

## Choose to Live

*However, you are chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation,  
people who belong to God. You were chosen to live  
so you can tell about the excellent qualities of God.*

1 Peter 2:9

“You’ve been in an accident,” the man was saying, to which I answered in my head, *What are you talking about?*

In my muddled mind, I knew only one thing: I was lying face up on pavement. It felt cold, rough, unforgiving under my thin running shorts and long-sleeve shirt. I couldn’t tell exactly where this pavement was located, because I couldn’t see. It was like being in a black tunnel – not a speck of light anywhere. I could feel and hear things, but without sight I knew little else. Except that I hadn’t been in a car that morning. I’d been on foot. Someone had been with me, too, but at the moment this fact only danced at the edge of my conscious mind. Whoever I’d been with, we hadn’t been riding in a car. So why was this guy telling me I’d been in an accident?

Now he was saying something else. In a calm, reassuring tone, he told me I was critically injured. It was the commanding voice of someone who knew what he was talking about, that public-safety-worker-in-charge type of voice. A cop, a doctor, maybe a firefighter. Yet, no matter how persuasive the voice, what he said

still made no sense. How could I be critically injured if I wasn't in a car? And wouldn't I feel pain? I didn't feel any pain at all.

"What's your name?"

I gave him my name. No problem there.

"Who can we call? Someone close to you, next of kin..."

I gave him the name of my husband, Felix. I also gave his phone number. If nothing else, my brain was working just fine. I finally put to him the question that had been rolling around my head: "How could I be in an accident if I wasn't in a car?"

The man, who would identify himself as an EMT somewhere along the way, told me I'd been a pedestrian. A car had hit me as I stood in the road. Now it began to hit home that this was real, and I started to cry. I tried to move, but the EMT wouldn't let me, which made no sense to me because I still didn't feel any pain.

At this point, I began to fade away. Not exactly the black nothingness of unconsciousness, though. More like a weird, vivid dream. I was sitting on a porch somewhere with my head down, asleep. As I woke up, I saw my sister coming toward me. She yelled, "Wake up, Frankie, wake up!" I didn't know what she meant—at least at the time I didn't. I couldn't even understand why she was there to begin with. Angela ("DeeDee," we called her) had been dead for over sixteen years.

"Wake up, Frankie!" DeeDee called again. I reached out but couldn't touch her. I reached farther, but now she was moving back, away from me. A powerful feeling surged through my body and mind, a sense of resolve like nothing I'd ever known, and I'm no stranger to resolve. In that instant, I knew I had to survive this.

Whatever had happened to me, no matter how bad, I had to survive it. There was far too much left for me to do. God was telling me, through Dee Dee, to wake up, realize who I really am and do the things I was meant to do.

I never had a chance to tell DeeDee I understood her message, because she went on moving away. I kept pleading with her not to go. DeeDee, my older sister and closest friend, had been my favorite person in the whole world. We had been through everything together as children, including some of the darkest times imaginable. I'd missed her every day of these past sixteen years. Oh, how I wanted her back with me, especially at that moment! But she went on growing fainter, until she was gone altogether, and I fell unconscious again.

The next time I woke up I was lying on a hospital bed. At least that was what I sensed without the benefit of sight. It's possible my eyes were just closed, but if they were then I either couldn't open them, or else my subconscious mind refused to. My ears worked perfectly, though. The conversation I heard nearby came through sharply, and it confirmed for me that I was either in an emergency room or an operating room. I heard my husband's unmistakable voice, and the voice of someone else I didn't recognize, but understood to be a doctor. They were talking about my legs. They were talking about amputating them. The doctor explained to Felix that I had seventeen breaks in total, most of them severe. The right was worse than the left and they wanted to amputate it immediately. The left one could wait, but that probably would have to be taken as well. They would just have to see.

"No!" I interrupted.

The room went silent.

“That’s right, I’m awake,” I said, “and my choice is *not* to have my legs taken.”

Speaking in a deep, but gentle voice, the doctor described just how badly the legs had been damaged. He told me there was almost no chance the right one could be saved. Even if they tried to save it, the surgery would take hours and there was a chance I would die on the operating table. The average heart simply could not take such surgery, he explained.

My reply was one I think my husband was ready for, knowing me as he did, but not the doctor: “Didn’t anyone tell you who I am? I am Frankie Bell, and there’s nothing average about me.”

Of course, the good doctor wasn’t about to be dissuaded that easily, knowing the risks. “Even if we save your legs, there won’t be anything you can do with them.” Again, he had underestimated me.

“Not only will I walk again, I will *run* again,” I declared. Then to Felix I summed up my attitude about the whole thing: “This is a win-win, ‘cause I know I’m going to heaven if I die on that operating table. And if I don’t die, then I’m going to run again.” I’m sure Felix didn’t even blink. He’d been with me long enough to know I meant every word. I had been a runner for a long time; my legs were as vital to my existence as my heart and lungs. And I’d been a fighter even longer than that. Only God had any real power over me when my mind was made up. “I’m ready for heaven, that’s fine with me. But I can’t go on here on Earth without my legs.”

Another man was in the room, and he was speaking comforting words to Felix. I recognized the voice: Bishop Nolan Torbert, bishop at my church, the True

Deliverance Holiness Church, and a family friend. All at once a new and urgent thought came to me out of the blue.

“Don’t you let Felix leave without paying our tithe,” I told Bishop. I usually took care of paying our church tithe every week, but the week before I had been away, probably at a speaking engagement, so I hadn’t been able to.

Naturally, Bishop Torbert replied, “Don’t you worry about that.”

But I was worried. “If I die, I don’t want to be in heaven with a credit beside my name,” I said. That’s just the way I am. I owe God my obedience and the church my support. I take these things very seriously.

That’s about all the conversation we had. Very soon I was being whisked away to surgery, where I would soon be fighting to save my legs. Or else I would be in another place where they wouldn’t be needed.

As I was wheeled to the operating room, I remember hearing my dad beside the gurney. Sometime in the past few minutes he had arrived, or maybe he’d been there the whole time and I didn’t know it. I took his hand and said, “Dad, don’t worry about me. God’s promised to heal my legs.” I wasn’t just trying to be positive, mind you. I was absolutely certain.

And that’s the last thing I can recall of that morning.

I guess I can understand everyone’s concern at the time. Only later would I learn the extent of my injuries: two broken wrists, a broken jaw, broken shoulders, three breaks in my spinal column and a severe laceration of my scalp. Twenty-five breaks in all, and God only knew what kind of internal damage. Yet I can tell you with all honesty it wouldn’t have mattered to me if every bone in my body were fractured. I was going to pull through this.

Surgery took somewhere between nine and eleven hours. How long I stayed unconscious after that I could only guess, but the next time I woke up I was in a post-surgical recovery room. Even this I couldn't be sure of, because I still hadn't opened my eyes. I was pretty doped up, too, as you can imagine.

But I could hear my family in the room talking in quiet voices, and I understood where I must be. So, the first words out of my mouth weren't, "Where am I?" or "How are my legs?" My first words were, "Can I please have some yogurt, I'm hungry." This elicited a lot of relieved laughter. You see, my family all know I'm kind of a health freak, and yogurt is one of my favorite foods. This simple request meant my brain was working okay.

Some of my family ran off to Wal-Mart to get me all the yogurt I could eat, but of course it would still be a while before I was ready to eat anything at all. The nurses were much more concerned about my pain level than my stomach. They gave me more drugs, and I drifted off again. I would be drifting in and out for a while. It could have been minutes, hours, even days for all I knew. One time, I woke up to hear the voice of my department chair, Professor Lisa Kensler. Dr. Kensler was the one overseeing my doctoral dissertation, and we met once a week to discuss its progress. I apologized to her: I wasn't going to make our meeting that week. Her answer was, "You think?"

Another time, I awoke to the voice of the nurse who'd flown in the helicopter with me to Columbus Regional Hospital. She had heard I was okay, and she'd prayed for me to heal. However, when she heard that I still had my legs she had to come see for herself. All she could say was, "Thank God." To her—one of those most familiar with my condition right after the accident—it must have seemed almost miraculous. Her voice certainly sounded that way.

And then there was a very special visit from someone I hadn't seen in a while. My friend Dexter and I had had a falling out some years ago over a business matter. Though we'd never spoken about it again, in my heart I had forgiven him. Now I was seeing him for the first time in my hospital room. In fact, he was the first thing I saw when I finally could use my eyes.

In his face I saw that he didn't know what to say, so I broke the ice. I told him I was glad to see him. He said he just had to come and see me and pray for me. I let him know I'd forgiven him, and that I loved him. We'd once been good friends, and I knew I couldn't go on holding any grudges if I was going to get through this. I asked him for a mirror; for the first time I was curious how I looked. He wouldn't give me one, and for good reason, but he offered to take pictures so I could see them later.

My waking periods were becoming longer and more alert. Now, other parts of the accident were coming back. Other facts, information I hadn't been ready to deal with before. I kept hearing the letters "D.O.A." in my head. They had been spoken by people directly after the accident. At one point, I had even felt around my body, making sure I was all there. With a flesh and blood body I decided I couldn't possibly be in heaven, so I must be alive. What the letters, D.O.A.—dead on arrival—referred to, I couldn't imagine.

And then I remembered. The person who had been with me that morning. The one whose face had been at the edge of my conscious mind as I lay on the cold pavement right after the accident.

"Where am I, where's Marie?" I asked Felix, who was by the bed at the time.

"You're in the hospital," Felix replied.

"Where's Marie?" I asked again.

Hesitation. Then, "She's in another hospital."

"No, she isn't," I said. "I heard 'D.O.A.' If I'm not D.O.A. then it's her."

Felix hesitated again. That was all it took. I knew before he even replied, "I'm sorry."

Poor Felix. All he wanted to do was comfort me. By comforting me, I would be stronger. More important, I would be focused on myself, my own recovery. That's the natural response when dealing with a loved one who has just endured terrible physical trauma. But that's not the way I operate. What makes me strong and what makes others strong aren't always the same. My way of grieving my good friend Dr. Marie Wooten, Dean of Math and Science at Auburn University, was to honor her with my courage, and resolve to survive this and get better. Knowing Marie hadn't survived made it all the more important that something good should come out of this. I knew Marie would want that.

Marie and I had been running partners. The morning of the accident, we had just started a five-mile jog on a route taking us through the streets of Auburn, Alabama, my hometown. As we stood just off the curb, waiting for the one car on the opposite side of the four-lane highway to go by, it had suddenly veered across the dividing line all the way to our lane and struck us both. I may have been badly broken by that car, but I was alive, and there was a chance I would heal. Marie hadn't been afforded even that opportunity; she'd been killed instantly.

I had to put that part of things behind me now. That was always my M.O. deal with it then get on with life. The past has never determined my future. Every tomorrow is another life for me, a fresh chance to make a positive difference for myself and for others, however small or large that difference might be. But I have

to say when you're lying in a hospital bed almost completely immobilized, and you're facing months of recovery and the visitors have gone for the day leaving the room much too quiet, you can't help but let memories percolate back to the surface. I had a lot of them to think about, and a lot of time to ponder them. And I think, in a way, it made me just that much stronger, for the memories I have are not all good, but they always inform my attitude in a good way.

And if those memories gave me even the slightest bit of an advantage, all the better. I would need all the positive energy I could muster. I was in for the fight of my life.