

PREPARATION

*It was good for me to be afflicted
so that I might learn your decrees.
—Psalms 119:71*

1984-1986

In his book, *The Making of a Leader*, J. Robert Clinton writes: “Mature ministry flows from a mature character, formed in the graduate school of life. Ministry can be successful through giftedness alone; but a leader whose ministry skills outstrip his character formation will eventually falter.” After studying the life histories of many key Christian leaders, Clinton has concluded that most go through periods of intense suffering early in their ministries. Such “trials of fire” produce disciples who have learned to trust God, manifest a deep intimacy in prayer, and express deep qualities of “love, compassion, empathy, and discernment.” In short, suffering can be a vital preparatory period in forming leaders who can last.

For Kit and Wayne Danley, the mid-1980s were such a time of preparation. As Wayne puts it, “I was being broken and so was Kit.”

The news of Wayne’s cancer landed on a congregation already emotionally exhausted by tragedy. Open Door Fellowship had recently lost their first associate pastor, a 27-year-old father, and a 4-year-old boy, all to cancer, and a young woman to suicide. Church members rallied to provide the Danleys with much practical and material support—the church paid the young couple’s bills for an entire year—but few had the



emotional and spiritual strength to step into battle with them in prayer. Wayne himself was completely spent. He'd been living with undiagnosed depression and was feeling overwhelmed with life. "Before the cancer diagnosis, I remember taking a written stress test in a doctor's office. The test asked various questions and then assigned a stress score. A score of over 300 points meant that the respondent was in huge danger, in crisis, and headed for a personal disaster. My score was 400-something!" Wayne reports. "In a strange way, the cancer came almost as a relief." He explains: "When I got the cancer diagnosis, I felt like I'd been drowning in the ocean, treading water desperately, and the cancer was like a sandbar. I could put my feet down, hold my nose above the water, and rest." In addition, Wayne had been so depressed that the thought of dying and going to heaven actually sounded pretty good. Kit also tried to view the cancer as a disguised blessing. Thinking back, she said, "I remember the fear, but at the same time, all I had to worry about was my family."

Faithful friends Grace Thrall and Pam Ryan supported Kit emotionally and practically during the difficult days. "In the early days of my marriage, I would call Grace for any

"I was being broken and so was Kit."

—Wayne Danley

little thing, from a cooking tip to some normal catastrophe with the kids," Kit remembers. "I leaned on her the way a child would lean on her mother." For some in the Danleys' life, the cancer, Reuben, the financial problems, and Wayne's depression were overwhelming to the point of paralysis. But Pam Ryan hung in there; "she had the stamina for it all," Kit recalls with gratitude. Through these special women, Kit began to grow in being more emotionally honest and vulnerable.

With Wayne's cancer came a much-needed time of reduced busyness in Kit's schedule. That meant more opportunities to cultivate closeness to God. But true intimacy, Kit was learning, required not just time, but transparency. "I found myself kind of tip-toeing into a deeper level of honesty with God," she says. She remembers praying at length to her Heavenly Father in "spiritual-sounding words," and then briefly, at the end, admitting to Him her true emotional state. She felt God encouraging her to reveal herself to Him more and more. She began to journal about her prayer times. She became a regular visitor at the prayer garden at Canaan in the Desert, the grounds owned by the Evangelical Sisterhood of Mary in north Phoenix. She began trying to practice listening for God's voice. She says with a chuckle: "I was becoming an Evangelical mystic."

Urgent prayer and desperate dependence were needed, for Wayne's prognosis was dire. Tests completed after his initial diagnosis indicated that the cancer had spread throughout his lymph system. He underwent a dangerous and massive 6-hour surgery in December 1984 and it wasn't clear if he'd pull through it. Just prior, though, Kit felt the Lord give her a special pledge through Isaiah 54: 9-17. The text

“I was in a fiery furnace and God was doing a big, big thing in my life.”

—Kit Danley

records God’s covenant promise to Israel to grant it peace and unfailing love even in the midst of adversity—an oath similar to the one He made in the days of Noah and sealed with the sign of the rainbow. Kit sensed in her spirit that God was promising her that not only would Wayne be physically healed, but that He was also going to complete a work in Wayne and in herself that would show them His “life direction” for them. Kit vividly recalls sitting at the hospital, awaiting the outcome of the surgery. “When they wheeled Wayne out of the operating room, they left him briefly on a gurney in the hallway in front of a window,” she describes. “There had been a desert rain storm that day and it produced this giant rainbow, and it was visible through the window just above Wayne’s head!” She took it as God’s special sign from the Isaiah 54 promise—and could only laugh hysterically three days later when their friend, Dennis Martin, asked her if she’d happened to see “the biggest rainbow he’d ever seen” a few days before.

Wayne still had a long year of chemotherapy ahead of him that would reduce his 250-pound frame by a hundred pounds within a matter of weeks. But God made good on His promised healing. It was an amazing deliverance, but

Isaiah 54:9-17

- 9 “To me this is like the days of Noah,
when I swore that the waters of Noah would never
again cover the earth.
So now I have sworn not to be angry with you,
never to rebuke you again.
- 10 Though the mountains be shaken
and the hills be removed,
yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken
nor my covenant of peace be removed,”
says the LORD, who has compassion on you.
- 11 “O afflicted city, lashed by storms and not comforted,
I will build you with stones of turquoise,
your foundations with sapphires.
- 12 I will make your battlements of rubies,
your gates of sparkling jewels,
and all your walls of precious stones.
- 13 All your sons will be taught by the LORD,
and great will be your children’s peace.
- 14 In righteousness you will be established:
Tyranny will be far from you;
you will have nothing to fear.
Terror will be far removed;
it will not come near you.
- 15 If anyone does attack you, it will not be my doing;
whoever attacks you will surrender to you.
- 16 “See, it is I who created the blacksmith
who fans the coals into flame
and forges a weapon fit for its work.
And it is I who have created the destroyer to work havoc;
no weapon forged against you will prevail,
and you will refute every tongue that accuses you.
This is the heritage of the servants of the LORD,
and this is their vindication from me,”
declares the LORD.

This text was Kit’s most “precious promise passage” during the season of suffering through Wayne’s cancer.

WAITING

“I remember thinking one day in 1982, ‘I’m married to a church guy. I’m doing youth stuff with white kids. I’m a mom. When am I going to get to really start living my calling to Christian community development?’” Kit Danley says. She was 28 years old, and she was impatient. “At some point I read in a leadership book that the Apostle Paul went through

a 14-year preparation period before really entering into his calling. And I was like: ‘Ugh! Not for me!’”

Looking back, Kit now recognizes that often God puts His people through waiting periods. These are seasons for learning to lean into Him and to surrender to Him.

“Before the season of suffering in the mid-‘80s, I used to be way ahead of the Lord,” Kit admits. “I was always running way ahead of Him and then turning around and complaining to Him, ‘You are so slow!’” But after this season, she says, God was way ahead of her. “He’s patiently waiting for me, of course. But I’m not in charge anymore.”



Wayne, after two cancer surgeries
and chemotherapy

for Wayne there was even a bigger miracle God performed. “Somehow through all this Kit and I were able to stay true to each other,” he says. “It wasn’t easy, but we did.”

While the Danleys were experiencing this season of “refining fire,” God was also preparing Open Door Fellowship for new things. Lay leaders like Michelle Mazingo and Russ Yost had stepped up into leadership over the Food & Clothing Bank in Kit’s absence, keeping the fledgling effort afloat. Pastor Bill Thrall, Sr. was digging deeper into his own journey as a man called to mentor emergent leaders. And keynote speaker Viv Grigg, author of the landmark book, *Companion to the Poor*, had challenged the congregation at its 1986 Missions Conference to move more radically into ministry among the poor.

As Wayne regained strength, Kit returned to a more active role at the church. Initially, Bill asked her to invest her

newfound energies into a citywide discipleship program he was dreaming about. Kit agreed to work on designing such an initiative as part of her coursework in a distance-learning program through Fuller Seminary. The paper she wrote proposing the effort, though, received a B+, her lowest grade yet in graduate school. She handed it over to her mentor, but then told Bill, “I’m not called to do this.” She had an “overwhelming sense of confidence” that her ministry among the poor, which she felt had been put “on hold,” was about to be reborn.

Wisely, Bill accepted her analysis, and then invited her to articulate more specifically her vision for Open Door’s work in the community. “I went before the elders at Mel Shultz’s home and had the vision all drawn up on a big piece of paper,” Kit describes. “It was very holistic and included suburban partnerships. It was rooted in the local church. It was very incarnational, and it had language of evangelism, discipleship and leadership development.” She adds, “It was very different from what we had been doing. Granted, it was rudimentary, but it actually had the core components that mark the ministry today for the most part. The transformation that God had been doing in my life during this preparation season had birthed this larger vision.”

The response from the elders who’d gathered that night was unanimous. “There was a definite sense in that room that ‘this is from the Lord,’” Kit recalls. “The elders basically said, ‘This is a vision, this is right, and we want to anoint it and bless it. Go and do it!’” ●