

A Journey Through Grief

Through the loss of our daughter, God showed us that the only thing that mattered was to be in His will.

By Sally Barrett

The miles home seemed interminable as we ended our beach vacation that had begun so joyously. Our daughter Pammy had given her heart to the Lord during our church camp meeting that had recently ended. The few weeks since then had been so precious! I was just beginning to realize how wonderful it was going to be for the two of us to walk together as Christians, both serving the Lord. We had experienced a new feeling of closeness and harmony.

Now we were returning home without our Pammy, for our coastal trip had ended in tragedy. Pammy had drowned! She had been our only daughter, so precious to my heart. I had always wanted a daughter, and now she was no more.

Tragedy on the beach

It happened on a beautiful August day, the last part of our vacation. My husband and I were relaxing on the sand, enjoying the sunshine. Rob, our oldest son, was playing in the water with Pammy and ten-year-old Richie. We glanced up from time to time as they splashed and ran about in the water close to the shoreline, jumping the waves that rolled over the sand.

A sudden shout startled us from our relaxation. Richie came running to us, sobbing: "Rob and Pammy are in the water. They can't get out!" I'll never forget the dagger of fear that struck my heart. This couldn't be happening!

Looking back, I know it was only God who sustained me through the next hours. The lifeguards went out into the current that had pulled our children under, and after a time, they brought the limp form of our daughter to the shore. As they worked over her there on the sand, my heart cried out to the Lord, "Lord, You know the desire of my heart." I wanted my Pammy back alive and well, and yet even in that moment, I felt that she was His child. Little children gathered around out of curiosity. One of them asked if the girl had been baptized. I remember thinking at the time, How foolish a question! I wanted to tell them, "I know she is saved."

Pammy was gone

Our oldest son was taken from the water, and although he clung to life, he needed help too. He had swallowed much sand and water in his attempt to save his sister. An ambulance had been called and Rob and Pammy were rushed to the nearest hospital. As I rode in the ambulance with them, I remember touching Pammy and realizing that she was not here on this earth with us any longer.

The ride back to our home in Portland without Pammy was the hardest thing I have ever had to face in my life. Memories came back to me, one after another. She had been just one month short of sixteen, and had gone through the trials and problems of teenagers who have not yet given their hearts to the Lord. But things had been so different for the past few weeks! I had been looking forward to the good times we would have together now that she was saved. Our second son, Del, had come from Portland as soon as he heard the news, and was riding back with us. He said something I will never forget: "Mom, the Comforter, the baptism of the Holy Spirit, has been given to us. Now we can see the work of that Spirit in our lives."

God gave peace

It was true. He did help us. In all our grief, the Lord put a wondrous peace down into our hearts. Not once did a thought of questioning God come to us—only thankfulness that Pammy had been ready to go. We knew she was with the Lord, and there was an unspeakable comfort in knowing that one day our family would be reunited.



At home, we faced her empty room with all the girl things she had accumulated through the years. Days went on, and before long, the school year opened. At the time of day when she would have come home, I'd find myself listening for her footsteps at the door, but they didn't come.

Even though Pammy was gone, God was always with us. Nine years before this, He had prepared us to accept His plan when He changed our hearts and lives, and put His peace into our hearts.

My husband's mother had been a wonderful Christian, a real saint of God. One day she and a group of other mothers had gathered to pray for their wayward children to be saved at any cost. Those prayers were answered in a dramatic way.

A miracle on the railroad tracks

First, the Lord permitted a near tragedy in our home. It was summertime, just before the camp meeting. I had invited many of our relatives to our home for a family get-together, and we were visiting and exchanging family news. While we were picnicking, our one-year-old Richie crawled onto a train track in back of our yard. Suddenly, I heard the grinding and screeching of train brakes. As the train came to a halt, we realized our baby was missing.

What anguish gripped us! When we rushed to the tracks, the shaken conductor told us he had seen the baby on the rails. But there was Richie, sitting unharmed beside the tracks! The conductor couldn't believe that he was safe. He said there was no way he could have stopped the train in time to avoid hitting him.

Oh, how God talked to me through that incident! I questioned the Lord, "Why?" I even asked, "Do you want me to attend that old-fashioned church?" I meant the Apostolic Faith, the church where my husband's parents went. I had despised it all my married life because of its high standard of holy living. Now I wondered if that was what God was asking of me, but then I reasoned that God doesn't talk to people like that. It had been just my emotional upset at that time.

Sorrow came to our home

A few short weeks later, sorrow came to our home. My mother-in-law who had told me about her God, and had prayed for me, went to be with the Lord. We had nothing to console us, no strong arm to lean upon as we had nine years later when we lost our Pammy. However, through the pain of that loss, my husband was saved.

His father asked him to go to church with him one night, and out of respect for that Christian dad, he went. When my husband came home that night, his face was shining. Kneeling by my side where I sat on the davenport, he told me, with tears running down his cheeks, "I am saved." I knew in my heart it was true, although I had never experienced anything like it. I had joined the neighbourhood church and accepted Christ. I even taught Sunday school and tried to do my best to live a good life. But that night as I looked at my husband I realized I had never had the peace that shone on his face.

God showed me my heart

In my stubborn way, though, I told him, "You go your way and I'll go mine." However, God did not leave me in that condition. He began to show me what was in my heart—the bitterness, pride, self-righteousness, and the criticism against this church and its people.

A few nights later, while my husband was again at church, I was out in the rose garden pruning off the old dead roses. As I cut away the drooping blossoms, the dead leaves and branches, I felt I was snipping things out of my life. I would tell the Lord, "Lord, I don't want this in my life anymore. Lord, take that out. If You will make me a Christian like my husband, I won't do this anymore." Out there in the rose garden, I was really praying to God.

A week later, I went to church with my husband, ready to turn my life over to God. The Lord let me see that all my self-righteousness was as filthy rags in His sight. I felt like filthy rags. I saw all the criticism, hatred, and sin, and I wondered how God could love me. But He did! As I prayed with repentance that night, God put such wonderful peace and joy into my heart. In a moment of time, He took away the condemnation and the love for things I thought I couldn't get along without. My heart and life were filled with something far deeper and sweeter than anything I had ever known before.

The only thing that mattered

Through the years since that time, God has shown me that He can use all the happenings of our lives for our good if we will let Him. We can look back and see God's way and His plan for us even in tragedy. God permitted us to have a beautiful home, a happy family, a good business, and we were satisfied. But through the loss of our daughter, God showed us that all our plans and ambitions could be wiped out in a moment of time. The value of the things we had held so dear faded away, and the only thing that mattered was to be in His will.

During the months following Pammy's death, we were thankful for the missionary outlet we had at that time. Men from our church visited the ships which came into the Portland harbour, and that gave us many opportunities to meet foreign seamen, invite them to church, and tell them of our hope in Christ. We even took a Korean student into our home.

We moved to Korea

Six years after our daughter's death, we made our first missionary trip to Korea. Through the contacts we had made with the Korean seamen, we found many open doors there. Upon returning from that trip, we sold our home, transferred our business to our oldest son, and moved to Korea where we lived for about twenty years.

Many times when apart from our family, far from friends and home, the words of a song that came to me when Pammy was taken, have rung in my soul. As I knelt by my bed that night, the words flowed through my heart: "My Jesus, I love Thee, I know Thou art mine." It meant much to me then, and it means more to me today, whether sung in our own language, or in the language of the Koreans among whom we labour. Through grief and sorrow, through loneliness and pain, as well as in times of joy and blessing, the sustaining thought that Jesus is mine has been the foundation for my life.

Sally Barrett and her husband were missionaries of the Apostolic Faith Church, serving in Korea for more than twenty years. She was a faithful worker for God until her death in 1992