

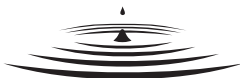
**TWIST
OF
FAITH**

ONE TRAGEDY SHATTERED HIS WORLD

TWIST OF FAITH

ONE CHOICE FREED HIM TO HEAL

RIDLEY BARRON



Ridley Barron Ministries
hope • healing • forgiveness

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*Dedicated to the memory of
loved ones lost and the joy of
new loves found. To God be
all the glory for showing us
the Hope we all can have.*

PROLOGUE

Good Friday, April 9, 2004, broke brilliantly on Hilton Head Island, South Carolina. Warmth and sunshine slowly awakened the countryside, providing a contrast to the cooler, cloudy days that had preceded it. It was a nice reminder that spring had arrived.

Even though my wife and kids and I were in the final hours of what had been an incredible spring break trip, our day started like so many others: Josh, our youngest, was the first to stir, followed closely by his sister, Abby, and older brother, Harrison. Other than the little hotel room the five of us were packed into, and the need to load luggage and toys into our van for the journey home, there was nothing unusual about the day.

Home was Douglas, Georgia, a small town of about 20,000 people in the southeast part of the state. This was where we had moved to plant a church in August of 2000. It was where my wife, Sarah Ellen, and the kids and I had lived for the past four years. Although the trip was normally about four hours, Sarah Ellen and I had decided to take our time in making our way home. It wasn't often that we were

able to get away like this. We had enjoyed the much-needed break from the demands of our ministry responsibilities and did not want to rush back into our daily schedules too quickly.

The first stop on the return trip was a leisurely breakfast at a restaurant on the island. Our kids paused to play with some ducks in the parking lot there before all five of us loaded back into our seats. The van's back end was packed with golf clubs, suitcases, a stroller, and several bags of newly purchased school clothes. I took my normal place in the driver's seat, with Sarah Ellen in the passenger seat next to me. Behind us was a split bench seat that held all three kids. Abby, age six at the time, sat immediately behind Sarah Ellen. She was our only girl and, of course, had Daddy wrapped around her finger. Her blond hair was radiant in the sunlight, and the back seat was filled with her laughter as she did her best to stay one step ahead of her two brothers.

Next to her, in the middle of the seat, was my oldest son, Harrison. At age nine, he was the mirror image of me in both his looks and his temperament. Much of our free time together was spent tossing a ball or wrestling around on our den floor. I also enjoyed watching him play sports and was pleased to be coaching his Little League baseball team, which was midway through its season.

Harrison had been a "surprise," conceived before Sarah Ellen and I had celebrated our third wedding anniversary. We called him our miracle baby too, because despite having

to fight his way through some first-trimester complications that Sarah had with the pregnancy, he'd been born a completely healthy and very vibrant little boy.

Finally, immediately behind the driver's seat was the newest addition to the Barron family, Joshua. Josh was approaching eighteen months old and was a constant joy. Many people had told us that parenting would get easier with our third child because by then, we would better understand what we were doing and what was required. I chose to believe that Josh just made it easy. His personality was so alive for someone so young. Both of his older siblings were absolutely crazy about him and would often fight over who would take care of him.

Just the night before, on Thursday, the entire family had enjoyed some time in the hotel swimming pool. We had used the opportunity to begin introducing Josh to the water and teaching him how to swim. To close out the evening, he and I had snuggled in our bed and watched the Braves game as he snacked on potato chips. It was an amazing evening.

As we traveled home, we made several other stops, including a short shopping trip—much to Harrison's chagrin. School would be back in session on Monday, and Sarah Ellen wanted to get a few more clothes for our rapidly growing kids. We enjoyed a late lunch and let the kids burn off a little energy on a playground while Sarah Ellen and I talked. Afterwards, we took a side trip into Savannah to pick up a few things for our church at a local Christian bookstore.

With Easter Sunday just ahead, there were some loose ends to wrap up in preparation for such a big weekend in the life of our young church. We had planted GracePointe Church four years before in Douglas. We loved those people very deeply, and they were very much a part of our lives.

Our last stop was about forty-five minutes from our house. Although the kids had a DVD to entertain them, they were beginning to get a little antsy. The older two needed to use the restroom, and Sarah and I were both ready to stretch our legs a bit, so we stopped at a convenience store in Hazlehurst, Georgia, to let everyone have a break.

As we returned to the van, I asked Sarah Ellen if she would mind driving the rest of the way to our house. I wanted to finalize my thoughts before delivering my Sunday morning message, but I had another motive as well. Just the day before, we had received the call to come back to Middle Tennessee. At the invitation of our former church in Nashville, we would be returning in a few months to suburban Franklin—a place we had lived for six years while serving a church there—to begin our second church plant. I was laying out plans for our new church and thought this last leg of the trip would be a great time to do some goal setting without interruption. Sarah Ellen agreed, so we secured our kids in their places and she and I swapped seats.

The rest of our trip home would be on rural roads through the beautiful South Georgia countryside.

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Farms, ponds, country houses, and a few fluffy clouds dotted the scenery over the next several miles as we drove back to our home in Douglas, Georgia, on that Good Friday.

Before too long, Sarah turned on her blinker and maneuvered onto a road that I was unfamiliar with. Looking up from my reading, I asked where we were going.

“Taking a shortcut,” she replied. “It will save us about fifteen minutes.”

Sarah Ellen had been selling custom jewelry for a couple of years, and this involved home shows and visits to local events. In the process, she had learned many of the backroads and shortcuts around Coffee County. She was letting me in on one of her new secrets.

I turned back to the book I was reading and my final preparations for the Easter message I would deliver on Sunday. Suddenly Sarah Ellen shouted, “Oh my word!” Then . . . darkness.

How long I was out, I’m not sure. But the sound of Harrison’s voice over my left shoulder aroused me from

unconsciousness. He was half crying, half shouting at me, “Daddy! Daddy! What’s happening? Are we okay? What’s wrong with Mommy?”

I awoke to a very dreamlike state. I couldn’t decide if I had fallen asleep and missed part of the trip, or if something completely different was going on. I just knew that my head was very clouded.

But when I heard Harrison’s alarming question of “What’s wrong with Mommy?” I got my first glance at the driver’s seat. My wife’s seat was laid back, her head against the headrest and her breathing very labored. Instinctively, I tried to reach over to her, but I couldn’t move—my legs were pinned in by the crumpled dash. I also felt severe pain in my left shoulder, and though my body was feeling very stiff and achy—calling to mind the first few days of football camp where every muscle in my body would ache from the hours of impact—everything else seemed to be in working order. (I would later learn that my left humerus was broken just below the shoulder joint, and my right wrist had been broken in the accident as well.)

I could not undo my seat belt, so I strained to touch Sarah Ellen. It was to no avail; I was stuck.

I was also very disoriented. The only thing that was clear was that something horrible had happened. Our van was settled backwards into a ditch about sixty yards from the intersection through which we had just passed. To my left, tall Georgia pines guarded the far side of the two-lane road.

The front windshield was shattered, and the dashboard was crushed. The window on Sarah's side of the van had broken out completely, and her neck was at a weird angle.

The next thing I knew, a man I had never seen before was peering through the driver's side window and trying to rouse my wife: "Ma'am! Ma'am! Are you okay? Can you talk to me?" The tone of his voice and the dire look on his face were unsettling.

Sarah was not answering.

When she tried to turn her head in my direction, I grew more alarmed and screamed, "Sarah! Sarah! Wake up, baby. It's going to be okay." Then I begged her: "Sarah! Sarah! Talk to me."

Still nothing.

In the distance I could hear approaching sirens. The stranger had worked his way around the front of our van and was now leaning through my busted window. "Sir, are you okay? Is there anything I can do for you?"

I ignored his question, my every thought focused on Sarah. She slowly rolled her head back to the center of the headrest, and a huge breath escaped her lips, almost as if she was sighing with pain. The man repeated his question more adamantly, "Sir, are you okay?"

"I think so," I snapped. "Would you please just take care of my wife?"

"Sir, I don't think there is anything we can do for her."

His words caught me by surprise and took my breath. I

began to cry. The tears burned as they rolled down my face. Cuts that had been opened up by flying glass in the accident were now filling with salt. I did the only thing I could think to do: I closed my eyes and began to talk with God. Years of Sunday School answers and Bible verses escaped me now. All I could manage were a few desperate sentences: “God, You won’t let her die. You can’t. It’s not fair . . . I can’t be alone; I won’t make it by myself.”

To this day, I will not forget the sense of peace that entered the car at that moment. Nothing about the situation had changed; I simply felt more in control of my thoughts and actions. I believe God wanted to remind me that I still had three kids to take care of.

I took one last glance at Sarah, still praying that she would suddenly turn and face me again with those beautiful blue eyes of hers. Nothing.

Harrison was screaming more loudly now, having picked up on the conversation in the front seat. “Daddy, what’s going on with Mommy? Why isn’t she talking?”

“It’s okay, buddy.” *Was I trying to convince him or myself?* “Everything’s okay. Mommy is just a little hurt.”

Wrestling with my seat belt, I twisted as best I could to try and calm him. My legs and arms were pinned so tightly that I could not see Abby at all. “It’s okay, buddy,” I reassured him. “Everything’s going to be all right. How’s Abby?”

“I don’t know, Daddy. She’s not moving or talking.”

“Abby. Abby! It’s Daddy . . . Can you hear me? . . . Are you okay?”

By this point, I was afraid that my worst fears were multiplying. But then I heard in a very hushed tone from the back seat, “I’m okay, Daddy. I’m alright.” I could tell by her voice that she was in shock, unsure of what had happened, afraid of what she didn’t know.

Wrestling even more with my seat belt, I twisted my head around as far as I could, wanting to lay eyes on my kids. For the first time, I was able to free myself enough to see in the seat behind Sarah’s. It was empty; Josh and his car seat were no longer in the van with us.

Panic filled me. I peered as far back into the van as I could to be sure that Josh hadn’t been tossed to the rear of the vehicle. He wasn’t there either.

I noticed that many of the windows had been broken out in the crash. Putting two and two together, I concluded that Josh must have been thrown from the vehicle when the van rolled over. Instantly, I turned to the stranger and screamed at him, “Sir, you’ve got to find my son! There is a third child and he’s missing! Go find him! He must have been thrown from the van!” With those words, the man disappeared to start the search.

Others who had arrived on the scene joined him, and together they frantically scoured the side of the road.

That’s when time began to crawl for me. I prayed harder. “God, this can’t be happening. It’s got to be a dream. Help

me. I am so scared right now. Will You take care of my wife? Please, let her be okay. She's got to be okay."

I was crying, begging, and negotiating all at the same time. "God, my kids don't deserve this. Neither does Sarah. Take me! The kids would be okay with her. They need their mom. Please, God. Please." I must have repeated the word *please* a hundred times. It was the one word that kept surfacing in my mind.

Over the course of those few desperate minutes in the van—amid all the chaos—something unexpected happened in my heart. First, God and I began a conversation that would go on for the next several months with increasing intensity. Second, and most importantly, God's presence became more real for me. I sensed him reminding me, "Ridley, you are not going to be alone. Haven't I always promised that? Now, just trust me. *We* will get through this . . . I promise."

The moment was broken by the voice of one of the firemen working to free my legs. "Sir, we've found your other son. He's going to be okay. They are getting him ready for transport in an ambulance now. Now, let's see what we can do about getting the rest of your family out of here."

One trip was over—one of the best vacations our family had ever had together. Another was just beginning—a much longer, more difficult one than I could ever have imagined. My family and I were about to embark on a journey like nothing we'd ever experienced.