

# OH GOD, I'M DYING!

How God Redeems  
Pain for Our Good  
and for His Glory

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NASHVILLE

NEW YORK • LONDON • MELBOURNE • VANCOUVER



## Chapter 1

# “WHATEVER YOU FACE, I WILL BE WITH YOU!”

If only his day would have ended as well as it had begun.

On March 3, 1996, 30-year-old Mark Smith, his wife Debbie and their 11-month-old son, Doug, bundled up for a 65-mile drive from their home in Marion, Indiana to Winchester, a smaller Indiana town. Despite the sun’s rays bathing the landscape, a cold breeze stung their cheeks as they walked to their Ford Taurus. Yet the warmth inside them, instilled by three recent positive events, more than compensated for the uncomfortable temperature.

Two months earlier, Mark had launched his new, challenging ministry as an academic administrator at Indiana Wesleyan University. In addition, he and Debbie were reveling

in their new role as parents. Finally, Mark was on the cusp of his doctorate, having recently submitted his dissertation to the dissertation committee at West Virginia University. Feeling the immense relief of finishing the writing project, Mark eagerly anticipated serving as a guest speaker later that morning at Randolph Friends Church. Having served five years as a pastor, few things kindled more joy within Mark than preaching the Word of God and meeting new people.

### **A Grace-Filled Sermon**

When Mark stepped behind the pulpit, he spoke on one of his favorite themes and passages. He dissected a heart-massaging text on God's ability and willingness to help weak people: 2 Corinthians 12:9–10.

The apostle Paul had been pleading with the Lord to remove what he called a “thorn in the flesh,” some type of impediment that Paul believed hindered his ministry. The Lord refused, citing the value of this limitation in keeping Paul humble. Instead of healing Paul, the Lord assured him of an even greater divine intervention: “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.”

Then Paul did an about-face. “Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore, I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.”

With exuberance, Mark explained how God turns the world's value system on its head. Instead of applauding human competence and self-sufficiency, God values neediness, a

poverty of spirit that leaves His people no other recourse but to depend on Him. God views our weakness as a spiritual asset, providing an opportunity to showcase His power in and through us.

Church members saw Mark’s beaming countenance, heard the intensity of his voice and observed expressive gestures that embellished the message. Throughout the sermon, Mark reiterated his main point: “*God’s grace is sufficient for any situation that we face.*” They watched and listened as Mark’s heart literally overflowed from his lips.

No one present realized that the first person to receive an opportunity to apply the message would be the messenger himself.

## **An Unexpected Detour**

When the service ended, a couple from the congregation with whom Mark and Debbie were already friends hosted them for lunch. With Tim and Esther Dotson, they enjoyed a satisfying meal and catching up on each other’s lives. Debbie and their baby stayed with the Dotsons when Mark left at 1:45 p.m. for an interview with the board of a different church. A United Methodist Church in the area was seeking a regular interim preacher while they searched for a new pastor. Mark relished the possibility of preaching more often.

What Mark couldn’t anticipate was the calamity waiting to happen just three miles from the Dotsons’ house. The driver of an oncoming car, his attention diverted, veered to the left out of his lane and headed directly for Mark’s Taurus.

*Wham!!*

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The collision sounded like a small bomb detonating, followed by the grinding noise of metal scraping against metal. The head-on crash crumpled the left front and driver's side of Mark's Taurus as if it were made of pliable plastic. The other driver's abrupt change of direction didn't give Mark time to brake or to swerve out of the way. With Mark going 45 miles per hour and the other driver traveling at 60 miles per hour, the impact was horrific.

The impact knocked Mark's car a total of 80 feet off the road and into the edge of a cornfield. The impact shoved the dashboard and steering column into Mark, pinning him to the seat. Metal from the left front fender area and driver side door slashed into his left arm and lower left side. Blood spewed from multiple gashes, spilling onto his clothes and pooling on the floorboard.

The blow temporarily rendered Mark unconscious. He awoke moments later, unable to move. Though shock initially mollified the degree of pain he felt, Mark knew his condition was critical. Smoke filling the car made breathing difficult. He saw the blood seeping from his body. *Could rescuers get him out before he bled to death?*



“For I know the plans that 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).



By instinct, Mark cried out to the Person he served and loved the most: *“Oh God, I’m dying!”*

Mark recalls the thoughts that roiled around in his head. “I knew I was facing eternity,” Mark recalls. “I didn’t want to die. I had lots of reasons to keep living. Yet while in that helpless, uncertain state, the comforting, sweet presence of the Holy Spirit enveloped me. I heard the Spirit whisper, ‘*Son, you are Mine!*’ I realized that going to be with the Lord would be a blessing, for I knew that my sins had been forgiven and Jesus Christ had bled on the cross to make heaven possible for me.

“Then my mind switched to another train of thought, as I wondered about the condition I’d be in if I survived. Was I facing lifelong disability? Would I be able to work? That’s when I heard another inside whisper from the Holy Spirit: ‘*Whatever you face, I will be with you!*’”

Mark heard the wail of sirens drawing closer and closer to the scene. Then the flash of red and blue lights from emergency



*Mark’s Taurus after rescuers utilized the “jaws of life” to extract Mark from the car.*

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vehicles streamed into the car. Moments later, the crunching of metal began as rescuers utilized the “jaws of life” to peel away enough metal to extract him from the car.\*

He wasn't sure he had a future on earth, but Mark felt the overwhelming presence of the One who controlled his future.

*Who was this college administrator and preacher who lay trapped in a mangled car for 45 minutes? What marker events in his first 30 years brought him to this pivotal point in a rural Indiana cornfield? What evidence of God's grace, which He had preached about so passionately that morning, had he already experienced? Would his past experiences with the Lord help Mark pass the formidable tests that lay ahead?*

*\*Rescuers airlifted the other driver to a hospital. He also survived the crash.*