

Waiting on God

MY HUSBAND, Shawn, answered the phone that night. Turning to me he said, “Marlena, your brother is on the phone. Something’s happened to your dad.” I felt a knot in the pit of my stomach as I reached for the receiver. “Kenny, what’s wrong?”

“Dad had an accident. He totaled your car.” At my dad’s unrelenting insistence, we’d exchanged cars a month earlier so he could get ours repaired for a cheaper price in Pennsylvania. “How is he?” I asked.

“I don’t know. We can’t find him.”

“What do you mean, you can’t find him?”

“We think he’s lost in the woods. Michelle and I have been looking for him since 4 o’clock this afternoon. The police called off the search because it’s dark. They think he was drunk and that he fled the scene. But I’m not sure. He might’ve hit his head against the steering wheel and just be out of it. I say that because we stopped at an old farmhouse near the accident. The farmer and his wife said dad knocked at their door and told them he was cold. When they asked if he needed any help, he swore at them and told them he didn’t. Then he left. They said he was all cut up and bruised and that he was almost incoherent. We’re going to keep looking for him. Ask the Lord to help us find him.”

Kenny told me that he and my sister, Michelle, would continue combing the woods for my dad. After I hung up, I relayed the details to Shawn. Then we begged God to spare Dad’s life.

God did spare his life. But after the accident my dad began engaging in extremely bizarre, erratic, and dangerous behavior. Two weeks after the accident, he quit his job, leaving him and my mom with no health insurance and no income. By that time, my parents were living temporarily with my sister and her family because they’d sold their property and were searching for a new home. But since my dad was behaving so recklessly—drinking and driving, getting into fights at bars, claiming he was a spy, hitting people up for money, allegedly sleeping with a girl half his age, and generally acting like a maniac—neighbors, friends, and family members feared for their safety. No one wanted him around. My brother-in-law insisted that my mom and dad leave their home. My parents were now without a place to stay, penniless, in the dead of winter.

A reprieve from the nightmare came when my dad was detained by police for a “302”—also known as a mental health arrest. We all breathed a collective sigh of relief. For the moment we didn’t have to worry that he would kill himself or someone



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else during one of his outbursts. In custody, my dad was diagnosed with bipolar disorder, a diagnosis he refuses to admit. Since his arrest and diagnosis, my dad has bounced back and forth between jail and mental institutions while my mom has bounced among the houses of family and friends.

I’ve spent a long time waiting on God to bring order and healing out of chaos. But I haven’t always waited well. For two months after the accident, while fervently begging God to heal



my dad, I was irritable and neglected my husband and daughter. Meanwhile, I spent hours on the phone with lawyers, judges, social workers, friends, and family in an effort to help my dad and to find my mom a home.

I finally stopped my fix-it-all frenzy when God lovingly confronted me through my husband. “Marlena,” Shawn said, “you have to stop. Stop calling. Stop everything. You’ve done all you can. You’re not doing yourself or us any good. Don’t let

your dad take our family down too.” It was hard to release my grip and wait on God in the midst of chronic difficulty.

Looking back, though, I realize God has used this waiting period as a form of discipline. Even though there has been little change in circumstances, God has been transforming me.

In the midst of my waiting, I’ve learned that God unmasks our true selves, revealing who we really are. Until Shawn confronted me, I hadn’t realized how obsessed I was with trying to get circumstances under my control. I thought that if I could just reason with my dad and find the right resources, I could fix the situation. When things didn’t go my way, I worried throughout the day and spent the night lying in bed trying to figure things out. Ultimately, God revealed that my desire for control and worry demonstrated that I didn’t completely trust him. God used the time of waiting as a mirror for my soul, showing me who I really am.

I’ve also learned that if we let him, God uses the waiting times in our lives to reorient us to new ways of being. After I became aware of my desire for control and my lack of trust, I had to repent. For me that repentance consisted of relinquishing worry and control and reorienting myself to a posture of rest and trust.

This painful situation has lasted far longer than I ever dreamed possible. But God has used these circumstances to cultivate patience in me as I wait on him to help my parents. Moreover, the presence and prayers of Christ’s body have sustained me. I have learned that I cannot wait alone; I must wait in community. I have learned to allow others to bear my burdens. And although initially I allowed the circumstances to rob me of joy, I’ve learned to look for traces of joy and thank God for every little gift.

Waiting on God is one of the severest disciplines in the Christian life. Yet the discipline of waiting is essential if God is to form us into Christ’s image. I am uncertain of my dad’s future. But one thing is certain. This time around, I will not be in a fix-it-all frenzy. I cannot fix it. Only God can. ■



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