional restoration as well. The possibility of rebuilding her breast using her own tissue offered her a sense of control and normalcy, an anchor amid the storm we were facing.

As the doctor continued with technical terms—microvascular anastomosis, free flap, deep inferior epigastric perforators—Erika squeezed my hand, her eyes fixed on the drawings. But there was something different in her gaze. She was no longer the same frightened woman who had received the initial diagnosis months earlier. This Erika radiated a strength born from something deeper than mere human determination.

SEEDS OF FAITH

What the medical world saw as a battle with cancer, God was using as a catalyst for something greater. During those months between surgeries and treatments, a small seed of faith had begun to sprout in Waco. It all started in the living rooms of two families, sharing Scripture and testimonies of how God was sustaining us through this trial. In those early days, no one could have imagined that these intimate gatherings would transform into something that would transcend our own circumstances.

A brother in faith, moved by our testimony, offered us a small space on his property. On Sundays, that modest space transformed into a sanctuary filled with praise. That's how God allowed us to start a church we named Restoration Church of Waco.

Despite the exhaustion from treatments, Erika found her special place among the children. It was beautiful to see her surrounded

by little ones, teaching them with a patience and love that seemed to multiply with each session.

"Kids are more intuitive than we think," she told me one afternoon after her class. "They don't need you to explain everything. They feel God's love and accept it with a simplicity that we adults have forgotten."

THE NIGHT BEFORE SURGERY

The night before surgery is etched in my memory as a testament to God's grace. Kevin and Sofia were already in bed, and we were packing our bags for the hospital. The day's toll was beginning to show, but Erika maintained her spirit.

"You know what?" she said as she folded a nightgown, her voice mixing weariness and mischief. "At least I'll get free liposuction. I never would have been able to afford it otherwise." Her laughter echoed in our bedroom, though I noticed the slight tremor in her hands as she continued packing.

Suddenly, her eyes welled with tears. "Why are you crying?" I asked softly, moving closer to her.

"Because I'm thankful," she replied, her voice cracking slightly. "Thankful that God uses even this to bless us. Look how the church has grown, how people come seeking hope and find Jesus. All of this," she said, pointing to her chest, "has been the instrument God used to open doors we didn't even know existed."

IN THE OPERATING ROOM

The operation lasted eight hours. While the surgical team worked meticulously under microscopes, connecting tiny blood vessels and transplanting tissue, something equally delicate was happening in the waiting room. Our congregation took turns staying with me, demonstrating that we were no longer just two

families gathered in a living room; we had become a community of faith supporting one another.

Kevin and Sofia stayed with a church family, a temporary refuge that barely eased their restlessness. Their questions about their mother, laden with longing and worry, flowed through text messages like an endless river. "Are they fixing Mommy?" Kevin would ask with childlike innocence. The simplicity of his words stood in stark contrast to the complexity and tension in the operating room, where doctors worked tirelessly.

WAKING UP

The moment Erika awoke from anesthesia revealed her character. Her first halting words weren't about pain or the surgery, but about the children at church: "Who will teach them on Sunday?" she murmured hoarsely. Even at her most bodily vulnerable, her heart remained with her ministry.

The following days became an exercise in patience and faith. Recovery from DIEP flap surgery takes time; the body must accept the relocated tissue as its own. It was fascinating to see how this visible process mirrored what was happening in our fledgling church: each new member was organically integrated, becoming a vital part of the body of Christ.

We established new routines at home. The children adapted to each phase of their mother's recovery with surprising resilience. Kevin had become especially attentive, always watching for when Erika needed water or an extra pillow. Sofia, though small, seemed to sense when her mother needed space and could spend hours playing in her crib with the spinning toys above her.

Evenings became our special family time. When the day's weariness set in, Erika had a unique way of closing the day. "Kevin," she whispered one night as the kids snuggled in for their nightly blessing, "do you know why Mommy sleeps so well now?" Kevin shook his head, curiously, "Because the angels put

an extra pillow here for me," she said, gently touching his face. Kevin's innocent laughter mingled with her own sleepy chuckle, creating one of those moments of grace that made our journey more bearable.

Kevin and Sofia exchanged knowing glances—they understood it was time for final hugs and goodnight kisses. It was a simple but precious routine, a reminder that even amid the most difficult trials, God allowed us to find episodes of genuine joy.

LESSONS IN THE VALLEY

During her recovery, Erika often reflected on the spiritual parallels of her experience. One afternoon, while resting at home, she shared a perspective that would change how we viewed suffering: "It's like this surgery," she told me. "The doctors took something from one part of my body to heal another. That's how God works: He takes our pain and transforms it into ministry, turns our anguish into testimony."

The church continued to grow. People were drawn not by promises of prosperity or instant miracles, but by the authenticity of a story of faith amid suffering. Erika, with her healing body and unwavering spirit, became living proof that true renewal begins from within.

Every Sunday, we saw new faces at our gatherings. People came seeking hope and found a community willing to walk with them through their own valleys. The sincerity with which Erika shared both her struggles and victories resonated especially with those facing their own trials.

GOD'S MASTERPIECE

Erika's physical restoration stood as a powerful emblem of God's work in our lives and ministry. Like a skilled artist, He took each broken fragment and converted it into a magnificent work of art,

where every scar became visible testimony to His unwavering faithfulness. As the Psalm says, He was truly with us in distress, and rather than simply rescuing us, He shaped and strengthened us through it.

As we celebrated this moving victory and watched our ministry flourish with renewed vigor, we could hardly foresee the challenges the future still held. Physical restoration had been an undeniable triumph, but we would soon discover that some battles require more than surgical precision and steadfast determination. It would take every ounce of faith, and every lesson learned, to courageously face what lay ahead.

REFLECTION FOR THE SOUL

In times of renewal, God often works on multiple levels simultaneously. While the surgeon's scalpel worked to restore Erika's body, the Holy Spirit was crafting something equally beautiful in our hearts and community.

Have you considered that your current trials might be God's chisel, carving something beautiful you cannot yet see? As Erika discovered, sometimes our deepest scars become our most powerful testimonies of God's grace, and our most vulnerable moments can be precisely when His light shines brightest.

CHAPTER 4



HE HAD TO GO THROUGH SAMARIA

"And He had to go through Samaria."

- John 4:4

There are times in life when God takes us on paths we don't understand—detours that seem to lead us away from our destination. Like Jesus on His journey to Jerusalem, sometimes the longest road turns out to be the most necessary. This truth would reveal itself in the least expected circumstances, on an early morning that would mark the beginning of a journey transforming not only our lives but the lives of hundreds more.

It was a quiet first light, one of those that anticipates dawn with deceptive calm. The dark sky seemed to hold its breath, as if knowing something was about to happen. The rustling of trees,

swayed by an almost imperceptible breeze, contrasted with the tension beginning to fill the air. From our bedroom, I could hear the faint creak of wood settling, a reminder that even in stillness, everything remains in motion.

We were exhausted but overflowing with joy after having baptized seven people in the crystal-clear waters of the river. That day had been further proof of divine power manifested in our small community, Restoration Church. The sun had shone brightly, reflecting off the water's surface and filling the atmosphere with light. Erika, despite the accumulated exhaustion from her medical treatments, had radiated a special energy throughout the service. "I'm not worthy," she confessed to me that night as we talked about the meaning of baptism. But I knew, as God knew, that her wounded heart glowed with a warm light that drew everyone to our message of hope and renewal. Her presence was like a beacon illuminating the path for those seeking comfort and faith.

At four o'clock in the morning, our joy was abruptly interrupted. Knocking on the door resounded with an urgency that shattered the peace of our home. Erika woke first, her maternal instincts ever alert. "There are police officers outside," she whispered, "they're asking for someone named Roberto."

In my pajamas and barefoot, I headed for the door. The immigration officers first showed me the photo of a stranger, but as they turned the page, my own face looked back at me from the official document. "Helmuth G. Dubon, you are under arrest." The coldness of the handcuffs against my wrists felt like a blow that brought me back to a reality we had feared since beginning the process to regularize my immigration status.

Erika begged to be allowed to say goodbye to the children, but the officers were adamant. As they led me toward the van, the coldness of the pavement against my bare feet blended with the rough texture of the asphalt. The early morning breeze cut my skin like tiny blades. From the window, I saw Erika holding Kevin in her arms; our little boy slept, oblivious to how our world was being transformed. The air smelled of metal and dampness, a scent that seemed to foretell something irreversible.

For Erika, this would be the beginning of a battle that would test every ounce of her faith and strength. With cancer still active in her body, chemotherapy treatments couldn't be stopped. Now she would have to face them alone, while keeping afloat a home with two young children, maintaining a full-time job, and leading a church.

CONTEXT ABOUT MY IMMIGRATION SITUATION

What was a routine detention for the agents represented the culmination of a series of events we had feared. My immigration story was complex and had been a topic of ongoing concern between Erika and me for years.

I had been in the United States under a Temporary Protected Status (TPS) program that granted me a work permit and legal status. For years, this permit had allowed me to work, pay taxes, and build our life without any problems. After marrying Erika, a U.S. citizen, I began working toward permanent residency status, but the process was complicated by my existing immigration history.

Due to an error in renewal timing and confusion in interpreting the requirements, I lost my TPS protected status before my

marriage-based residency application could be completed. When Erika was diagnosed with cancer, our situation changed drastically. The illness increased the urgency to regularize my immigration status - we needed legal stability to face the medical battles ahead.

Erika, always thinking of our family, submitted a formal application for my permanent residency despite the risks. Our lawyer clearly warned us: "By applying for residency, you'll be revealing your current address to immigration authorities. They could come looking for you." It was like voluntarily turning ourselves in, but Erika's health and our children's future compelled us to try.

That's how, under a law that penalizes illegal presence after a certain number of days, I fell into the category of people who had to be deported to continue their immigration process from outside the country. What I never anticipated was being suddenly taken from our home in handcuffs, separated from my family at the very moment they needed me most. The agents executing that early morning raid were simply enforcing the consequence of our own desperate decision to secure a stable future for our family in crisis.

THE ROAD TO SAMARIA

San Antonio became my first destination in this ordeal, marking the beginning of an arduous journey. The icy cell, with its rough, cold concrete walls, seemed to freeze the very air. Every breath transformed into a visible cloud of vapor, and my hands felt as cold as metal in winter. My thoughts, however, were with Erika—the dark-haired, bright-eyed woman whose strength I had always admired. I remembered how she sat in the

chemotherapy room, fluorescent lights shining above her head, as the medicine silently fought the cancer in her veins. Her bravery was almost superhuman, defying the pain that often flashed across her face and the fear that came with each new session, with seemingly limitless resilience.

Now, it was my turn to summon every ounce of inner strength, as if each heartbeat should sustain not only my spirit but also support her and the children. They faced the heartbreaking reality of being without a father, their little eyes full of questions they couldn't yet articulate. My thoughts swirled like an unstoppable whirlwind, oscillating between paralyzing fear that left me immobile and searing hopelessness that threatened to consume every hope—a chaotic dance of emotions giving me no respite.

When I was transferred to Brownsville, everything took an unexpected turn. The huge detention center, known within the Hispanic community as the 'corralón' (large enclosure), was a vast space where the voices of men with stories etched by suffering echoed endlessly. That first night, between choked sobs and deep snores, I felt a warm, comforting presence. God whispered softly to me, "Read John 4." After searching among the detainees, a young man named Leo, his eyes full of understanding, lent me a small, worn New Testament.

I read the passage over and over until a revelation hit me forcefully: 'And He needed to go through Samaria.' Just as Jesus had detoured His way to meet the Samaritan woman, I understood that God had brought me here for a definite purpose. Jesus's pressing need to pass through Samaria was His way of seeking a lost woman in need of His forgiveness, who

otherwise would never have had such an opportunity for redemption and hope

That night, I took courage and shared with Leo what God had spoken to me, proposing that we start a prayer meeting. At first, only he joined in. I sang 'Cansado del Camino' (Tired of the Road, a popular worship song in Spanish) with my eyes closed, feeling God's presence. When I opened my eyes, almost all the prisoners had turned off their televisions and were sitting in front of me. I preached to them about Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman, and about fifty men gave their lives to Christ that night. I saw broken men, some physically wounded after crossing the border, others bearing invisible scars. God had done a mighty work amid the pain.

THE WARRIOR AT HOME

While I was discovering my ministry in the detention centers, Erika was fighting her own battles in Waco. Every morning became an act of faith: waking the children, preparing breakfasts, taking them to daycare, and maintaining the routine they desperately needed. Kevin, barely four years old, began asking heartbreaking questions: 'Why doesn't Daddy come home?' Sofia, too young to understand, felt the absence in ways only her crying could express.

The most devastating moments occurred when the children returned from school. My old red Mitsubishi was still parked in our driveway, a silent reminder of my absence. "Here's Daddy!" they would excitedly shout every time they saw it, running up the driveway with the certainty that this time they would indeed find me inside the house. Erika, with tears she tried to hold back, would answer them in a breathy voice, "Yes, kids, God is going

to bring him home soon." It was a promise she held on to with faith, even as her heart broke a little more each afternoon when the children's hopes were dashed.

The visits to the oncologist continued with their relentless rhythm, marking the days like an unstoppable metronome. Erika faced each chemotherapy session with the same determination that had characterized her attitude since the initial diagnosis had struck like a thunderbolt. But now, in that room with white walls and the smell of disinfectants, she didn't have my hand to squeeze during moments when the pain became almost intolerable, nor my shoulder where she could rest her head when exhaustion overcame her.

"God has not brought us this far to abandon us now," she proclaimed in a steady voice at every Sunday service, her steadfast faith echoing off the walls of our small church. The congregation watched her arrive each week, her gait sometimes slower, her steps dragging, but her face was always lit by a smile despite the circumstances. The children of the church, with their laughter and games, remained her special ministry; in their bright eyes and lively voices, Erika found strength to continue, to endure another day.

SOUL-SUSTAINING VISITS

Our weekends became a tangible testament to love and resilience. Erika, defying exhaustion from chemotherapy sessions, prepared for the long drive from Waco to Brownsville with the children. Dressed in comfortable clothes, she carried a bag full of snacks and toys to entertain Kevin and Sofia along the way. The route was challenging: first, a nearly three-hour drive to Houston, where my brother-in-law Douglas and his wife

would join this caravan of love, before continuing another five hours to the border.

Seeing them through the glass when they arrived was like bittersweet torture for me. Kevin and Sofia's little hands, smudged with cookie crumbs and sticky from juice boxes, pressed against the glass partition that separated us, while their big, bewildered eyes tried to understand why Dad couldn't cross over to hug them. Erika disguised her own pain behind a brave smile that barely hid her trembling lips. "Everything is fine with my treatments, don't worry," she would tell me with characteristic firmness, though the shadows under her eyes and the pallor of her skin told another story. The weariness in her expression was undeniable, and it tore me apart inside to know she was facing everything practically alone.

SEVEN CHURCHES IN THIRTY DAYS

During the thirty days I spent in detention, I could feel God's hand moving the pieces of a plan I only understood later. Each transfer, which at first seemed to result from administrative errors, missing vaccinations, or facility renovations, became a new opportunity to establish a worship service. Like Paul on his missionary journeys, I was moved from one detention center to another, leaving small nascent congregations in each one.

The first night in each new cell block followed the same pattern: I would sit on the edge of my bunk, close my eyes, and begin softly singing "Tired of the Road." Sometimes my voice was the only one echoing in the cell, but other times, an inmate with enough courage would join me, his voice trembling at first. Gradually, more voices would join, creating unexpected harmony amid the oppressive silence. I could feel barriers

crumbling and hearts opening to the music's warmth. Men hardened by life's adversities broke down, weeping silently in God's palpable presence.

I heard soul-wrenching stories: parents separated from their children by the border, young people fleeing violence in their home countries, tormented souls searching for a second chance at redemption. Each story added a layer of humanity to the place, turning the cold, barren facility into a haven of shared hope.

RETURN TO THE HOMELAND AND WAITING

The day of my deportation became an unexpected testimony of how God uses our darkest moments for His glory. I said goodbye to my brothers in detention, those men who had found hope in our nightly worship meetings. As I walked away from the compound, songs of praise resounded from the cells, like a continuing echo of the work God had begun. He didn't need us to be present to continue His purpose; we were only temporary instruments in His eternal hands.

Exactly thirty days after my arrest, I found myself stepping onto Salvadoran soil, still dressed in the same worn flip-flops and faded pajamas in which I had been taken. A decade had vanished like a sigh since my departure in 1999, and now the country welcomed me like an old friend: the vibrant greenery of fields stretching to the horizon, the humid heat clinging to my skin from the coast, and the symphony of tropical birds I had almost forgotten.

Defeat tried to nest in my heart, but something deeper—perhaps the same grace that had sustained me within the prison walls—prevented me from succumbing to that feeling. My cousins

arrived to pick me up, their faces lit with genuine joy that acted as a balm to my wounded spirit. At my aunt's house, one detail broke me: she had prepared my bed with thin cotton sheets, remembering my preference after so many years. In that simple act, I found a kind of love that transcends time and distance.

The next fourteen months in El Salvador became a living testimony to divine providence. While I completed my college degree which I had left unfinished in 1999 and strengthened ties with key people in our journey, such as Pastor Mario Vega, Erika was fighting her own heroic battle in Waco. With strength that still leaves me speechless today, she kept our family afloat: raising two young children, maintaining a full-time job, enduring chemotherapy treatments, and pastoring a church. Daily phone calls and video chats with the children barely mitigated the distance, but her voice never betrayed the immense weight she carried.

During those fourteen months, my life wove into a tapestry of vibrant contrasts. As I sat at my desk, resuming the studies I had abandoned, my mind often crossed thousands of miles to Waco. There, Erika moved with the precision of a conductor, facing an impossible symphony of responsibilities. The university classrooms, with their faded murals and chalkboards filled with explanations of literary history, felt like a peculiar refuge—a place where I could lose myself in knowledge while a shadow of guilt lingered for not being with my family in their darkest moments.

Meanwhile, Erika shone as an example of grace under pressure. Daily calls, often punctuated by household bustle, were my window into her world. I imagined her waking before sunrise, whispering soft but firm instructions for the kids to get ready with backpacks and snacks. Then, eyes still heavy with sleep, she

would take them to school. Afterward, she would throw herself into her optometry practice—fitting glasses, conducting exams, adjusting contact lenses, and smiling at patients with a warmth that belied her exhaustion. And, as if that weren't enough, on weekends she found energy to lead our small congregation, inspiring with every word. Though her voice on the phone remained steady, I could hear the weight of each day in her silences and deep breaths.

Kevin and Sofia adjusted to seeing me through a screen with childhood's unique resilience. "Daddy, when are you coming back?" became the question I dreaded most. The answer was always the same: "Soon, my loves." But "soon" stretched like an elastic band in time, marked by legal formalities and endless waiting.

THE LEGAL BATTLE AND THE UNEXPECTED MIRACLE

During those challenging months, while I spent my days teaching ESL at Colegio Internacional de San Salvador and striving to complete my degree, Erika was fighting on another front. Between grueling chemotherapy sessions and multiple pastoral responsibilities, she wrote letters with tireless energy, addressing every authority she could reach. From the governor to congressmen and senators, her determination knew no bounds, each envelope sealed with firm purpose. "If God could open the Red Sea," she would say with conviction as she carefully sealed another envelope, "He can create a path through bureaucracy." She continued this effort throughout the fourteen long months of my deportation, repeating her efforts again and again.

I vividly remember one night. After tucking the children into bed, she settled on the living room couch, the dim lamplight

creating a cozy haven. She looked at me through the video call with tired but determined eyes and told me she had written to Michelle Obama. It wasn't a desperate plea but the brave testimony of a woman facing cancer with unyielding determination. The letter, handwritten in blue ink on lined paper, emerged from a heart that was broken yet brimming with hope. The First Lady responded with a letter promising to refer our case to the proper authorities for an expedited response. Though not much, it was a small cloud of hope, similar to what Elijah's servant saw before God's rain blessed the land.

In El Salvador, nights were particularly challenging. In the quiet of my room, wrapped in the cotton sheets my aunt had so carefully chosen, my prayers turned into deep conversations with God. "Why this detour, Lord? How can this fit into Your plan?" The silence that followed was charged with inexplicable peace, the same peace I had felt in the cold detention cells—a peace surpassing all understanding.

THE MIRACLE IN A FAX

The morning that would change the course of my life came without warning, like an unpredictable sunrise illuminating the sky. I was in the middle of an English lesson with Korean students when the secretary's voice echoed in the classroom: "Professor, you have a fax."

My heart stopped for a moment before pounding wildly. For months, each arriving document had been a whirlwind of hope and disappointment. The fax paper was still warm to touch as my eyes scanned the words holding a universe of meaning: "Your case has been approved."

With the paper pressed against my chest, I ran to the school bathroom where tears flowed freely, a torrent of uncontrollable emotion. When I called Erika, her cries of joy mingled with exalted praise. "See?" she said between sobs, "God had a bigger plan." The emotion in her voice rang out like a heavenly melody, filling the air with hope and gratitude.

THE LESSON OF SAMARIA

This necessary detour through our own "Samaria" taught us what Jesus already knew when He decided to take the long road to Jerusalem: sometimes detours are the true destination. Like the woman at the well who returned to her village to share her encounter with Jesus, each man I met in detention carried with him a seed of hope.

And Erika—she proved that faith can come through in extraordinary ways. In her simultaneous battle with cancer and bureaucracy, in her determination to keep our family together despite the distance, in her determined trust that God would open a way where there was none, she embodied the truth that God's plans, though mysterious, are always perfect.

What seemed like a tragedy became a twofold testimony: of how God can use a deportation to reach souls in detention, and how a woman with cancer can become a source of hope for an entire community. This "detour" would not only result in my residency and subsequent U.S. citizenship but in the transformation of countless lives that found Christ along the way.

REFLECTION FOR THE SOUL:

Sometimes what appears to be a devastating detour in our lives is the direct path God has laid out for His purpose. Imagine Jesus, who "needed" to pass through Samaria—a place fraught with history and tension, where every step resonated with meaning. Our moments of crisis, those soul-shaking experiences, can be divine appointments disguised as detours—paths that seem arduous and circuitous on the surface.

Are you going through what seems like a painful detour in your life path twisting through shadows and doubts? Do you wonder why God allows your journey to take such difficult routes, full of seemingly insurmountable obstacles? As we learned in our own Samaria, that place of unexpected encounter and transformation, sometimes God's detours are His highways to miracles—not only those we need but those needed by all whom we will meet along the way, each with stories and destinies intertwined with our own.

CHAPTER 5



WHEN FAITH ASKS WHY

*"LORD, why do you stand far off? Why do you hide
yourself in times of trouble?"*

- Psalm 10:1

The psalmist's lament echoes down the centuries like the cry of every heart that has been unable to comprehend what God is doing. It is not a question born out of rebellion but of the deepest longing of a child seeking his father's presence when they need it most. This honest cry before God is not a sign of weak faith but, paradoxically, an act of deep trust—the courage to question while knowing that the foundation of the relationship is strong enough to bear the weight of our sincerest doubts.

The deepest questions of faith rarely arise in moments of victory. It is in the dark valleys, when God's silence seems most deafening, that our beliefs are put to the test. The fall of 2009 would mark the beginning of another such valley in our journey:

my return from El Salvador, where deportation had ironically become an opportunity to complete the education I had left unfinished years before. I returned with a degree in hand but found a different landscape than the one I had left. Our small church, once vibrant with hope and growth, now showed signs of decline.

Erika and I stood at a genuine crossroads, an emotionally charged turning point. The discipleship school of one of Waco's most prominent churches stood as a shining ray of hope, a promise of renewed direction and purpose for our ministry. The decision to relinquish leadership of our church felt like parting with a spiritual child we had watched grow and flourish. Every gathering filled with laughter and tears, every soul that had found its way to the Gospel, every testimony that had resonated in the hearts of the faithful weighed heavily on us. With a deep sense of responsibility and love, we handed over the care of this precious legacy to a group of loyal and dedicated brothers and sisters who courageously decided to continue the work we had begun.

THE DARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL

Just when we thought we were beginning a new chapter, cancer reappeared like an uninvited intruder. This time in the lymph nodes. The doctors proposed a change in chemotherapy protocol and the installation of a Port-a-Cath near Erika's heart. This small device, a subcutaneous portal connected directly to a central vein, would become the new entry point for treatments, avoiding the painful search for veins each time.

It was then that I noticed something I had never seen in Erika before. Her spirit, which had always been strong and unbreakable, was beginning to show small cracks, like fissures in glass. In the dimness of our bedroom, the questions emerging from her lips were sharp as daggers: "What have I done wrong

to deserve this? Why does God ignore me in my suffering? Why do some receive His healing and others, like me, do not?"

Each night transformed into an intense exercise in practical theology. As the dim lamplight cast shadows on the walls, I would frantically search through Scripture, hastily turning pages seeking verses that might offer relief to her troubled heart. I would speak softly about divine sovereignty, explaining how ultimate healing was in the hands of His perfect will. However, my attempts at comfort seemed to hit an invisible wall of pain and confusion surrounding her.

"Then why pray?" she retorted, her voice oscillating between defiance and anguish, like a taut rope about to snap. "If everything depends on His will, what's the point of asking for anything if our words can't change what He has already decided?"

THE STRUGGLE BETWEEN FAITH AND DOUBT

During chemotherapy sessions, Erika swung between waves of deep faith and storms of intense questioning. "See that bag of red fluid?" she would say to me, pointing to the drug methodically dripping into her system. "It's the blood of Christ." In those moments, her eyes reflected an inner battle: the fervent desire to cling to her faith while her mind struggled with unanswered questions, like a turbulent sea.

Her restless mind became a detective of the past, searching for reasons and clues like someone examining a crime scene. She reviewed every detail of her life, dissecting memories with a watchmaker's precision: the food at school, her diet during youth, the birth control pills she had taken while we lived in Boston. Each memory emerged as a possible culprit, a suspect that might have contributed to her current condition.

The leaders at the training school offered valuable insights, trying to help us make sense of the chaos. But the truth is that some questions don't have easy answers. Some nights, as I held Erika

while she cried, I realized that perhaps the purpose wasn't to find all the answers, but to learn to live faithfully with the questions.

Like Job during his suffering, we discovered that mature faith doesn't mean an absence of doubt, but the ability to maintain trust in God even when answers don't come. Erika's questions weren't a sign of failing faith, but of a faith strong enough to be honest with God.

In her more lucid moments, Erika wrote in her journal, "Perhaps the question isn't 'why me,' but 'what for?' I don't understand Your plan, Lord, but I choose to trust that You understand mine."

As I watched Erika navigate between faith and doubt, between trust and questioning, I realized we were experiencing a different kind of testimony. It wasn't the triumphant story of instant healing we had hoped for, but the deeper account of how God sustains us even when our "whys" remain unanswered.

THE BATTLE FOR UNDERSTANDING

The nights became our spiritual battleground. As the house slept and silence amplified our thoughts, Erika began voicing questions that many believers are afraid to utter aloud.

"If God is good," she whispered in the darkness, "why does He allow so much suffering? Not just mine...look at how many people in the chemotherapy room, how many children with cancer." Her words trembled between reverence and defiance. "And if He has the power to heal, as Matthew 8:17 says, '...He Himself took our infirmities and bore our sicknesses,' why are some healed and others not?"

I found myself struggling to find answers that would satisfy both heart and mind. I reminded her of Job's story, a righteous man who suffered without apparent explanation. "But Job got

answers in the end," Erika argued, "God spoke directly to him. I just hear silence."

The questions deepened with each chemotherapy session. "Is this punishment?" she would ask as the red liquid dripped into her Port-a-Cath. "The Bible says in Romans 8:28 that all things work together for good to those who love God...but how can this be for good?"

During these spiritual struggles, God provided an anchor of wisdom through Pastor Mario Vega of Elim Church in El Salvador. With a blend of pastoral compassion and deep biblical understanding, his emails shone like a light in the darkness. Pastor Mario guided her through the uncharted terrain of her questioning faith with answers grounded in Scripture, yet sensitive to human pain. His counsel helped Erika navigate the tension between doubt and trust, reminding her that honest questions aren't signs of weak faith, but part of the journey toward more mature faith.

Gradually, we began to understand that maybe mature faith isn't about having all the answers, but about maintaining confidence amid the questions. As Erika wrote in her journal, "Perhaps the true test of faith is not in receiving the miracle we ask for, but in continuing to believe when the miracle doesn't come as you have hoped for.

One particularly difficult night, after hours of intense nausea from chemotherapy, Erika collapsed in my arms in our bedroom. Her tears fell like silent rain on her sweat-soaked shirt. "People insist I just need more faith," she sobbed, her voice cracking with despair and exhaustion. "As if my lack of healing is my fault, as if I don't believe enough." Her hands trembled slightly as she spoke, her frustration so tangible it seemed to fill the space between us like dense fog. "But even Paul had a thorn in his flesh that God didn't remove, and no one questioned his faith."

"Sometimes I think about Gethsemane," she confessed. "Jesus prayed that the cup of suffering would pass from Him, but in the

end, He said, 'not My will, but Yours be done.' Maybe true faith isn't believing that God will fulfill our desires but trusting Him even when He acts in ways we don't understand."

Her doubts weren't limited to her personal situation; they began infiltrating every corner of our theology on healing and suffering. "Why are some prayers answered and others not? How can we truly discern God's will? If He is the same yesterday, today, and forever, why do miracles seem so different now?"

One evening, as we read 2 Corinthians 12:9 together, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness," Erika reflected, "Maybe the healing God wants to give us isn't always physical. Sometimes, it's the strength to keep worshipping even when we don't have answers, or the peace that transcends all understanding when life feels meaningless."

This struggle with doubt didn't weaken our faith; it deepened it. It taught us that God is big enough to handle our questions, our frustrations, and even our anger. It taught us that true faith isn't the absence of doubt, but the decision to keep trusting despite it.

A RESPITE IN AREQUIPA

The mission trip to Arequipa, Peru, came at a crucial moment for us. It was an integral part of Antioch Community Church's discipleship school, an intensive program that sent students around the world for three weeks of evangelistic work. While some of our companions departed for remote villages in Africa or isolated communities in Asia, we were assigned to Peru's "White City."

For Erika, this trip represented much more than simply fulfilling a program requirement—it was a necessary respite from the constant battle against cancer. As we walked the narrow, winding cobblestone streets of Arequipa, the sun shone intensely on the volcanic sillar facades, creating a radiance that seemed to purify the soul. The murmur of street vendors, the aroma of anticuchos

grilling on small street carts, and the majestic Misti volcano watching over the city from a distance formed a scene that dramatically contrasted with the sterile hospital corridors we had frequented.

While sharing the gospel with strangers in the crowded plazas, Erika experienced something unexpected. Speaking of hope to others, while she herself struggled to maintain it, produced a kind of spiritual resonance. The long hours dedicated to group prayer, away from the constant tensions of work and medical visits, gave her space to process her emotions in a new and profound way.

"There's something transformative about stepping out of your own story for a while," she told me one night as we rested in our small lodging, "to enter someone else's story and see how God is working there too."

It was in Arequipa, surrounded by towering mountains and clear blue skies, that Erika committed most seriously to writing in her journal, which was a worn notebook where she recorded not only Bible verses but also the subtle ways she felt God speaking to her. The pages, filled with scribbled notes and fervent underlines, became a testament to her personal struggle, a detailed map of her spiritual journey through the valley of doubt and uncertainty.

During our time in Waco, God blessed us with an extraordinary community of brothers and sisters who had recently arrived at Antioch Community Church where we were meeting. Almost as if orchestrated by divine appointment, most were Puerto Ricans who became cornerstones of our faith. Their vibrant, warm culture unfolded like a soft, cozy blanket that wrapped around us.

Maria and Edsel Santoni always arrived with laughter that sounded like a joyful melody and warm embraces that wrapped everyone in happiness. Jose and Sharon Salcedo never failed to bring words of encouragement that felt like balm to our tired souls. Tito and Sandra brought with them a serenity so profound

that it could calm any storm, like a gentle breeze on a tumultuous day. Miguel Cabrera, with his wisdom, was like a lighthouse guiding our steps through darkness. Our dear friend Brenda and her husband Richard Telles, with hearts as generous as a grandma and grandpa, knew exactly how to embrace the children, making them feel loved and safe. My great friend Micah Burns was the epitome of loyalty; his presence was unwavering. And our Salvadoran compatriots, Rene and Maria Magaña, along with Veronica and Roberto Panameño and the Duran's Family, joined us with shared determination;. They walked shoulder to shoulder with us through this bleak valley, lighting the way with their company.

They all supported us when weariness threatened to overcome us. Their fervent prayers, constant presence, and unconditional love were living testimony of how God uses His people to sustain those going through difficult times.

PREPARING FOR THE FUTURE

During this storm of doubt and questioning, Erika demonstrated wisdom that transcended our immediate circumstances. One night, while the children slept, she surprised me with a request that revealed the depth of her love and foresight.

"I want you to go back to college," she told me with that mixture of tenderness and determination that characterized her. "You need to finish your master's degree." Her eyes shone with a clarity that unsettled me. "If something happens to me," she continued, though the phrase pained my soul, "the kids will need you to have a better job. A master's degree will give you better opportunities."

It was typical Erika: even amid her own battle, her mind and heart focused on securing our future. I enrolled at Texas State University in San Marcos, a commitment that meant a three-hour commute twice a week. I worked part-time in Waco and divided

my days between classes, studying, and being present for my family.

Erika became the pillar that made this new challenge possible. On afternoons when I needed to study, I would see her playing with Kevin and Sofia, keeping their laughter away from my study space, despite the fatigue chemotherapy caused her. "It's my way of repaying you for what you did when we first got married," she would say with a smile, remembering how I had supported her during her optometry studies.

For a year and a half, while dealing with a roller coaster of medical treatments and profound questions about life, I traveled regularly to San Marcos to complete my master's in education with a focus on teaching Spanish. Brenda and Richard Telles, with boundless warmth, opened their home to me with overflowing generosity. There we spent countless hours praying together and engaging in deep conversations about faith and God's nature. Their love and hospitality exceeded all expectations; they prepared my room with care, as if welcoming an honored guest. We would often eat together, and evenings stretched late into the night as we watched soccer games with Richard. Thanks to him and his patience, I finally deciphered the intricacies of sport; his knowledge and passion were truly contagious.

Through these enriching experiences, I obtained all the necessary certifications to become a Spanish teacher in the United States, a career I practice to this day. This achievement would not have been possible without Erika's vision and steadfast support as she worked full-time to sustain our family. I am also deeply grateful for the Telles family I believe God placed in my path as an unexpected gift.

A LIGHT IN THE VALLEY

As I traveled between Waco and San Marcos, pursuing a more secure future for our family, Erika's daily actions wove a tapestry of sacrificial love. During this time, Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 4:16-18 took on new meaning for us: "Therefore we do not lose heart. Though we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So, we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal."

Looking back now, I understand that while I struggled to make sense of the present, Erika was building bridges to a future she might not see. Her love manifested not only in playing with the children while I studied or offering words of encouragement when exhaustion threatened to overcome me, but in preparing a safety net for a tomorrow where she would not be physically present—testifying to how true love always looks beyond the present.

This realization gives new meaning to her uncertainty about God's will. While we had questioned the "why" of present suffering, Erika was also living the "what for," paving the way for her loved ones to continue even in her absence.

IN CONCLUSION

The fiercest battles of faith don't always end with clear answers, but with a peace that surpasses understanding. As I watched Erika help Kevin with his homework one afternoon, I understood that we were living a sacred paradox: amid our deepest uncertainties, God was writing a story of love and provision beyond our immediate comprehension.

Doubts didn't completely disappear—they rarely do. But we began to see them not as enemies of faith, but as companions on

a journey toward truth. As Erika wrote in her journal one night, "Perhaps the purest faith is not the one that never wavers, but the one that chooses to trust even amid uncertainty."

Erika had discovered a profound truth through her spiritual journey: sometimes the greatest act of faith is not receiving the miracle we ask for, but becoming the miracle others need. As she paved the way for a future she wouldn't live to see, she exemplified a faith that transcended immediate circumstances.

At the end of this season of soul-searching and preparation, we emerged transformed. Not with all the answers, but with a deeper understanding that God's love manifests not only in miraculous healings but also in the strength to persevere when healing doesn't come as we have hoped for.

And so, as we continued to grapple with difficult realities and treatments, we discovered that true victory lies not in receiving the answers we seek, but in finding peace to live with the unknowns, strength to continue loving amid pain, and wisdom to see God's hand even in our darkest valleys.

REFLECTION FOR THE SOUL:

When our questions seem bigger than our answers, and God's silence hits us with deafening force, can we, like Erika, choose to trust? Psalm 10:1 begins with an anguished question, "LORD, why do you stand far off?" But it concludes with a statement of faith: "You, LORD, hear the desire of the afflicted; you encourage them, and you listen to their cry" (Psalm 10:17).

On the pages of her Bible, Erika recorded her thoughts and emotions during that difficult period. On one page, in sticky notes with shaky handwriting, she wrote: "Lord, I may not understand all Your ways, but I choose to trust Your heart. And as I walk through this valley, I know You are using every step to prepare a testimony that transcends adversity." Her words

reflected nights of silent tears and days of uncertainty as she sought meaning amid confusion.

CHAPTER 6



NED - WHEN GOD SPEAKS IN ACRONYMS

*"The LORD is my light and my salvation; of whom shall
I be afraid? The LORD is the strength of my life; of
whom shall I be afraid?"*

- Psalm 27:1

Scripture has a remarkable way of weaving our stories through time, like golden threads connecting hearts and experiences across generations. Psalm 27, "The LORD is my light and my salvation—whom shall I fear?" had been my anchor when I was a teenager and first gave my life to Christ in a small church called Maranatha in El Salvador.

I had attended Maranatha at the invitation of a sister named Toña, who has since gone to be with the Lord. My friend Richard

and I had proposed to "just go for tamales," as we said to each other. "Don't go forward to accept Christ because they always pressure you there," he told me with apparent conviction. "Don't worry," I replied, "I would never become a Christian," not knowing what I was saying.

That night, after a message about fear, God moved me so deeply that before I knew it, I found myself kneeling at the altar in prayer. That was my spiritual birth in 1989, at age fifteen. I clearly remember the sense of peace that flooded my heart, as if a heavy burden had been lifted from my shoulders. At that moment, I knew my life had changed forever.

At that time, I was facing the fear of losing my grandmother, the most beloved person of my childhood, and these words had given me strength to trust God despite my fear. The image of my grandmother, with her warm smile and wrinkled hands, gave me comfort amid uncertainty.

Now, decades later, the same verse was taking on new meaning as we faced the most difficult battle of our lives. Erika's cancer diagnosis had shaken us to our core. Every treatment, every hospital visit was a reminder of life's fragility. Yet in the middle of the storm, the verse that had sustained me in my youth was once again a source of hope.

The God who had been faithful in my adolescence, upholding my fearful heart, was still the same God who would guide us through this valley of shadows. Remembering how God had sheltered me in the past gave me strength to face the present. I knew that even though the road ahead was difficult, we were not alone. God was with us, guiding us and giving us strength to move forward.

SPINAL METASTASIS

Erika's pain began as an almost imperceptible discomfort in her lower back, barely a whisper in her body, similar to those first drops of rain that herald an approaching storm. I remember that morning, sunlight spilled warmly over our kitchen, illuminating the table where she served cereal to Kevin and Sofia. As she poured milk into bowls, she mentioned the discomfort in a casual tone, her voice a delicate balance between resignation and faint hope. After years of coping with cancer together, we had learned to pay attention to even the subtlest hints of pain.

The radiology room at Scott & White greeted us with its familiar symphony of mechanical whirring and the pungent aroma of antiseptics.

Every corner of that room evoked memories of our initial struggle, from the first tests to the treatments that followed. The constant sound of machines and the clinical environment were stark reminders of life's fragility and the battles we had fought together. Erika lay on a gurney, her gaze fixed on the ceiling as the technician worked.

Despite the technician's professionalism and neutral demeanor, we couldn't help but notice the shadow of concern in his eyes. It was a look we had seen before, a mixture of empathy and worry that told us more than words could express. We knew that each image captured might reveal something new, something that could change the course of our struggle once again.

As we waited for the results, time seemed to stand still. I remembered the countless times we had been in this same situation, waiting for news that might bring relief or more

challenges. In those moments, our faith and the love we shared had strengthened us, and I knew that no matter what the outcome, we would continue to face everything together.

"The cancer has spread to the spine," the doctor announced later, his voice mixing gentleness with gravity. Metastasis, that word we had feared so much since the initial diagnosis, was now our new reality. As we listened to the technical details about spinal lesions and treatment options, my mind wandered to our little ones, playing at home under the care of church friends, unaware that our world was changing again.

GOD REVEALED TO US NED

In the world of oncology, there exists a three-letter acronym that patients and families cling to with desperate hope: NED, which stands for "No Evidence of Disease." It represents the ideal end result of cancer treatment—that blessed moment when imaging scans show no tumors, blood tests return to normal ranges, and physical exams reveal no detectable signs of cancer. It's the medical equivalent of reaching the summit after a grueling climb up a treacherous mountain.

Physicians, cautious with their words and well aware of cancer's deceptive nature, avoid using the term "cured," preferring this more precise clinical language. For cancer patients, reaching NED status represents that long-awaited victory, the permission to finally breathe a sigh of relief and start rebuilding their lives. It's what oncologists write in reports when treatment has succeeded, what patients pray for during endless chemotherapy sessions, what families celebrate with tears of joy and gratitude: remission, the absence of detectable disease.

But for our family, God was about to reveal a much deeper meaning to these three simple letters—a meaning that would sustain us when the medical definition remained frustratingly out of reach.

The words Erika wrote in her notebook flowed from a fluttering heart, her hands trembling as the ink mingled with tears that fell on the paper. "Lord, why do you allow some to receive their NED status and others not? Why are some healed while others must continue carrying this cross?" These questions, which for years we had debated during our nights of theological reflection, now presented themselves with renewed meaning. Just as I had found comfort in Psalm 27 during my adolescence, we were now searching together for new dimensions of God's faithfulness.

It was in that doctor's office, when the room was plunged into darkness and silence, that God began to whisper something we had not yet contemplated. The initials "**NED**," common in the medical field to indicate "No Evidence of Disease", were also the letters that formed her name: **Norbi Erika Dubón**. It was as if an invisible finger traced those letters in the air, an intimate reminder that God knew every detail of our story, even down to our names.

And, as we faced the stark reality that physical healing might not manifest as we had hoped, we felt God reshaping their meaning deep in our hearts once again, a meaning which we had embraced with renewed determination. Erika had recorded this new meaning in her journal, where she had written that those letters could also stand for "No Evidence of Discouragement." As I remember our conversations, I can hear her steady, calm voice explaining that this didn't mean there would be no difficult

moments, but rather the certainty of God's grace, always ready to guide us through them.

This revelation transformed our perspective on the battle against cancer. It was no longer just about achieving a desired medical result but about experiencing God's continuous presence in every step of the way. The real victory wasn't in the absence of disease, but in the constant presence of peace and hope that the world couldn't explain.

THE BREAKING POINT

By 2012, the cumulative effects of treatment had reached a breaking point. Years of chemotherapy had transformed Erika's once vibrant spirit—the woman who had energetically played with our children and devoted herself to church ministry was now struggling with debilitating symptoms. As relentless nausea, profound exhaustion, and an expanding array of side effects dominated her daily experience, Erika began to fundamentally question the conventional medical approach to her care

One particularly difficult afternoon, after another session that left her physically devastated, Erika held Sofia in her arms as tears ran silently down her cheeks. Kevin, sensing his mother's sadness, approached with his children's Bible, the same one she used to teach him during the evenings. "Mommy," he whispered, "do you want to read something?" In that moment, the strength I had found in the Scriptures during my youth was now manifesting in the next generation.

Radiation therapy became our new daily ritual: twelve sessions that would mark not only her body but our spirits. Each day, as Erika lay motionless on the cold table of the linear accelerator,

she whispered the verses that had sustained our faith for years. The hum of the machine intermingled with her silent prayers as technicians directed high-energy beams at the lesions in her spine from their shielded booth.

The side effects came like relentless waves. Radiation fatigue settled in Erika's body like a thick fog that not even the children's laughter could completely dissipate. Her skin became red and irritated, and constant nausea turned every meal into an act of will. But amid this dark valley, our faith community stood firm as a protective wall around us.

It was during these grueling treatments, when conventional medicine seemed to offer as much suffering as hope, that Erika and I began researching alternative approaches to cancer care. Desperate for options beyond the painful status quo, we immersed ourselves in studying integrative therapies and holistic treatments showing promise around the world. These possibilities offered a glimmer of hope on nights when pain kept Erika awake and our search for answers intensified.

On these nights, I would stroke Sofia's hair when she sometimes slipped into our bed, and Erika's eyes would shine with a mixture of hope and determination that reminded me of the woman who years before had chosen our little girl's life above all else.

Evenings at home took on a new rhythm, providing moments of family intimacy between medical challenges. Kevin and Sofia, with that special sensitivity God gives to children, found unique ways to show their love. Sofia, at seven years old, would leave drawings of angels under her mother's pillow, each stroke a testimony of childlike faith. Kevin, at nine, had developed the

habit of praying aloud each night, "Jesus, help Mommy find the right medicine."

On nights when physical pain intensified and the future seemed hazy, we found special refuge in Revelation 21:4: "He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." This verse joined Psalm 27 in our arsenal of divine promises, reminding us that the same God who had been our light and salvation in the past was still our strength in the present.

Twelve years after those difficult times, I find myself flipping through her journal in the dim light of my living room, and I can feel God's presence at work amid the pain Erika experienced. On a worn page, her words hit me with clarity: "I have discovered that there are different kinds of healing. There is the physical healing we all desire, that hope that lights up our darkest nights, but there is also the healing of the soul, a deep and serene peace that envelops us when we finally understand that our worth isn't measured by our health, but by who we are in Christ."

WHEN MEDICINE LOSES ITS MAGIC

Years of chemotherapy had taken their toll. Her once strong and athletic body now showed the scars of countless battles. Constant nausea, overwhelming fatigue, and multiplying side effects led her to question the entire conventional approach.

"I can't take this anymore," she confided one night, her eyes reflecting both determination and fear. "There has to be another way. These treatments... I feel like they're killing my spirit along with my body."

"What if the medical system is so focused on killing the cancer that it forgets to keep the patient alive? I don't want to spend my last days—however many I have—feeling half-dead from treatments."

The white walls of the hospital, which had once seemed like a sanctuary of hope, were beginning to feel like a prison of empty promises. Erika spent hours online, her tired eyes scanning scientific articles, survivor blogs, and alternative studies. Her journal from that time reveals an overwhelming struggle:

"Why after decades of research and billions of dollars are we still using the same poisons to 'cure'? Chemotherapy is slowly killing me, and no one seems to have a better answer."

One particularly difficult afternoon, after another session that left her physically and emotionally devastated, Erika broke down in tears: "It all comes down to money," she whispered, her voice mixing anger and despair. "Treatments cost thousands of dollars, pharmaceuticals make millions, and patients... We patients just die a little bit every day."

Her questioning became more acute with each visit to the oncologist. "Why in forty years have they found nothing better than poisoning our bodies, hoping the cancer will die before we do? Why is it that every time the cancer returns, the only answer is more of the same poison?"

The cycle seemed endless and cruel: treatment, temporary remission, recurrence, more treatment. As she wrote in her journal, "It's like being stuck on a medical hamster wheel. We run and run, exhausting ourselves more and more, but do we really make progress?"

The stories of other patients fueled her doubts. In waiting rooms, we heard similar testimonials: people declared "cancer-free" only to face more aggressive recurrences months or years later. "Is this really healing," Erika wrote, "or are we just buying time at too high a price?"

Frustration deepened as she watched alternatives being systematically discredited or ignored. "Why are natural therapies ridiculed without even being studied?" she wondered. "Why are physicians who propose alternative treatments marginalized from the medical community?"

One night, while reviewing her latest tests, Erika expressed her deepest disappointment: "The system isn't designed to cure; it's designed to treat indefinitely. A cured patient generates no revenue, but a patient in continuous treatment... that's the perfect business model."

The evidence of this vicious cycle was in her own body. Years of chemotherapy had left her immune system devastated, her energy depleted, and her spirit battling between hope and resignation. "I feel like a failed experiment," she wrote. "Each new treatment promises to be the answer but only brings new problems, new side effects, new medical bills."

Yet amid this crisis of faith in the medical system, God was saying something else. . As she wrote on a later page of her journal, "Maybe true healing doesn't come in a bottle of pills or a bag of chemotherapy. Maybe the healing God has in mind is deeper than the absence of cancer cells."

This crossroads brought us to a place of questioning, not only about medical treatments but about the very meaning of healing. What did it really mean to be healthy? Was it the absence of

disease, or was there some other definition that God wanted to show us?

THE SEARCH FOR ALTERNATIVES

Amid this dark valley, we began to hear hopeful stories. Testimonies of cancer patients who had found healing in alternative clinics in Cuba, Mexico, and elsewhere. Stories of holistic treatments that addressed not only cancer but the whole person.

"There must be another way," Erika would whisper at night when medication-induced insomnia kept her awake. "Something that won't destroy my body in the process of trying to save it." But our situation was complex. With two young children and no extended family in Waco, the options of traveling abroad for alternative treatments seemed unattainable. Every story of hope felt like fruit hanging too high to reach.

Then, during our desperate search, we discovered the Burzynski Clinic in Houston. Like a ray of light amid the storm, this closer-to-home possibility ignited a spark of hope. Here was a different approach, one that promised to treat cancer without the devastating effects of conventional therapy.

Erika wrote in her journal that night, "Lord, is this the way You have been preparing? Is this the door You have kept open while all others were closing?"

The roller coaster of emotions between faith, reason, and encouragement continued, but now we had a new direction. As the effects of radiation slowly diminished, new hope began to grow.

As she wrote in her last entry of this period, "I don't know if this new path will bring the healing we seek, but I do know that each step brings us closer to understanding that true healing goes beyond medical treatments. Perhaps, in the end, this whole journey isn't just about finding a cure but about discovering deeper peace amid the storm."

REFLECTION FOR THE SOUL:

Like that teenager in El Salvador who found strength in Psalm 27 while fearing the loss of his grandmother, we now face our own dark valleys with the same promise: The LORD is our light and salvation. In the most difficult times, when conventional paths seem exhausted and fear threatens to paralyze us, His word remains an unchanging beacon of hope.

Do you find yourself at a crossroads today, with familiar paths narrowing like high walls around you? Are you, like we were then, looking for answers in places where traditional solutions have failed? Remember that the same God who has been faithful through generations, who was my strength as I prayed on my knees in that little Maranatha church and our light in dark hospital corridors, is still the One who guides our steps along unexpected paths toward His perfect purpose.

CHAPTER 7



SEARCHING FOR HEALTHCARE IN OTHER PATHWAYS

*"I will bring health and healing to them; I will heal them
and reveal to them the abundance of peace and truth."*

- Jeremiah 33:6

The promise in Jeremiah 33:6—"I will bring them health and healing"—takes on special meaning when we consider how God often works in unexpected ways. In biblical times, healing came through natural elements: mud for the blind man's eyes, fig poultice for Hezekiah's boil, oil and wine for the wounded man in the Good Samaritan parable. These stories remind us that God can use both conventional and alternative methods to manifest His healing power.

As I look back on this time, the memories overwhelm me. The images are so vivid that I can almost smell the fresh aroma of carrot and celery in our kitchen, hear the steady hum of the juicer,

and see Erika carefully measuring each ingredient for what she called "God's medicine."

THE PATH TO NATURAL HEALING

It all began in Tampa, at a holistic clinic where for the first time we heard a different approach to healing. It wasn't just about fighting cancer but about strengthening the body God had given us. The doctor, a soft-spoken man with kind eyes, explained how the human body has an innate ability to heal itself when given the right tools.

"It's as if we've been given the wrong instruction manual all our lives," Erika wrote in her notes, which I now keep beside her Bible. The pages, occasionally stained with green drops from the juices she prepared, testify to her tireless quest for healing.

The clinic introduced us to a world we barely knew existed—one where food was medicine and toxins were the enemy. We learned about the acid-alkaline balance in the body, how cancer thrives in acidic environments, and how certain foods could help restore proper pH levels. Erika absorbed this information like a student discovering a new language, filling notebooks with diagrams of cellular function and lists of healing foods.

We began a 21-day detox that was a true test of love and commitment, a journey requiring more than willpower—it demanded an unbreakable family unity. I joined her on this path not only out of solidarity but because I understood that this task required the support and shared energy of everyone in our household. Our children watched curiously as we transformed our kitchen, a place of familiar comfort foods, into a laboratory of health and nature. "Why is everything green?" Kevin asked, wrinkling his nose at the earthy, fresh scent of wheatgrass juice permeating the air.

Each morning, Erika would rise early to prepare her "medicine"—a careful combination of vegetables and fruits

chosen for their specific healing properties. Carrots and beets for their blood-cleansing abilities, leafy greens for their chlorophyll and mineral content, turmeric root for its powerful anti-inflammatory effects. She approached this ritual with the same precision and dedication she had once applied to her optometry studies, measuring and timing each element perfectly.

The transformation wasn't just physical. As the toxins left her body, there were difficult days of headaches and fatigue—what the holistic doctor had called "healing crises"—but there were also moments of surprising clarity and energy. "I feel like I can think more clearly," she told me one evening, her eyes brighter than I had seen them in months. "It's as if a fog is lifting."

HOPE IN HOUSTON

The Burzynski Clinic came into our lives as an answer to countless prayers filled with both hope and despair. Dr. Stanislaw Burzynski had developed an innovative therapy using natural peptides, known as antineoplastons, to selectively target cancer cells without harming healthy ones. His personalized approach resonated deeply with our understanding of the uniqueness with which God views each individual.

"For you created my inmost being, you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful; I know that full well." - Psalm 139:13-14

However, this hope came with a hefty price tag: \$15,000 for the initial treatment. That figure seemed unattainable that night as Erika and I sat at the kitchen table, papers strewn around us amid tears of worry. It was then that we experienced another lesson in humility and community. Our family and friends, with warm hugs and words of encouragement, each contributed what they could. Through their help, we raised the money needed for treatments in Houston.

A YEAR OF TRANSFORMATION

Regular trips to Houston became part of our family routine. Watching Erika grow stronger with antineoplaston treatments was like witnessing a gradual miracle. Her body, free from the devastating effects of conventional chemotherapy, began to show signs of recovery. This treatment combined with her radical diet change seemed to be yielding its first positive results.

Our refrigerator underwent its own transformation. Gone were the processed foods, the white sugar, the refined flours. In their place appeared jars of fermented vegetables, containers of sprouted seeds, and bundles of organic produce delivered weekly from a local farm. The cold-press juicer became the centerpiece of our kitchen, humming from dawn until dusk as carrots, kale, beets, and apples were transformed into vibrant, living nutrition. It felt as if we were rediscovering the wisdom of Genesis 1:29: "Then God said, 'I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food.'"

WHEN ROADS NARROW

Eventually, the cost of treatment became unsustainable. Ending our time at the Burzynski Clinic felt like closing a door of hope, especially since we had seen positive results. Erika wrote in her notebook, "Sometimes God's ways take us through valleys we don't understand. But even there, He is with us."

In 2013, a persistent headache brought us back to the reality we had been dreading. Imaging revealed a three-centimeter tumor in the left cerebellum. Sitting in the neurologist's office as he explained the tumor's exact location, Erika squeezed my hand and whispered, "No Evidence of Discouragement, remember?"

Today, despite all the time that has passed, every memory remains so vivid that it hurts. I can see Erika in our kitchen,

preparing her green juices. I can hear her laughter as we tried to convince the kids to taste beet juice. I can feel her hand squeezing mine at each doctor's appointment.

Her notes and jottings, which now guide me in writing this book, testify to a faith that refused to be defeated. On a page stained with green juice, she wrote: "Maybe true healing is not always physical.

Maybe it's learning to trust God even when the road grows dark." These phrases appear so frequently in her notebook that I can't help but repeat them.

The brain metastasis marked the beginning of a new chapter in our battle, one that would take us even further in our journey of faith. Erika expressed it this way: "God's paths don't always lead where we expect, but they always take us where we need to be. If He allows cancer to return, He must have a purpose even in this."

THE SHADOW IN THE VALLEY

As the Texas sun set over our home in Waco, Erika and I sat in the backyard watching Kevin and Sofia play on their swing set. The air felt heavy with the crushing weight of the news we had just received. The tumor in her cerebellum—three centimeters of invasive mass—loomed like a dark mountain threatening to eclipse all the light we had found on our alternative medicine journey.

Centimeters matter when it comes to the brain. Three centimeters of cancer cells in the cerebellum weren't just numbers on a medical report; they represented an immediate threat to everything Erika was: her ability to move, maintain balance, and be the active mother she had always been.

"You know what I was reading this morning?" Erika whispered, her voice soft but steady, as she unconsciously brought her hand

to the back of her head. "The 23rd Psalm. 'Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me.'" She paused, watching our children run and play. "I think we're entering that valley now."

Her words echo in my memory with a clarity time hasn't erased. It was typical of Erika to find a biblical anchor for every storm we faced. The three-centimeter tumor had become our new Goliath, a mass that doctors described in increasingly urgent and worrisome terms. But like David, we prepared for battle with a faith that transcended medical odds.

The next chapter of our story would take us into even broader territories of faith and resistance. The cerebellum, that crucial center of balance in the brain, had become our new battleground. Three centimeters that would test every aspect of our faith, every fiber of our endurance. What we didn't know then was that God would use even this massive trial to teach us a different kind of balance: between medicine and faith, between struggle and surrender, between fear and hope.

As Erika wrote in what would become one of her most defiant reflections, "The size of the tumor does not determine the size of my God." "Perhaps the real miracle isn't always the absence of the storm, but the peace we find within it. No Evidence of Disease may not be our physical reality, but No Evidence of Discouragement remains our victory by which I choose to live."

IN A FINAL NOTE

Our search for healing at the Burzynski Clinic represented more than a medical alternative; it testified to how God sometimes takes us down roads less traveled to show us new dimensions of His care. Antineoplastons, those natural peptides offering hope when conventional medicine seemed to have reached its limits, reminded us that creation itself contains elements of healing we're only beginning to understand.

In the end, we recognized that each step in our journey, whether through conventional or alternative medicine, was part of a larger plan. True healing, we discovered, isn't always measured in medical terms but in the inner transformation that occurs when we learn to trust God even in the most unexpected ways.

The search for alternative treatments became an act of sincere and devoted worship. Erika, with trembling but determined hands, precisely measured every gram of turmeric and ginger, every piece of green apple mixed with fresh celery, trusting in these natural ingredients' healing power. As she underwent antineoplaston treatments, she felt the needle's pressure as a constant reminder of her struggle, but her heart echoed David's song: "I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made."

The financial sacrifices we made were reflected in receipts piled on the table, silent witnesses to our dedication. The exhausting trips to Houston, with long hours in uncomfortable seats in our white Ford Escape and endless waits at the clinic, became part of our pilgrimage. Nights spent reading by lamplight, devouring books and articles on natural medicine, were part of our active worship—our way of saying, "Lord, we will seek Your healing in every corner where You may have hidden it."

This phase taught us that faith doesn't mean passively waiting for a miracle. Sometimes it means actively seeking the answers God has already placed in His creation. As we kept our hearts open to His direction, we felt His presence in every difficult decision, and our firm trust in His goodness sustained us.

REFLECTION FOR THE SOUL:

In the end, we understood that each carrot juiced with its fresh vibrancy, each alternative treatment with its uncertain promise, and each prayer lifted for wisdom to make the right decisions were all part of a larger journey of trust and transformation.

God's true medicine not only heals the body; it also restores the soul and renews the spirit, leaving an indelible mark on our being.

Have you experienced times when you had to let go of preconceptions about how God should work in your life? What did you learn from that experience? How often have we limited God to our conventional expectations of healing?

CHAPTER 8



THE HEART BEHIND THE SMILE

"A virtuous woman, who can find her? For her esteem far surpasses that of precious stones."

- Proverbs 31:10

Sometimes, in the heat of the most intense battles, we must pause and remember why we fight. This chapter is precisely that pause along the way, a refuge where sickness cannot enter, where only the pure essence of who Erika was shines through. As I write these words, I feel as if I'm unwrapping a priceless gift: the opportunity to share the light she radiated, beyond her fight against cancer.

The cobblestone streets of Zacatecoluca, El Salvador, stretched under a bright blue sky, creating the perfect backdrop for the first years of her life. In that corner of the world, the tropical sun poured its warmth on red-tiled roofs that glowed orange at sunset. The aroma of freshly ground coffee hung in the air, mingling with the clear, resonant laughter of children playing

traditional games like "arranca cebolla" (onion puller) and "peregrina" (pilgrim) in the dust-covered courtyard. Erika, a seven-year-old girl with bare feet, felt the warmth of the dusty ground and looked up at the infinite sky. Her dreamy eyes reflected a longing for a world beyond the horizon, not yet knowing that her future would be marked by touching so many lives with her love and dedication.

Like a hummingbird momentarily separated from her garden, Erika waited patiently as her mother crossed borders and deserts to build a new home in Los Angeles. She was left behind with her siblings and father, clinging to hope that one day they would see their mother again. Letters and phone calls became invisible bridges that held their small, divided world together. Years later, she would confess to me that those months of waiting forged in her a resilience that would stay with her throughout her life. The attention of her older siblings, the stories of her grandmother, and the little adobe house where she grew up became the foundation for her ability to keep hope alive, even when the future seemed uncertain.

The Los Angeles apartment was small, but her mother had turned it into a sanctuary of discipline and unwavering love. She was a woman forged in the old Salvadoran tradition: a tireless worker who traveled by bus to clean houses and put food on the table. She was as strict as a steel ruler, but with a heart as big as the distance that now separated them from their homeland. In that cramped space, Erika learned the lessons that would define her character: the importance of hard work, the dignity of quiet service, and the transformative power of faith lived out in small, daily acts. She learned to live with just the essentials and to dream of a better future.

Her first college experience at Marymount University in Palos Verdes, California, marked the beginning of her spiritual metamorphosis. Like a butterfly emerging from its chrysalis, Erika discovered her purpose while sitting in the wooden pews

of Elim Restoration Church in Los Angeles, which met in a school at Crenshaw and W. Adams Street.

There, her devotion to service was like a silent flame: she made no noise, but her steady light illuminated every corner. Driving an early 1990s blue Ford Astro van that her mother had painstakingly purchased, Erika found her greatest joy in picking up her sister Sandra and her nieces and nephews; her laughter filled the vehicle as they drove to church. Although her vehicle was unconventional for a young woman, she didn't mind. "The important thing is that I can use it for God's glory," she would tell me with a smile. At church, Erika served as a deaconess and cell group leader. She never sought to be the center of attention, but her warmth and dedication inevitably made her the heart of every ministry she joined.

It was in that sanctuary of service, later at the Restoration Church in Panorama City, that our paths crossed. I was directing a theater group that was just starting at the church, and she came to an audition, hugging her notebook to her chest like a shield. We were looking for people who could act or sing; Erika possessed neither of those skills, but something about her made me accept her without hesitation: she had a genuine humility that no one else had.

"That first time I saw you," she would confess to me years later, with that look of hers that seemed to contain galaxies, "God whispered to me that you would be my husband." Her eyes sparkled every time she remembered that moment, as if she could still hear that divine whisper echoing in substantial meaning—an authentic reflection of a love that defied all doubt and skepticism. Our marriage faced opposition, especially from Erika's family, who saw me as a newcomer from El Salvador, an unknown immigrant in the church with no clear future to offer her. Some suspected my only intention was to regularize my immigration status, while others doubted my ability to provide her with a stable life.

Yet Erika never showed the slightest doubt. Her confidence in me was as solid as granite. "You have a divine gift for teaching and a noble heart," she would repeatedly tell me with a firmness that gave room for no reply. "God will take you to places you can't even imagine." With that confidence as our guiding star, we set out for Boston. There, the New England College of Optometry loomed as the stage for her next great metamorphosis.

Within its walls, Erika would pursue her Doctor of Optometry degree, and it would be in that place where together we would build a path that only God could have so precisely laid out. The historic campus, with its majestic old brick building and central spiral staircase, stood as the perfect backdrop for our shared journey, a journey that combined dreams and hopes with every step we took. The air there was permeated with the scent of knowledge and promise, and every corner whispered stories of past and future accomplishments.

In Boston, our lives unfolded as a portrait of contrasts that only true love could transform into something beautiful. While Erika climbed the ladder of academic achievement at the New England College of Optometry, I found myself in the basements of that same institution, where the only position available to me was as a janitor. I, who had been a Spanish teacher in El Salvador and had published poetry in Christian magazines, now wielded a mop instead of a pen, my creative voice muted by a language I was still struggling to master.

English surrounded me like a dense forest where I often lost my way, though my understanding of Spanish grammar helped me recognize familiar patterns in this foreign landscape. Despite this, there I was, cleaning the bathrooms and hallways of the very university where my wife was building her promising future.

The nights grew long as I vacuumed every room of that majestic building. In an act of both love and practicality, she had taken a job at the library, creating a perfect arrangement where she could

wait for me while studying beneath the warm glow of reading lamps. It was in these moments that Erika's true character shone brightest: never once did she look away when seeing me in my janitor's uniform. There was never a hint of embarrassment in her eyes when introducing me to her classmates and professors..

In our tiny, rented room in the bustling heart of East Boston, Erika exhibited every day the remarkable duality of her character. As a diligent student, her discipline was almost mechanical : she devoted twelve hours daily to study, regulated by a clock that she followed with the precision of a soldier on campaign, interrupted only by two brief twenty-minute breaks. However, during those rare moments of rest, another side of Erika emerged: the one who laughed until tears welled up in her eyes from exhaustion, and who found humor in even the most absurd situations. Her laughter echoed off the walls, filling the space with unexpected warmth.

This laughter was our infallible thermometer. When exhaustion caught up with her, uncontrollable laughter would burst from her like bubbles in champagne. She could laugh at absolutely nothing for minutes at a time, until sleep overcame her like a gentle wave carrying the last of her laughter to the shore of rest. It was in those moments of vulnerability that her beauty was most evident : natural, without artifice, without makeup, beautiful in its simplicity. Her brown skin glowed with a vitality that not even fatigue could dull; her pronounced eyebrows and long eyelashes joined her shiny black hair to frame a face that told stories of determination and tenderness. She shared with her Minero family this characteristic prominent nose that, amid laughter, became the subject of affectionate jokes, especially her "big nostrils," as she herself called them with self-deprecating humor, although she sometimes playfully accused me of teasing her. I must confess that my nose is also large and prominent.

Small in stature but athletic in build, her physical presence reflected her spirit: compact yet powerful, delicate yet resilient. Sofia would later inherit each of these distinctive traits, like a

mirror reflecting her mother's beauty. "You look just like your mother," her uncles and grandmother would often tell her. But beyond physical, Erika possessed an inner strength that manifested in her occasional stubbornness and strong opinions about life. Her conservative values weren't an adopted stance but a deep conviction that guided every aspect of her existence. And above all, her honesty was unwavering; she would rather face the consequences of truth than hide behind a lie, even in the most difficult times. It was an authenticity that knew no compromise, a transparency that made her inner beauty shine even brighter than her outer beauty.

Erika's down-to-earth nature wasn't a practiced virtue; it was the air she breathed. Once she became an optometrist, her patients often mistook her for just another assistant. She came to work in long, flowered, extremely modest dresses. Her attire, as conservative as a Bach melody, never revealed the symphony of knowledge that inhabited her mind. Medical and anatomical terms frolicked in her memory with the precision of a ballet dancer, but her voice remained soft as a velvet caress.

Accessories and fashion trends slipped by her like water off a duck's feathers. Her beauty was like a sunset in the countryside: natural, uncontrived, elegantly simple, yet mesmerizing. "Why complicate what God made simple?" she used to say with a smile that lit up her eyes before her lips. Her true passion was in serving others, in helping without expecting anything in return. At church, she always worked behind the scenes, making sure everything ran smoothly while avoiding recognition. She was a humble soul, and that made her even more admirable. I remember how she showed compassion in the most unexpected moments. She could pause in the middle of a busy day to comfort someone, to offer a word of encouragement, or just to listen. Her capacity for empathy was astounding, and many times I found myself silently admiring her, marveling at how she touched the lives of those around her.

And yet, Erika wasn't perfect. Her penchant for order and my tendency toward chaos created a unique dance in our marriage. She organized the world into perfectly labeled compartments; I saw it as a canvas to paint without lines. I was like a Salvadoran cumbia trying to blend with a structured sonata. Our differences, instead of separating us, created a peculiar harmony. Like yin and yang, we complemented each other in ways that only time and experience allowed us to fully appreciate. In that dance of opposites, we found our rhythm. My calmness was the perfect counterpoint to her intensity. Where she saw an agenda to follow, I saw adventures to explore. And somehow, in that space between order and chaos, our love blossomed.

There was another duality about her that made her even more fascinating. On one hand, she was practical, disciplined, and serious. On the other, she had a deep, almost poetic sensitivity that surfaced at the most unexpected moments. She loved writing in her journal, reflecting on her faith, and finding meaning in life's small things. Although she didn't openly say it, I knew those pages were her way of connecting with something greater, of making sense of the mysteries that sometimes overwhelmed her.

Bringing It All Together

Erika was all this and more. She was a woman of contrasts, of nuances, of depths not always evident to the casual observer. Although our lives were impacted by challenges and sacrifices, I never doubted how fortunate I was to have her by my side. Her presence left an indelible mark on my life, one that will not fade with time.

Love, in our home, spoke the language of actions rather than words. We weren't the type for sweet talk or public displays of affection. We both had to grow in developing this virtue. Erika had grown up in an environment where affection was demonstrated in acts of service, not verbal expressions. Her love manifested itself in the details: coffee brewed before dawn, notes

hidden in unexpected places, clothes carefully arranged in the closet, a message written on a napkin, or simply the way she anticipated our family's needs before they arose.

Her heart was a secret garden where acts of kindness blossomed, a garden that few ever saw. In our church, she served from the shadows, like a night gardener who plants seeds of hope without waiting for dawn's applause. Her compassion shone through quiet gestures—a whispered word of encouragement at the perfect moment, a private prayer lifted in silence, and an embrace that conveyed more than a thousand words ever could.

Her life was like a symphony composed in the language of service and humility, played in the keys of discipline and compassion. She didn't need prominence to shine; her light was more like that of a distant star: constant, reliable, eternal in its influence.

Today, when I close my eyes, I can hear the cascade of her laughter echoing in memory's corridors. I can see her bright white teeth. I see the girl from Zacatecoluca who became a woman of inexhaustible faith, the disciplined student who conquered her dreams of becoming a doctor with quiet determination, the Erika who wasn't afraid to take the subway from the bleak train stations of East Boston to college, the wife who loved through the eloquence of deeds more than words. This chapter is for her—for the Erika I knew in Van Nuys, with whom I spent five harsh Boston winters, whom I loved, who still lives in my memories. And though the pain of her absence remains deep, I find comfort knowing that her story, her essence, her legacy will live on in these pages.

REFLECTION FOR THE SOUL:

The deepest virtues often manifest in the quiet spaces of everyday life. As Erika taught us, true greatness need not be proclaimed loudly; it sometimes whispers in the halls of quiet

service, laughs in moments of exhaustion, and loves in the universal language of actions.

Have you, like her, found beauty in serving from the shadows? Have you discovered that sometimes the deepest expressions of love come wrapped in the simplest gestures? Erika's life reminds us that true virtue, as Proverbs describes, surpasses the value of precious stones not by its outward brilliance, but by the inner light it radiates in every life it touches.

CHAPTER 9



WHEN TIME TURNS PRECIOUS

"Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom."

- Psalm 90:12

This prayer of Moses, born in the wilderness of uncertainty, resonates with special depth when facing mortality. It isn't a plea to know how many days remain, but for the wisdom to make each day count. In the darkest moments of our battle, this verse became our anchor, reminding us of that time's true measure isn't in its length but in how we live it in God's eyes. Like shadows lengthening into sunset, awareness of our mortality began to color every moment, every decision, every breath. What once was a vigorous struggle became a silent battle, this happens when death ceases to be an abstract concept and becomes a tangible presence in life.

THE STORM IN THE CEREBELLUM

The diagnosis came like lightning on a clear day: a three-centimeter tumor, located in the left cerebellum like a silent intruder. The mass, pressing against delicate brain tissue, unleashed storms of pain that turned the brightest days dark for Erika. I clung to Scripture with urgency. Psalm 23:4 echoed in my mind: "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me..." But this valley was deep, and although I trusted God's presence, the weight of our situation crushed us both. Erika sought comfort in the Word too, but her doubts were stronger at this stage. "Why again, why me, why now?" she would whisper.

No surgeon wanted to commit to such a risky operation. But finally, one accepted the challenge. "It's complicated, but we'll try," he said. His tone didn't inspire confidence, but time wasn't on our side.

Suboccipital posterior craniotomy, the medical term we learned to pronounce—would be the first attempt to free Erika from this tumor. It took our neurosurgeon nine seemingly- endless hours in the operating room at Scott and White Hospital in Temple, Texas, after most neurosurgeons had shaken their heads in denial, muttering about risks and complications. Every consultation had been a maze of medical explanations and evasions.

I sat in the waiting room, clutching my Bible. Philippians 4:6-7 became my refuge: "Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God..." Yet despite my prayers, fear persisted.

The Steroid Waltz

Steroids became our new traveling companions, silent but omnipresent. Dexamethasone kept brain inflammation at bay like a relentless guardian. But like any pact with the necessary but

unwanted, it brought its own procession of shadows: Erika's face transformed, her features softened by swelling that seemed to erase the contours of who she was; her mood—once as steady as a compass—now fluctuated like a ship in stormy seas; and sleep, that universal comfort, became an elusive visitor rarely knocking at her door.

When fatigue finally overcame me, Erika would find her own sanctuary. Instead of tossing in the bed of restlessness, she would quietly rise and seek refuge in our small bathroom closet—now converted into an improvised tabernacle—where her Bible's pages, illuminated by a small lamp, received light and tears marking the passages that gave her strength. There, in that intimate place where she met with her Creator, annotations were born in the margins of her Bible, written testimonies of a continuous conversation with God.

In the night's stillness, when I momentarily awoke, I could hear her crying through the walls. It wasn't the wail of despair but the prayer of a broken heart that still knew to Whom it belonged. Her voice, sometimes barely a whisper and other times a restrained sob, raised praises that seemed to defy all human logic. Those night songs came from the God "who gives songs in the night" (Job 35:10). They became a balm that soothed not only her troubled spirit, but that also spread a protective cloud over my interrupted sleep.

Today, years later, I understand those solitary hours weren't in vain. Like a heavenly banker, Erika made deposits of faith on behalf of Kevin and Sofia, spiritual investments that no inflation can devalue, no crisis can erase. In her generosity, she reached out to me as well. Those moments of nightly communion, when the rest of the world slept, had held our family steady in the storm, even long after her departure. It's as if she planted seeds in darkness that only now, under a different sun, we're beginning to see bloom.

THE FIRST LOST BATTLE

Despite everything, three months after the first surgery, the doctor's words fell like stones in a still pond: "The tumor has returned." But something in Erika's eyes told me she suspected a different reality. In our late-night conversations, when pain kept her awake, we wrestled with troubling questions about her initial treatment, that the first surgeon, intimidated by the tumor's precarious location, had barely skimmed its edges, leaving the beast's heart intact. The post-operative imaging report had noted "residual tumor tissue," a clinical phrase that took on new meaning as we studied it together. The surgeon had explained during our follow-up consultation that the tumor's precarious location near critical neural structures had necessitated a conservative approach—what he termed "maximal safe resection."

While understanding the medical rationale, we couldn't help but wonder if a more aggressive surgical strategy might have been possible at a specialized center. Erika, who had meticulously researched her condition, kept returning to studies suggesting that extent of resection was a significant factor in long-term outcomes for her particular type of tumor.

THE EXODUS TO NEW BRAUNFELS

Summer 2014 found us packing our lives into boxes, moving our small family to New Braunfels, Texas. The decision was both strategic and desperate: we needed to be closer to a larger, more experienced medical center. San Antonio promised new hope, a new surgical team, a new opportunity.

My new job as a Spanish teacher at Canyon Lake High School provided stability, but our home conversations had begun taking a somber turn. Erika, ever practical even when facing the unthinkable, began talking about the future in terms of "when I'm no longer here."

"We need to pay off the house as much as we can," she insisted with heartbreaking urgency. "If anything happens to me, I want you and the kids to have a safe place." Her words were like small prophecies I refused to hear. Her insistence felt like silent foreshadowing, an acceptance of what neither of us wanted to admit out loud.

THE SECOND BATTLE

The second craniotomy was even more extensive than the first. Ten hours in the operating room as the new surgical team struggled to remove "as much as humanly possible" from Erika's cerebellum. Time takes on a different quality when someone you love is under the knife. Minutes stretch like elastic; hours feel like days. Every time the operating room doors opened, my heart leapt, only to sink again as another doctor, another family, another story passed by. Text messages arrived constantly: friends, family, our congregation. Everyone wanted updates; everyone was praying. I mechanically responded, updated, and thanked them for their prayers. But part of me was in that operating room, under those bright lights, where expert hands navigated the delicate tissues of my wife's brain.

"As much as humanly possible." Those were the surgeon's exact words when he finally emerged, his mask still hanging from his neck, eyes tired but satisfied. They had extracted as much of the tumor as prudence allowed. The cerebellum, that precise conductor of our movements, had been manipulated, altered, freed from its invader, but also changed forever.

The days of recovery that followed revealed a different Erika. Balance, that most basic function we rarely appreciate until we lose it, had become her new Everest. Watching her try to sit up in bed, arms shaking with effort, face contorted in absolute concentration to perform what was once automatic, was equally shattering and inspiring.

"I feel like a baby learning everything all over again," she confessed one afternoon as I helped her walk down the hospital hallway, her hand clinging to the railing with the intensity of someone who fears falling off a cliff. Every step was a small victory, every meter walked a testament to her unwavering determination.

But perhaps the most subtle and heartbreaking change was in her speech. Words, once so precise and fluid in her mouth, now played hide-and-seek in her mind. I could see her searching for them, brow furrowed in concentration, eyes moving as if visualizing them floating just out of reach. Sometimes they emerged, bright and accurate as before. Other times they vanished just as she seemed about to capture them, leaving her frustrated and, at times, fearful.

"I can't find... the thing... that thing we use to..." Her sentences remained incomplete, hanging in the air like unfinished bridges. I learned to wait, not rush her, not complete her thoughts for her unless she asked with her eyes.

The doctors explained aphasia to us in clinical terms: language areas affected by proximity to the tumor, postoperative edema, neuroplasticity. Words attempting to quantify something immensely personal: Erika's struggle to remain herself when the tools she had used all her life to express herself were now damaged.

In the evenings, when the hospital quieted and only the rhythmic beeping of machines remained, I would sometimes find her quietly weeping. It wasn't because of physical pain, which was considerable. It was something deeper: the fear of losing essential parts of herself. "What if I never become me again?" she whispered one night, her voice barely audible.

"You're already you," I replied, holding her hand. "Different, challenged, but always you. The core of who you are isn't in your balance or your words. It's in your heart, your spirit, your faith."

Gradually, with intensive therapy and her characteristic determination, Erika began recovering parts of what she had lost. Her balance improved enough to walk with support. Words returned, although some seemed lost in the labyrinth of her transformed mind. But something else had changed, something deeper than neurological. There was a new fragility in her, an acute awareness of the impermanence of things we once took for granted.

We left the hospital under a bright sky, Erika in a wheelchair, but with our eyes fixed forward. The road ahead was uncertain, but we carried a new understanding: that even in our altered versions, even when parts of us have been taken or changed, there remains the possibility of finding meaning, purpose, and beauty.

The most profound change, however, was invisible to brain scans. Erika's warrior spirit, which had burned so brightly for years, was beginning to show signs of exhaustion. Conversations about healing and miracles became sparser. "I just want to go home," she repeated frequently, and although she meant our physical home, something in her tone suggested a deeper longing.

THE NEW NORMAL

Tree of Life Church became our new sanctuary. Within its walls we found a community that needed no explanation when Erika stumbled while walking or when her words tangled mid-conversation. Home cell groups bloomed again, and new friendships emerged like flowers after rain, each divinely placed in our path for this particular leg of our journey.

Erika's return to work as an optometrist at America's Best testified to her resilience. With determination that defied the scars on her cerebellum, she learned to compensate for her new challenges. When words escaped her, she found creative ways to communicate. When balance failed, she quietly leaned on

furniture. Her patients rarely noticed that their attending physician was fighting her own battle.

The Symphony of Chaos

Our days became a chaotic orchestra of phone calls. The phone rang constantly: doctors updating treatments, nurses checking symptoms, pharmacies confirming medications, the insurance company requiring endless documentation. Each call reminded us that our life now orbited around the disease.

Weekly therapies became rituals of hope. Erika worked tirelessly to regain control of her body, to find the words the tumor had tried to steal. Therapists marveled at her determination, though they saw in her eyes the exhaustion that no amount of rest seemed to alleviate.

WHISPERS OF TOMORROW

Our nightly conversations took a turn I refused to accept. Erika talked about the future like someone reading a map of a country she knew she wouldn't visit. "Promise me the kids will stay in church," she would tell me. "Make sure Sofia knows how much I loved her, that Kevin remembers I was always proud of him."

Whenever she mentioned these topics, I tried changing the conversation, clinging to a present that was slipping through our fingers. But Erika, with that wisdom that comes only when viewing life from eternity's edge, insisted on paving the way for a future she sensed she wouldn't share.

THE WEIGHT OF TIME

Regular hospital scans turned into breath-holding exercises. Each visit felt like Russian roulette with our hopes. The doctors spoke in terms of "progression" and "stability," words that weighed like lead in our hearts. We longed to hear the long-

awaited **NED**. Although we now understood its true meaning, our hearts still dreamed of receiving that report.

At home, we learned to celebrate small victories: a day without headaches, a complete sentence without stumbling, a walk without staggering. But we also learned to recognize the signs of fatigue on her face, to interpret the increasingly frequent silences.

DREAMS DANCING IN THE FIELD

Between scans and therapies, life continued its unstoppable dance on New Braunfels soccer fields. Kevin, with passion for soccer burning in his dark eyes, pursued the ball like a warrior on his own crusade. Every match was more than a game; it was an offering, a prayer in motion. "This one's for you, Mom," he would proclaim in a vibrant voice whenever the net shook with his goals, his gaze instantly searching the crowd for us, as if making sure Erika had witnessed his small victory against adversity.

Meanwhile, a few yards away, Sofia existed in a parallel universe, indifferent to the soccer fervor consuming her brother. Her world revolved in rhythms and movements: precise spins, calculated leaps, and the aerodynamic grace of her cheerleading routines. With pom-poms in hand and

determination on her face, she created her own language of love and resilience, a silent but equally powerful tribute to her mother's struggle.

Three times weekly, practices became our sacred ritual. Erika, despite the fatigue consuming her, never missed. She would sit wrapped in a blanket on cold days, fighting the effects of steroids and exhaustion, but her eyes never failed to follow her little soccer player's every move.

In Kevin's eyes dwelt a premature wisdom, a quiet realization that each game might be the last his mother would witness. This

awareness manifested in how he ran to us after each game, in how his hugs lasted a little longer than usual, in how he studied his mother's face as if memorizing every detail.

Sofia's Studio

At home, Sofia had turned her iPad into a personal production studio. Her videos were windows into a world where cancer didn't exist, where her mother didn't struggle to find words, where life was as simple as deciding what color lipstick to use in her next tutorial.

"Welcome to Sofia's news!" she would announce with professional earnestness that made us laugh to tears. Her weather reports, made from her bedroom window, included predictions like "tomorrow will be sunny with a chance of unicorns."

Erika treasured each video. At night, when pain kept her awake, I would often find her reviewing those recordings on her phone, smiling through tears as she watched her little artist blossom. Sofia made tutorials on applying lipstick, putting on makeup, and many things that only a child's innocence could create.

THE WEIGHT OF LOST MOMENTS

"I'm missing so much," she whispered one night after the kids had fallen asleep. "Kevin will soon be too big to want me to hold him after his games. Sofia is growing up so fast.... Who will teach her how to apply real makeup? Who will help her pick out her prom dress?"

The weight of these future moments she feared missing was reflected in how she treasured the present. Every goal Kevin scored was photographed, every video Sofia made carefully stored in the cloud. It was her way of leaving footprints on a path she feared she might not walk completely.

The children, with that resilience unique to childhood, found ways to keep hope alive. Kevin swore he would play for

Barcelona one day and go to the World Cup with La Selecta Cuscatleca (El Salvador's national team), "and you'll be there, Mom, in the front row." Sofia planned future talent shows where her mother would be the head judge. Their dreams became little lights illuminating our darkest days.

Dancing with Eternity

There were times, especially during our home cell meetings, when Erika seemed to transcend her physical limitations. Her testimony, though broken with elusive words, touched hearts more deeply

than ever before. People didn't just hear her words; they saw her faith lived out in every faltering step, in every smile defying pain.

In retrospect, that year in New Braunfels was like a long sunset. The colors became more intense, each moment more precious, as the light slowly faded. Erika knew it, I think we all knew it on some level, but we chose to live in that space between the already and the not yet, treasuring each moment like the precious jewels they were.

As she wrote in her diary during those days: "Time is different now. Every moment is a gift, every breath, a prayer, every smile, a testimony. I don't know how many days I have left, but I know each one has a purpose in God's hands."

And so, we continued, day after day, between therapies and work, between cell groups and scans, between hope and preparation, dancing with an eternity approaching with silent but sure steps.

During this time, I noticed a change in Erika. Her laughter, though less frequent, had a new depth. When she laughed, it was as if she wanted to capture life's essence in that instant. Her smile, despite everything, still lit up any room. But there was also the flip side: moments when her gaze was lost in distance, as if contemplating something I couldn't see.

On one of those nights of quiet conversation, Erika said to me, "I want you to live. If something happens, I want you to move on. I don't want you to get stuck in the past." Her words pierced my soul but also gave me direction. Amid all the chaos, she was preparing me for a future without her.

CLOSING REFLECTIONS

Summer 2014 marked a before and after in our lives. The move, the operations, and the constant fight against cancer had transformed us. We no longer lived with the same fresh hope of the early years. Now, every day was a gift, and every moment together was a victory over the shadow of death surrounding us.

The end of our time in Waco was also the end of a life stage. Looking back, I see how God held us in His hand every step of the way, even when the road was dark and the future uncertain. In Isaiah 41:10 the Lord says, "Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand."

As I write these words, I feel this chapter begins with surrender, the moment when we started accepting that God's will, doesn't always align with our desires, but it is always perfect. And although the shadow of the end was becoming clearer, so was the certainty that every moment we shared was proof of the eternal love uniting us.

This chapter of our life taught us that when we count our days, as Psalm 90 says, it isn't just about numbers on a calendar. It's about the wisdom that comes from valuing each moment as the precious gift it is, finding purpose even in the darkest valley, and trusting that God is present in every breath, every tear, every laugh stolen from pain.

REFLECTION FOR THE SOUL:

How do we count our days—waiting for tomorrow or treasuring the present? Erika's battle teaches us that every moment is an opportunity to show love, build memories, and leave a legacy of faith that transcends time itself. As she discovered, true wisdom isn't in knowing how many days we have left, but in making each day count for eternity.

With the perspective that only time can give, I now understand that this period was more than a battle against cancer. It was a profound lesson about time's value, about how every moment, even the most painful ones, can become a testimony of God's grace when lived with faith and purpose.

CHAPTER 10:



THE LAST PARADISE

"To everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under heaven."

- Ecclesiastes 3:1

There is wisdom in the words of Ecclesiastes that is only fully understood when life forces us to look at time differently. King Solomon reminds us that every moment has its divine purpose: there is a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance. In our battle with cancer, we were learning this truth in an intimate and painful way.

Sometimes, amid the most difficult trials, God gifts us with moments of pure grace—oases in the desert where the soul can rest and remember that life is more than its current struggle. The year 2015 would be one such divine gift, a time set aside by God Himself where medical concerns would give way to the simple joy of being together.

Erika understood this before I did. While the after-effects of the brain surgery lingered like a distant echo, she had made a quiet but firm decision: she would live every remaining moment with an intensity that defied the gravity of her diagnosis. It was as if the Holy Spirit had given her a special wisdom to recognize that this was our time to treasure memories, to laugh without reservation.

Our trip to the Bahamas was the perfect snapshot of this new way of living. The crystal-clear waters of the Caribbean washed away, if only temporarily, the wounds that treatments had left in our hearts. It was our time to celebrate life in its fullness.

Erika dedicated herself that year to being a present mother and wife. She had never been so dedicated on the little things: the children's school performances, Sofia's art projects, and the musicals at their school. She was the first to applaud and the last to stand at the end of each event, with a radiant smile that lit up the entire auditorium. Yet with the same discipline she had always shown, she insisted on her plans: to save, to pay down the mortgage, to secure our future without her. "It's the least I can do," she would tell me in quiet moments. She was doing her very best to leave the type of memories that would give strength and love to her family in the years to come.

THE JOURNEY

When I proposed the cruise to the Bahamas, her eyes lit up with a sparkle I hadn't seen in months. "Can we?" she asked, with a bit of hope and doubt. The question carried the weight of all our medical and financial concerns.

"We can," I replied. "We must."

The ship greeted us as a floating world of possibilities. Our cabin, decorated with towels folded into the shape of swans, drew exclamations of awe from Kevin and Sofia. "It's magical!"

declared Sofia, her eyes lit up as she explored every nook and cranny.

Worries seemed to dissolve with each mile we moved away from the coast. The daily ritual of medications and constant vigilance for symptoms faded. Erika laughed more freely, as if the sea was carrying away the weight she had been bearing.

Our first destination was Key West, an island that welcomed us with its warm breeze and clear skies. We rented a golf cart to tour the streets lined with colorful houses and palm trees that seemed to dance in the wind. Erika couldn't stop laughing every time the children got excited seeing something new: a coconut stand, a souvenir shop, or a cat crossing the street.

"Let's live like tourists today," Erika said with a mischievous smile. And so, we did. We sampled Key Lime Pie at a small café, drank fresh coconut water, and dipped into the crystal-clear waters at the beach. There was no room for fear or worry that day. It was as if cancer had been left behind, outside the boundaries of that tropical paradise, but the real paradise was our next stop.

PARADISE FOUND

The Bahamas greeted us with a spectacle of color that seemed designed to heal the soul. The water, in shades of turquoise that defied description, had as its backdrop a sky that seemed hand painted. Beaches as white as stardust stretched out before us like blank pages waiting for our stories.

Kevin and I decided to rent a jet ski one afternoon, looking for adventure. We were laughing like kids as we spun around in the water. At one point, while trying to make too sharp a turn, we both fell into the water. The jet ski flipped over, and amid laughter and some embarrassment, we had to ask for help to turn it upright again. The kids, watching from the shore, applauded

and teased us affectionately. "That's what they get for trying to show off!" Sofia shouted between giggles.

One of the most memorable nights was photo night. Erika insisted that we all prepare as well as possible. She carefully chose her dress, applied her makeup meticulously, and helped the children dress in their formal clothes. "I want these pictures to be special," she said with a smile, though I noticed the weariness in her eyes. That night, under the warm lights of the ship, we captured moments that are now treasures. Every smile in those photos was a testament to love, resilience, and gratitude.

The crystal-clear waters embraced us like a healing caress. I watched Erika swim with the children, her grace in the water belying the battles her body had fought. The sun danced on the crashing waves, creating glistening drops that seemed to celebrate every moment we shared. We spent hours swimming in the sea, playing with the children, and just floating under the sun. Erika would close her eyes, letting the waves gently rock her, as if the water was washing away every ache, every fear. It was almost like the cancer had evaporated in that vast sea. For a moment, we believed that time stood still.

THE STOLEN MOMENTS

In the evenings, after the children fell exhausted into their bunks, Erika and I would sit in our cabin. The darkness made it impossible to tell when the sea ended and the sky began, creating the illusion of infinity.

"Do you think they'll remember these moments?" she asked one night; her voice barely audible over the ocean's murmur.

"Every one of them," I replied, squeezing her hand. "And many more to come."

We both knew it was a promise I couldn't guarantee, but at that moment, under the Caribbean stars, we chose to believe it.

"Do you realize how small we are?" said Erika, her gaze lost in the waves. "But still, God cares about us."

The Return

When the cruise ship docked back in Galveston, we stepped off with renewed hearts. The trip had given us a needed respite, a parenthesis amid the chaos. But there was also tension in the air, something neither of us wanted to mention.

"It's been perfect," she said as we packed, stroking one of the towel swans we had decided to keep. "Every second."

"Yes, it has," I replied, looking into her eyes.

There was a note of finality in her voice that I refused to acknowledge then: a part of her knew that this temporary paradise would be our last escape together.

As we drove home, the kids snoozing in the back seat, the Texas sunset painted the sky in hues that reminded me of Bahamian waters. Erika hummed softly to a song we'd heard on the cruise, her fingers tapping out the rhythm on her knee.

"You know what?" she said suddenly, turning to look at me. "I wouldn't change a thing about this trip. Not a single moment."

The underlying implications of her words lingered, mixed with the fresh memories of the joy and laughter we had just shared. We were returning to our reality of medical appointments and brain scans; nevertheless, we carried with us a treasure trove of perfect moments in our collective memory.

And so, with these memories in our minds and the sound of our children's laughter echoing in our souls, we prepared to face what was to come, one day at a time.

REFLECTION FOR THE SOUL:

During the darkest moments of our struggle, when pain and uncertainty seemed overwhelming, we found comfort in the promise that every season has its purpose. The battle with cancer taught us to

cherish every moment, to find joy amid suffering, and to trust that God had a plan, even when we couldn't see it clearly.

Our trip to the Bahamas was a tangible reminder of this truth. During the storm, God gifted us with a time of rest and renewal. The crystal-clear waters and white sandy beaches offered us respite from pain and an opportunity to reconnect as a family. It was a time to laugh and dance, to celebrate the life and love we shared, despite the trials we faced.

As we reflect deeply on these moments of our existence, I wonder: How can we learn to trust in the intricate divine purpose of each season of our lives, even when the "why" slips through our fingers like sand? How can we find joy and gratitude, like sunshine breaking through storm clouds, amid our struggles, with the certainty that God working it all our good? These questions invite us to lift our gaze beyond immediate circumstances, to contemplate the horizon with faith, and to trust that, in God's perfect timing, every tear and every laugh fits together like pieces in the vast and colorful mosaic of our lives.

CHAPTER 11:



WHEN THE VALLEY GOES DEEP

"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me."

- Psalm 23:4

FAITH IN THE DARK VALLEYS

There are valleys in our spiritual journey that seem bottomless. The psalmist David knew this when he wrote of the valley of the shadow of death—not just a place of passing darkness, but a path we must travel step by step, clinging to the promise of divine presence. In 2016, we began to descend into that valley, holding hands with God and with each other.

We often hear that God sustains us in times of trial, but rarely do we stop to consider what that truly means. Faith, that invisible

lifeline we cling to in the storm, sometimes feels thin and fragile, as if it could snap at any moment. Yet it is in those dark valleys, where answers elude us and suffering seems endless, that the depth of our trust in God is most thoroughly tested.

Erika always believed that her battle was not only physical but also spiritual. She knew her body was weakening, but her spirit refused to surrender.

"If this is the road I must travel, I will do it with dignity," she told me one night as I helped her to bed. Her voice was hesitant but firm, and her eyes showed a willpower that contrasted sharply with her tired body.

THE SHADOW LENGTHENS

The year 2016 arrived with a growing darkness. Although the previous year's surgery had been declared a "success" by doctors, cancer cells had never been completely eradicated. At every checkup, fear lingered beneath the surface of our conversations. Finally, during a routine consultation, we received the news we had been dreading: the tumor was growing again, invading more aggressively than before.

The early signs had been subtle but unmistakable. Erika would ask about a phone call minutes after discussing it. Important details would slip from her grasp like water through fingers. "Did I tell you about Kevin's school project?" she would ask, confusion flickering across her face when I gently reminded her we had just talked about it. Her eyes, still bright with determination, now flashed with frustration as her mind betrayed her with increasing frequency.

THE STOLEN INDEPENDENCE

May brought an event that marked a devastating turning point. I was in my classroom, surrounded by the soft murmur of focused students, when my phone vibrated with her call.

"Honey, I'm on the freeway," her voice trembled with fear and confusion. "I think I had an accident."

In that instant, the world stopped turning. I rushed out, my heart pounding with the same urgency as the ambulance sirens already wailing in the distance. When I arrived at the scene, the sight of her car crumpled against the highway's median divider told a story beyond the accident itself. This wasn't just a collision—it was cancer claiming yet another piece of Erika's life: her independence.

The doctor's assessment was definitive. She would never drive again. This freedom—so fundamental to her identity as a professional, a mother, a woman who had always managed her own path—was now permanently surrendered to the advancing disease. I watched her hand over her car keys that evening, her fingers lingering on them for just a moment, as if saying goodbye to a trusted friend.

Erika began experiencing excruciating headaches and moments of short-term memory loss. Sometimes she would repeat questions I had answered moments before; other times she would forget where she was. It was like watching the person I loved fade into tiny fragments each day.

We searched for options, clinging to hope that something could still be done. At Texas Oncology Hospital in San Antonio, we met Dr. Caldwell, who suggested an aggressive treatment: whole brain radiation.

"We can try to shrink the tumor and buy time," he told us with a calculating look, like someone who has repeated the same phrase to hundreds of patients.

The decision wasn't easy, but Erika didn't hesitate. Behind her eyes, I could see the mental calculations she was making—not about her own comfort, but about time. Sofia was only 9, Kevin just 11. Every month, every week, every day she could remain with them mattered infinitely.

"If there's a chance, I want to try," she said without wavering. Later that night, as we lay in bed discussing the treatment, she confessed through tears, "I just need a little more time with them. "I can endure anything if it means I get to see Kevin graduate middle school, play soccer, be a man of God or watch Sofia grow into a young woman," she whispered, her voice breaking with emotion. "They're so young... Sofia won't even be a teenager for years. I just want to be there when she experiences her first school dance, her quinceañera, her high school graduation. I want to help her pick out a prom dress someday, to see the woman she'll become." The raw maternal yearning in her voice—that desperate hope to witness the milestones that most mothers take for granted—tore at my heart like nothing else could. The fierce love that transcended her own suffering—was both heartbreaking and awe-inspiring. I wanted to believe her. I wanted to believe we still had a fighting chance.

THE FINAL ARSENAL

Whole brain radiation transformed our days into a sacred rhythm of hope and perseverance. Each morning, we would make the solemn journey to the hospital, the rising sun casting long shadows behind us—shadows that seemed to mirror the darkness we were fighting within Erika's brain. Dr. Caldwell had presented this treatment as our shield, our last line of defense against the cancer's relentless advance, but what the clinical

explanations couldn't capture was the profound spiritual surrender each session demanded.

The thermoplastic mask—technically called a cranial immobilization device—was central to this process. It began as a flat sheet of plastic immersed in hot water, then carefully molded to the exact contours of Erika's face. Once hardened, this second skin would be secured to the treatment table, rendering her completely immobile for the thirty-minute sessions and ensuring radiation beams hit their targets with precision.

As I watched Erika being prepared for treatment each day, her body was still beneath that precisely molded mask, I witnessed a battle far beyond the physical. Each thirty-minute session required a yielding of not just her body, but her very will to a process that offered hope wrapped in suffering. The radiation that promised healing also brought with it a constellation of side effects that tested the limits of her endurance—yet somehow, she found the strength to return day after day, her faith unwavering even as her physical strength wavered.

"It's my armor," Erika would say with a brave smile, her eyes shining with determination as she tried to find light even in those somber moments. "My defense against the invisible enemy." Though the mask represented confinement, she transformed it into a symbol of her resilience—another example of how she refused to surrender her spirit, even when her body was restrained.

One day, after a session, Erika shared a thought with me. "Do you know what I think about while I'm in there?" she asked, her voice quiet but firm. "I imagine each radiation beam is like an arrow of light, chasing away the darkness in my brain."

However, the darkness seemed to have plans of its own, lurking in deeper corners. Despite multiple rounds of radiation, the tumor refused to yield, defying all our efforts. After weeks of

treatment, scans showed minimal improvement, and Dr. Caldwell suggested we seek additional options.

It was then that we were referred to MD Anderson in Houston, where a specialist proposed a new plan: stereotactic radiosurgery, specifically Gamma Knife radiation. Unlike conventional radiation therapy, this cutting-edge procedure didn't involve actual surgery but rather used 192 precisely focused beams of gamma radiation that converged on the tumor with sub-millimeter accuracy. The treatment was tailored to the three-dimensional contours of Erika's cerebellar tumor, delivering high doses of radiation to the cancerous tissue while largely sparing the surrounding healthy brain tissue.

The doctor explained how each beam alone was relatively weak, causing minimal damage as it passed through healthy brain matter, but at the point where all beams intersected—directly at the tumor—their combined energy created a powerful therapeutic effect. This non-invasive procedure promised pinpoint precision that conventional radiation simply couldn't achieve, like an army of expert archers, each arrow destined to hit its mark—echoing Erika's own imagery of light arrows fighting the darkness within.

THE LAST CHANGE

After this final treatment, Erika began to fade before our eyes, like a photograph exposed too long to the sun. Her memory, once so precise, became a maze of lost moments. Her body, which had fought so valiantly, finally demanded surrender.

The wheelchair was now our constant companion. I had finished the school year just in time to become her full-time caregiver. Summer vacation took on an entirely different meaning as we spent it in hospital hallways.

Guilt gnawed at my insides. "Why did we allow so much radiation?" I wondered during silent nights as I watched her sleep. "Why didn't we question more? Why didn't we seek other opinions?" But these questions came too late, like echoes in an empty canyon.

In situations of extreme pressure, rational decision-making often gives way to desperate trust. We found ourselves surrendering to the expertise of those in white coats, their credentials and confident assertions becoming our lifeline in a storm of uncertainty. There was never enough time to research thoroughly, to get multiple opinions, to weigh all the possible consequences. The cancer was advancing, and every day spent deliberating felt like ground lost in a battle we couldn't afford to lose.

Without medical training, we lacked the vocabulary even to formulate the right questions. Complex terms like "radiation necrosis," "fractionation schedules," and "cumulative dose thresholds" were foreign concepts we barely grasped as we signed consent forms and nodded our understanding. We were like infants in the hands of caregivers, completely dependent on their judgment, wisdom, and ethics. Only later did I realize how vulnerable this made us—how this necessary trust also left us exposed to the limitations, biases, and sometimes the profit motives of the medical system.

Looking back, I understand why we made the choices we made. The desperate need to do something, anything, to save Erika overshadowed all else. Time was our enemy, and caution seemed like luxury we couldn't afford. But I've also learned that sometimes, in the rush to act, we forget that doing more isn't always the same as doing what's best.

THE HOMECOMING

In mid-July, the words we had been dreading finally came, it was time to consider hospice. This meant we would no longer strive to cure, but to make her final days as comfortable as possible.

Our home was transformed into a makeshift care unit. The hospice nurses became earthly angels, teaching me how to care for someone who had once been my rock.

The bathroom incident will haunt me until my dying day. It happened late one night when Erika needed help getting to the bathroom in our bedroom. What should have been a simple task had become increasingly difficult as the cancer stole her strength. I had helped her there, waited patiently outside the door, and then gently guided her back toward our bed when disaster struck.

Just three steps from reaching the safety of our mattress, her legs—once strong enough to carry her through hospital corridors and church hallways—simply gave way beneath her. I tried desperately to catch her full weight, but my own exhaustion betrayed me. We collapsed together onto the cold tile floor of our bathroom, the sound of our fall echoing through the nighttime silence of our home.

Our tears mingled as we lay there, my arms still wrapped around her frail body. The bathroom nightlight cast long shadows across her face, illuminating the mixture of pain and humiliation in her eyes. This woman, who had bravely faced countless treatments and preached faith while her body failed her, was now unable to complete even the most basic journey from the bathroom to the bed.

"It's okay," I whispered against her hair, tasting salty tears. "We're in this together."

But it wasn't okay. Nothing about this was okay. My muscles strained as I tried again to lift her, my arms trembling not just from physical exertion but from the crushing weight of my own helplessness. Despite my love, despite my prayers, despite my desperate need to be her strength, I couldn't even raise her from the floor.

We remained there on those cold tiles for what felt like an eternity, both of us weeping—she from pain and indignity, I from the terrifying recognition of my limitations. My body shook uncontrollably, a physical manifestation of the fear and hopelessness that seemed to seep into my very bones.

In that sacred, terrible moment on our bathroom floor, the truth I had been fighting crashed over me: love alone, no matter how fierce or faithful, couldn't restore what was being taken from us. This realization broke something fundamental within me, even as it opened my heart to a deeper understanding of surrender. Sometimes the most profound act of love isn't heroic strength, but shared vulnerability, the willingness to lie on the cold floor together when standing is no longer possible.

The Last Days of Summer

The children navigated this new reality as best they could. We tried to keep them busy with friends, but the truth seeped through the cracks in our facade of normalcy. Kevin, very aware for his age, began spending more time in his room. Sofia sought refuge in her videos and games, creating a world where her mother could still dance and laugh.

The physical therapy sessions became increasingly more difficult. "I don't want to do any of this anymore," Erika confessed one day, her voice barely a whisper. The warrior who had never surrendered was finally acknowledging her exhaustion.

THE THRESHOLD

As I watched Erika sleep, I remembered all the battles we had fought together. Every surgery, every treatment, every moment of hope and despair. Now we stood on the threshold of something neither of us wanted to name, but which approached with night's inevitability.

The last twenty-one days would be both the longest and shortest of our lives. Time took on a liquid quality, flowing unpredictably as Erika began her final transition. Her body, no longer accepting food or liquid, seemed to be preparing for a journey only she could make.

One afternoon, as I held her hand, I whispered:

"I'm here, love."

She opened her eyes with effort and looked at me with infinite tenderness.

"Do not be afraid. God is with us."

Those words were her final gift to me. I clung to them with all my soul, because I needed to believe them. Because even though I felt I was losing her, I knew her love and faith would never disappear.

The chapter of her earthly life was ending, but her legacy—her love, her courage—would remain forever.

"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me." Psalm 23:4

I now understood that, sometimes, the valley is not just a place to pass through—it is where we learn the deepest lessons about love, faith, and God's grace.

REFLECTION FOR THE SOUL:

As I sit at my breakfast table in my kitchen in Cypress, Texas, with the morning chill caressing my skin, I reflect on Erika's final days. I remember her room, infused with soft lavender scent, and how evening light streamed through the window, tinting her walls golden. I realize that the valley of the shadow of death is not simply a passage, but fertile ground where the deepest lessons about love, faith, and God's grace are sown. In those moments of great darkness, when clocks seemed to mark time with erratic, capricious rhythm, I discovered a fundamental truth: love and faith can sustain us even in the most difficult circumstances. Erika, with her serene gaze and smile that never faded, left me a legacy beyond her earthly life.

As we face our own challenges, sleepless nights or seemingly insurmountable decisions, how can we find the peace and strength that Erika displayed in her final days? How can we allow our experiences of grief and loss, those moments when the world seems to stand still, to teach us about God's love and grace, transforming our suffering into a living testimony of hope and faith?



*The next chapter will narrate Erika's last twenty-one days,
her final journey towards eternity...*



CHAPTER 12



THE LAST 21 DAYS

"The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord."

- Job 1:21

My hand trembles as I write these words. Seven years have passed, and I still feel the lump in my throat when I return to these memories. There are pains that time doesn't heal; it only teaches us to live with them. This chapter has been waiting inside me, like a contained scream that finally needs to be released.

Twenty-one days. The same number that once marked our detox fast years ago now returned like a divine echo to mark her farewell. Even now, in a different house and a different life, the memories remain vivid enough to transport me completely. In the evenings, when silence falls around me, I can still feel the emptiness she left behind. Sometimes while driving home from

work, I glimpse what my mind insists is her reflection in store windows, as if she were still sitting in the passenger seat beside me. And when I close my eyes, I see her exactly as she was in those final days—lying in that bed, white sheets swirling around her frail body, her breathing soft as a slowly fading melody, her chest rising and falling almost imperceptibly, as if each inhalation required titanic effort.

The hospice nurses said not to give her food and water, that it was part of the natural process. But how do you explain that to a heart that refuses to let go? Secretly, like a disobedient child, I would bring teaspoons of melted ice cream to her lips. It was my last act of love, or perhaps rebellion against the inevitable. Each drop of water I slipped into her mouth was a silent prayer: "Stay a little longer."

The deepest pain wasn't mine. It was watching Kevin and Sofia face a loss no child should ever experience. When Sofia said, "You're never going to see me when I have double digits," I felt my heart shatter. Seven years later, those words still ring in my ears, and I still can't find an answer that soothes that childish pain now transformed into a teenager's premature wisdom.

The singing around her bed has become one of my most precious yet painful memories. The room was dimly lit by a lamp in the corner, and soft whispers of voices enveloped the atmosphere like a comforting mantle. The music seemed to reach her in that space between the worlds where she dwelled, a melody resonating in some deep corner of her being. In my internal struggle to keep her alive and cling to hope that God would lift her from that bed, one day God spoke to me through a worship song, "Thy Will Be Done." As the words floated through the air, I felt as if the Holy Spirit was gently whispering to my heart, "You have to let go." Even today, when I hear that song, I can feel the Spirit's presence that enveloped us then, like a warm breeze caressing the soul.

With her weak voice but full of conviction, Erika asked me to play "Ten Thousand Reasons." One stanza says,

"And on that day When my strength is failing, the end draws near and my time has come still my soul will sing Your praise unending, ten thousand years and then forevermore."

Erika would turn her gaze to me, her eyes shining with a mixture of peace and determination, as if telling me without words, "Eternity begins for me; I will keep singing."

It's impossible to erase from my memory the moment when Erika spoke to me without words. We were in her room, the air filled with solemn stillness as we sang softly. My knees sank to the carpet beside her bed, and the dim glow of the night lamp softly reflecting on her face. Suddenly, her lips moved in an almost imperceptible whisper: "It's okay, let me go." Seven years have passed since that day, and my heart is still torn between believing it was her words or a divine echo. However, in that moment, I felt as if the weight I didn't know I was carrying vanished from my shoulders. For the first time since this struggle began, I dared to think that the victory God had planned was different from the one I had been pleading for.

The way Erika chose to leave reflected her protective essence. She waited until the one moment I had stepped away with the children to enroll them in school. Kevin, with his new books and backpack in tow, was about to start seventh grade, while Sofia, her puffy hair bouncing, was entering fourth. They were everyday plans, a glimmer of normalcy amid the storm. My mother's call came as I was returning, her voice cracking with commotion: "Son, come quickly, Erika has already gone to be with the Lord."

Sometimes I wonder if Erika knew—if in her heart she understood that she needed to protect me from witnessing that last breath. For twenty-one days, I hadn't left her side, and yet

she chose to leave in my absence. As a final act of love, she wanted to spare me the pain of seeing her exhale for the last time.

The scene my mother later described to me was woven with divine threads. Olga Lerma, a woman whose faith could move mountains, had arrived just in time, like an angel sent for this sacred moment. Her prayer, according to my mother, transcended the earthly; her words carried an authority and fervor my mother had never witnessed in all her years of faith.

In those final moments, my mother told me that Erika awoke once more, as if a heavenly light had called her. Her consciousness returned with supernatural clarity. She took the hands of my mother and mother-in-law, who were praying beside her, in a last gesture of earthly love. Her eyes, which for so long had reflected her battle, now shone with indescribable joy. It was the look of someone glimpsing the glory awaiting her. With that final expression of perfect peace, she crossed the threshold into eternity.

My mother-in-law, Doña Isabel, with that maternal love that refuses to accept the inevitable, clung to the last vestiges of hope. "No," she whispered, her voice cracking as she denied the reality before her, "she is alive." Her words echoed the heart of every mother reluctant to see her daughter depart before her.

"Yes, Doña Isabel," my mother replied softly, her own voice tinged with grief and understanding, "she is already with God." In that moment, these two women—a mother who had just lost her daughter and another who had witnessed her departure—melded in an embrace where grief and consolation intertwined, where tears of loss mingled with the hope of eternity.

My mother-in-law, who would tell me this later amid sobs and tears streaming down her cheeks, saw in her daughter's eyes one last glimmer of that unwavering determination that had characterized her throughout life. I had witnessed it many times before: the same determined look that shone when she insisted on studying optometry despite the odds, when she stood firm in

her decision to marry me and move to Boston to pursue dreams beyond known borders, and when she faced every life challenge with courage and resolve.

A mother's heartbreaking cry of pain as she watched her daughter depart mingled with the final prayer, a sound that seemed to come from deep within—a primal wail from one witnessing the reversal of life's natural order. "Not like this, Lord," I heard her whisper in a broken voice in Spanish, "not before me."

Arriving home, I found the nurses preparing her body. I was offered the opportunity to see her one last time, and the decision shook me. Part of me longed to say goodbye, but another part feared that image would eclipse memories of the vibrant Erika who had been my companion. Finally, heartbroken, I walked away and sought refuge in the room with Kevin and Sofia. We hugged and cried, caught between the need to remember and the pain of loss, until we had no breath left for more tears.

The moments that followed unfolded as if in slow motion. The hospice nurses, with that unique blend of professionalism and compassion, began their final ritual. Their movements were precise but gentle, as if they understood they were handling not just a body, but the last tangible vestiges of our memories with her.

Watching her body leave our home was like witnessing the final act of a sacred play. The stretcher moved forward with ceremonial slowness, taking with it not only her physical presence but also the light that had illuminated every corner of our home. The walls that had witnessed our laughter, tears, and prayers now seemed to contain only echoes of what was. Every space that once felt welcoming because of her presence now expanded into an inexplicable emptiness.

Divine providence, in its infinite wisdom, had orchestrated these last moments with a delicacy that only years later I can truly appreciate. During the weeks of hospice care, my mother-in-law

had been a constant presence, a silent pillar of maternal strength mixed with deep grief she tried to contain. I watched her move about the house like a tireless guardian, her hands always busy with invented tasks to keep herself moving smoothing the children's already-smooth blankets, rearranging pillows that needed no adjusting, making coffee no one would drink. It was her way of fighting imminent reality, of delaying the moment when she would have to accept that her youngest daughter, her "little one," the one who had achieved seemingly impossible dreams, was leaving before her.

"Mi doctorcita," I heard her murmur one night as she stroked Erika's hair. In those two words was condensed all the pride of an immigrant mother who had seen her youngest daughter achieve what once seemed impossible. Erika had been the first to earn a college degree, the one fluent in English, the one who had built a respectable career. In a mother's unwritten plans, Erika would be there in her older years, her pillar in the future.

The house began to fill with a different kind of silence. It was no longer the expectant silence of recent days, where Erika's every breath was monitored and treasured. This was a definite, heavy silence that seemed to absorb even our footsteps. The children's toys on the floor, the book Erika had tried to read months before, her favorite robe hanging behind the door—every object seemed to scream her absence.

My mother-in-law now moved with a new stillness, as if reality's weight had finally caught up with her. Her hands, which for weeks had been in constant motion, now rested motionless in her lap. I watched her sit on the couch where Erika used to rest, her fingers gently caressing the fabric, as if wanting to find some residue of her daughter's warmth.

The calls started coming in: family, friends, church members. Each ring brought the need to say aloud what we could barely process in our hearts. Each "I'm so sorry" received was one more reminder that this wasn't a dream from which we would wake.

News of Erika's departure brought the whole family together one last time. Her brothers arrived with that silent grief characterizing men who have lost their younger sister. Douglas, the most expressive of the three, made no attempt to hide his tears. For years, he had seen his "little sister" as an earthly angel, someone who with unwavering faith knew how to reach into the depths of his heart when it faltered on its spiritual journey. Her hugs, always prolonged and sincere, were as if she wanted to transfer strength through them. Now, those same arms hung at his sides, unable to accept they could no longer embrace her once more.

Numa, with his characteristic composure, processed grief differently. His deep faith allowed him to see beyond the present moment, finding comfort in God's sovereignty. "She is with the Lord, where she always wanted to be," he murmured in reflection, though his eyes revealed the emotional cost of that spiritual certainty.

Chris, Erika's brother, for whom she had maintained a spiritual battle for decades and shed many tears praying for his restoration, was immersed in profound grief. The loss of his younger sister brought him immense pain, compounded by his own ongoing journey of faith and healing. I could see in his eyes both sorrow and reflections of the spiritual seeds Erika had planted in his life through her constant prayers and unconditional love. Only God knows how her life—and now her departure—would continue to bear fruit in Chris's heart, unfolding in God's perfect timing.

Sandra, her sister, arrived from California with her daughter Amy. The hugs between Amy and our children were especially painful—Erika had been more than an aunt to her. During difficult years in Los Angeles, Erika had become her mentor, her role model, living proof that a Latina woman could achieve her highest dreams.

"She taught me there are no limits," sobbed Amy, holding a photo of Erika on her phone. "When everyone said it was

impossible, she showed me you could." It was true, Erika had planted in Amy the same determination that had driven her to overcome every obstacle.

Memories of weekends in Waco flooded my mind: the impromptu nights where we all ended up sleeping on the living room floor, exhausted after hours of conversation and games with the children. Erika, even amid treatments, insisted on preparing special meals for her siblings. "I want to make them some pupusas," she would say as she moved around the kitchen with determination, ignoring her own fatigue. The house filled with aromas and laughter, creating moments I now understand were precious gifts God allowed us to treasure.

Those constant trips from Houston had become pillars of support during our battle. The children looked forward to their aunt and uncle's arrival, and Erika seemed to regain strength from their presence. Now, seeing these strong men broken by grief, I understood how much of their own strength they had sacrificed to be our support all those years.

But it was my sisters-in-law, Patty and Mirna, and a woman of great importance to Erika, her aunt Victoria, who helped me understand a different dimension of Erika's impact. During her last days, I watched them care for her with devotion beyond family duty. They bathed her tenderly, applied cream to her parched hands, combed her hair with the delicacy with which a daughter is cared for.

"It was impossible not to love her like that," Patty told me one night, as she rearranged Erika's pillows for the umpteenth time. "She taught us so much about grace, about serving without seeking recognition."

Mirna, with her characteristic serenity, had been our practical anchor throughout the process. Her love for Erika manifested in the smallest details: she researched anti-cancer diets, arrived with homemade desserts, and always found ways to make even the healthiest meals palatable to Erika. Beneath her apparent calm,

however, lurked an ocean of emotions. In moments alone with her sister-in-law, when she thought no one was listening, her voice would crack as she whispered words of encouragement and held her hand. It was in those intimate moments that the mask of strength would fade, revealing the deep bond she had developed with Erika beyond conventional family ties.

This web of family love had been an integral part of our journey, each member bringing their own color to the tapestry of care and devotion surrounding Erika until the end. To see them now gathered to bid her farewell was testament to how a life lived in service and love can weave bonds even death cannot break.

THE SOLEMNITY OF A FAREWELL

Arranging her funeral was an act of love, but also of impossible strength. Friends and family came from far and wide. At Tree of Life Church, we celebrated her life with the music she loved, with stories from those who knew her, with her family's farewell, with tears and gratitude. "Cara a Cara" by Marcos Vidal was the anthem that accompanied us, because now Erika was face to face with the Master. How many times she had suggested she wanted that particular worship song at her funeral, but I always pretended I didn't want to discuss it and changed the subject. Today it was reality.

Now I understand that eternity is real, that love transcends death, and that Erika not only lived but left an indelible legacy. This chapter isn't just her farewell. It's her victory. It's her immortality in every person she touched, in every story she left behind, in every seed of faith she planted that continues to grow. And it's my commitment to tell her story, so her light will never be extinguished.

Seven years later, the questions persist, haunting me. What happens when God doesn't heal? What happens when we cry out

for a miracle and receive only deafening silence? Over time, I've tried to understand that healing isn't always what we long for. True healing is eternal, and although Erika received it, I find it hard to accept. Her body remained here, but her soul was restored to fullness. However, I wonder if that's enough to ease the void she left behind.

God didn't promise us a life without pain, but He said He would walk with us through the valley of the shadow. After Erika departed to be with the Lord, the pain was so overwhelming that I felt I couldn't pray, couldn't draw near to God. For two years, that weight was a constant burden, yet He never left me. For two long years, I kept silent before Him—no questions, no prayers, just an open, bleeding wound. During that time, God made no demands of me. He didn't reproach me or rush me. He was simply there, patient and silent, while I struggled inwardly, not knowing if I would ever be ready to speak to Him again.

Erika's legacy lives and breathes in every life she touched, but especially in our children. In Sofia, I see much more than physical resemblance—it's as if God took her mother's very essence and planted it in her. When Sofia smiles, the world stops just as it did with Erika; her gestures, the way she tilts her head when thinking, even her crystalline laughter are living echoes of her mother. People often pause, amazed to see how God preserved Erika's beauty in her daughter. In Kevin lives his mother's unwavering determination, that warrior spirit that knows no defeat.

In her legacy, **NED** took on a deeper meaning: No Evidence of Discouragement, No Evidence of Defeat, and finally No Evidence of Death—because in Christ, what the world sees as an ending is really the beginning of an eternal story. Death didn't end Erika's story; it simply opened a new chapter that continues to be written in the lives she left behind.

As I write these final lines, tears still run down my cheeks, warm and salty. But now, they aren't only tears of heartbreaking pain but also of sincere gratitude for having shared my life with

someone who left an indelible mark on my heart. She taught me so much about unconditional love, unwavering faith, and infinite grace. On the canvas of our suffering, God painted a masterpiece of grace, one that unfolds with each dawn I face without her. What the world saw as a losing battle against cancer, we saw as an eternal victory.

EPILOGUE:



LIFE GOES ON: EMBRACING THE DAYS WE'VE BEEN GIVEN

*"Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained
for me were written in your book before one of them came
to be."*

(Psalm 139:16)

Losing someone we love leaves a permanent scar. The pain never completely disappears; it simply becomes part of us that, though sometimes painful to revisit, also reminds us that we have loved deeply. Some days, grief feels like a persistent shadow, a constant reminder of what we've lost. Other days, it's barely a silent whisper that, instead of paralyzing us, propels us forward, motivating us to honor the memory and legacy of our loved ones with our lives.

During this journey of pain and healing, one truth remains unbreakable: God has numbered our days and calls us to live them fully, with purpose and gratitude.

The Bible reminds us in Psalm 139:16: "Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be." This truth kept me going when the weight of Erika's absence threatened to crush me. God knows the exact duration of our journey on this earth and, although we don't always understand why some lives are shorter than others, we do know this with certainty: while we're here, we have a divine purpose to fulfill, a testimony to share, a footprint to leave.

After Erika departed to be with Christ, I found myself wandering in a spiritual desert unlike anything I had previously known—a barren landscape where prayer, once as natural to me as breathing, became impossible. I've rarely spoken about this period, partly because language itself seems inadequate to capture the gravity of a grief that only those who have lost their life partner can truly comprehend.

It wasn't that I had lost faith in a fundamental sense. The theological framework I had built over decades remained intellectually intact. Yet something profound had ruptured in my spiritual practice. When I attempted to pray, words evaporated before reaching my lips, leaving only a vast, echoing silence. What does one say to the Creator when your heart is so thoroughly fragmented that you can't even articulate your own pain? When the person who had been the living embodiment of faith in your daily life is suddenly gone?

Within me dwelt a churning sea of contradictory emotions: anger that barely acknowledged itself as anger, disappointment that felt

like betrayal to admit, confusion that spiraled into more questions rather than answers, and an emptiness so absolute it seemed to have physical weight. I carried this silence like an invisible burden while simultaneously trying to navigate life as a widowed father of two children who needed stability, love, and hope—three things I felt spectacularly unqualified to provide in my shattered state.

The children needed a father who could pray with them at bedtime, but I found myself unable to form the words. They needed reassurances about heaven and God's plan, while I stood mute before my own unanswered questions. This tension—between what they needed and what I could authentically offer—became yet another dimension of the grief I carried silently.

For years, I struggled with the tension between honoring Erika's life and embracing the life that continued to unfold before us. How do you move forward when someone so fundamental is no longer by your side? How do you embrace new joy without feeling like you're betraying the past or leaving behind what was so precious?

The story of this book doesn't end with Erika's death, nor with the acute pain of her absence. For a long time, I interpreted her departure as the end of our shared dream, the definitive closure of a chapter that would end our story. But God, in His wisdom and mercy, patiently showed me that life continues to flow, that the calling continues to vibrate in our hearts, and that His plans always come to fruition, though not in the way we imagine in our limited human perspectives.

The questions accumulated: Why had God allowed this if we had prayed so much, if we had believed so much in His healing power? What good had those nights of prayer vigils, those fasts,

those declarations of faith been? But God, in His unwavering faithfulness, did not leave me for a moment. In His patient love, He allowed me to find my own path to healing, respecting my process and my time.

In that slow healing process, I found that I needed to create new memories that weren't tinged with pain. I began to travel with my children, Kevin and Sofia, not to escape the pain, but to contextualize it within a life that still deserved to be lived. I wanted to create luminous memories with them, give them moments of joy amidst persistent pain, and help them find hope in a future that no longer included their mother's physical presence. Through those travels and shared experiences, I began to heal little by little, without even realizing how it was happening.

During our travels, God whispered His promises to my wounded heart in ways so personal that they sometimes left me breathless. I particularly remember our visit to New York, where we traveled without rigid itineraries, simply letting ourselves be carried by what the city offered us. One afternoon, contemplating the One World Trade Center and the Memorial of the Twin Towers, I immersed myself in a deep reflection on the different paths of healing.

Those towers were never rebuilt; instead, something completely new emerged. Observing the water falling into the two square voids that mark the footprints of what once existed, I understood that my life was following a similar path. It wasn't about restoring exactly what I had lost—that was impossible—but about honoring the void while allowing something new to emerge alongside it.

Within me, among the rubble of what was once my life with Erika, a reconstruction wasn't taking place, but rather a different, unexpected birth. The conflict that tormented me was precisely that: the tension between preserving the sacred ruins of what was and allowing new life to flourish without feeling that I was betraying her memory.

At that precise moment, as if divinely orchestrated, José Salcedo and his wife Sharon appeared beside us, great friends from our days in Waco who had been a fundamental support during the beginning of our battle against cancer. The probability of meeting casually in the largest city in the United States, without prior communication, was so minimal that it could only be God's work. We embraced with an emotion that transcended words, and spent the entire day together, as their children were the same age as Kevin and Sofia.

At the end of that unexpected day, I felt my heart finally beginning to surrender to the persistent divine invitation. It was as if God was clearly telling me: "Even if you try to hide in your pain, I will find you where you are and I will do it with a love that never ceases." That experience was tangible evidence that God was actively restoring my fragmented life, offering me a new beginning, just as those towers had been replaced to give new life and purpose to the city.

It was on that gradual path toward my own restoration that God, in His perfect timing, brought another person into my life. Meeting her wasn't simply finding new love; it was a living reminder that God not only restores what's lost but also blesses us with new beginnings that we couldn't have imagined before.

Elvira Iliana Dubon is the daughter of a pastor from the Elim Church in El Salvador. She and her family are also close friends

of Pastor Mario Vega, whose role in Erika's spiritual life during her most difficult moments had been fundamental.

Iliana's story resonates with ours in ways that only God could have designed. She grew up in a home where faith was the gravitational center of everything, but she also knew firsthand the scarcity and economic difficulties that often accompany the pastoral calling. Despite constant trials, her family never wavered in their commitment to serve the Lord with all they had. Her path and mine have connections so deep that sometimes it seems God had been preparing us for each other over the years in ways that only now we can fully appreciate.

Over Christmas 2020, God gave us an unexpected gift: Lucas, our son. He was born amid the global uncertainty of the pandemic, when the entire world seemed to stagger under the weight of fear and loss. His arrival was a powerful testament that God continues to be the author of life and hope. As mentioned previously, the Bible exhorts us in Psalm 90:12, "Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom." Life, even marked by the pain of loss, remains a precious gift that we must live with intention and purpose.

For our family, his arrival was a gift of hope, a renewing joy not only for Iliana and me but also for Kevin and Sofia, who received him as the gift he was. His presence among us has been like a soft mantle of divine comfort, showing us that after the harshest winter, a new spring always comes. And now, we eagerly await the arrival of another baby, a new life that confirms that God's work in our family continues to unfold with a grace that surpasses us.

Today, Kevin has taken a path that reaffirms the prayers his mother gave for him. Although he began his university education

in systems engineering, following a safe and predictable route, in his second year at Texas A&M, he experienced a divine calling that completely reoriented his career path. With a conviction that immediately reminded me of his mother, he shared his desire to become a teacher to directly impact children's lives, to educate and form them not only academically but also in values and character. God answered Erika's fervent prayers in a way that none of us could have anticipated, but that perfectly reflects her maternal heart.

Sofia is about to graduate from high school and has found her place in the church, especially through service in youth groups and her occasional participation in the worship team. In every ministry she helps with, one thing is notable: it's not simply an activity, but a channel through which her sensitive spirit connects with God and helps others do the same. So, she continues her mother's spiritual legacy in ways that she would have deeply appreciated. She is also about to start her university studies at Texas A&M, following in her brother Kevin's footsteps.

During our time at Antioch Community Church in Waco, Texas, Erika and I received multiple prophetic words that showed a recurring theme: "nations." Time and again, people who prayed for us mentioned this word with an insistence we couldn't ignore. In our limited interpretation, we assumed that meant that someday we would literally travel as traditional missionaries, crossing oceans to preach in distant lands. But when the reality of Erika's aggressive illness burst into our lives, that dream seemed to irreversibly fade.

Now, with the insight that only time and grace can give, I realize that God had a much more expansive plan. During one of the prayer services, a pastor named Joe Ewen, who was recognized

at Antioch Community Church for his prophetic gift, prayed for us saying: "I see the nations being touched by your faith. The Lord gives you the nations, and you and your children will bless people from all over the world." At that moment, our understanding was limited by our own paradigms about international ministry.

Today I see clearly that this book is a fundamental part of the fulfillment of that prophetic word. Through these pages, the story of Erika and our family is reaching hearts in different parts of the world that we could never have reached personally. Kevin and Sofia are also participating in the fulfillment of that word, each in their own unique way: Kevin's educational vocation and Sofia's musical service are living extensions of the legacy that God entrusted to us.

When I reflect on the detours of my life, I see a divine pattern. Just as Jesus needed to go through Samaria—an apparently unnecessary detour but charged with purpose—my path has also been marked by apparent interruptions that turned out to be an essential part of God's plan.

My deportation to El Salvador, which at the time seemed like a tragedy, allowed me to complete my university education and regularize my legal situation in the United States. My arrival in Boston as an immigrant without English proficiency led me to clean the same hallways where Erika was building her professional future. That humble beginning as a janitor was another necessary detour in my formation.

God continues to unfold His purpose in our lives in surprising and redemptive ways. Today, I find myself teaching Spanish at River Oaks Baptist School, one of Houston's most prestigious educational institutions—a position that represents not just a

job, but the culmination of a divinely orchestrated journey. When I walk through those classroom doors each morning, I carry with me every step of the winding path that brought me here: the young teacher in the humble classrooms of El Salvador, the immigrant janitor mopping hallways in Boston while Erika pursued her optometry degree, the husband facing years of professional uncertainty due to immigration challenges, and finally, the graduate student completing the master's degree that Erika had so insistently encouraged me to pursue.

What once appeared as detours, setbacks, and obstacles now reveal themselves as essential preparation. The language skills honed in my homeland, the humility learned through service work, the patience developed during legal limbo, the academic credentials earned through Erika's foresight—each element was necessary for the mission I now embrace. Beyond just teaching Spanish, I have the privilege of sharing my faith and testimony with students at a crucial formative stage and leading the Hispanic ministry at River Oaks Baptist Church alongside Iliana. These opportunities to witness lives being transformed in our community aren't coincidences but confirmations that those apparent detours were not accidents or punishments; they were the necessary path, precisely molded with divine purpose, to prepare me for this exact moment in His greater plan.

Similarly, the dream that Erika and I shared of reaching the nations with our testimony has begun to materialize in ways we never imagined during our nightly conversations. The vision we had together has taken tangible form through nedvision.org, a non-profit organization we founded specifically to support cancer patients and their families. This foundation fulfills one of the deepest desires that Erika expressed during her last months:

to create a refuge of hope for those facing not only the devastating physical effects of chemotherapy but also the discouragement that comes with this battle. Her desire was that no one would have to walk that valley alone or without the spiritual tools that sustained us.

It is because of this confluence of paths—the professional stability she foresaw and the mission we dreamed together—that today we dare to request support from you, who feel moved by this story. Your donations will allow us to distribute this book for free in hospitals where patients fight against cancer, in homes fractured by crises similar to ours, in prisons where discouragement is a frequent visitor, and in any other place where a message of unbreakable hope is needed. If Erika's testimony can touch nations in a way that surpasses everything we imagined during her earthly life, then the divine promise we received remains valid, and its fulfillment continues to unfold in ways we are only now beginning to glimpse.

God has demonstrated His faithfulness at every step. His purpose continues to be fulfilled, sometimes in ways so unexpected that they leave us speechless. This story is a living testimony that He never abandons us and that His love transcends the barriers of time, death, and pain. Just as Erika spent entire nights interceding for our future, today we can clearly see that those prayers continue to bear fruit. Life goes on, and in every step we take, God reminds us that His work in us is far from concluded.

A FINAL REFLECTION

As I contemplate this extraordinary journey, from the depths of grief to the height of restoration, I realize a fundamental truth

that I want to share with anyone who is going through their own valley:

We can honor the past while embracing the future that God offers us. We can honor the memory of those we've lost by choosing to live with a purpose that honors them, appreciating each moment as the gift it is, and pouring abundant love on those around us. Because that is precisely what God desires for us: not that we remain eternally paralyzed in pain, but that we move forward with renewed faith.

If today you find yourself in the midst of grief, let me offer you this encouragement born from my own experience: life, even after the most devastating loss, is still worth being lived fully.

Carry with you the precious memories as a treasure. Honor the past without idealizing or denying it. But also, dare to open your heart to what God is doing right now in your life. Because He is always writing a new story of redemption. A new life, a new purpose, and a new joy may be closer than you dare to imagine.

Nothing we've experienced has been by chance. Each fervent prayer raised in that small closet where Erika met with God, each struggle, each painful loss, each unexpected blessing, and each new beginning have been part of a divine plan much greater than our immediate circumstances.

I can still imagine her kneeling in that closet, whispering passionate prayers for a future she would never personally step into, but one that she believed with all her heart. Today, we live in the answers to those prayers, breathing the air of the promises she helped bring into existence.

The story has not concluded. The promise still stands. The nations are still waiting.

And through this book, through our renewed lives, and through the work that God continues to do day after day, the dream that began with Erika remains alive. Not as a faint echo of the past, but as a vibrant force that continuously expands—like ripples in a pond that never cease, touching ever more distant shores. Her story now reaches places we never would have imagined and touches hearts we never knew. In each life transformed by this testimony, Erika lives again, and the initials NED take on a new meaning: No Evidence of Distance—because her legacy of faith knows no boundaries, neither in time nor in space.

In
Loving Memory
OF

DR. NORBI ERIKA DUBÓN



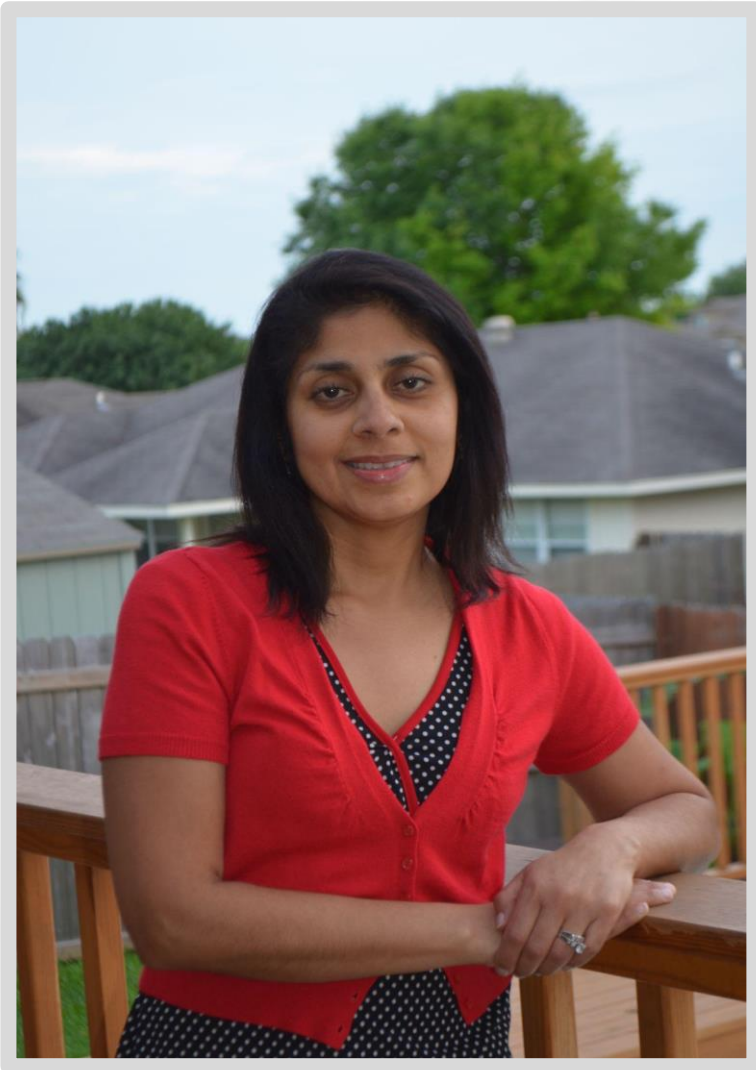




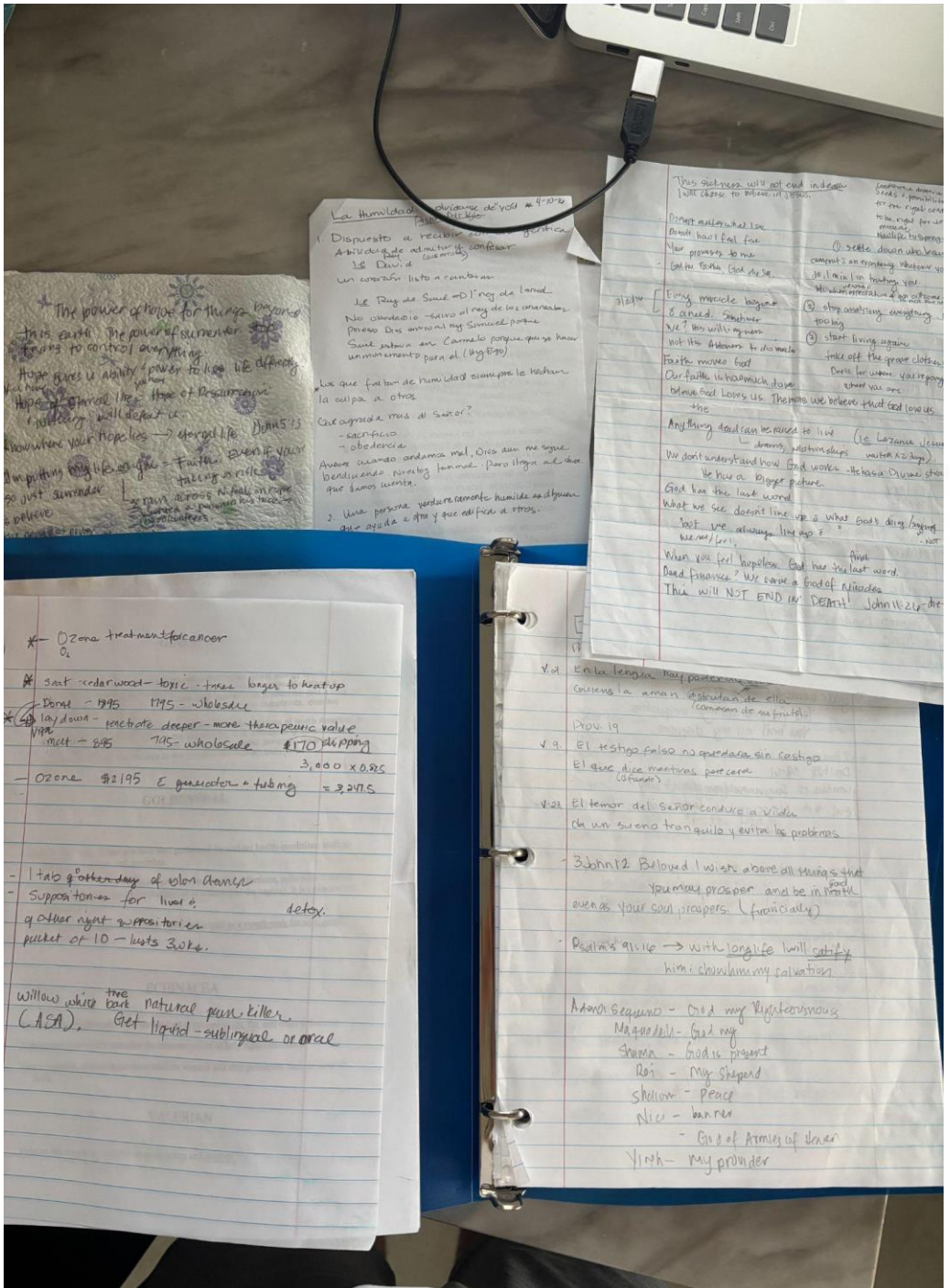


APPENDIX

IN LOVING MEMORY OF NORBI ERIKA DUBÓN



MON	<p>2COR 12:8-11</p> <p>...Bastante mi gracia pues mi poder se perfecciona en la debilidad. Por eso me regocijo en debilidades</p>	MON	<p>unforgiveness strife jealousy bitterness</p>
TUE	<p>Insultos, privaciones, persecuciones y dificultades... porque cuando soy débil entonces soy fuerte.</p>	TUE	<p>① Cain became fruitless b/c of attitude</p>
WED	<p>My grace is sufficient for you for my power is made perfect in weakness For the sake</p>	WED	<p>② he became a Vagabond - a wanderer. Don't know who-you are, where you are or where you are going.</p>
THU	<p>of Christ then I am content in weakness, in trials, hardships, persecutions and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.</p>	THU	<p>③ Cain became a "marked" man - Pulls a "Bullseye" Rom 16:17 Mark those</p>
FRI	<p>Jor 33:3 3/1/13 Call unto me, and I will answer thee</p>	FRI	<p>who cause division Prov. 6: 14-19 - Discord makers.</p>
SAT	<p>Mat. 6:16 Thy Father which seeth in</p>	SAT	<p>Jude 11 David Van Koovering</p>
SUN	<p>secret himself shall reward thee openly.</p>	SUN	<p>Unforgiveness Alters the blood in a person's body who's into strife: bitterness</p>



God is our refuge and strength,
a very pleasant help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear.

Psalm 48:14

For this is God, Our God
forever and ever. He will be
our guide even to death.

Psalm 55:22

Cast your burden on the Lord,
and he will sustain you; he
will never permit the
righteous to be moved.

Psalm 22:24

For he has not despised or
abhorred the affliction of the
afflicted, and he has not
hidden his face from him, But has
heard, when he cried to him.

siempre.

En tiempos difíciles serán prosperados
en épocas de hambruna tendrán
abundancia

Psalm 38:15, 21-22

Yo Señor espero en ti, tu Señor
y Dios mío serás quien responda.

Señor, no me abandones. Dios mío
no te alejes de mí. Señor de mi
salvación Ven pronto a mi ayuda

Psalm 44:25-26

- FeBS - Also Prov. 2 (21)

Hebrews 10:35 So do not throw
away your confidence; it will be
richly rewarded.

Así que no pierdan la esperanza
porque esta será grandemente
recompensada.

'Faith is able to cast your
burdens onto God and not to feel
anxious about the outcome.

"Now to Him who is able to do immeasurably beyond all
we ask or imagine, be all glory forever and ever!"

Eph. 3:20

I don't want to think anymore

I'm going crazy

I cry, I don't sleep at nights

I try to act normal - get up

- go to work etc....

but deep down I hurt.

Everytime I see my son I want
to break into tears. I see his
beautiful big eyes. I think.

God I don't want my son to grow
up w/o a mother pls, pls

let me live. I feel so sad deep
down b/c nothing is being done.

No one see us to care, no one
wants to help.

I feel I was told you have car,
you have no insurance - BYE.

Stay home & die !! You're on your own!!

12/14/06 - One more sleepers night.

My mind is going crazy again
I cried. Woke up Gustaw.

My hubby's been such a wonderful
man/person since day 1 I've met him.

I feel bad for him as well as for
my son. I want to share ^{many} more
years w/ him. I know he feels helpless
but he is there for me always 24/7.
and that's the only thing that matters to
me.

God, it's 3:30am, please tell me
what it is YOU want. Help me listen.

Maybe I'm not listening. I'm not paying
attention. Tell me what you want me to do.

All I ask is for me to live to raise
my son + the baby on the way. Once
they have married you can take me w/
you. Please that's all I ask.

"He counts the number of the stars; He calls them all by name.

Great is our Lord and mighty in power.

His understanding is infinite." Psa. 147:4

God is our refuge and strength,
a very pleasant help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear.

Psalm 48:14

For this is God, Our God
forever and ever. He will be
our guide even to death.

Psalm 55:22

Cast your burden on the Lord,
and he will sustain you; he
will never permit the
righteous to be moved.

Psalm 22:24

For he has not despised or
abhorred the affliction of the
afflicted, and he has not
hidden his face from him, But has
heard, when he cried to him.

siempre.

En tiempos difíciles serán prosperados
en épocas de hambre tendrán
abundancia

Psalm 38: 15, 21-22

Yo Señor espero en ti, tu Señor
y Dios mío serás quien responda.

Señor, no me abandones. Dios mío
no te alejes de mí. Señor de mí
salvación ven pronto a mi ayuda

Psalm 44: 25-26

- Feb 5 - Also Prov. 2 (21)

Hebrews 10:35 So do not throw
away your confidence; it will be
richly rewarded.

Así que no pierdan la esperanza
porque esta será grandemente
recompensada.

"Faith is able to cast your
burdens onto God and not to feel
anxious about the outcome."

never apply. Mean while I had received a letter from Medicare asking me if I wanted Medicare prt B? I said no b/c I had Medicaid (I didn't know at that time that the Medicaid I had was being denied). So I innocently told Medicare No, that I didn't need it b/c I already had ins. (Medicaid/Breast/Cervical Cancer)

As a result of all this I was left w/o any type of ins. I couldn't apply to an Advantage Medicare Ins. Plan b/c I didn't sign up for plan B and it was nec. in order to have prt B in order to get an Adv. Ins.

At first I worried b/c I would not be able to have any kind of Dr. Care, any kind of tx's and/or Dr. testings. So I called Medicare to see if I could still apply for prt B and they said yes. I submitted the request on Aug 15, 2015. It got to the processing ctr. I was told that by Oct 15 I would have prt B, then ^{Sept 15} I was told that the ctr can take up to 60 days to process this. Boy I didn't know what to think anymore. BUT since I had been praying about cont. this tx I began to see this as part of God's plan telling me. You're done. Even i medicare + Adv plan mv L. 2015 a 3/15

Every October I had a mammog^{ram} Date

of the (L) breast since I only had the (R) removed. With no ins. and not u/elo any Dr. (since I didn't have ins.) I decided to sch. my own scan. I told myself "one thing is for sure but the other is for you to become irresponsible of your tests/screenings."

My appt was sch. for Friday Oct 30, 2015 - AAP radiology @ Kyle. First it was @ S. Marcos but they only do screening mammography not diagnostic - done @ Kyle.

A week before this day ^{Some} friends ^{Jessi & Monica} were sharing w/ us a testimony of someone that was going through cancer but was using some kind of liquid vits. They showed us a picture of the before/after + wow. They also shared w/ us a documentary titled "The Truth About Cancer."

It was a 9 episode documentary and my hubby and I watched it. The first 4 or 5 episodes we kind of know. My hubby & I have always thought that there's a "conspiracy theory" going on w/ cancer, cancer tx and dr.

The Thurs before my appt. Monica called me

Great is Your love, reaching to the heavens;
Your faithfulness reaches to the skies. PSALM 57:10 NIV