



Two Easters

By **Bob Steinkamp**



"Another beautiful day in South Florida. It's 78 degrees here at your Spring break station. Now back to more oldies from the sixties and seventies," the voice coming from Tom's car radio crooned. Tom Allison was stuck in a traffic jam, but he really didn't mind. He was on A1A, the road that parallels the Fort Lauderdale beach. The afternoon sun pouring into the opened top of his motionless convertible was beating hot on Tom's balding head, but he barely noticed.

With an oldies tune playing in the background, Tom watched the beach and thought about the first time that he had driven that same stretch of A1A. It had been about that same time of year, over 30 years before. He had come to Fort Lauderdale with a car full of guys during spring break from Xavier College. Tom smiled as he recalled all the mischief they had been involved in. That wicked vacation was still the topic of conversation at every college reunion back in Cincinnati.

Life had been good to Tom, until several months ago. After graduation from college, Tom had married Betty Appleton, whom he had dated throughout most of their college days. They settled in Cincinnati. His career as a stock broker had seen its ups and downs during the past three decades. The first few years had been mostly down, but he and Betty were in love and determined to make their marriage work.

Two years after they were married, Brad, their first son was born. Tom and Betty agreed that she should give up her job as the manager of Blooming Flowers by Bud and stay home to raise their son. Tom had taken a night job as a musician across the river from Cincinnati in a Newport, Kentucky night club to supplement his brokerage commissions.

"I never thought that my hobby of playing the saxophone would put food on the table," he had joked more than once, while at the club. Actually, the saxophone had been more than a hobby for Tom. His parents had paid for his lessons during his junior high school years. Tom had played in the marching band at Seven Hills High School and had gone to college on a partial scholarship in music.

It was during those night club days that Tom was re-introduced to drinking and to drugs. It was also during those days, a quarter century ago, that Tom was introduced, by Satan himself, to being unfaithful to Betty. "My wife has changed since the kid was born. Besides, what does a fling once in a while hurt?" he had once remarked to Todd, the drummer in that band, while boasting about a new conquest.

"What does it hurt?" Our friend Tom Allison was opening doors to the enemy that would bring down his marriage. Granted, sin is fun for a season, but 25 years later Tom would realize who his party life was hurting: His God, His wife, and his family.

"Blasted construction!" Why do they have to do road construction on A1A during spring break?" Tom asked himself. He glanced at a woman on the beach who reminded him of a woman that he had been observing at the church that he had been attending for the past two weeks. "Wonder how that gal at church would look in a bathing suit?" he mused.

Tom had made that journey, not from Fort Lauderdale to Cincinnati, but from a married man a faithful wife and two sons, Brad, now 27, and Brett, age 20, to one of the number of people who call themselves "single", even though our Lord God calls them "married."

A year before, Betty had discovered what she had long suspected: her husband was unfaithful. After a few weeks of counseling, and many meaningless apologies, Betty had asked Tom to leave their home.

Tom had mixed reactions to that final confrontation. On one hand, he appreciated their comfortable home and knew that he would miss it. On the other, Betty was handing him the freedom for which long he had sought, or at least he thought. Tom could not understand why everyone, including his two sons were making such a big deal out of his leaving home. Tom was unable to understand the "big deal" because he had been blinded by Satan, who was trying to destroy the Allison family.

Within two months, acting on the advice of her friends, Betty had filed for divorce, citing adultery. Even her pastor had told her that, "You have to protect yourself. Besides leopards don't change their spots, and Tom will never change. Once adultery hits a marriage, even a good marriage, it's all over. God has someone better for you, or this would never have happened."

"Guilty as charged," Tom replied with a grin, while sitting in his attorney's office, listening to Betty's divorce petition being read to him. "Don't give her a thing. Let's make her twist a bit."

A few months later, it was Tom doing the twisting. Their divorce case had been assigned to a female judge with a reputation for being tough on unfaithful husbands. Tom had survived two days in court, but most of his and Betty's possessions did not. By the end of that second day, the marriage of Tom and Betty Allison had ended, at least by the world's standards. According to the standards of heaven, they were just as married to each other, in a covenant marriage, as they had ever been.

After he moved out, Tom roomed with first one friend and then another. Yes, he had some good time, with his buddies from the band, but he was miserable. Being divorced did not bring him all the happiness that he had anticipated.

"There's more to this divorce thing than having to do your own laundry," Tom told a friend, half-joking, but mostly serious. "I would not want Betty to know it, but I am miserable."

During those first months, reconciliation crossed Tom's mind more than once. Each time, he would stop by their home under the pretense of picking up something. It was strange for Tom to be knocking at the door of their own home, but that was Betty's demand. Each visit would end in a shouting match between the couple, although neither was able to recall afterward what had triggered the confrontation.

Tom was not the only one suffering. Betty hurt very deeply, but did not know what to do about it. "Something's just not right about being divorced and alone", she once confided in their pastor.

"That's because you are not adjusting," Reverend Bosworth replied. "You are a prime candidate for our divorce recovery class. We need to get you over this thing and healed so that you will be ready for Mr. Right when he comes along."

Pastor Bosworth was right. There was a "Mr. Right" for Betty Allison that God intended for her to spend the rest of her life with. She did indeed need to get ready for him. Her "Mr. Right" was named Tom Allison.

Tom and Betty were not the only ones hurt because of their divorce. Their young adult sons, Brad and Brett, also suffered deeply. Brad had been dating the same girl for several years, and they had been discussing marriage. Brett had stopped dating since his parent's divorce.

There were others damaged because of that divorce as well. They were Tom's clients at the brokerage firm where he worked. He had made several major mistakes that had cost both clients and the firm money. Finally it was suggested to Tom that he seek other employment.

Tom responded to an ad in a business journal for a salesman at a boat manufacturing company in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. After several phone calls were exchanged, he was invited to come down the following weekend for an interview. From the onset, Tom's anticipated career change was being misrepresented to his friends and to Betty. The "boats" he anticipated selling, became "yachts." "We will have someone pick you up at the airport if you come down," became "They are flying me to Fort Lauderdale for an interview." "We are looking seriously at several other applicants," became "They are dying to get me." "Straight commission," became "More money than I've ever made in my life."

The weekend of Tom's interview, his plane had not even landed when Tom knew that he had to have that job. His plane landed at Fort Lauderdale International Airport heading west, providing Tom a breathtaking view of the beach and Port Everglades with its many cruise ships waiting to sail. The blue seas, white beaches, and clear skies were quite a contrast to what he had left from only hours before in Cincinnati.

Tom had been offered a job that weekend, selling boats from a Federal Highway location. A week later, sloshing through Cincinnati's February snow, He loaded his car and headed south. Tom's

foremost desire was that the hurt that he continued to feel every day would go away after he moved away from Cincinnati.

Late that evening, tired from a day of driving an overloaded car, Tom stopped for the night at a motel in Georgia near I-75. He offered his charge card to the desk clerk and began to register: Mr. & Mrs. T. Allison. It wasn't until the clerk handed him the room key and commented, "You and Mrs. Allison have a nice evening," that Tom realized what he had done. "Oh well." He reasoned to himself, "Out of sight, out of mind. Once I get settled all the Betty stuff will go away."

The following morning, just after Tom passed the WELCOME TO FLORIDA sign, he stopped at a welcome station, where he sipped on cup after cup of free orange juice. "Wait 'til Betty hears about this," he thought, never realizing his mistake.

Bryan, one of the other boat salesmen with whom Tom worked, helped him find an efficiency in Oakland Park, and he attempted to settle in. Hardly a day went by that Tom did have another orange juice incident, recalling something that he just had to share with Betty, and then being jolted back to the reality that Betty would not be there when he went home that evening.

Tom's boat sales were few and far between. Being the newest salesman, he had been assigned to work evenings. The boat lot had plenty of visitors each night, but few customers. Most people just stopped to look at the huge lot of new boats sitting on trailers. Tom worked ten days before he actually sold a boat. Nevertheless his letters to both his former co-workers in Cincinnati and to the guys in the band in Newport read as though people were standing in line to buy yachts from him.

One evening, on his way home, Tom noticed a Skyline Chili restaurant on Federal Highway. Skyline in Cincinnati had been Tom's second home all through college. Many of his dates with Betty included a stop there. He and Betty had visited Skyline almost weekly throughout their marriage.

"Skyline?" Tom said to himself, "No way, it couldn't be the same. I've got to find out." Verbalizing his thoughts aloud had become a way of life for Tom. Little quips that he once would have shared with Betty he now said to himself, since he was alone most of the time.

Tom wheeled his car into the narrow lot and went inside. "I'll put them to the test and see if this is a real Skyline," Tom said to himself as he shut his car door. "Hi, welcome to Skyline," the waitress greeted, "What can I get for you."

"How about a four way bean and two coneys," he replied, sure the waitress would have to ask what he meant.

"Coming right up," came the waitress's cheerful reply, as she called out the order to the cook.

For the next half hour Tom imagined that he was back in Cincy. He looked at the poster of the city's skyline and recalled the names of prominent buildings. While waiting for his food, Tom took a few of the small round oyster crackers from his dish and lined them up on his napkin, just he had always teased Betty about doing. When he took the first bite of chili, Tom closed his eyes and pretended that he was back in Cincinnati, grabbing a bite to eat, on the way home to his beloved wife.

Tom's closed eyes quickly filled with tears as he thought about home. "What am I doing here?" he thought. Tom thought about how he had moved to a community where two million people lived, yet he knew only about six of them by name. For just a second, Tom contemplated how long it would take him to reach Cincinnati, if he were to head north right then. "No, she doesn't want me, he concluded in his confused mind."

"Everything all right?" the counter waitress inquired.

"Yeah, guess I got my chili too hot and it choked me up and made my eyes water," Tom lied back.

That wasn't the first sleepless night, nor would it be the last for Tom Allison. Most nights he watched television until he fell asleep. His phone seldom rang, and the people who came to his door were always looking for someone else.

Tom's mail was almost as silent as was his phone. Each night after work, as he opened that mailbox, something deep inside him, longed to see Betty's handwriting on an envelope.

Looking for a way to ease his hurt, Tom had attended Fellowship Church for the past two weeks. He had heard an advertisement for that church on the oldies radio station that he listened to. It sounded like the kind of place where he could find people much like himself.

Tom liked that church from the time that he had first walked in the door. The sermons seemed too "holy roller", he had reported to Bryan, his co-worker, but they had scores of singles and a band that was outstanding.

Although Tom said that he wasn't "looking," he made careful note of the attractive females at Fellowship. One, in particular, much younger than him, reminded him of Betty and how she looked several years before.

The following Sunday was Easter, and Tom invited Bryan to go to church with him, "to check out the chicks." Bryan agreed, and on Easter morning, despite the huge crowds and multiple worship services, Tom found seats for he and his friend directly next to the woman that he had been observing.

"Hi, I'm Sandy," she volunteered as soon as they sat down. "Happy Easter." After introducing himself and returning the greeting Tom nudged Bryan, sitting next to him. "Man, this is easier than the bars," he whispered.

As the service ended, the pastor asked the congregation to join hands while singing the closing song. Tom took Sandy's hand. Something about its warmth made Tom feel good. As the song ended, Tom gave Sandy's hand a small squeeze, which she promptly returned. On the way out, Tom and Sandy exchanged phone numbers and stories. She was a nurse at Broward General Medical Center, he learned, and in the process of a divorce from a Pompano Beach attorney. Since she had no children, Tom suddenly forgot about his own sons, and he, likewise, reported having no children.

Back in Cincinnati, after the separation Betty had returned to work at Blooming Flowers, where she had worked years before. She was an excellent manager and floral designer, and Bud, the owner, welcomed her return, since he was up in years and had health problems.

Betty was thrilled to see that she had not lost her touch for designing floral arrangements. Something about going back to where she had worked more than 25 years before made her feel young again. She enjoyed calling call out of town shops with orders and talking with people she had known back then. Many asked about Tom, and Betty always hated to hear the response after she said they were divorcing. One afternoon, she had just concluded another of those calls, and had received some more advice on what she should do. Bud's wife, Norma, was designing a basket as Betty hung the new order on their board.

"It's strange," she told Norma, "Everyone always has some advice or weird comment to give as soon as they hear the word, divorce. I just can't understand. Our divorce is a private thing in our family, but everyone wants to tell me what to do. You would not believe what I hear."

Norma paused, choosing her words carefully, and snapped the end off a gladiola as she began to speak. "Honey, divorce really isn't a private thing at all. Your divorce affects your family most of all, but it also breaks down a bit of our society."

"What do you mean?"

"We are living in an age when people changes spouses just about as often as they change cars. Look at all the children who are hurting, growing up without a natural mom and dad there for them. I don't know the answer, but there must be a better way than divorce."

Norma's last words reminded Betty of something that she was forever hearing on the car radio. A lady's voice would declare, "There is a better way than divorce. Your marriage need not end that way. . ."

Each time Betty heard that radio spot, she answered aloud, "Sure," and changed the station. She did not want to hear anything about divorce.

"I just thought of something," Norma added. "There was a lady years ago, Julie, I believe, at Chicagoland Flowers who did something to get back with her husband. Why don't you call her?"

"The last thing I want is my lying, cheating, husband back."

"Then why did you just call him my husband."

"Habit I guess. It doesn't mean a thing."

Betty had forgotten that conversation until a week later. Their divorce was final and Tom was moving to Florida. She continued to hurt very deeply. Betty was on the phone with Chicagoland Flowers, giving them an order.

For some reason she asked the lady taking the order, "Do you have a Julie who works there?"

"No, she hasn't been here for years, but I've heard all about her. The girl only worked here for a short while, but she is a legend."

"How so?"

"It seems that Julie's husband was a big shot at some company downtown and left her for his secretary. They were divorced, but she did something to get him back home. They were remarried and now he is the pastor of a church in Indiana. So many people still call here looking for her that we keep her number on the board. Sure hope they remember me that well years after I quit."

"What's the number?" Betty asked.

No, Betty did not call Julie Grant that afternoon. That phone number was tossed into a stack of other papers on the counter of Blooming Flowers. It did, however have a strange way of working its way to the top of the stack, time and time again.

One day when Betty was hurting deeply, that number had once again worked its way to the top of that stack of papers. Bud and Norma had gone to a doctor's appointment, and Betty was alone in the shop. Betty dialed the number without even picking up the paper.

"Hello, God bless you."

"How," Betty wondered, "could anyone who has gone through a divorce, possibly sound so happy?" Betty knew after hearing only three words that she would like this Julie.

"Hi, my name is Betty Allison from Blooming Flowers in Cincinnati. I'm not even sure why I am calling you, but I got your number from Chicagoland. My husband and I are divorced. He was unfaithful and I had to divorce him, but this thing isn't getting any better. He has moved to Florida to sell yachts. When does it stop hurting?" For the next hour, Julie Grant shared all about her marriage to Tom. She told her about CHICAGOMAN and the online chat rooms. She also shared about how Pastor Brown, now deceased, had confronted her Tom. Julie told about Tom's health problems and that morning in ICU when he had asked Julie to forgive him.

"Betty" Julie inquired, "tell me about your relationship with the Lord Jesus."

"Well, Tom and I are members of the church where he grew up. They have a divorce recovery class I attended once, but something was missing. Honestly, I haven't been to church for some time now. All I can see are couples and I come home, alone and hurting even more than when I went."

"Do you have a personal relationship with Jesus?"

"Well, as personal as anyone can. But how can anyone know someone they can't even see?"

"Betty, I have some good news for you. In fact, the best news that you have ever heard." For the next few minutes, Betty heard the greatest love story that she had ever heard. She heard the gospel story of God sending His only Son, Jesus to come into this world by being born through a virgin. Julie explained so clearly how Jesus had been crucified, paying the price of sin to all who would receive Him.

"Betty, does this make sense to you?"

"Yes, she replied through her weeping."

"Would you like to receive God's gift of eternal life right now?"

"Yes, yes I would."

Julie led her new friend and sister in prayer, asking the Lord to forgive her of her sins, and inviting Him into her life. Both women were weeping as they concluded. "I feel so clean, so new," Betty sobbed. "Until now, religion had always been just an hour on Sunday morning. It was a ritual, not something personal for me. How can I ever thank you? I need to call Tom and tell him who I discovered today."

"No," Julie replied. "I don't think that is what the Lord would have you to do just yet. You see, God will change Tom by your prayers, not by your words. I have an idea. Easter is next week. Do you have any plans?"

"Do I have any plans? Julie you know what it is like to be divorced. No, my calendar is not too full for that day."

"I have an idea. You are only a few hundred miles from us, so why don't you come over for the Easter weekend? You can stay with us and go to church on Sunday and hear Tom preach. We can eat a quick lunch and you can start home before dark."

"Julie, you don't even know me, and you're inviting me to stay with you? I don't know what to say."

"Just say yes, and I will give you some directions."

"All right, if you are sure," Betty consented. The Lord had not allowed the phone to ring for the entire time the two women had been on the phone. The delivery man was out and not a single customer had come into the flower shop to interrupt this divine appointment.

Betty's eyes were still red when Bud and Norma returned from their doctor's appointment. "Is something wrong, honey?" Norma asked.

"No, no, everything is fine. But I want to tell you what just happened." Betty related her entire conversation with Julie Grant. After they heard about Julie's invitation for the weekend, Bud had a comment.

"Honey, that car of yours is just not in good enough shape for you to take it on the road by yourself. How about if you swap cars with us for the weekend and take our new car? I like what you heard from this Julie and want to do our part to help out."

"I can't believe it!", Betty began to sob. "Julie told me about how I needed to pray about my needs and that God would answer my prayers. Just before you came in from the doctor, I had tried to pray and ask God to help me get to Julie's for the weekend. Thank you so much." Betty gave the fragile, elderly Bud such a hug that it almost knocked him over.

Although the shop was swamped with Easter orders, Bud and Norma insisted that Betty take off the afternoon of Good Friday. Shortly after noon, she headed west in the Baxter's luxury car, with a beautiful centerpiece, arranged by both Betty and Norma carefully secured on the back seat.

Betty found the Grants to be a couple in their early sixties, and two of the most loving people that she had ever met. It was difficult for Betty to imagine they had marriage problems.

That evening, before going to bed, Julie handed Betty a small paperback book, titled CHICAGOMAN. It was the account of their marriage problems and of God's healing that home. Betty was awake late that night, reading her new book.

Late that night, safe behind the closed bedroom door, Betty cried out to God as she had never done before. "God, what do You want me to do? Please forgive me if I gave up on Tom too soon. Help me God, I am so confused and hurting so much. O God please help me."

Pastor Grant's church had a work day at church on Saturday, in preparation for Easter. Although he really did not need to be there, Pastor Grant spent the day at church, allowing Betty and Julie to be together alone most of the day.

Julie answered Betty's questions about how the Grant marriage was restored. She taught her about getting a word from the Lord regarding her own marriage. Greatest of all was the hope that Julie shared, not in her husband, but in what the Lord could do.

Saturday night, the Grants took Betty to a nice restaurant. "I remember my budget during those days when the Lord had to be my husband," Julie commented. "This dinner is our treat."

Betty was amazed at Pastor Grant's openness as he talked about some of what her Tom must be going through. "I know. I've been right there," he interjected more than once during the conversation.

Sunday morning was a blessed experience that Betty will never forget. "A friend of Julie's must be the secret phrase to have everyone greet you here," she joked with Julie. "What a super church."

Betty was amazed at that Easter service. Pastor Grant and all his congregation, prayed to the Lord, sang to Him, and worshiped Him just as if he were right there in the sanctuary with them.

At prayer time, Pastor Grant invited people who were praying for a loved one to join him at the altar. Although Betty had never before publically responded in any worship service before, she was one of the first at the altar, with Julie quickly joining her. Pastor Grant prayed as though he were talking about no one but Betty's Tom. This was also the first time that she had wept openly at a worship service, but it would not be the last.

That afternoon as Betty prepared to head back to Cincinnati, she said good-bye to the Grants as though they were long time friends. She had never met anyone with whom she felt as comfortable as with that couple.

On the way home, Beth heard from the Lord. She did not know just how it happened, but with the setting sun behind her, she prayed and took a stand with God for Tom's salvation and the restoration of her marriage.

"Father, this is only the second time I have prayed out loud, since I was a kid, but I just want to thank You for all that You have shown me this weekend. Lord, I don't know how you will do it, but I will not

give up on my husband any longer. Help me, Lord to share what little I know of you with Tom. Amen."

During the week after Easter, Betty began a journey with the Lord that cannot be described. She discovered a group of other female standers in Cincinnati and met with them weekly. One lady introduced her to a new church. Soon she had other people believing and praying with her for Tom's salvation and for his return to their marriage.

Although 1,150 miles away, Tom's church attendance improved during that same time. He and Sandy could be found sitting in church together each week. Their going out for coffee as friends soon led into dating. In only a few weeks, as soon as Sandy's divorce was final, Tom had moved into her Bonaventure apartment. His schedule had changed to days, so that the way was cleared for both Tom and Sandy to attend divorce recovery classes at church together.

Someone at church discovered that Tom was a proficient saxophone player, and he was invited to join their praise band. Tom enjoyed that experience. The words seemed foreign to him, but he appreciated the tunes being played by the instrumentalists.

Tom had made some contacts at the Musician's Exchange and soon had a job playing his saxophone at a night spot on Lauderdale beach. Soon he was making more playing the sax than he was trying to sell boats, and "retired" as a "yacht salesman," as he wrote to a friend in Cincinnati.

Shortly after they moved in together, Sandy began to pressure Tom to get married. He certainly never told Sandy, but something about marrying her just did not seem right to Tom. Somehow he still felt married to Betty.

"Honey," she began one evening, "I ordered return address labels today, so I made them Tom and Sandy Allison." Sandy paused, awaiting his response.

"Uh, well, that's not quite the case.

"No, but it will be soon, right?"

"Uh hu, I suppose."

"Just how long are we going to continue this living arrangement without getting married? When you moved in here, I assumed that we would be married soon. I am single and you are single, so what's the problem. You always say that you love me."

"I do love you, but it just doesn't seem right to get married yet. Maybe it will be different after we complete those divorce adjustment classes, okay."

"I am telling you now, either you marry me soon or move out and I'll get on with my life," Sandy concluded the conversation.

Although God's timing was perfect, Tom did not think so when Sandy brought their mail upstairs the next afternoon. He recognized the handwriting on that envelope as soon as he saw it. The letter bore a

yellow forwarding sticker from his former Oakland Park address. He stared at Betty's return address. He knew from the colored card-shaped envelope that this was not a letter about business matters.

"Aren't you going to open your mail?" Sandy inquired. She had taken a position just behind Tom's shoulder, where she was going to be able to see whatever was in that envelope. Although the return address did not include a name, she knew it had to be from Betty.

Tom slowly and deliberately began to open his mail. He felt like the kid that had just been caught with his hand in the cookie jar. "We're divorced," he thought. "I'm not responsible for whatever she has sent me."

It is amazing how prodigal spouses have a way of sensing when their mate takes a stand for restoration of their marriage. Both Tom and Sandy seemed to know whatever was in that envelope that he was fumbling with must be about his marriage to Betty.

Moving with all the deliberate actions of someone opening an Academy Award envelope, Tom finally withdrew a greeting card. It was indeed a greeting card from Betty. The cover showed a Bible and red roses and read, "Thinking of You."

The printed text inside expressed the senders's desire that the Lord God was meeting every need in the recipient's life. The card was signed, "With love, from your wife for a lifetime, Betty." Tom felt good just seeing Betty's handwriting.

"Turn it over. There's something written on the back," Sandy volunteered. Tom had hoped that she had not noticed. He pulled the card closer to himself, in an unsuccessful effort to shield the text from Sandy's view, and began to silently read the words:

"Tom, Please forgive me for my part in causing our marriage to fail. I was wrong to divorce you. I gave up on you, but God hasn't. The Lord has touched me and is changing me to be the wife that you need. I have taken a stand with Him and am praying for the restoration of our marriage. I will wait for you until God brings you home, no matter how long it takes. Love, Betty." Underneath was written Mark 10:27. Even though Tom did not own a Bible, he was most interested in knowing what that verse meant.

"She's just not coping," Sandy exclaimed. "I think it's time for us to get married--unless you intend to go back to a frozen wife in frozen Cincinnati. Well, what is your answer, Mr. Allison? I want to know right now!"

"Well," Tom paused, "I suppose we could get married sometime, maybe."

"Sorry, Tom, that's not what I wanted to hear. Either you ask me to marry you right now, or pack your bags and leave."

Tom had never felt so threatened in his life. "How did I get in this whole mess?" he silently pondered.

"Tom, I am waiting. What is your answer?"

Having limited funds, and no other place to live, Tom blurted out, "Let's get married."

"Great, honey!" Sandy's voice bubbled with excitement. "I'll call Fellowship Church and see what we need to do."

For the first time since his dinner at Skyline, Tom considered loading up his car and heading north on I-95 to Cincinnati, putting the entire Florida nightmare behind him. He did not do so.

Less than a week later, Tom found himself sitting in an associate pastor's office at Fellowship Church with Sandy, preparing for marriage.

"You have both been married before. It didn't work then. What makes each of you think it will work out this time?" Pastor Chuck Cosgrove inquired.

"Well," Sandy replied, "The first time I was just too young and my second husband was verbally abusive and unfaithful."

"First time, second time?" Tom wondered. "I did not know that she had been married twice before. I am about to become husband number three. Something's just not right here."

Pastor Chuck replied, "You are certainly right, Sandy. That is why the Bible has the escape clause for unfaithfulness. How about you, Tom? Why is this marriage going to work."

Tom had already formed his reply in his mind. "There was unfaithfulness in our marriage, also." Tom did not volunteer that Betty had been faithful, and that he had been the unfaithful one.

"It sounds to me like you guys are on the way to a great life together," Pastor Chuck concluded. "Let's check the calendar and see what is available."

Before leaving Fellowship Church that afternoon, Tom suggested they visit the bookstore. While Sandy browsed through books about love and marriage, Tom headed straight for the Bibles. He secretly wanted to know what that verse meant that Betty had sent him in her card. With some difficulty, Tom found the Gospel of Mark, and then turned to chapter 10, verse 27: "With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God."

Was it really possible that God could straighten all this out and avoid him having to become Sandy's third husband? He was about to marry a woman he had only met at Easter. "No way," Tom concluded, "Not even God could straighten out the mess that I am in."

The following Saturday at 3:00 PM in Pastor Chuck's office, Tom and Sandy thought they were getting married. In truth, they were only attempting to legalize their adultery, because in the eyes of Almighty God, each one already had a covenant spouse. Tom even had a spouse who was praying and standing with God for the restoration of their marriage.

Their honeymoon consisted of a dinner party with a few friends, and then going home to the apartment in Bonaventure where they had been living together for a few weeks. Sandy officially ended that honeymoon by her comments Sunday afternoon.

"I think you need to let Betty know that you are married so that she will quit trying to hang on to you," she said.

"All right, I'll give her a call." Deep inside his being, Tom looked forward to hearing Betty's voice again.

"I don't think that is necessary. Call one of your sons instead."

Tom was embarrassed that he had not called Brad, his oldest son, in so long that he could not remember the number. Finally, Tom found the number in his address book.

"Hi, son!" Tom began in an upbeat way that caused Sandy to smile. "How are you?"

"What's wrong dad?"

"I just called with some good news," he continued, evoking another smile from Sandy. "I got married yesterday to a wonderful gal here in Fort Lauderdale that I met on Easter. You will really like her, son."

Brad provided no response at all.

"How about letting your mother know?" Tom requested.

"No sir," came the reply. "You got our entire family into this mess, so do your own dirty work. If you want mom to know, you tell her yourself. You belong here with mom, not with some tramp in Florida. Dad, grow up. You are not on some fantasy vacation. Get back to reality!"

"All right, son. Thanks. Good-bye."

"What did he say, Tom?" Sandy inquired.

"He sends his congratulations."

"Tom, there's something else we need to talk about," Sandy was dropping the other shoe. "Do you really think it's fair that I work ten hours a day at the hospital to support us, while you sit around? Blowing that trumpet for a few hours three or four nights a week isn't much of a job for a husband to have."

"It's not a trumpet. It's a saxophone."

"Whatever, it is still like play instead of work. I want you to find a day job doing something."

Tom knew that the bass player had a wife who had also made that same request. The man had become a bag boy at Publix Super Market in Southport Shopping Center, across from Port Everglades.

"It's easy work and you meet interesting people," Steve had remarked once, "Unlike this place, you get to go outdoors. Best of all, it makes our old ladies feel we're working."

By Wednesday, Tom could be found four hours each day at Southport. Wearing an orange shirt and green apron, asking, "paper or plastic bags?" Steve had been right. This was a fun job. He did meet

interesting people, from all over the world, many of them tourists from the Port area. He also met women, some of whom made Sandy look dull and unattractive.

Friday afternoon, on his break, Tom went to the pay phone out front of the store, called Directory Assistance for the number of Beautiful Flowers by Bud in Cincinnati, and dialed the number. He was excited to hear Betty answer.

"Hi, Betty, this is Tom. How are you?"

"I miss you a lot, but the Lord is taking care of me until you come home."

Tom had never heard Betty talk that way. A bit taken back by her comments, he blurted out the reason for his call. "I just wanted to tell you that I got married last Saturday to a wonderful girl who you would really like. We met on Easter at church."

There followed dead silence on the other end of the phone.

"Betty, are you all right?" Tom asked.

"Yes, I'm fine," came Betty's reply. Tom could tell from her voice that she was crying. "Tom, I can't talk at work. Can you call me tonight?"

Not wanting to hurt Betty any more, Tom agreed to call her that evening at home.

Betty immediately called Julie Grant, with whom she talked often. "It's all over," Betty sobbed, "Tom got married. Now he will never come home!"

"Remember," Julie responded, "that God's delays are not God's denials. That piece of paper they received means nothing to your stand for a restored marriage. God recognizes you as Tom's covenant wife. Don't you dare let this trick of Satan throw your stand for a loop!"

"I'm trying not to," Betty replied, "but it hurts so much to know that someone else is calling my husband her husband."

Remember what I taught you about the enemy's big guns?" Julie asked.

"Yes," Betty sobbed, "he seems to bring out the big guns when the victory is almost here. But I asked Tom to call me tonight. What am I going to say?"

"The same things that you would have said to him before you knew. Just continue to show him the love of the Lord, that unconditional love, you know, love without conditions. Love Tom on the phone tonight the same way that the Lord loves us, even when we don't deserve it," Julie instructed.

"Don't you realize," she continued, "What a grand opportunity the Lord is giving you through this non-covenant marriage to communicate with your husband? We will be praying for you guys tonight."

"Thanks. Even through all this stuff about Tom getting married, I am beginning to see the hand of God. Julie, this could be it!"

"It could be it, or could just be the Lord getting you prepared for it. Either way, let's praise Him for everything that He is doing. By the way, did I tell you that my Tom and I are praying about going to a pastor's conference in Fort Lauderdale in two weeks? Another pastor and his wife had plane tickets and are now unable to go."

"Great! Your Tom can go see my Tom and straighten him out."

"Whoa," Julie fired back. "Haven't I taught you anything? Now who would be at work if we forced open that door, God or us? Besides, I doubt that my husband will visit many yacht dealers in Fort Lauderdale, even if we do go. I just thought that it would be grand to be in the same town as your prodigal and for us to be praying for him."

"You're right, Julie. Hey, thanks for being my friend and keeping me on track."

All that afternoon, Tom thought about the call that he had promised to make to Betty that evening. There really was no reason for him to call back, but it had been good to hear her voice, and after all, he had said that he would call.

That evening he called Mort, the band leader, and told him that he might be a few minutes late. Armed with an ample supply of quarters, Tom sought out a private phone booth. Obviously, this was one of those calls that could not be made from home with Sandy around.

After passing several possible locations, Tom pulled off State Road 84 into a quiet shopping center behind Wendy's restaurant. Leaning against his car, he dialed his former home number and began to deposit quarters.

"Hello?"

"Hi, it's me."

"Two calls from my absent husband in one day. I am a very fortunate woman."

"I wish you wouldn't call me your husband. Like I told you, now I'm somebody else's husband."

"All right, but God and I will always consider you to be my husband, and I am praying for you. Did you receive the card I sent?"

"Yeah, Sandy and I both received it. That's what caused her to make me get married."

"You didn't want to get married?"

"Just not now, but it will work out all right, I suppose."

"Tom, is your little Easter bunny pretty?"

"She looks a lot like you, but not as nice."

"Thanks, honey. I appreciate that."

"I guess that slipped out."

A band on the beach was missing one saxophone player that night. Tom was on the phone with Betty, his covenant wife, until he ran out of change. Betty then offered to call him back. Their conversation had its up and downs, but Betty gave God all glory that they were talking.

Throughout the call, she was able to express to her husband time and time again that she was praying for his return to the Lord and to their marriage.

Tom went on to the band, feeling good, and glad that he had made that call. He had captured, for a short while, that peace that he had always experienced at home, and that had escaped him since their divorce.

Several days later, Tom had one of those, "Wait until I tell Betty about this!" moments. He had wheeled a cart of groceries out for a woman wearing sunglasses and a scarf. The outline of the face resembled a famous actress. After her groceries had been placed inside a Mercedes, Tom just had to ask. It was indeed her! She had offered to autograph a photo from the car for Tom. For some unexplainable reason, he had requested a second photo, signed to Betty. Sandy had been momentarily forgotten in that moment.

Tom felt really dumb as he wheeled the empty shopping cart across the huge Southport parking lot. What should he do? Sandy would have an absolute fit should she ever see something that she would really desire, but autographed to Betty. Yet, that photo was almost a collector's item. He couldn't throw it out.

On Tom's break that afternoon he went to the post office sub-station inside the card shop next door to the grocery and mailed the photo to Betty. It felt good to be writing the address of the Allison's Cincinnati home on the mailing envelope. The clerk helping him pack up the photo saw what it was and exclaimed, "How in the world did you get this? Wow! You must really love this Betty to have gotten this for her."

Tom walked outside and onto the sidewalk with those words ringing in his head. "Do I really love Betty?" Tom asked himself, "she was a good wife for twenty five years, and now it sounds like this religion thing has only made her better." Just then he passed the pay phone on the wall and stopped to call Betty. He had to tell her there was a surprise coming in the mail for her. "Strange," he thought as he dialed, "how I remembered the number of the flower shop."

For the next few days, he had to call Betty every day to see if her surprise had arrived. She always ended each call with, "Don't forget, I'm praying for you."

When the photo did arrive, Betty was thrilled. It was signed, "To my friend Betty. It was a 'pleasure' doing business with your husband." Betty assumed Tom had sold the actress a yacht. She had no way of knowing the actress had taken off on a grocery store motto, 'Where shopping is a pleasure', from the store where Tom was a bag boy.

Tom's daily phone calls to Betty continued, even without a specific reason. They were always brief, but pleasant, ending with that same, "Don't forget, I'm praying for you." Soon Tom was looking forward to hearing those words, and knowing that Betty really was praying for him.

About a week later, Tom was having a bad day. Sandy had been on the warpath that morning about something, probably money. Then he went out to discover that someone had cut through the top of his old convertible and had stolen his car radio. That afternoon, he had allowed a grocery cart to get away from him and roll into a fancy car. Although it made only a small mark, the owner was irate, and the store manager took it all out on Tom.

Soon afterward, Tom took his break and headed for that same telephone for his daily call to Betty. This call was different. "Stop praying for me!" he roared, "you are ruining my life! You and this standing thing are driving me nuts. I'm never coming home. You hear me, NEVER! Now get on with your life and leave me alone." By this time, Tom was screaming into the phone.

"Tom, I love you too much to ever stop praying for you. Good bye." Betty's ending the call that way did not allow Tom to hang up on her as he has anticipated. He stood on that sidewalk, holding the phone and became aware that several passing shoppers had been watching him rant into the phone.

"What are you looking at?" Tom barked at one. "Get a life of your own and stop nosing into other people's business, you creep!" As soon as he had said it, he regretted it. "What is happening to me?" he asked himself, "I have never yelled at a stranger before. Betty is driving me nuts."

No, Tom, my friend. Betty is not driving you nuts. She has contacted you only one time, by card. Remember, it is you who has been calling her every day. The Holy Spirit of God is convicting you of some wrongs in your life.

That afternoon, Tom carried out his "paper or plastic?" routine, feeling remorseful for the telephone incident. He didn't know exactly what to do to correct what he had said to Betty. Neither did he know that Betty had already forgiven him for everything that he had said that day. In fact, she was now forgiving Tom every day for anything, known or unknown, that he had done that very day.

The manager of the store had asked Tom if he could stay over for a few extra hours that day. The band did not play that evening, and rather than go home to more of Sandy's wrath, he agreed.

That afternoon, Tom was wheeling groceries out for a middle-aged man. Tom made a habit of sizing up his customers. This one seemed to be happy and friendly, as he remarked, "I always feel guilty when someone older than me brings out my groceries."

"No problem, it's the store's policy. Glad to help."

"You seem, well, more on the ball than most other bag boys." Glancing at the name tag on the green apron he asked, "Where are you from, Tom?"

"From Cincinnati, but I sure like it in Fort Lauderdale. I'm a musician at night, a sax player, and just do this for a few hours a week to get out of the house and get some exercise."

As that unknown customer unlocked his passenger side car door, Tom spotted two or three books lying on the car seat. They were titled, "Standing After the Prodigal Returns." "Standing," Tom thought, "that's the word that Betty uses. Prodigal, return? No, it couldn't be the same."

As the man moved the books aside to make way for his groceries, Tom commented on the title. "That's an interesting name for a book. Can I ask what it's about?"

"Sure. It is about praying for an absent spouse, and then continuing to pray after God brings them home."

"Do these, ah, prodigals, ever come home?"

"They sure do, every day. Here take a copy. You might enjoy it."

"No thanks, I am happily married. Appreciate the offer though." Deep within, Tom wondered what was in that book. Attempting to change the conversation, Tom looked up at a huge airplane on final approach to the Fort Lauderdale International Airport. "Do you ever wonder who all those people are?" he asked.

"Do you ever wonder who all those people are?" Julie Grant asked her husband as she looked out the window of their plane as it descended into Fort Lauderdale. Reverend and Mrs. Tom Grant were coming to attend a three day Pastor's Conference.

"Yes, I suspect that many of them hurt very deeply. Somewhere down there is Tom Allison. If it is in the Lord's timing, I just wish we could meet."

After checking into their hotel on 17th Street Causeway, Tom and Julie had the rest of the evening free. They went walking, admiring the sights. Going past one yacht broker, the pastor asked his wife, "I wonder if that could be the place where Tom sells yachts?"

"Only the Lord knows. There's a grocery store. Let's pick up a danish and save paying hotel prices for breakfast."

"Sounds good."

As the Grants checked out, a man near fifty years old bagged their danish and orange juice. "You look like a preacher," he commented. "Tourists for sure, and I hear there's a huge convention starting tomorrow across the street."

"Right on both counts, tourist and preacher. Now that's a combination, isn't it? I'm Pastor Tom Grant. We're here for the first time from Indiana."

"I like that name," their bag boy replied, "I'm a Tom also."

"Glad to meet you. This is my wife, Julie. Thanks for bagging our things."

"Bye."

After Tom and Julie Grant were out of the store, Tom commented, "There is something about that man that checks in my spirit. He is trying to be happy, but his eyes looked so wounded."

"I sensed something also," Julie replied. "I almost wanted to ask him, if he had a wife named Betty."

"I had the same thought, but there is no way that a yacht broker would be sacking groceries in a place called Publix. Nevertheless, I sense that you and I need to pray for two hurting men named Tom in Fort Lauderdale tonight."

That night, after the grocery store had closed, Tom Allison tossed his green apron into his back seat, got into his convertible with a hole cut in the top, and headed home to Sandy. He was silently hoping that she would be asleep when he arrived.

After his car radio was discovered missing, he had borrowed a portable radio from Sandy. Coming to work in the daytime, he had listened to his oldie rock and roll station. Now at night, he could receive only one station being broadcast from a Fort Lauderdale church.

At first, the music sounded good, and some were even recognizable by Tom. Then a spot announcement played. A lady's voice declared, "There is a better way than divorce. Your marriage need not end that way. . ."

Those words hit Tom like a brick. He pulled his car onto the shoulder of I-595 as tears filled his eyes. First, the book about prodigals going home, then that friendly preacher who seemed so happy with his wife, and now this on the radio. Tom gripped his steering wheel tightly, as cars passing at 70 miles an hour honked warnings at him.

Directly east of him, over near the beach, a couple from Indiana were praying that the Lord might bring Tom to his senses and home to God and to his family.

"I feel like my life is going as fast as one of those cars," Tom said aloud. "God help me. O God, please show me what to do," he sobbed.

It happened in an instant. It was as though someone had popped a balloon to reveal a beautiful prize inside. As soon as Tom had cried out to the Lord, he had been told to go home. Tom sat frozen. What would he have to do? Quit his job at the store? Tell the band that he was finished? Divorce Sandy? Ask Betty if she would even have him back? Tom looked out the windshield of his motionless car. Up ahead was the I-95 northbound ramp. It was as though something said to him, "Just go home. Don't worry about the rest."

Tom did not take that northbound road. Instead, he continued on to Bonaventure. He found Sandy fast asleep. Tom gathered up his saxophone and few belongings and loaded them into his car. He left Sandy a rambling note, apologizing for having made a mistake by marrying her. He asked her to call the store, and Mort from the band, telling them he had moved back to Cincinnati.

Tom stopped at an ATM, withdrew his few dollars, gassed up the car, and headed north. He still wore his orange shirt from the store. The only item of Sandy's that was not returned was that radio. He listened to that Fort Lauderdale station until he was out of range, and then found another Christian station. Tom sought out station after station, all through the night. Tom drove, listening to music and preaching that sounded as though it was being broadcast just for him.

Although they were out of town, a distressing message was left on the Grant's answering machine late that night: "Julie, this is Betty. I'm giving up. Standing is just too hard and nothing is changing. Tom screamed at me this afternoon. Besides, he is married to someone else. I know the Lord is going to

send me the husband that I need. I know you guys are out of town, but please don't call me back. Thank you for everything, but there is nothing else to talk about. Goodbye."

By dawn, Tom was in Georgia, still headed north as fast as he could go. He did not stop to sleep or to eat, but took breaks and had snacks when he purchased gas. His car had never run better, nor had he ever felt better that he did. When the sun came up, Tom felt as rested as though he had slept all night. Hundreds of miles behind him, Pastor Tom Grant was so convicted over the bag boy that he and Julie had met, that he skipped a noon session at the conference and went to Publix to talk with the manager about how to locate the man.

"I would be glad to help you if I could," a helpful manager stated, "but the guy's wife called this morning. Seems her husband left a note and ran away from home during the night. I tell you, they come and they go. I never would have suspected it from Tom Allison, though."

"Tom Allison!" Pastor Grant felt as though he had just been punched in the stomach. He jogged back to the hotel to tell Julie. "Lord, did I blow it? Father, wherever Tom is right now, please protect and guide him."

Pastor Grant skipped all the sessions that afternoon. He and Julie, both badly shaken, stayed in their room and prayed. Late that afternoon, Julie checked their answering machine at home and heard Betty's message. The Grants were even more devastated.

That afternoon, about 5:15 PM, Betty rounded the corner, on the way home from work. At first she thought she was having a vision. Sitting in front of her home was a car that looked just like Tom's. Her heart began to pound. As she pulled into the driveway, she saw Tom, wearing a rumpled orange shirt, and in need of a shave, asleep behind the wheel of his car. The vehicle had a big hole torn in the fabric top. Covered with Florida bugs and red Georgia mud, the car looked as rough as did Tom, but that did not matter. Tom was home, regardless of the reason. The Lord had answered her prayers.

Betty momentarily forgot the hopeless message that she had left for the Grants less than 24 hours before. Betty also forgot her flirtation with a customer that day. She also forgot her comment to Norma, her boss, following that incident; "If Tom doesn't want me, I'll find someone who does." Those events, as well as every hurt since their separation, had just been erased quicker than a crashing computer hard drive, just by the sight of rumpled Tom sitting in that driveway at home.

For a few seconds that seemed like hours, Betty stared at her sleeping husband. What had brought him home in a uniform shirt? What did the green apron and name tag lying in the back seat mean? Finally, she could wait no longer, and touched Tom's arm while gently calling, "Tom, honey, you're home." Tom instantly sprang from his car, wide awake.

Tom did not even wait to go inside to carry out the next step in his process of repentance. From the deepest part of his being, Tom confessed everything that needed to be confessed. He sincerely asked Betty to forgive him for everything that he had done. Leaning against that dirty car, the couple embraced and cried.

"Thank you, Jesus, thank you Jesus," Betty repeated over and over in the softest of voices.

"Jesus," Tom interjected, "I've been hearing about Jesus for 24 hours. I didn't know why I walked out on everything in Fort Lauderdale until I was on the way home. Now I know why; Jesus told me to come home. It wasn't a real voice, it was just something that told me what was right."

"It wasn't something, honey. It was someone and His name is Jesus."

"That's what I mean, but I just can't say it right," Tom amended. "Anyway, about three or four A.M. today, just before I crossed the Tennessee line, a preacher came on the radio who really made sense to me. Did I tell you I listened to Christian radio all the way home? That preacher, from Tennessee, sounded like he was talking just to me. Betty, I prayed to receive Christ. Do you know what I mean?"

Betty's heart was jumping inside her chest. Her husband was listening to the Lord! Her foremost prayer request had been answered!

Tom and Betty moved all the items from his car into their basement apartment. He took a shower and fell asleep. Tom would sleep until almost noon the next day.

Back in Fort Lauderdale, Pastor and Mrs. Tom Grant waited for their flight home to be called. "Honey, it's in God's hands," Tom assured his wife. "The Lord knows what he's doing. We can't beat ourselves up any longer. We were right where He wanted us to be. Tom leaving that non-covenant relationship, for whatever reason, is a step in the right direction."

Getting out of the chair, Julie walked toward the bank of airport pay phones, to check for messages at home before their flight.

"You have one message. Yesterday at 8:22 PM"

"Julie," an excited voice exclaimed, "Tom came home. He was sitting in the driveway when I came home from work. He prayed to receive Christ on the way home, listening to the radio. Tom's asleep in the basement right now. I am thrilled! Talk to you when you get home. By the way, disregard a message that I left for you yesterday. Love you guys, bye."

Julie walked quickly back to the waiting area. "Tom," she said in an excited voice, "You won't believe this . . ."

"Oh, yes I will," he interrupted, "God is not limited."

The Lord had three surprises in store for Tom Allison that following weekend. He and Betty were going to visit the Grants for the weekend and be in their church on Sunday. They had to be back by Sunday evening, when Bud and Norma, the owners of the flower shop where Betty worked, had invited them over to discuss "something important."

Just as Tom and Betty were about to get in the car on Saturday morning, the postman delivered an Express Mail envelope to Tom. The return address indicated that it was from Sandy in Fort Lauderdale. Inside Tom found a short handwritten note attached to a one page legal document.

"Congratulations," the note began, "We are no longer married. Two weeks ago, when you were signing forms to go on my insurance, you also signed a petition for annulment of marriage. I knew that you

still loved your wife and someday were going to go back to her. The day you left, my attorney walked the petition through and found a judge to sign it. Our marriage is invalid. The joke is on you! Sandy."

Tom and Betty rejoiced all the way to Indiana. The Lord had worked another miracle in their restoration process. There was now no obstacle to their remarriage.

The second surprise for Tom came when he officially met Pastor and Mrs. Grant. He had no idea that he had ever seen them before. When the car pulled in and the Grants came out to meet them, Tom thought, "He looks familiar. Looks like somebody I met in Lauderdale."

The first words from Pastor Grant's mouth provided the answer, "Hi Tom, glad to meet you. Paper or plastic bags?"

"You!" Tom stammered, "You're the guy. . . the guy . . . with the orange juice . . . the preacher . . . who . . . who . . . at the . . . conference . . . Lauderdale? How? What?!!" By then, the Grants, along with Betty, were laughing with a stuttering Tom.

"Only God can arrange things like us meeting," Pastor Grant replied. During that weekend, that entire meeting at Southport was explained to an amazed Tom.

The two couples spent all Saturday afternoon and evening talking and praying. Plans were made for Pastor and Mrs. Grant to travel to Cincinnati on the following Saturday to re-unite Tom and Betty in marriage.

After a blessed morning worship service, Tom and Betty said good-bye to their friends and headed home to Cincinnati. On the way, Tom asked, "Wonder what Bud and Norma have to tell us that is so important?"

"I'm afraid I know," Betty replied. "Bud's health isn't good and several florists chains have called. I suspect they are selling out."

"Not good," Tom said while shaking his head from side to side. "I don't have a job yet, and you are about to be fired. God needs to come through for us again on this one. Oh well," he joked, "wonder if Kroger's is hiring bag boys? I have experience."

"Even if they are, I know that God has a task for you besides sacking groceries."

In only a few hours, Tom and Betty sat in Bud and Norma's living room and learned the fate of her employment at Beautiful Flowers by Bud. Bud's opening comment in that conversation was strange, as he inquired, "Tom, do you know anything about arranging flowers?"

"Let me explain," Norma interjected, "It's a long story and not very good news, I'm afraid."

"Kroger's, get my apron ready," Tom thought. He had heard from Betty how the big chains snap up small, independent flower shops. They consolidate their operation and many of the employees are terminated.

"The shop has provided us with a good living," Norma continued, but the time has come for us to make some changes in our lives. I'm sorry to tell you that Bud has been diagnosed with cancer. He is only expected to live a few months."

"Let's go for a drive," Bud suggested, "That's the best way to tell the rest of the story." Soon, all four people were in the Cordell's automobile, headed somewhere.

Tom and Betty sat in the back seat tightly clutching hands. The only time that Betty had been in that car was a few weeks ago when she had gone to see the Grant's for Easter. Tears welled up in her eyes as she thought about of God's goodness to her family since that fateful weekend when she first took a stand with God for restoration of her marriage. But why was the Lord making her firing so painful?

In a few minutes, Norma stopped the car in front of Beautiful Flowers by Bud. "See anything different?" she inquired. Fragile Bud had turned around in the seat to watch the reaction.

That is when Betty saw it! The sign that once read Beautiful Flowers by Bud, now freshly painted, proclaimed Beautiful Flowers by Betty.

"What! . . . what does it mean . . . I can't! . . . I don't . . . What does that mean? Didn't you sell out to a chain? That's what we thought."

"No honey," Bud spoke, "We did not sell out to a chain. That shop has provided for Norma and me to live comfortably for the rest of our lives. Had we sold it, since we have no children, it would have only meant money for our nieces and nephews to fight over when we are gone. We are giving you guys our business."

"We can't think of anyone better to continue on what we have invested our lives into," Betty affirmed. "There is only one stipulation. You cannot sell out to any of the chains that have been after us. We think too much of our customers to hand them over to a corporation. Our people have been too good to us down through the years."

"Let's go home," said Bud. "I am tired and I know that you guys must have questions."

That evening, while drinking coffee and discussing the flower shop, Bud asked a question that was off the subject. "Betty, Norma and I have watched you closely during these past months and we admired you. Now that I am about to die, how can I get that same happiness that you had when your marriage was dying?"

That night, two old retiring florists were born into the Kingdom of God. "Just as you have given us a gift of the shop that we do not deserve and could never pay for ourselves, God has given us the gift of His only son, Jesus. He died on the cross to pay for our sins. Just as we can receive or reject your gift of the shop, you can receive or reject God's priceless gift of eternal life."

"I've rejected God all my life," Bud cried. "Will He still have me in my last days?"

"Absolutely!"

Later that night during the drive home, Tom and Betty, still suffering from shock, talked about all that had happened in their lives in the past few months. "Easter was the day that things turned around for me. That's the day I took a stand, refusing to allow the enemy to have you.

"Did you know that Easter was the same day that I met what's-her-name in Florida?"

"We really did have two Easters," Betty commented. "Looking back, I can see the hand of God in everything that has happened to bring you home to me and to the Lord."

The following day, Tom spent his first day at the flower shop and he loved it. He was a natural for the florist business. "Dealing with those wholesalers is about like dealing with the stock market," he joked.

Later that week, both couples spent many hours on flowers for a special wedding. On Saturday, Pastor Thomas Grant officiated as Tom and Betty Allison were remarried in their home. "This is where I prayed my husband home and this is where I wanted to remarry him," Betty had explained to others from her stander's group who had attended.

Of all who attended that wedding, none were more proud than their sons, Brad and Brett. Brett introduced his new girl friend, Carrie, to his mom and dad for the first time. At one point, Carrie whispered to Betty, "I love the Lord and am praying for Brett to receive Him. He's starting to ask questions."

That evening, before the Grants started home for Sunday services, Tom Allison handed Pastor Grant a carefully wrapped package. Betty had no idea what was inside. The pastor opened it to find an old green grocer's apron with a name tag that read TOM pinned to it.

"That is my last reminder of Fort Lauderdale," Tom explained. "I threw that apron in the back seat the night the Lord spoke to me and I headed home to Betty."

If you are ever in Pastor Tom Grant's office, be sure to notice the clothes tree over in the corner. Coats and jackets might come and go from there, depending on the season, but that green apron remains.

"That is my symbol of what God can do," Pastor Grant will explain to you. "Whenever I am tempted to doubt the power of God, I look at that apron and am reminded of what a mighty God we serve."

My friend, I pray that you have some kind of "green apron" to remind you, on those difficult days of what a Mighty God we do serve. He does bring prodigals home. May God bless your family.

A PERSONAL WORD

"Is this story about your family?" Well, yes and no. The entire story and the characters are fictional, but our family has experienced the heartache of being torn apart by divorce. I praise God that He also allowed me to know the happiness of a marriage restored by Him in 1987. God gave Bob and me 23 more years together, prior to his death in December 2010.

Perhaps you have never eaten at Skyline, or bagged groceries at Publix, nor can you play a saxophone, yet this short story reads like your story. If so, we encourage you to turn to the Lord Jesus Christ for His healing touch on your marriage. There are no circumstances too complex for the God we serve. We pray that you will allow Him to level the mountains surrounding your home. May God bless you.

Charlyne Steinkamp and family