

## **Keeping Faith During the Dark Times**

by Bill and Margaret Hansell

**Bill:** I believe sincerely and deeply our story and journey might be of help, and I trust the Lord will use it in the lives of others.

I am holding in my hand a piece of metal that almost took from me the most important, precious, and valuable person in my life. This concave steel bar only weighs a couple of pounds. There is a hole drilled in the middle. The dimensions are approximately 2" wide, by 13" long, and a ¼" thick. I believe it is a leaf from a truck or trailer spring.

On June 15<sup>th</sup> of this year, my wife Margaret was driving westbound on Interstate 84, traveling at the rate of at least 65-mph. Some forty miles east of Portland, this hunk of metal came crashing through the windshield, with absolutely no warning. Margaret described it as just coming out of the sky. We have no idea where it came from but it hit the car hood with such force, it gouged an opening in the upper part of the hood. It looked as if a big can opener had been used. The bar then proceeded through the windshield creating a blizzard of glass shards. It slammed into the upper chest of my wife, with its end against her seat belt, the only protection she had.

If it had hit her an inch or so higher, she would have been killed, or at the very least incapacitated, which would have resulted in a very serious car wreck. Who knows how many lives might have been lost had that happened!

She ended up with a bruise and still with enough of the windshield left to limp into Portland. Obviously, we are very thankful God spared her life.

As we travel the highway of life, there are things that come through our windshields.

1. They certainly are not planned.
2. They can cause a lot of pain and damage.
3. Often we do not know why or where they originated.
4. We do not know why they happen to us.

For example, on Saint Patrick's Day in March of 2000, something came crashing through "my windshield," as Margaret and I sat in a doctor's office. "Cancer cells have been found in your prostate" were the words of the urologist to me. And like Margaret in the car, I now had to deal with what had just happened. This past year has been an incredible journey of faith, but that is another story.

In the spring and early summer of 1992, a very ugly item came crashing into our lives. It was called by various names, such as substance abuse, addiction, alcoholism, and drugs. But the individual had but one name, Bill, our first-born. He was 22 years of age, and through an intervention process, it was confirmed he had some problems.

Let me digress here for a moment to tell you a bit about my background. I was raised on a farm north of the little town of Athena, Oregon, about 220 miles east of Portland.

Margaret, who is from Portland, and I met at the University of Oregon. We both became Christians through the ministry of Campus Crusade for Christ, and were active in this ministry on campus. We were married during spring break of our senior year. After graduating from the University of Oregon in the spring of 1967, we joined the staff of Campus Crusade. We were on staff for the next 12 years, at Berkeley, Sacramento, and the last five years in Sydney, Australia, where I served as the national Campus Director. Besides our son Bill we have five daughters. One is married, and she and her husband have given us our two grandchildren.

We returned from Australia in 1979 and moved to the Athena area to raise our six children in a rural environment and to be near my side of their extended family. I worked on the family farm through 1982. That year I ran for County Commissioner, was elected, and took office in 1983. Presently I am in my 19<sup>th</sup> year, the third year of my fifth term.

Alcohol has never been a part of our lives. Margaret and I have never had any alcohol in our home—no beer, no wine, no liquor of any form. So when we learned of our son having a drinking problem, it was a shock and a surprise. It was totally foreign to what we had done and taught in our home.

I won't go into the details; but while Bill was a student at Willamette University and through a series of events, we learned of his usage. In the fall of 1992, he went through a month long treatment program, and was diagnosed as an alcoholic/addict. He has multiple addictions or at least addictive behavior. He was clean for about nine months and then began using again for the next eight years.

One of the questions I asked was, "Lord, how did we get here? What happened? We were driving along seeking to serve and glorify You in all we do, and this comes suddenly crashing through the windshield, changing our lives dramatically."

At the first "You're Not Alone" conference, I shared some thoughts from Psalm 23, which had been of help to me. Being a farm boy, the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm has always been a favorite of mine. The fourth verse of the Shepherd's Psalm was very helpful.

"Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for You are with me."

Let me summarize three aspects of this verse that ministered to me, as we were in the Valley of the Shadow of Drugs.

1. **Walk and through.** We travel through the valley. It is not a box canyon. We do not go there to stay. We are passing through to greener pastures, and God has a plan for us. Sometimes traveling takes longer, but we are always moving through the valley.
2. **Fear need not control.** I will fear no evil. There is a fear of understanding of what sin can and will do to a person, especially substance abuse. People die from it every day. I do not know of anyone who wants his or her child to die such a death. And there is that fear. But at the same time we do not need to live in fear. We can fear no evil, because the Lord is with us.
3. **I am not alone.** Just like the name of the ministry, "You're Not Alone," I am not alone in the valley. The promise is, "You are with me." The Lord is in the valley with me. He never abandons or leaves me to face the issues by myself.  
I also had two important questions I needed to answer, as I was in this valley.

**First question: Is there a reason I am in this valley?** My answer before and remains the same today is, "yes." I did not choose to be in this valley; in fact, it is someone else's poor choices that caused us to be in the valley. But God is still sovereign, and He loves me. This is not the only valley I have ever been through, nor will it be the last. I am being refined and that sometimes is a painful process. But it is His way to lead me to greener pastures, to make it to higher ground in my walk of faith.

I can also say that when the Lord has taken me through those valleys of life, I am a better person with a stronger faith. They have been tremendous times of growth, maturity, and learning to trust. I wish I had never entered this valley, but I am trusting while I am in it. I also told the audience in Phoenix that I would be looking forward to the time when I would exit. The real issue, I believe, is how do I travel through this valley? How do I react? Will I trust in my Shepherd?

**The second question: How do I relate to my son?** My desire was to maintain a relationship of love with him. I believe I was successful. I tried to be honest with him in love. And I realized the person he had become was not the person God intended him to be. I did not accept his choices, though I knew he had the right to make them. Bill is a free moral agent, and I cannot make the right choices for him. But you know what, I would not make them for him, even if I could. Bill needed to make them, not his dad.

Two years ago at the conference in Phoenix, I concluded my remarks with a new concept I had just learned and was putting into practice. It had to do with prayer for our prodigal son. For many years my prayer had been, "Lord, whatever it takes." I prayed this because I did not know what it was that would get Bill's attention. Whatever it would be, I wanted the Lord to do it.

Then some dear Christian friends whose youngest son had been deep in addiction shared with me what they had done. Their son was now clean and sober and serving the Lord. They began to take their son to the Lord, in prayer for healing. There are four instances recorded in the Gospels where parents brought their children to Jesus for healing. Sometimes the child was too sick to come, and the parent brought Jesus to the child. In each case the child had a serious problem and needed healing. It is never recorded the child ever asked his parents to take him to Jesus. The parent saw the need and took the initiative. In each case the child was healed. It seems it was really the faith of the parent, and not the child, which caused Christ to hear. It was their faith in what Christ could do.

I began in the spring of 1999 to take my son to the Lord each day in prayer for healing—healing spiritually, physically, mentally, and in every other way. My concluding sentence two years ago was and I quote, "And I believe some day our son Bill, his mother, and I will pass through this valley together." I was done and I sat down. There was nothing else to share. We were in the valley trusting the Lord. I would also be finished at this time today were it not for some amazing things God has done in Bill's life. I do not share this as an "absolute." It is just how God has chosen to work in our family. He works in other ways in other families.

Our granddaughter was born on September 1, coincidentally the same day another daughter is getting married this year. Margaret flew down to Sacramento to be with Susanna at the birth of Rachel. I drove down later to bring grandma home, and meet the little one.

When I returned home, having driven most of the day and night and arriving at 3:00 a.m., our message machine had a series of messages from our son. He wanted to talk with me. On the last message he left a phone number where he could be reached.

As far as we knew, Bill was in Sun Valley, Idaho, still feeding his habits and working to be able to afford them. He had been there off and on for a couple of years.

When I returned the call a few hours later, I discovered it was a Motel 6 in Twin Falls, Idaho. I was put through to his room. In somewhat of a halting voice, he said he had recommitted his life to the Lord, and wanted to know where he might go to get some spiritual grounding. My first question to him was, "Are you in any kind of trouble?" You know the foxhole conversion syndrome. He assured me he was not.

Because I needed to leave for work, I did not have much time to talk, and I suggested he come on home. He was reluctant until I reminded him, when the prodigal son decided to make some changes, he went home. Bill said he would be there in the late afternoon. I told him we would kill the fatted calf, and Mom would serve roast beef, one of his favorite dinners.

As I drove to work, my reaction was one of caution. I thought, "I have been praying for this kid's healing every day for nearly fifteen months, and yet I am not shouting from the rooftops." He had a couple of spiritual renewals in the past, but his addiction always pulled him back.

On my eighteen mile drive home from work, for some reason my thoughts turned to his long hair. It was not a major thing, but Bill had long hair, which I thought was pretty ratty. It was his identification with his lifestyle. What if anything would he do with his hair. I knew I would not make it an issue, but still I wondered.

Bill was home and as he came up the basement stairs, I saw that his long hair was gone. He had found a hairdresser in Boise on his way home and had his locks shorn. He looked great, to his old-fashioned Dad.

After dinner, we sat down and asked him what had happened. He related that over the last week, he had grown more repulsed with what he was doing, and with what he was becoming. He knew he had to get out of Sun Valley. He loaded his meager belongings in his car and drove to Twin Falls. While there in this restless state, he tried to figure out just what it was he wanted to be. What kept coming to his mind was to be a Godly man, and he knew he was not. Not even close.

He watched a movie on TV that had some real family values, and it touched his heart. He knew this was what he wanted.

Bill then said, "Dad, I know you are not supposed to do this, but I went to the nightstand and pulled out the Gideon Bible and randomly opened it. I turned to Exodus 30." As he started to read it, he realized it had to do with the tabernacle, and priestly duties, not your everyday devotional Scripture. He decided to read something else. Then Bill said, "No, I am thirty years old, and I am going to read the thirtieth chapter."

What the Holy Spirit did in the next few minutes in that motel room, probably violates most of what is taught in seminary classes about how to study the Bible. Through reading Exodus 30, Bill became convicted of his life choices, and took action.

One of the commands in this chapter to the priests was the prohibition of burning false incense. Bill remembered reading from a druggie publication about someone's assertion that what the priests were really burning was marijuana, which caused them to hallucinate, see visions, and hear voices. No false incense, and Bill said God spoke to him about his drug usage. Also in Exodus 30, instructions were given on the libations, or drink offerings. There was a right way and wrong way, and Bill felt convicted about his drinking. Before the chapter ended there were words about the smoke from the altar, and our son felt God was talking to him about his smoking.

Finishing reading Exodus 30, he got up, flushed his drugs down the toilet, poured out his booze, and crumpled up his cigarettes and threw them in the trash can. He then recommitted his life to the Lord and began to try to reach me by phone.

My one question to him was how was this experience different from some of the other spiritual renewals he had previously had. His reply was concise and clear. "I have never been repulsed by what I was doing before." It is my belief that true repentance had taken place, when Bill turned from his sin to his Lord.

Life for Bill is still one day at a time, and he has had to deal with some issues. But he is walking with the Lord and living in a Christian community in Eugene, Oregon. He has been accepted at the University of Oregon and will begin this fall. Since October he has been working with troubled youth. The significant thing about this is he has stayed with this job longer than any other job he has had in the past ten years.

As Margaret stated after a recent conversation with Bill, “We have our son back!” Much has happened in our lives since the first “You’re Are Not Alone” Conference. We were in the valley of the shadow of drugs for around a decade. For nearly ten years we were moving through the valley. At this point in time, we have exited the valley, because of some of the choices our son has made.

As I conclude I want to offer some thoughts on how I coped while in this valley.

- **Prayer:** It is absolutely essential. Our Shepherd desires for us to come to Him in prayer. I took my loved one to the Lord for healing. I put aside any personal agendas such as: “Lord, you do this in this way at this time. Lord, make this happen or cause this to take place.” Rather, we parents present our child to God for healing. He is sick and needs the touch of the Great Physician. I took our son Bill to the Lord in prayer for healing every day for over fifteen months. It was the best investment in his life, I believe, I ever made.
- **Relationships:** I worked at maintaining a healthy father/son relationship. I kept the lines of communication open. God gave our children to us and us to them. I am not talking about enabling or condoning or encouraging their behavior. What I am saying is to love them and care for them. Do not drive them away. Then when they need someone to turn to for help, they will know where to go. It was certainly true in our son’s case. And I did not forget the relationship with Margaret. We worked to maintain it, grow it, and under any circumstances, did not allow Bill’s bad choices to divide our relationship. We remembered our commitment to each other—“for better or for worse.” One last relationship was with our other children. Our son had five younger sisters, in whose lives we continued to invest, to love, and to provide. Sometimes, during the tough times, they needed us even more.
- **Do no let fear rule our lives:** If we live in fear, it will absolutely take over our lives. In the valley, which is a scary place, we need to trust and walk with the Lord. The psalm states, “I will fear no evil.” Why? “For You are with me.” I am the first to admit it is easier said than done at times. But we have to cast all our fears upon Him. If we don’t, it will be very hard to cope in that valley.
- **Keep moving:** We walk through the valley. What I am saying is we need to keep living our lives. We cannot let this situation rob us of the joy of living.
- **Trust:** I knew that my Savior was with me in this valley. He promised, and I believed Him. His heart broke for our son even more than ours did. I did not understand why the piece of metal came crashing through the windshield of Margaret’s car. But I was willing to trust Him.
- **Don’t blame:** I learned not to spend very much time trying to find the answer to most questions that begin with WHY or WHAT? Why me, Lord? Why did it happen to us? What did we do wrong? What should we have done differently? Bill was always very forthright with us. He told us he chose to do what he did. He was responsible for his actions and choices.

After the bar came through the car window, I never asked God, “Why? Why our car? Why my wife?” God is still in control, even when addiction comes crashing into our lives. Because I did not play the blame game, I had real peace and could focus on the Lord.

This then is my journey both in and out of the Valley of the Shadow of Drugs.

**Margaret:** Unlike my husband, I did ask “Why?” I asked why because I had watched our little son grow up. He was a charming precocious little blonde toe head. All through grade school and high school he excelled in everything that he chose to do. He could have chosen to do anything he wanted. And yet, for some reason he chose to get involved with substances that brought a lot of disharmony to his life and to our lives, too. And so, I did ask those questions of “Why? Why would he do that? And why, Lord, after the years that we gave to You, why would You allow it?”

And it was only after one evening when I chose to take a walk out in the country and was lamenting to God and asking Him those questions of "Why?" that He began to reveal to me, "Margaret, it is not about why. It is that you have no control over what is happening." The answer He gave me was to trust Him and to have faith in Him and to believe in Him that He could bring something good out of this. Let go, is basically what He was telling me. I learned that there was not anything that I could do. I guess in having six children I became quite a controller. In order to get anything done I had to control everything. So, I wanted to control this, too, in our son's life. And that message came so clear: Was I willing to trust God in this situation? Did I really believe God was in control and could bring something good out of it? And that night He began to give me the faith that I could trust Him for that; not that I didn't continue to try at different times to grab hold again and didn't have to learn to let go again, because I did. Probably, for me part of what made it difficult was an aspect of fear, because I had a brother who died of a drug overdose.

As our son began to mature, I began to see in him characteristics similar to his uncle, my brother who had died. The frightening part of this is that they hardly knew one another, because we were always off someplace away from my brother. My brother was very charming. He could talk anybody into anything. I could see this in our son. I could see some of the thinking that was so irrational. I guess I projected some of the fear onto our son. Sometimes, if we believe that what is going on in our child's life is far worse than what is going on in reality, we react to that fear rather than to what is really happening. So, God took away some of that from my life. He began to give me that real confidence that I could trust Him and to believe that God would bring something good out of Billy's life. So to me, it was so exciting to hear him when he came to us that evening, had dinner, and mapped out what God had begun to show him to do in his own life. He listed a number of things that he felt God wanted him to do. He thought God wanted him to be in a place where he could be disciplined, where he could continue his education, and where he could also support himself. There were many things that he spoke of and we have watched those things come about. And, as Billy has had the desire to pursue those things, it has been so exciting to see God's faithfulness to our son and to us.

We all, I am sure, have had those promises and prayers for our children when they were born. We believed that God was going to do it. Yet, as Bill pointed out, when we got the bad news of Billy's abuse and then addiction, sometimes we wondered. But those promises were true and are true, just as true today as when they were written in the Bible. God is faithful and that is what I have seen in Billy's life. How exciting to see Billy have the motivation to do the different things that God has revealed to him. We get excited about those little steps because so many times he was not able to do any of them. He would get a job and then leave the job or did not have motivation to hang in there for anything. For me, that is a real sign that there is growth and that God is working in his life. Probably as a mother, there are certain things I think he should be doing. Yet, God has shown me that this is not my issue. God is working in Billy's life. The thing I have to do is give God the freedom to do it and not get in the way of what God wants to do. It was not an easy lesson to learn. I am sure it is a lesson I am going to have to learn over and over again even in the rest of my children's lives. I am sure my sons-in-law will tell me that I need to let them do what they need to do in their lives.

Another thing I would like to share is that I think God gave my husband Bill real wisdom. This is not for everybody. When we first found out that Billy had a drug problem, we had a very extensive mailing list from our missionary days with Campus Crusade for Christ. We shared what had happened with our son in our newsletter, much to Bill's mother's dismay. We told people about Billy's drug addiction. We have people who call us even today because they remember that letter. As their children have faced the same thing, they have felt the freedom to call us and talk to us. God has used that as an open door for us to be able to minister to a lot of different people.

Our being honest and open was something that God has been able to use. I know that God reveals different things to each of us. I guess the main thing is for us to be open to how God

wants to use each of our lives because each one is unique. I know even in our son's life we can begin to see how God is taking what has happened in his life and is giving him a desire to work with autistic children. He really believes he can understand them because of his drug addiction past and what it did in his mind. So, I guess we can have hopeful hearts in spite of what all of us are going through. There is the fact that God does not waste anything and that He will use it. What He wants from us is faith and trust. I know for me finally I have learned that contentment is wanting God's will more than my own way and being willing to do God's will.