

A WALK
THROUGH
THE DARK

A WALK THROUGH THE DARK

HOW MY HUSBAND'S
90 MINUTES IN HEAVEN
DEEPENED MY FAITH *for a* LIFETIME

EVA PIPER
WITH CECIL MURPHEY



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

NASHVILLE DALLAS MEXICO CITY RIO DE JANEIRO

© 2013 Eva Piper with Cecil Murphey

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 Nashville, Tennessee, by Thomas Nelson. Thomas Nelson is a trademark of Thomas Nelson, Inc.

Thomas Nelson, Inc., titles may be purchased in bulk for educational, business, fund-raising, or sales promotional use. For information, please e-mail SpecialMarkets@ThomasNelson.com.

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are taken from The Holy Bible, New Living Translation, copyright © 1996, 2004, 2007 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois, 60188. All rights reserved. Scripture quotations marked NIV are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Printed in the United States of America

13 14 15 16 RRD 6 5 4 3 2 1

*In loving memory of my mom, Ethel Pentecost.
She was a model of strength, will, and utter determination.
God, Family, Country*

CONTENTS

<i>FOREWORD BY DON PIPER</i>	xiii
1. THE DARKNESS BEGINS	1
2. GETTING READY	12
3. STEPPING INTO THE UNKNOWN	18
4. FACING THE REALITY	25
5. DIFFICULT PHONE CALLS	35
6. THE FIRST DAY	42
7. THE CHILDREN SEE THEIR FATHER	53
8. THE CHILDREN NEED YOU	56
9. OUR FIRST DISAGREEMENT	59
10. DEALING WITH A LAWYER	63
11. "HE'S GIVEN UP"	67
12. THE FIXATOR	74
13. THE HELP I DIDN'T KNOW I NEEDED	83
14. A SHOCKING TRUTH	86
15. ANOTHER PROBLEM	88
16. FINDING MY PLACE	94
17. RETURN TO TEACHING	97

18. "THANK YOU FOR LETTING ME MINISTER TO YOU"	101
19. MY PRIVATE THERAPY	104
20. MY LEARNING TIME	114
21. THE SILENT TREATMENT	120
22. NICOLE IS GROWING UP	133
23. A STRANGE COMFORT	138
24. DON'S STORY	140
25. FROM INSIDE THE HOSPITAL ROOM	146
26. THE DON PATROL	158
27. THE LEARNING CONTINUES	165
28. TRAVELING WITH THE YOUTH	172
29. LEARNING TO WALK	176
30. GOOD-BYE TO THE FIXATOR	185
31. THE MANY QUESTIONS	189
32. A TRIP TO HEAVEN	197
33. MOVING ON	205
34. TIME FOR A BOOK	209
35. LINGERING EFFECTS	214
36. WHERE WE ARE	218
37. BECAUSE	221
38. WHEN THE DARKNESS COMES AGAIN	225
<i>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</i>	231
<i>ABOUT THE AUTHOR</i>	235

FOREWORD

[To come—save 4 pages]

I.

THE DARKNESS BEGINS

On January 18, 1989, my husband died. In a matter of seconds, I went from living in the light to walking in the dark.

And I've always been afraid of the dark.

I can give no compelling reason for my fear, but it's there. As a child, I went to sleep with a night-light. At night I still keep the bathroom light on and leave the door slightly open. When I enter our home, I hit the light switches; the more the better. No one will ever find me walking through a pitch-black field or along an unlit beach.

It's not just the physical darkness. I also strongly dislike being "kept in the dark." I'm one of those people who reads the first chapter of a book to get the plot and immediately skips over to the final chapter. Something in me has to know how everything turns out. Only then can I enjoy the middle of the book.

On that day in 1989, I began a walk having no idea how or where it would end or how long it would take. I couldn't have prepared for the darkness that began on that chilly, damp January afternoon.

Looking back, I sometimes wonder why I had no hint that anything terrible would happen. Even now, I'll convince myself that I've

fully embraced the light; and, without warning, I'm stumbling in the darkness again.

That Wednesday, January 18, started like any other normal day for me. I taught first grade at Stevenson Primary School in Alvin, Texas. Less than two years earlier, we had moved from Bossier City, Louisiana, to Alvin after Don, my husband, accepted the position of minister to youth at South Park Baptist Church.

Monday morning, Don left to make the hour-and-a-half drive in his Ford Escort to Trinity Pines, a Baptist retreat center north of Houston. The center was presenting a three-day conference focusing on church planting (how to start new churches). Don's big dream was to start his own congregation. He had been enthusiastic about the opportunity to learn more about how to get a church started.

Don had mentioned the conference to me several weeks earlier. I had sensed his excitement about the event and encouraged him to attend. "They invited spouses to come along," Don had told me. "Do you want to go with me?"

"Yes!"

I've tried to support Don throughout his ministry and felt that going with him would help me understand some of the issues he would face in establishing a new church. I decided to take three personal days and accompany him.

I didn't get to attend many events with Don, so I eagerly looked forward to spending time with him, as well as learning more about evangelistic outreach in communities. Selfishly I was looking forward to having some "away time" with my husband.

Even though there would be several hundred ministers present, I thought how nice it would be not to have one of our kids clamoring for our attention. Since moving to Texas, Don and I had had very little couple time to talk and enjoy each other's presence. In Bossier City, my parents had lived around the corner, so getting a babysitter wasn't a problem. We didn't have that luxury in Texas.

Seeing that the children were provided for didn't prove to be a big

problem. Nicole was in seventh grade, and her best friend was Kim Chisolm. Nicole already spent a lot of her free time with the Chisolm family; they assured me it wouldn't be an imposition for our daughter to stay there.

Our twin sons, Chris and Joe, were in the second grade. Another family at South Park Church offered to keep the boys while we were gone.

I had gotten the time off, we'd made arrangements for our children, and everything was set for us to leave Monday morning for Trinity Pines. We'd stay for lunch before starting back. That would give us a relaxing drive home to Alvin, with plenty of time to arrive for Wednesday night services.

But as it turned out, I didn't go.

Less than a week before the conference, a number of new students entered the school. Several of them ended up in my first-grade class.

After trying to figure out how to get the new children assimilated into the class and into the school system and still go with Don, I realized I couldn't get everything done before we left. It wouldn't have been fair to my substitute to deal with the new children along with the other issues a substitute encounters.

"I don't know their reading level," I told Don. "I can't leave them until I've tested them and know how they fit into class. I can't go with you." I was disappointed that I had to drop out. It would have been an excellent conference for both of us.

Don was also disappointed, but he understood.

Monday at school was normal for me—or as normal as a classroom can be with six new students, all first-graders, who transferred into the school in the middle of the year. It took a little more time and effort to get the six children tested, but by the end of the school day on Monday, I had accomplished that.

Tuesday went well. Wednesday morning was uneventful; so were lunch and recess. On Wednesday evening, all five of our family members met at the church as usual for the regular midweek evening events. We ate dinner at the church and then attended our individual activities.

Nicole was involved with Acteens, a mission organization for teenage girls. The boys were members of Royal Ambassadors (RAs), a mission group for boys in grades one through six. I was a choir member, and we practiced on Wednesday evenings. Don had planned to teach at what we called our midweek prayer service. So all five of us were involved. I expected Don to meet us at the church, and we planned to drive home in two cars.

Nothing unusual. Just our regular Wednesday arrangement. But that night we didn't meet at the church. In fact, it would be many Wednesdays before the five of us were together again at church.

The weather that Wednesday in Alvin was chilly and damp. At times heavy rain hit and then turned into drizzle. Either way, it was miserable. My classroom at school was located at the end of the hall, so I could hear the downpour beat on the metal covering over the sidewalks that led to the temporary buildings. As I peered out the glass doors that led outside, the world looked cold, damp, and dismal.

Then came my personal darkness. At about one thirty it began to descend.

I was teaching in my classroom about ninety minutes before the end of my day. I sat at one of the kidney-shaped tables, working with one of the four reading groups. The other students were at work at their desks. We had turned the classroom into a winter wonderland, and occasionally I would pause, gaze around the room, and enjoy looking at what we had done. We don't often have snow in South Texas, so it was a tradition to decorate the rooms with a winter theme to help the students understand what winter looks like in the North.

Students had made snowflakes from ceiling tiles. There were also winter pictures made with Ivory detergent snow “paint” and snowmen made of cotton balls.

One bulletin board still held the New Year’s resolutions written by the students after they returned from the Christmas holidays. Except for the small group with me, the children sat in the traditional brown desks with chairs. The beige-painted, cinder-block room didn’t have any windows except a small vertical one on the door.

A slight noise attracted my attention. I looked up from the book I held as the classroom door opened about three inches. Glenda Sosa, a tall, redheaded instructional aide, motioned for me.

I shook my head and pointed to the children as if to say, “I can’t stop now. I’m in the middle of a lesson.”

Glenda motioned again, and the intense look on her face said, “Come anyway. It’s important.”

I nodded, but it seemed strange. Ordinarily, she would have said something at the door or motioned to let me know what she wanted. Not this time.

I held up my hand to say, “Give me a few seconds,” then turned to the children. “I’ll be right back. I want you to be quiet at your desks while Mrs. Piper speaks to someone at the door.”

I put the book down and walked toward her.

“They need you in the office right away,” Glenda said in a voice that didn’t sound quite normal, “I’ll watch your class for you.”

I thanked her and left.

The first thing that went through my head was a question: *Have I aggravated a parent?* That’s one of the realities of teaching. During my career I had encountered a few students who didn’t like something I did or said and told their parents, who complained to the principal. There had been occasions when I’d sat patiently in a parent-teacher conference, listening to what a fellow teacher called “a complaint that you’re infringing on their little darling’s rights.” By working together we usually came to an understanding, and the year would continue

with no further problems. As I walked toward the office, I couldn't think of anyone who might have complained recently.

A second thought hit me: *Maybe I didn't turn in an important form, or I forgot something I was supposed to have done.* I was still new to the district and learning the ins and outs of what was expected.

My third thought was about our twin sons. Even though we kept them in separate classes, they still found ways to get in trouble. There were never serious difficulties—they were good boys—but being in separate classrooms didn't mean they couldn't find ways to be together. The restroom, the cafeteria, and the playground were twin-friendly areas, and places for them to conceive of ways to have fun.

Chris had always been outgoing, while Joe was quiet and reserved—at least until he got to know people. Together they could dream up all kinds of mischief (and often did), both at home and at school. I thought a time of earlier in the year when I had been accompanying one of my students to the office. Around the corner that day came Chris with his second-grade teacher, and around the other corner I spotted Joe with his teacher. I took my student by the hand, turned, and went back to my classroom. I said softly to myself, “I don't want to know about this.” (I never did learn what happened.)

The boys. It has to be the twins. I wonder what they've done now.

I walked into the office, and as soon as the assistant principal, Mary Nell Douglas, saw me, she got up from her desk, rushed over, wrapped her arms around me, and gave me a hug. A tall woman, who exemplified a professional manner in character and dress, Mary Nell was her typical warm, caring, and friendly self.

Even though it was my first year at Stevenson, Mary Nell had made me feel welcome and a part of the family. I especially appreciated that she offered advice in a positive manner. She was popular with the staff because we felt she had our best interests at heart.

Just one thing was off: an embrace wasn't her usual method of greeting me. Before I could speak, she said, “We've gotten a call from your church.”

“What—”

“Don’s been in a wreck. We’re trying to find out what happened.”

I stared at her, taking in what she had said.

In that moment, God spoke to me. I didn’t hear an audible voice, yet the message was so clear I couldn’t doubt the reality. *This will be difficult, but it’s going to be okay. Don has two broken legs and a broken arm.*

To some, that probably sounds strange, especially because it was so specific. God had spoken, and there were no doubts. I believe God whispered to me to give me the perfect peace of which the Bible speaks and to prepare me for what was ahead.

“It was a car accident,” Mary Nell added, “I don’t know where.”

I didn’t know where Don was, what had happened, or how seriously he was hurt, but a deep, inner calm came over me.

As I stared at her, I could see she was troubled, and I could sense her concern for me. “It’s all right,” I said. “It’s going to be all right.”

I took a deep breath to steady my voice and to keep from crying. At heart, I’m an emotional person, easily brought to tears; however, I’ve learned that I can sometimes control those tears. It’s a trick I learned back in high school when I started wearing contacts. Crying made my mascara run, getting into my eyes and wreaking havoc with my contacts. Over the years I’d become an expert at controlling my tears in public, but this time, even after God’s assuring words, drops of salty liquid slipped down my face while I tried to wipe them away.

“Who called?” I asked. “What do you know? Where is he?”

“I don’t know anything more. Not yet.”

I sat down in the big leather chair in front of Mary Nell’s desk and put my head in my hands.

Parts of the next half hour remain blurred in my mind. Two of my best friends from church rushed to the school. Suzan Mauldin taught at Alvin High School and left her classes to be with me. Susan Long

was a nurse on duty, but she was able to leave her job so she could come too.

Both were of medium height and slender. Suzan Mauldin had shoulder-length, dark hair, which she often wore in a ponytail. She was always tastefully and stylishly dressed. Her students loved her because she was accessible and easy to talk to.

Susan Long was the athletic type, blonde, and blue-eyed. Her typical outfit was a pair of jeans and a T-shirt. My son Chris says he remembers her having kind eyes. I guess that characteristic goes along with being a nurse.

Both women had reached out to me after we moved to Alvin. Like them, I was a young, working mother, and we connected. The Long and Mauldin families were active in the youth group, as well as teaching Sunday school, going on retreats, and serving as counselors at youth camps. Suzan and Susan had taken it on themselves (which was typical of them) to look after the newcomer—me.

I wasn't surprised to see them in Mary Nell's office. It's what friends do; they show up for each other.

Mark Evans, the minister of music from South Park, arrived at about the same time. Soon there were others—a small office full of people—all there to express their sympathy and concern. I vaguely wondered why so many had come.

It's not as if Don has died, I thought as I looked around. I already knew about the broken arm and broken legs before we had any report, so I was calmer than my comforters.

I was also surprised at the number of people who came. After all, we had only been in Alvin a short time. It encouraged me to know that so many individuals cared. Because Don and I were away from our own families for the first time in our married life, my new friends' presence touched my heart. The fact that they had made the effort and taken the time to come made me aware of their kindness and their affection.

As I greeted each one, I thought of something my mother often

said while I was growing up: “Actions speak louder than words.” I appreciated them even more because I knew that those who came weren’t there out of duty. That was obvious. They came because they cared. I hugged them as they entered and tried to thank them for coming. I write *tried*, because sometimes tears flowed and words wouldn’t come. But I realized that words weren’t needed, so I didn’t feel embarrassed when I couldn’t articulate my feelings.

Before long, more church members arrived and filled the office. In all, probably fifteen to twenty individuals showed up.

Most of them didn’t stay, but their coming meant so much. They walked into the office, hugged me, said a few kind words, and left. Others, like Susan, Suzan, and Mark, stayed the entire time. Some were teachers from the school across town where I had taught the year before, but several were church members, along with a few school administrators.

I still knew nothing—only what God had whispered to me. I didn’t tell anyone about that message, but I tried to assure them I was fine. After several minutes, I became aware that I was comforting them because they seemed more upset than I was.

While we waited for further information, I slowly surveyed the room and stared at my friends who had gathered. They probably said many things, but their words were lost to me almost as soon as they were spoken. However, they did one thing that was important and something I’ll never forget: each one of them wrapped his or her arms around me and held me. From every person, it felt like a spontaneous gesture, which made it even more powerful. In the years since I’ve learned that an embrace can often speak more, comfort more, and convey more love than the wisest or most profound words.

Mary Nell kept dialing number after number, trying to find out something, anything. Following up every lead she could, she was determined to obtain more information.

Susan grabbed an extra telephone directory and went into another office to use the phone. She called every area hospital to ask if a patient named Don Piper had been brought in.

At each hospital, the operator replied, "We have no patient by that name."

The ringing of the phone in the outer office interrupted the stillness in the room. Seconds later, the secretary transferred the call to Mary Nell's office.

She listened a few seconds before she announced to all of us, "It's the hospital in Huntsville." (Huntsville was about 130 miles away.) Someone was apparently giving her basic information, and she put her hand over the phone and said, "Don has been taken to Huntsville Memorial Hospital, just off I-45."

She listened again before she held the phone out to me. "Do you want to speak to Don?"

I could see the relief on her face. Her expression seemed to say, *See, it's not so bad.*

Of course I wanted to speak to him. I took the phone and said hello.

"We have Mr. Piper," a woman replied, identifying herself as a nurse. "Would Mrs. Piper like to speak with him?"

"Yes, I would. I'm Mrs. Piper."

"He is unable to hold the phone himself, so I'm going to put it up to his ear."

"Don! Don! How are—"

"I just wanted to come home . . . I just wanted to come home." After that he groaned and I couldn't understand anything else.

I will never forget that groaning because it was such a horrible sound, especially coming from someone I know is strong. Tears filled my eyes again, and I didn't know what more to say.

Susan took the phone from me and spoke with the nurse. In retrospect, I have to say I was in shock. I don't remember if I continued crying, but I probably did. I'm prone to tears when I get emotional, but it's not my nature to scream or shriek.

As soon as she hung up, Susan said in a very even and professional voice, "They are doing some assessment."

“What does that mean?” I think I asked, or perhaps I only wanted to.

“He’s at the Huntsville hospital. They’re going to assess his injuries and stabilize him before they transport him to Hermann Memorial Hospital.” Hermann Memorial is one of the anchor hospitals of the world-renowned Texas Medical Center.*

In fact, it’s the hospital I was born in while my dad was stationed at Ellington Air Force Base. “This much the nurse told me. Don has two broken legs and a broken arm.”

I knew that. I hadn’t told anyone that God had spoken, but the message from Susan brought immediate peace.

Everything was going to be all right. If God had been right about Don’s injuries, then he must be right about everything turning out okay. How little did I know what it would take to get to that point.

* The terms *Hermann Hospital* and *Texas Medical Center* are used interchangeably throughout this story.