TRIUMPH THROUGH TRAGEDY

by

Robert Brown
P.O. Box 2188
Bundoora, 3083
Melbourne, AUSTRALIA
Chapter 1 - The Accident

'Hang in there mate, you're going to be all right, an ambulance is on its way,' someone said, as I lay motionless on the ground.

'What happened?'

'You've been involved in an accident.'

Then I started to remember what had happened.

After attending a church working bee, I had decided to ride my motor bike to a football game. While I was travelling along a quiet side street, I noticed a car ahead of me to my left. As I proceeded to pass, he did a right hand turn in front of me without any indication. Having no time to swerve or brake, we collided. My motor bike ricocheted off the car and I went head first into a cannon positioned outside an RSL [Returned & Services League] club.
The next thing I knew I was on the ground, paralysed, unable to move. By the time I was conscious again, people had gathered and an ambulance had arrived. I could hardly breathe, so I asked a bystander to remove my helmet. Realising what had happened, but not knowing whether or not I would pull through, I said to those nearby: 'I want you to know that God loves you and that Jesus died on the cross for your sins.'

While I was lying motionless on the ground, the ambulance officers began to make an assessment of my injuries and to take my observations - my heart rate, blood pressure, pulse rate, skin colour, skin warmth - and they also assessed my conscious state.

Then they began to check my neurological condition. They checked for loss of power to my hands, arms, legs and feet. They asked me if I could move, to which I replied 'No.' By now there was strong indication that spinal cord injury had occurred.

They also noticed that my breathing was unusual, because the break in my neck had affected my intercostal muscles, which assist in the breathing process. As a result of this, I was only using my diaphragm and not my chest to breath. This would also indicate a high spinal cord injury.
Once the ambulance officers had diagnosed the likelihood of spinal injuries, they cut my
clothes off and began to immobilise me as best as possible. They then placed a cervical collar
around my neck and made sure that my head was in good alignment.

A Jordon frame was then placed over my body, plastic slats were slid underneath me and then
hooked to either side of the frame, thus allowing them to lift me onto a stretcher without
moving my body. Sandbags were also placed on both sides of my head.

Once in the ambulance, I was given oxygen and my observations were taken again. I was also
asked a number of questions in order to establish whether I was disorientated or not. The
ambulance officers contacted the hospital to inform them of my condition and that they were
on the way. Instead of going into casualty, I was taken directly to the intensive care section of
the spinal unit. The hospital was just around the corner from the accident scene. Little did I
realise that the hospital I had ridden past on my motor bike would be my home for quite a
while.

When I arrived at the hospital I was taken to a small examination room in the spinal unit.
Although conscious, things were very hazy. I thought to myself: 'Poor Bev, how is she going
to cope?' At the time she was nine months pregnant and we were expecting our first child.

The doctor on duty decided to telephone my wife. Being aware that she was so far into her
pregnancy, he took great care in explaining what had happened. At the time of the call, Bev
was resting in bed. She had had a very busy morning. We had risen early and gone to the
church working bee. While I was busy cleaning windows, Bev was taking our dog 'Buzy,' for
a long walk.

Around noon, we decided to go home for a bite to eat. All that morning I could not decide
whether I would go and watch the football in the afternoon or stay home. I used to enjoy a
Saturday afternoon match because it was a break from the hustle and bustle of ministry. Often
I would meet other members of the congregation there and we would have a great time
stirring each other and supporting our team. I asked Bev if she would like to come, but she
declined. Had Bev accompanied me, I would have taken the car, but as I was going alone I
decided to take the motorbike.

'Hello Mrs Brown, this is Dr Dawkins from the Austin Hospital.'
Initially Bev couldn't understand why the doctor was calling her on a Saturday afternoon. She
thought that the call might have been in reference to a foot complaint I had been treated for at
the hospital.

'Your husband Rob says that you are nine months pregnant. Are you okay, are you feeling
fine?' he asked.

'Yes,' Bev replied.

'My reason for calling is to inform you that Rob has just been involved in a motor accident.'
Thinking that I might only have some bruising or a minor break, Bev asked: 'Is he all right?'

'Well, it appears at this stage that Rob has broken his neck. Can you make it into the hospital?' he asked. Sitting there stunned, Bev finally said 'Yes.' The doctor gave her the directions over the phone, but they just went over her head.

As the reality of it all started to set in, Bev began to cry. Then she thought: 'Who can I call? How will I get into the hospital?' Bev immediately called my sister Irene and explained what had happened. She told Bev that her husband had gone away for the weekend, but she would call my other sister Debbie and her husband Darren, to pick Bev up and take her to the hospital.

As Bev waited by the front door it seemed like an eternity before they arrived. While my brother-in-law drove, Debbie sat in the back seat trying to comfort Bev. 'Is Rob going to be okay?' she asked. 'The doctor suspects that he's broken his neck.' Bev noticed that this had upset Debbie.

When they arrived at the hospital, Bev went straight to the casualty department and explained the situation to the nurse, who was expecting her. Noticing that Bev was pregnant, she called for a wheel-chair but Bev declined.

Like the typical hospital, there were many corridors to go through before Bev finally arrived at Ward Seven. While waiting in a side room, Bev was introduced to the wife of a spinal patient. She was involved in a group called 'Backup.' This is a support group of people who are close to people with a spinal injury. She briefly explained to Bev what she could now expect, being the wife of a person with a spinal injury and how 'Backup' could assist. Bev was grateful for the information and advice, even though at the time she could not fully understand what was she was hearing.

By now the other members of my family had been contacted and had started to arrive at the hospital. When Bev was called in to the treatment room she saw me lying motionless on a table with just a draw-sheet covering me. Seeing me conscious was a great relief to her. I looked at her, smiled and said: 'Don't worry, God has everything under control.' Bev was again banished to the little room while I was taken away for a CAT scan and x-rays.

After this, the head of the spinal unit, Dr Brown, confirmed that the x-rays had shown that I had broken my neck and my back in three places, resulting in spinal cord damage, and that I had also broken a rib which in turn had punctured a lung. My mother, who was standing by, spoke up and said: 'Will my son walk again?'

'We don't know at this stage,' the doctor replied. My mother's question and the doctor's answer shocked Bev, for even with her nursing experience, the consequences of the situation had not yet fully dawned on her. By this time Bev felt helpless. Nobody knew how to help her or what to say.

After the x-rays I was taken back to the admission room where I had head tongs attached to my head. The head tongs were attached to weights of about three kilograms and their purpose was to immobilise the bones in order for them to heal.
Around 10pm, Bev and her dad left the hospital and went home (we were living at Bev's father's place at the time). It disturbed her to have to leave me at the hospital in that condition. After a cup of coffee, Bev went to our room exhausted and sat on the bed. She started to cry and then she began to pray: 'Dear Lord Jesus, I know that You understand how I am feeling. Please help me to cope with this situation. Bless Rob, be with him, heal and bring him home soon.'

As Bev pondered on what had taken place during the day, she had hoped that this was only a nightmare which would be gone by the morning.

How strange it was that one day could be so different from the next. On the Friday, Bev and I were on cloud nine. After attending a pastors' and wives' fellowship meeting, we headed off to a little country town real estate agent to sign the papers for our first home. Although small, it was a lovely three bedroom brick house and was only a five minute walk to the church which I was going to help pastor with Bev's brother-in-law. After this, we returned to Melbourne excited, rejoicing in God's goodness, yet not realising what the next day had in store.

Saturday arrived and what a beautiful spring day it was. But in a moment our world was torn apart, and our dreams had become a nightmare.

The next morning when Bev awoke she was still very upset. She tried so hard to control her emotions because she didn't want to upset her father or be a burden to him. After getting dressed and having breakfast Bev came into the hospital. When she arrived she was alarmed to see the nurses cutting my hair off. 'Why are you doing that?' she asked. They explained that this was necessary in order to keep the area where the head tongs were put in clean. Also it would be weeks before my hair would be washed. It was easy to see that the nurses had not done a course in hairdressing. With my new `crew cut' it looked as though I was ready for boot camp.
Due to the large amount of medication, I frequently drifted off to sleep. Whenever I did awaken, there was Bev sitting by my bed trying to put on a brave face in order to encourage me, but I knew that deep down she was grieving.

In Ward 7, in a bed directly across from me, there was a man who became a quadriplegic as the result of an accident. He had been quite an active person who blamed himself for his injury, which could only be described as horrific. He was paralysed from the neck down and as a result, all he could do was move his head.
Because the break in his neck was so high, he was attached to a respirator, which was secured to his throat. For the rest of his life he would be dependent on this machine, and without it he would asphyxiate and die.

He had a loving family who gave him both great support and company. One day his sister introduced herself to Bev and gave her a tour of the hospital, showing her where the different amenities were. This was a big help, and Bev appreciated it very much.

I can vaguely remember him speaking words of encouragement to me in my early stages at the hospital, and that seemed to be typical of the man.

He was a popular person, much loved by the nursing staff. Understandably, he became quite depressed and lost all desire to live. Being the active person that he once was, he did not want to live dependent upon machinery and to rely upon people to do everything imaginable for him. What a daunting prospect he faced, living in a body that did not move. Not being able to walk, to stand up, to feed, dress and manage himself.

Although some quadriplegics manage to live this way, this was not going to be the standard of life for him.

Wanting to die with dignity, he took the matter before a Parliamentary Enquiry Committee, and stated his case. On a few occasions he spoke to the Health Commission, but to his dismay, his plea was rejected and he was certified as being unstable of mind and incapable of
making decisions at that time. The situation became quite public, featuring in both the television and the print media.

I wanted very much to visit him when I left the hospital, but unfortunately we heard on the television news that he had died. The sputum in his lungs blocked the tracheotomy which enabled him to breathe. At the time of death he was not on the ventilator because he could be off it for short periods of time.

The thought of suicide was not too far from the minds of some of the patients who were about to spend the rest of their lives in a wheelchair. No longer would they be able to do many of the things which had come so easily beforehand. It would be difficult because there would have to be adjustments to their lifestyle, made not by choice but out of necessity.

Although as a Christian I do not condone suicide, one would only need to spend a short time in a spinal unit to understand why a person would consider it. Some would take their own lives, if only they were physically able to do so.

Those who seem to have a huge problem dealing with their condition are those who, as a result of trying to commit suicide, do not succeed, but end up still having to live with spinal injuries.

I cannot for one moment begin to imagine how low that type of person would feel, one moment thinking that it would all soon be over, then before they knew it, they were in the spinal unit of the hospital looking at months of rehabilitation and facing the prospect of spending the rest of their lives in a wheelchair.

Unfortunately, too, there are others with spinal injuries who, being unable to cope once leaving the hospital, and possibly not getting a lot of support in the community, actually go ahead and commit suicide.

A good family, friends and outside community support base is imperative for those suffering spinal injuries because those who do not have this option find it difficult to cope.

Those who have no partners at the time of their accident seem to suffer an additional pressure because in the forefront of their mind are questions like: 'Who would want me now? Who would find me attractive? Am I good for anything?'

I have found that some people think that by having a physical disability, they have a mental disability as well. On one particular occasion, after I had been discharged from the hospital, I went to a hairdressing shop with my wife to get my hair cut. When the hairdresser approached, she looked at Bev and asked her how I would like my hair cut. Bev, looking somewhat astonished said: 'Ask Rob, he'll tell you.'

I also noticed that when Bev and I dealt with people before my accident, they would normally direct their questions and answers to me, but since the accident this had changed. At times I would say to Bev: 'Do these people think I'm stupid? Why are they ignoring me?'
These are just two examples of what I had to deal with in the outside world. Even with Bev there were times when I would jump to my own defence if I thought that she was speaking down to me or treating me as though I was a little simple, which would upset her because this was not her intention and she could not understand why I would have such a thought.

As much as it is difficult for single people, it is not uncommon for those with partners to separate due to the pressure and frustration of coping with a spinal injury. This must be heartbreaking for spinal patients who are not only trying to come to terms with their accidents, but also suffer the loss of their partners, not forgetting the children who are involved.

In view of this, I thank God for giving me such a wonderful, loving and understanding wife and daughter, and for the support of family, friends and church.

Once a week a psychologist who frequented the ward to ask each patient a series of questions visited me. She was doing research in a particular area, and I volunteered to help out. I was a bit surprised by some of the questions she asked, not because they were intruding or were an invasion on my privacy, but because they offered no hope. In some cases they could be more depressing to the patients than anything.

Bev attended the first of three family meetings which would take place during my stay in hospital. Dr Brown, a social worker, and a nurse, proceeded to explain to Bev what would take place during my stay in hospital. 'Rob will be in over Christmas, and beyond,' said the social worker. The average time a person with my type of injury would spend in the hospital was at least nine months. 'Over Christmas! But we're only at the start of September!' thought Bev. This distressed her greatly because it also meant that I would miss the birth of our child. Bev couldn't believe this was all happening, and that I would be in the hospital for such a long time. She also had to deal with mundane tasks, like the many forms which had to be filled out for Social Security so that I could receive an invalid pension.

On the Monday morning after the accident, Bev called the real estate agent, Mr Kilkenny, to inform him of our current dilemma and that we would have to cancel the contract on the house. He was quite good about the situation and was deeply saddened by the news. We were fortunate because when a house is bought, the person has three working days as a cooling off period. If they decide not to go ahead with the contract, they can simply pull out of the deal. Had the accident been four days later, we would have been left with a house which we couldn't possibly pay off.

The first two weeks in the hospital were quite intense. The reality of everything was swiftly sinking in. In the initial stages the doctors would come around regularly, pinching and poking to see if there was any improvement. Starting with my toes and finishing with my fingers, they would do a thorough examination and check for any signs of movement. Unfortunately there was none, and I remained paralysed from the chest down. As well as this, the petrol burns and leg wound I had sustained needed to be regularly dressed and cleaned.

Passive limb exercises by the physiotherapist were commenced to prevent stiffness caused by immobility, and also to prevent clots, which are always a risk.
Hope of any recovery was fading by the moment. My legs could have been tied into a knot and I would have been none the wiser. At times I would ask Bev to straighten my legs, thinking they were twisted, only to find that they were already straight.

I received a lot of visitors during this time, most of whom were members of my home church. The news of my accident came as quite a surprise to them. The senior minister addressed the congregation on the Sunday morning after the accident. ‘Unfortunately I have some sad news to tell. Pastor Rob has been involved in a motor accident, and is in a critical condition in hospital.’ After a loud sigh, the church sat in stunned silence.

My friends the D'Angelos looked at each other in complete shock. They had planned to meet me at the football, had waited for me to arrive, but were at a loss as to why I did not make it. Now they understood. When they came to visit, they were overwhelmed by all the paraphernalia attached to me.

When you incur a spinal cord injury, your stomach falls to sleep and you are unable to eat. To prevent vomiting and aspirating the vomit, a nasal gastric tube is put through the nose, down the back of the throat and into the stomach. This tube drains away any food or stomach contents remaining in it, or made by the stomach in the normal process. The stomach usually starts working again three to four days after the injury.

An intravenous drip was also attached to me, and this provided the fluid my body needed. It would stay in until I was up to eating and drinking again, which could take up to ten days. There would have been a substance called 'heparin' in the drip to prevent any possibility of clots forming in my legs. A calf muscle stimulator was also attached to my legs, which gave a pulsation to my leg in order to continue the flow of blood and to prevent any clots forming. There was also a tube called an intercostal drain, which was placed in my chest to inflate the space between the lung and the pleura (the chest cavity lining). Its purpose was to drain away any blood or fluid which had formed, as this could cause the lung to collapse. The chest tube was there for the purpose of allowing the lung to inflate.

‘How could Robbie be so fit and well one day, then battered and broken the next?’ the D'Angelo's thought. They remembered the fun we'd had together, the meals we'd shared, and the many hours spent talking about the things of God. Only the night before my accident, Bev and I were at their home laughing around the kitchen table as we drank coffee and had something to eat. Like typical Italians, you couldn't leave until you had eaten, regardless of whether you were hungry or not. I also think they felt sorry for me because I was so thin.

Although the many visitors were encouraging, at times it was exhausting. Some of my visitors couldn't come to terms with seeing me in that condition, especially the children. Besides having about 80 children in my Sunday school, and being the chaplain for the church's Royal Ranger's Scouting Group, I was also the chaplain for Northside Christian College. As the children were a major part of my ministry, it was such a blow not being there to continue my work with them.

I was pleasantly surprised one afternoon when two of the students I taught came into the hospital and presented me with a rather large get well card signed by the students, as well as a cassette of Christian music. It was a lovely thought, and it felt so good to be remembered.
On another occasion, a pastor friend and his wife paid me a visit. Graham and I had known each other for many years and were good friends. News of my accident had come as a shock to him, and seeing me there lying motionless made it even worse.

Not long after they arrived, he said to his wife: `We should be going now, Honey.' He said goodbye then headed off down the corridor. His wife, Julie, followed about two minutes later. As she approached the exit, she heard a commotion and noticed someone lying on the floor being attended to by the nurses. As she got closer she saw that it was Graham. Apparently, the sight of me was too much for him, causing him to faint. Every so often I remind him of this, then we have a bit of a laugh, much to Graham's embarrassment.

Being on the pastoral team in a church of five hundred people guaranteed me many visitors. It seemed like hardly a day went by without receiving a visitor or two. The pastoral staff and congregation at Northside Christian Centre were wonderful to both Bev and me. Their love and support will never be forgotten. They also took up a collection for us which helped us to pay a few bills.

There were times when Bev and I just wanted to be alone, but we soon learned that privacy was simply non-existent in a hospital. No sooner would we get a few minutes to ourselves than it would be interrupted. There was always something going on. If it was not a nurse needing to attend to me, then it would be either a doctor, a physiotherapist, an occupational therapist, an orderly or haematology nurse wanting some of my blood. Three times a week blood was taken from my arm and tested to make sure that my blood was not clotting too slowly, and so that I would not bleed. I was also prescribed an anticoagulant drug called `warfarin,' which helped to thin the blood, which in turn caused it to keep circulating to prevent the clots.

The ward nurse politely, and with great care, informed Bev that for three hours after lunch she could not see me. At this time the orderlies would arrive to turn the patients over. It would take about six of them to turn a patient. As pressure sores were a big problem to spinal patients, being positioned properly was also a must. I would spend four hours on my back and then two hours on my side. Initially this upset Bev because she found it hard to be told: `It's time for you to leave now, Mrs Brown.' It was like a continual tearing away, something that Bev was not adjusting to very well.

During this time, she would sit in the hospital gardens and fill in the time by knitting and reading the Bible. Although Bev would sit alone, she was well aware that Jesus understood how she was feeling, and that He was giving her the strength to cope.

After a gruelling first week I was out of the danger period, taken out of intensive care and moved to another section of the ward. Ward 7 was quite cramped and run down. It was built in 1890, and it certainly felt like it. If a nurse put a trolley on one side of the ward to do a surgical dressing, by the time she had turned around, the trolley would have rolled across to
the other side, such was the slant on the floor. One time, a possum fell right through the ceiling and landed on a patient, much to the patient's surprise!

One would find it hard to believe that people who had suffered such terrific injuries would be subjected to such poor conditions. In fact, the most recent prison built in our state is like a five star motel by comparison. I suppose it says a lot about the priorities of the state.
Chapter 2 - Settling In

In my third week I was once again moved to another position in the ward. By now I was starting to get used to the place. I knew what time my meals were brought to me, when the orderlies came to turn me, when the haematology nurse was wanting blood, and when the doctors came on their rounds.

I was also ready to be interviewed by the police regarding my involvement in the accident. On the particular morning the officer came, I wasn't feeling too well. Answering questions and giving detailed, thoughtful answers was the last thing I felt like doing. Retelling the details of the accident has never really bothered me because it was not as if it was a drawn-out torturous occasion. It was all over in a moment.

The police officer was quite understanding of my condition and did not try to rush, or coax me into admitting to something I did not do. My solicitor had also sent one of his assistants along. I think his reason for being there was to make sure that I didn't say the wrong thing, and also to ensure that the police officer didn't ask me any questions which would intentionally incriminate me.

`What time did you have the accident? What speed were you doing? Where was the other vehicle positioned on the road? Was there any indication of it being about to turn?' These were some of the questions he asked.

There were some things about the accident that I'll never forget, such as the car turning in front of me, as well as the initial impact. All I could think to myself was: `Oh, no!' There are other things that I just don't remember, probably because I was knocked unconscious!

The other party involved in the accident was an off-duty police officer. His version of the accident was different to mine, and as a result it came down to his word against mine - the word of a police officer against the word of a minister of religion.

After getting all the particulars, the police officer left and then I had a rest.

After nine long months, Bev was ready to give birth any day now. It seemed just like yesterday that we were both attending the prenatal classes together. For eight weeks we put aside our Monday evenings to learn about the methods and procedures relating to childbirth, and what to expect after it. I hadn't been too sure what to expect the first evening. I had taken along a Bible commentary to read because I thought it was mainly for the women, while the men went along for the ride. But I soon realised that I was mistaken.

There were six other couples in the group, and they all came from diverse backgrounds. There were the trendies, there were some working class people and there were some professionals. At 25 years of age, Bev and I were the youngest couple, and we felt a little out of place with these so-called `oldies.' They must have been at least in their early to mid thirties.

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During the first meeting, each couple introduced themselves to the group by giving their names, and by sharing about their occupations and interests. When the introductions were over, we were divided into small groups and given a number of questions to discuss. One question in particular was: ‘Would your love for your new-born child take away from the love for your partner?’ One gentleman spoke up and said that he thought it would, and that he was not going to enjoy the situation. He was quite a negative person, and Bev and I could not understand why he and his wife were starting a family. They came across as being quite self-centred and more interested in their careers.

What Bev and I did not know at the time was that this couple had not planned for this baby and initially wanted the pregnancy terminated by having an abortion. They were not given permission, as they had no grounds to do so because they were financially secure and had no sufficient reason.

After he had finished his lamentation, I said that the love I have for my wife would be a different kind of love to that of my child, and that I would also love one just as much as the other. The others in the group nodded their heads in approval, but he would have none of it. I think he considered the addition to the family to be a threat, which caused him to feel insecure.

Another week, the subject was on ‘Relaxation Techniques.’ We were all to lie down on the floor next to our partner while an audio cassette tape about relaxation was played. As the lady on the tape was giving us instructions, we were to carry them out in turn. Her voice was quite unique, and she spoke as if she was in a trance-like state. She sounded as though she should have been narrating love stories for Mills and Boone, with that slow husky voice of hers. ‘Concentrate on your toes ... now let them go ... ’ she said. Next we were directed to focus upon our legs, and so on until we reached the top of our head. When told to fixate our minds on our pelvis, Bev looked at me and started calling me ‘Elvis the Pelvis’. With that we both broke up laughing and tried our best to conceal this from our instructor who was supervising the procedure.

In week four, a mother-craft nurse came along and spoke realistically about what to expect when the baby was brought home. She also informed us of the services available through the local baby health centre. As well as discussing the different feeding techniques, the group was also shown the correct way to fold a diaper. It was the first time I had ever done this, but by the end of the evening, I had the hang of it.

On another occasion we watched a video that looked at two women who were having a baby, one by caesarean section and the other by natural means. It showed and explained what each of them went through and how they coped.

Although it was informative and realistic, I found myself closing my eyes in some parts which did not appeal to me. If this video was making me feel a bit strange, how would I cope with the real thing, when it was Bev’s turn? It was quite a revealing documentary which left little room for privacy. I was surprised that these women would allow themselves to be filmed in this manner.
The different positions to give birth was next on the agenda. While most couples opted for
the more orthodox method, there was one couple in the group who were into the natural
methods. As the other partners were practising their child-bearing positions on the floor, this
particular pair were going through their routine in the corner. It looked very odd to me and I
was not too sure what to make of this.

They were also determined not to use any form of pain-killers during the labour and birth.
The instructor kindly warned them not to be hard and fast about their decision and to keep all
options open. She then told the group about a couple who made an agreement with each other
that, regardless of the pain and suffering the wife was experiencing, under no circumstances
were pain-killers to be administered. It just so happened that things did not go as well as
expected. While the wife was clawing the wall in pain, the husband, keeping his part of the
deal, did not want her to take anything to relieve the pain - after all, a deal is a deal, isn't it?
Finally the wife came to her senses, with a little persuasion, and decided to take something to
relieve the pain.

The husbands were also actively involved in this session. Each husband was responsible to
help make his wife feel comfortable, to breathe along with her in order that she would
maintain her breathing rhythm, and to give her plenty of encouragement.

Two weeks before finishing the prenatal classes, one of the couples had their baby. During
her night off from the hospital, she and her husband came to visit the group and shared their
experience with us. It was so interesting to hear first-hand what they had experienced. They
even brought in a photo of their new-born baby.

After our final lesson, we were advised to visit the hospital where the birth was going to take
place, which Bev and I duly did. We were given a tour through the hospital by one of the
nursing sisters and shown where Bev would be taken on admission, the preparation room, the
delivery room, the ward and the special care nursery.

Bev, looking as though she could go into labour at any moment, became the talking point in Ward 7. Such was the interest in the coming birth that the nursing staff ran a sweep to see who could guess the time of the baby's arrival. A 24 hour time chart was put on the wall and it cost 50c to enter your name and the time you thought the baby would be born. Unlike a horse race, there was no wet track, weather conditions or barrier position to affect the outcome of the result, or to influence one's choice of time. It simply came down to pick a time and then hope for the best.

Bev was aware that there could only be one winner, so she was under a little pressure to deliver the goods at the right time. As Bev and I are not accustomed to entering sweeps, we left the guessing to our family and the hospital staff.
When Bev came in to visit me, she was aware of being watched. 'I see you haven't gone yet, Mrs Brown,' said one. 'Make sure you have the baby at such and such a time,' said another. It was all in good fun and we appreciated their interest.

Around this time I was awaiting the arrival of my sister, who was a staff member at Teen Challenge in the USA. My family had all chipped in to pay her fare so she could be with me. Lyn was a great help to both Bev and I. She was good company and was always eager to help. When my meals came around, Lyn was the first to feed me. At times I thought she was trying to kill me, especially when she used the knife to force the food from the fork into my mouth. At times I imagined the knife entering my mouth and exiting through my neck. But on the whole, she did a good job.

Although the time for Bev to give birth was approaching, she could still continue her daily visit to the hospital to see me.
As I look back now I don't know how she did it, or why she even bothered. I was so fortunate to have such a loving and faithful wife!

One day, after Bev finished feeding me some lunch, the orderlies arrived and were needing to turn me over. This was Bev's cue to leave. A friend of ours, Maria, who was also visiting at the time, invited Bev back to her place for coffee. Seeing that Bev was exhausted, Maria encouraged her to put her feet up and have a rest. Bev then put her head down and before she knew it she went off to sleep. After waking up, she drove home, cooked the dinner and then went to bed.

Around 1 am in the morning, Bev knew that it was time to go to the hospital. She called the hospital to tell them she was coming, and then she called a friend, Christine Power, who was going to be with her at the birth. Bev's father, hearing a stir, jumped out of bed, got dressed, ran out the door and jumped into the car. Over the past week, he had slept like a cat on a hot tin roof. The slightest noise woke him.

After getting ready, Bev made her way out to the car and politely asked her father to get her case. He hopped out of the car, dashed into the house, grabbed the case and then took off in the car. After going through one red light, Bev assured him that there was plenty of time and no need to rush. As the car went along, it seemed to both rattle and shake. Bev was not sure whether it was her father's nerves as he was driving, or the age and condition of the car that caused it.

Twenty nerve-wracking minutes later they arrived at the hospital. Bev's father grabbed the case, walked her to the entrance door of the hospital and kissed her goodbye. Waiting by were two matronly looking nursing sisters who took her case and showed her to the preparation room. By the time Bev had got ready, Christine, who was six months pregnant herself, had arrived by taxi.

After attending prenatal classes for eight weeks, Bev was well prepared for battle. She remembered learning the different breathing and relaxation techniques and how to put them into practice. In theory all this was great, but on the day it simply came down to doing what comes naturally.
When Bev's contractions were quite close together, the nursing sister moved her from the preparation room into the delivery room. As the midwives did not think the baby was going to come so soon, they delayed their call to Bev's doctor. Then, realising that the baby was to arrive sooner than expected, they promptly called Dr. Easton. Just before he arrived, and after five hours of labour, Bev gave birth with the help of the midwives. Dr Easton was quite apologetic and after checking Bev, he proceeded to examine our new-born baby.

Before she was taken up to the ward to be admitted, Dr Easton, aware of our situation, wheeled Bev to a phone so she could call me at the hospital. It was around 8 am when I received the call. The nursing staff, realising it was news of the birth, gathered around my bed. 'Rob, it's a girl,' said Bev. I looked at those about me and proclaimed: 'It's a girl.' Cheers went up from the ward. 'What's her name?' 'Kristy,' I said, 'Kristy Maree Brown.'

'How are you feeling Bev?' I asked. 'I'm fine Rob, just a bit tired,' she replied. 'Is Kristy well and healthy?' 'She sure is, Honey.' I was so relieved to know that my two treasures were okay. I said: 'Goodbye Bev, I love and miss you very much.' I gave the telephone to the staff, who moved it away. Although my body was well and truly tied to a bed in this hospital, my mind and thoughts were a few miles away, with Bev and Kristy, my little girl whom I could neither touch nor see.

The nursing staff took down my blue cubicle screens and put up pink ones. Off came my blue bed-spread and on went a pink one. My cubicle was then decorated with pink streamers and balloons. Then there was a dash to the wall chart to see who had won the sweep. 'Who's the winner?' 'Who's won?' was the cry. 'It isn't me,' said one. 'Me neither,' said another. I knew it wouldn't be me, since I wasn't in it. The ward clerk, checking her time, said: 'I'm the winner!' She bought a Royal Doulton money box with the money as a gift for Kristy. It was a lovely gesture and typical of the people on the ward.

Although I was now the proud father of a healthy baby girl, deep down I was grieved to have missed the birth I had been so looking forward to, having gone to the prenatal classes, joined in the activities and toured the hospital Bev was going to be in. But before I knew it, all my plans had gone. Bev was in one hospital and I was in another. I felt as though I had been robbed. 'It's not fair,' I thought. 'Why me, Lord?'

Meanwhile, Bev now had her hands full with our new bundle of joy. The feeding, changing, bathing and dressing of Kristy was something new for Bev. At times she felt inadequate, but as time went on, she grew in confidence.

One of the first to visit Bev was Christine and her husband, Kerry. Kerry borrowed a friend's video camera so he could tape Bev and Kristy. After filming, he came over to the hospital and showed me. A television and video recorder were set up in my cubicle so I could watch it. This was the first time, and the only way I could get to see what Kristy looked like. Kerry took about thirty minutes of film, but it seemed to be over in no time. Bev looked very well, considering all she had been through, and Kristy was just beautiful. I would have given anything just to be there and to hold her.
After watching the video, I became the 'movie star' and sent a message to Bev, via the video. It was a great idea of Kerry's, and it proved to be a great means of communication.

As the news of Kristy's birth got around, Bev started to receive a lot of visitors. People were very generous, and their gifts and cards were well received. We were so blessed to have such great family and friends. Of course Kristy was the main attraction. Bev's relatives said that Kristy looked like her, but my relatives insisted that she was the image of me. However, the impartial viewers said that she was like both of us. How any of them could distinguish is beyond me! Although Bev appreciated the visitors, she found it difficult to accept that all these people were seeing, cuddling, holding and enjoying Kristy, except for me.

After everyone had left, and the day was drawing to an end, Bev sat on her bed and reflected on her busy day. A nurse came along and spent some time with her. During this time, Bev expressed the grief and hurt she was experiencing. The nurse was quite understanding and didn't mind Bev pouring out her heart. I suppose this happens a lot to nurses.

This was a time when every girl needs a mother's support, but unfortunately this was not possible, as Bev's mother had already gone to be with the Lord. Bev often recalls how her mother would sit in a chair with a note pad, pen and her Bible, and wait upon the Lord. She was a Godly woman and a wonderful example to Bev.

By being in a private medical benefit fund, Bev enjoyed the privacy, peace and quiet of a single room. She would have found it very difficult to be in a ward with the other women, especially as they were enjoying the company of their husbands. Seeing them bringing in flowers, being by their partner's side and enjoying the sight of the new-born, would have been all too much for her.

In the room next to Bev's was a lady by the name of Margaret. She was also upset because she was unprepared for the early arrival of her baby, which was delivered by Caesarean section. As the hospital had no available humidicribs, her little baby boy was sent to another hospital while Margaret was at the other. The separation was quite traumatic for this young mother and she found it difficult to cope.

When Bev heard this, she thought to herself: 'I suppose I'm not the only person who's going through a rough time.'

On the Saturday afternoon Bev received a special visit from some dear friends of ours, Bill Benton and his daughter Esther. Bill's wife, Vera, had also been pregnant and was about six weeks more advanced than Bev. As they were looking forward to the birth of their second child, we were excited about the birth of our first.

As the months went by, it was time for Vera to go into the maternity hospital. The thought of anything going wrong was the furthest thing from their minds. Bev and I were too busy guessing whether they would have a boy or a girl. Waiting for Bill to call and give us the good news, we were shocked when told that a problem had arisen. Unfortunately, the complications resulted in the baby being stillborn.
After hearing this, Bev and I paid Vera a visit in the hospital. ‘What can we say? What can we do?’ we thought. Here is Vera, devastated at her loss, and in we come with Bev ready to give birth in a couple of weeks. Bev felt very uncomfortable, and was somewhat lost for words. Both Bill and Vera were obviously saddened by what had happened and were now trusting God to help pull them through. About three days later, Bev and I attended the funeral service for their son, which was held at the hospital. In one sense it was a sad occasion and our hearts went out to the Bentons, yet on the other hand it was a time to rejoice because of the knowledge that little baby Mark was now with the Lord, and that one day they would be reunited.

Vera did not come into the hospital to see Bev, and we can understand why. It must have been difficult for them, but being the unselfish and thoughtful people that they are, their concern was now for us, and we certainly appreciated it.

Occasionally Bev would try to call me on the phone. As the telephone was shared between two wards, it was sometimes nearly impossible for Bev to get a call through the first time around. When it was answered, it would have to be unplugged, wheeled into the ward where I was and then plugged in again. At times I wondered whether it was worth all the effort, but hearing the voice of my loved one on the other end made it all worth while. As I could not hold the telephone, it would have to be balanced by my pillow so I could talk and hear. It wasn't the most comfortable way to take a call, but I suppose it was that or nothing.

The maternity hospital had a scheme which allowed the mothers one day's leave before finally stepping back into the real world. My sister Gail arranged to pick Bev up and bring her to see me. I had no idea this was happening, and it was a pleasant surprise. I had not seen her for nearly a week, so we had a lot to catch up on. We talked about most of the things that had taken place while we were apart - things like who visited her, what the hospital conditions (including the food) was like, and how Bev was coping. And believe it or not we managed to slip in a few words about Kristy.

After a few hours, which seemed more like a few minutes, Bev had to go back to the hospital to feed Kristy. Once again we were separated. It was certainly not getting any easier to say good-bye, but it had to be done.

On one particular morning while Bev was attending to Kristy, a nurse approached her and explained that an afternoon city newspaper journalist and photographer wanted to interview and photograph her and Kristy. The Herald had received news of my accident, and that I had not yet seen Kristy. No sooner did Bev give them permission than the questions started to flow and the camera started flashing.

The very next morning, Bev and Kristy were discharged from the hospital and they immediately came to see me. This was a special occasion because it was the first time I had seen Kristy face to face. Bev placed her next to me on the bed. As I was unable to move my arm, Bev placed it around Kristy. She was sound asleep, oblivious to all that was happening.
Soon after, the men from the Herald newspaper arrived at the hospital. While the photographer walked around taking photos, the journalist asked me a number of questions. I remember one in particular: 'What does the future hold for you?'
'I believe the future will be better than the past,' I replied.

Seeing me lying there paralysed, with a broken neck and back, he wasn't convinced. 'If I print that statement, nobody would believe it,' he said. Needless to say, he didn't print it. But can you blame him? The article was a real success and made page three, and as a result we received a tremendous amount of feedback. One of Bev's uncles, who lives interstate, telephoned and mentioned that he saw the article in the local newspaper. As well as this, one of the pastors in the church received a call from his daughter, also from interstate, informing him that the article was in their local paper too. It also gave those in my church as well as other Christians an opportunity to witness to their family, friends and work colleagues.

Chapter 3 - A Glimmer of Hope

After four weeks in hospital I was still paralysed and unable to move my legs. Although I knew that God had not forgotten me, and that He was powerful enough to heal me, I accepted that perhaps God, at this point in time, was not going to touch me, and that it might be His will for me to serve Him for the rest of my life in a wheel-chair.
I so desired to go for a run, and I would have given anything to do it. Although I now had a severe disability, I never viewed myself as being disabled. Even in my dreams, I never saw myself in a wheel-chair or disabled, but being normal.

One day I asked another spinal patient if he had the same experience. To my surprise he said 'No.' In his dreams he would see himself as a disabled person. Over-hearing the conversation was a nurse. She told me that the reason I dreamed that way was because I was not accepting my condition, and the fact that I now had a permanent disability. But I wasn't too sure what to make of it, nor did it make any sense. But was it supposed to?

As I was spending most of my time on my back, all I had to gaze at was the ceiling. Unfortunately, the ceiling was not the easiest thing to look at because it had hundreds of tiny holes in it, possibly for ventilation reasons. It was getting so bad that I had to wear sunglasses because I was focussing on the holes and creating havoc with my eyes. For example, during one lunch break my bed was wheeled outside on to the balcony. I said to Bev: 'The sky looks very grey today.' Looking perplexed she replied: 'The sky is not grey, Rob, it's blue!' 'It cant be,' I insisted. 'Well it is,' she said. I also noticed that colours looked exaggerated outside. The leaves on the trees reminded me of a photograph that had been over-exposed. I don't know what caused it, but it lasted until the time I was regularly sitting up in a wheel-chair.

As it was difficult for me to read, because of the problem I was having with my eyes as well as being on my back, I found that listening to the Bible on audio cassette was a great source of strength and encouragement, as well as a practical way of getting my daily dose of the Word of God. I realised that there were little things in the Bible which I had missed while reading, but which I managed to pick up during my listening. One particular morning while being washed, I was listening to the book of Hebrews. As the nurse picked up my leg, a passage of Scripture rang in my ears and captured my heart. *Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. Make level paths for your feet, so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed* (Hebrews 12:12,13).

Upon hearing this, faith filled my heart and I knew at that moment that God had something great in store for me. I was aware for the first time since being in the hospital that the Lord was going to touch me. But when this was to happen and how God was going to do it I didn't know, I simply had to trust.

As part of my rehabilitation, an occupational therapist would come to the ward to see me. She was a cheerful girl and very optimistic, but at times quite impractical. While I was on my back in head tongs, she tried so hard to get me to use a typewriter. The thought of this, and the degree of difficulty it entailed did not inspire me to take up her offer. Understandably I declined.

Next, she was determined to teach me how to eat a meal while lying on my back. I couldn't for the life of me understand the logic of this, when for the rest of my life I would eat like most people, sitting up. *As my hands were weak and had very little movement, a mitten was*
fitted over my hand with the spoon attached by velcro. It was quite comical watching me balance my food and guiding it into my mouth by the use of mirrors.

Often my meal would go cold, and sometimes I wouldn't finish it because I found the activity too exhausting. Speaking of food, I really did miss good home-cooked meals. Although the hospital food was okay, it certainly couldn't be described as five star.

One evening 'leather' rather than steak was on the menu. As you could imagine, eating steak while lying on your back is not easy, as one particular patient found out. 'Quick! Get the nurse!' we heard. The nurses came, the curtains were drawn, and the suction machine was called for. 'What's going on? Is Ben's life in danger?' I thought. Later I found out that the patient was not having a heart attack, or a fit, but was choking on a piece of steak. What a shame it would be to survive an accident only to be choked to death by a hospital meal. Fortunately, Ben survived to live another day.

I was spoiled as far as food was concerned. Family and friends were forever bringing in meals for me. As I had lost a lot of weight, my Italian friends tried desperately to fatten me up. 'Pastor Rob, you must eat more! You are nothing but skin and bones,' was their plea. 'Have some more lasagne ... eat up this pasta.' Their description of me was quite accurate. The doctors were so concerned about my weight loss that they assigned a dietician to help me gain weight. Milk drinks were the order of the day, but the occasional coke was much appreciated. As bed sores are a big problem to spinal patients, especially the skinny ones like me, putting on some weight was a must. But all their efforts seemed to be in vain. No matter how much I ate, I did not seem to gain any weight.
After finishing breakfast one morning, it was time for my morning wash. Unable to do it myself, this job was left to the nurses. As I was unable to sit up due to traction, the mirrors over my bed allowed me to see what was going on. I looked at the big toe on my right foot and said to the Lord: "Why can't I even move my big toe?" Immediately God spoke to me, not with an audible voice, but rather by a distinct thought. He said: "Move your toe." So I tried to move my toe, something I had tried doing for four weeks, but to no avail. To my amazement and delight, my toe responded. It moved!

I said to the nurse: 'Look! Look! I can move my toe!' She glanced down and said: 'It's only a muscle spasm (involuntary movement). I said: 'No, look again, I can move my big toe!' I continued the demonstration by telling the nurse when I was about to move my toe, and when I was going to stop it. The nurses looked, but didn't quite know what to make of all this, considering that it shouldn't be happening. I knew that I wasn't experiencing involuntary muscle movement, but a miracle.

There seemed to be a renewed interest in me now. Initially the attitude of the medical staff was: 'Don't expect anything back, but if you do, then consider it a bonus.' But now, with a smile, it was: 'We can only hope.' Well, I did have hope - not in medical technology, because it was inadequate (unlike skin tissue, the spinal cord, once damaged can't be regenerated, and there is simply nothing medical science can do to rectify this). My hope was in God, and in Him alone, praise His Name!

This particular morning, my friend Kerry once again brought along the video camera. I knew that Bev would be in soon, so I asked him to start filming when I told her the good news concerning my big toe moving. I couldn't wait for Bev to come, I was so excited.

When Bev arrived I said: 'Honey, go take a look at my big toe.' Although somewhat unsure of what was going on, she pulled back the bedspread to uncover my feet. As I began to move my toe, Bev looked stunned. In amazement she asked: 'When were you able to do that?' 'Since this morning.' 'How did it all happen?' 'Well it all took place when ...' Together we rejoiced in God's goodness and thanked Him for His marvellous work in my life.

By now, things seemed to be picking up. Seeing Bev and Kristy each day was such a blessing. Having visitors was not so strenuous now, and I looked forward to them.

My brother Jim, who lives in the country, had his first opportunity to visit me. The sight of the head tongs seemed a bit of a concern to him. 'Do these things go straight through?' he asked. 'No,' Bev replied, 'Rob does have a brain somewhere in between.' We all broke into laughter together.

One night while sleeping I had a dream, or should I say a nightmare. I saw myself at night on a busy footpath, attached to a lamp post by my head tongs. Cars with their headlights on were crashing around me. All I could do was lay there just waiting to be hit. Suddenly I awoke
shaking. My heart was thumping and I was understandably distressed. Being the early hours of the morning, it was still quiet in the ward. As there was no-one around to talk to I stayed awake. I said: 'Jesus please help me.' Although I could not see anyone because it was dark, I was somehow aware that someone was standing at the end of my bed. I felt the touch of a hand on the toes of my left foot. Unable to move them since the accident, I felt that something had happened and that I could now move them. I could not confirm this until morning, when it was light. Awaking early, I positioned my mirrors in the direction of my left foot. I then attempted to move my left toes. Joy filled my heart as I saw them move.

This was as a great encouragement. I knew that Jesus had not left me nor had He forsaken me. He was just assuring me that He had everything under control!

I considered the hospital a real mission field. God gave me many opportunities to share the Gospel with the nurses, patients, orderlies, physiotherapists and even the ward chaplain.

Occasionally I would receive a visit from Ivan, the ward chaplain. After many lengthy talks, he became quite frustrated with me.

'It's not wrong to get angry with God!' he exclaimed. 'You've had a terrible accident and have suffered much.'

'But I can't get angry with God, He's been so good to me,' I replied, hitting a nerve.

'I come here to minister to you, and in turn you are ministering to me!' he said.

On one particular visit, Ivan opened his heart to me. He did not get on too well with his father, and as a result there was much bitterness. He was also frustrated with his denomination because they would not recognise his work. However, his problems went much deeper. It seems that he confused having a relationship with God with his love for the rituals and liturgy of the church.

From the discussions I had with Ivan, I was not too convinced that he in fact had a personal relationship with God. I said: 'Ivan, how can a person become a Christian?' Feeling embarrassed, he stumbled over his words and finally conceded: 'I'm not sure.'

I then proceeded to share the Gospel with him. At first he listened, but it all seemed too much for him. 'Stop preaching at me,' he said, and then stormed off. I was aware that Jesus was knocking on Ivan's heart, but he was not going to let Him in. Unfortunately, there are many people like Ivan in this world, who need to realise that it is not a matter of how religious you are, nor is it a case of being a 'do-gooder,' but a relationship with God starts with Christ, and Him alone. For Jesus Himself said: 'I AM the way and the truth and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through Me.' (John 14:6)

This is quite a remarkable statement by Jesus because, unlike other religious figures, He does not claim to be one of many ways to find God, but the only way! This is also supported by the apostle Peter. When speaking about Jesus he said: 'Salvation is found in no-one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.' (Acts 4:12)
Sadly, I didn't see Ivan too much after this eventful occasion, and finally all communication ceased.

My family once again paid me a visit. As Bev was unable to get in at night, it was good to have familiar faces around. About 8pm they decided to leave. Being on my own for the first time that day, I lifted my arms to give them a stretch. As I did, something remarkable took place. Starting from the tip of my fingers, I felt something pass through my body. I could not describe the feeling as a warm or cold sensation, but a feeling of power. As this was taking place, I found that I could now move muscles that were paralysed by the accident. Being overwhelmed by the situation I said: 'Keep it going Lord, keep it going.'

After handover, the night shift nurse came over to see me. 'How are you this evening, Rob?' Not realising what had happened, I began to share what had taken place, and what God had done for me. Inquisitively she said: 'Try to flex this muscle.' I did. Then lifting my knee she exclaimed: 'Now try this.' After giving me a solid work-out, I was exhausted, she was ecstatic, and God was being glorified. This was now the third time within a couple of weeks that I had experienced God's power in my paralysed body.

Working at the hospital was a Christian nurse, the sister of friends of mine at Northside. Fiona was a kind-hearted person who paid me regular visits. One afternoon when she came to see me, she noticed that I was asleep. Not wanting to wake me up, she decided to return later. In the meantime, I was moved to another section of the ward and a black native from a nearby island was put in my previous place. He had apparently been injured in a fall, and incurred spinal damage. When Fiona came back, she was not aware that I had been moved. As she approached she received the shock of her life. 'What kind of medication have they put him on? He's turning black,' she thought. Then taking a closer look, her pulse rate returned to normal as she discovered it was not me after all.

During my eighth week in traction I was told that my head tongs were to be removed and a neck brace was to be fitted. This excited me no end. Two nurses equipped with spanners came along to unscrew the tongs. They informed me that although it would not hurt, it would feel as though the tongs were being tightened even though they were being loosened. The nurses couldn't decide which way to turn the bolt. 'Do we turn it to the left or to the right?' asked one. 'I'm not sure,' replied the other. 'Well let's give it a go and see what happens.' At this point in time the enthusiasm of having the tongs removed started to wane. Here I was: paralysed, confined to a bed and at the mercy of two well-meaning spanner-wielding nurses. As they started to unscrew, all I could think was: 'God, please help me.' After turning one way, they noticed that they were not getting too far, so they decided to go the other way. Fortunately for my sake, their second choice was correct. The tongs came out, a neck brace was fitted, the nurses had a chuckle, and I was a very relieved patient.
Now my rehabilitation could start in earnest. I was looking forward to working out my weak and depleted muscles but unfortunately, complications set in. Petrol burns to my legs, which I had received in the accident, were not healing quickly enough. The doctors, not wanting this to hold up my rehabilitation, decided on a skin graft. Bev wasn't too keen on the idea, but we were assured it would be for the best.

I remember the morning of the operation quite clearly. I was feeling very sick and was given an injection to take away the nausea. While I was waiting in the operating room, the doctors were deciding which leg to take the grafts from. This was all a matter of fact to them, but to me it was quite daunting and disappointing. However, the thought that this would quicken my rehabilitation took away at least some of the frustration.

After the grafting was completed, I was wheeled back to my cubicle somewhat relieved. There was now an anxious wait to see if the skin would take. If it did not, then the procedure would have to be repeated. Meanwhile, every few hours a nurse would have to roll my grafts with sterile cotton buds to remove any air bubbles from under the graft.

An orderly passed by my bed. He noticed that I was lifting my arms straight up in the air. 'Are you praising the Lord?' he asked, tongue in cheek. 'No, I'm just stretching my arms,' I replied, 'but I still do praise the Lord.'

Looking quite astonished, he said: 'Do you mean to tell me that after all you've gone through and suffered, you can still thank God?' With a smile I replied: 'Yes.' At a loss for words, he turned and walked away, shaking his head. I have often wondered whether this was a greater testimony to this orderly than if I had got out of bed and run around.
The doctors who had performed the operation came back at a later time to check on their handiwork. Although the grafts seemed to have taken, the healing process was now going to be slowed down because I had contracted golden staph, a hospital-acquired bacteria which is resistant to antibiotics. It is only harmful when it comes in contact with an open wound.

Beside this, healing can take longer with a spinal cord injury because the blood pressure and profusion is slowed down because of the loss of control to the sympathetic nervous system. As a result of this, the blood flow around the body is not as good and therefore healing is slower. Good circulation is a huge contributing factor in the healing of wounds.

I was removed from my cubicle and placed in a separate small room to prevent the golden staph from cross-infecting someone who might have had an open wound, or had metal rods in their back which would cause it to become septic. When visitors came to visit, they were required to gown up before entering the room and to wash their hands when leaving. I felt somewhat like a leper when I was in barrier.

I thought to myself: 'How much more can I take? What else must I endure?' Then I prayed: 'Please help me, Lord Jesus.'

For many years I had been encouraged by a certain song. It meant more to me now than it ever did. The words were like a healing ointment to my troubled mind:

Oh, I know you may get weary
and the times they may get rough,
you may not have all you want,
but you'll always have enough.
And when your darkest hour comes
just remember what I said:
I've never seen the righteous forsaken
or their seed begging for bread.
Oh, I know it seems so hopeless,
and you don't know what to pray.
You've done all you know to do
and it seems there's just no way.
And when you feel you're at the end,
just remember what I said:
I've never seen the righteous forsaken
or their seed begging for bread
I've never seen God's people
with a need that He could not meet.
I know that He cares for His own,
and His promises He'll keep.

So just hold on a little longer,
the answer's soon to come,
the endless waiting's almost over,
the victory's almost won.
And when again you feel His joy
you'll remember what I said:
I've never seen the righteous forsaken
or their seed begging for bread

'I was young and now I am old, yet I have never seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging bread.' (Ps.37:25)

These words from the Psalmist were a continual encouragement to me as I looked toward Jesus who is my total resource.

During this time I had my first try-out in a wheel-chair. It was not as simple as it sounds. An orderly and a nurse lifted me out of my bed and placed me in the wheel-chair. Because I had been on my back for eight weeks, my balance was out of alignment and as a result, dizziness would occur. As I had not used my muscles for many weeks, I was so weak that I was unable to sit up in the wheel-chair without being strapped in. I started to feel very insecure, and it was difficult being at the mercy of others. After being motionless and stationery for so long, being wheeled along was a pleasant change, although at times frightening. It was a far cry from the roller-coaster rides I used to get so much enjoyment from.

From Ward 7 I was wheeled by the nurse to the rehabilitation gym, where I was going to spend a lot of time over the next few months. The rehabilitation gym was a real culture shock. As I sat, I watched both paraplegics and quadriplegics coming to terms with their condition. Some were using weights, while others were on the mats struggling to move a muscle. Then there were those like myself, sitting in their wheel-chairs. As I looked at them I thought: 'Is this what I look like now?' The thought frightened me because I didn't like what I saw. I wanted to run out, but I couldn't. No matter where I looked, I was reminded of my condition. There was nothing I could do and nowhere else to go.

I was then taken over to a gym bench and placed on my back. As I looked up to the ceiling, I tried to put the negative thoughts out of my mind. I thought about the toes I could wiggle, and the movement I had regained, and then I committed the situation to Jesus, and asked Him to see me through.

'It's time to go now Rob,' said the nurse.

As I was being wheeled back to my room, I spotted a familiar face in the distance. It was Bev. How happy I was to see her. I expected her to run up to see me, but I noticed that at first she stood there and stared. She did this not because she was surprised to see me up and about, but because she did not recognise me. Because I had lost so much weight, I looked like a white skeleton on wheels. As I drew closer I asked her: 'How do I look?' Suddenly, realising it was me, and trying so hard to hold back the tears, she smiled and said: 'It's great to see you Rob.' But inwardly Bev was distressed to see her husband wasting away before her very eyes.
Chapter 4 - Making Progress

After ten weeks in Ward 7, the charge nurse informed me that I was going to be transferred to Ward 17. This was the next stage in my rehabilitation and I remember this occasion very well. Unable to sit up due to being sick from an infection, I was wheeled to the ward on a trolley. Bev was there at the time and accompanied me on my three minute trip across the hospital.

When we arrived, I noticed that the ward was quite old, run down and needed a good paint. It reminded me of an asylum I had once been to (as a visitor). My visitors also felt very sorry for me. One would expect the conditions for those spending a long period of time in the hospital to be of a better standard.

As for Bev, she went home and cried.

Once in the ward, I was placed in the barrier section again because I still had golden staph.

My first room-mate, Bill, was an abrupt elderly man who snored like an old bear. He certainly wasn't the easiest person to room with. If he wanted the attention of a nurse during the night, instead of pushing a button which would ring at the nurse's station, he would yell at the top of his voice, with no consideration for others who were trying to sleep. In the morning I would often wake up more tired than when I went to sleep. His wife was a caring person and certainly put up with a lot. While I had visitors one evening, Bill asked his wife to get him a pen from his drawer. Unable to find it, she said: 'It's not here, love.' 'Haven't you got any eyes in your head?' he shouted for all to hear. I could tell that my visitors were embarrassed by this outburst, and as for Bill's wife, she continued her search without even a mutter.

My next room-mate, Gerd, was a delightful German man. We had some good talks and enjoyed each other's company. Unfortunately he also snored and kept me awake. As I didn't have the heart to complain to him, I simply put up with it.

The hospital was quiet in comparison to the noise of the traffic and hustle and bustle of the outside world, and being in the hospital for so long made me very sensitive to sounds. My hearing became so acute that, without seeing who was approaching me, I could tell who it was by the sound they made as they walked.

Around 10 pm one evening I said to the nurse on duty: 'Would you please tell Fred (the patient in the next room) to lower the volume on his television, it's keeping me awake?' She looked at me oddly and said: 'What television? What noise?' Then she went to investigate the source of the noise. I got the feeling that she couldn't understand what all the fuss was about.

Once a week, the para's and quad's would attend a compulsory patient education session. These sessions were held on the ward, and their purpose was to give the patients an understanding of their spinal injury. They also covered things such as travel, motel accommodation, work opportunities, social activities, and other related matters. On one
occasion we watched a video which showed one spinal patient mountain climbing, some playing sport, and another one dancing in a wheel-chair. Although this was reality, we weren't really looking forward to it. After the video, one of the nurses said to Gerd: 'Did you like that?' Gerd, looking very disconsolate, said: 'No, I didn't.

My physiotherapy and occupational therapy up to this point remained at a stand-still. The golden staph I had contracted was hindering the healing of my skin grafts, which in turn was affecting my rehabilitation. Also I was experiencing tremendous pain in my lower back. Whenever I moved it felt as though I was being beaten with a sledge-hammer.

Kristy was only six weeks old at this stage and her visits were a source of strength. One day Bev came in all distressed. 'I've been told by the charge sister that I can't bring Kristy into the room to see you.' 'Why not?' 'Because you have golden staph, and she says that this could harm Kristy.'

When Bev arrived home, she called the local infectious diseases hospital to get some advice. A doctor told her that had I been in an infectious disease hospital then there would be some risk. But considering this was not the case and that Kristy would have no physical contact with the infected areas, there would be no problem. Also one of the doctors at the hospital I was in could not understand the charge sister's logic. The charge sister would not budge, so for a time when Bev came to visit she would stand outside the window of my room so that I could see Kristy.

Not only were the nursing staff unhappy about the charge sister's decision, but the social worker, Simon, was not taking this lying down. 'This shall be brought up at the family meeting,' he said. He felt that seeing my eight week old daughter was important to my rehabilitation. This was the second of three family meetings. As I was still not well, the meeting was held in my room.

The medical staff who attended the meeting were my doctor, an occupational therapist, a physiotherapist, and Simon the social worker. Besides getting an update on my condition from the different departments, I was informed that I would be looking at up to eight more months at the hospital. The thought of this was quite daunting, and I was both disappointed and angry. Simon, the social worker, questioned the reason for Kristy being forbidden to see me, and after some consultation it was agreed that Kristy would be allowed to come in and see me. As well as this, I was told that I could have my first home visit when I was able to sit in my wheel-chair for a whole day. At the time this seemed like an impossible dream because every time I was placed in a chair I would feel dizzy, faint and sick after just five minutes.

Ten minutes after the meeting had dispersed, the nurse assigned to me, Debbie, informed me that the charge sister was reversing the decision of the group meeting and not allowing Kristy to come in to see me. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. 'What's wrong with this charge sister?' I thought. 'What does she have against me?' Simon, unaware of what had taken place, came bouncing along as pleased as punch about the decision that I could see Kristy. 'Well, didn't that turn out great, Rob?' he asked. Expecting to see a big smile, he was met with a frown. 'There's a problem,' I replied. As I began to fill Simon in with details, I noticed a change in his disposition. His face became contorted, he ripped off his barrier gown, and storming off in rage of disgust he said: 'She can't do that!'
Here we go again,' I thought. Finally after much discussion, a compromise took place. A little room that was used for storage was cleared, allowing the three of us to meet together in there. This old storage room was only about two metres square, but it was home away from home to us. It was the only place in the hospital where we could get a little privacy. Whenever I was not at physiotherapy or at occupational therapy, most times I could be found in my little 'office' (the store room). Of an evening I would have my meal brought there just so I could eat in private with my family, who would be visiting at that time. In the whole time I was in the hospital, my dad hardly missed a day. Any opportunity he had, he took to come in. It was no trouble for him to go to the cafeteria and buy me a Coke and an ice-cream. As I was still having problems gaining weight, I think he was trying to fatten me up as well.

One particular evening he brought in a whole bag of licorice. Not being content with only one piece, I nearly finished off the whole lot. At first this was great, but after a little while I felt sick. Finally I vomited it all up. Since it was green in colour, the concerned doctor took a sample away to be tested. I think he thought it might have been bile (a greenish alkaline liquid secreted by the liver to aid in digestion). The results came back negative as I expected, but it taught me not to be so greedy the next time.

Vomiting was as a real danger because if I was on my back I was stuck there, not being strong enough to turn over. One particular evening my sister Irene brought me in the best wiener schnitzel I had tasted for a long time. Later on, Bev wheeled me back to my room and helped me into bed. For some reason the meal did not agree with me. I asked Bev to stick around a little longer until my meal settled. As Kristy was being baby-sat by Bev's dad, Bev had to leave soon to get home to feed her.

'Are you going to be okay?' Bev asked. 'I should be,' I replied. Bev kissed me, then started off down the corridor. This nausea feeling increased, and I knew that I was about to be sick. 'Bev! Bev!' I called out, but it was too late, she couldn't hear me. I started to panic because I was on my back. 'Help! Help!' I called out, but no-one came.

As I began to vomit I couldn't get it out of my mouth. I felt as though I was choking. I desperately tried to turn over but couldn't. 'What am I going to do?' I thought. The vomiting continued, and fortunately it came without too much problem. After lying in my vomit for about 15 minutes I was able to get a nurse's attention, who then cleaned me up.

As I was still too sick and sore to go to the gym for physiotherapy, Maxine the physiotherapist came to see me. She was a very pleasant English girl, and very dedicated to her work. As I would talk to her about England, her eyes would brighten up and she would tell me all about her wonderful country. She appreciated the interest I showed and would bring in photos of her homeland to show me. However, in the initial stages she got frustrated by my slow progress. I wondered at times whether she thought I was trying to pull the wool over her eyes by exaggerating the pain I was suffering. But this didn't deter her. She was always there when I would least expect it, at the end of my bed, waiting to give my aching body a workout. I wondered if her philosophy was 'No pain, no gain.'

It was early December before I was regularly attending the gym. I had seven 90 minute sessions each week. As each minute was precious, there was no time to play around. It was
work, full speed ahead, all the time I was there. In the initial stages, the first item on the agenda was stretching. If the muscles were not stretched, then they would contract and become rigid, limiting the joints in their movement. When a spinal patient neglects regular stretching, his independence level can go down and he can experience such problems as not being able to roll over and move in bed, being unable to dress and clean himself, and other general tasks.

One day while I was at the gym, I noticed an elderly spinal patient whose arms were contracted toward his chest. They were so bad that rope was attached to his wrists then tied to his wheel chair in order to stretch his arms straight. He was obviously in great pain, but there was very little that could be done for him.

I then started using weights to help strengthen my arms and legs. There were many different exercises I could do in order to achieve this. When lying on my back, I had a rolled up towel placed under my knee. With weights attached to my ankles, I would then lift my foot off the ground in an attempt to straighten my leg. Another method was to lie on my stomach with weights on my ankles and then bend my knee towards my bottom. There was also an exercise bike available, but this got little use as most patients had no leg movement. I enjoyed every minute that I was on it, not only because it was strengthening my legs, but also because I could see them moving. Crawling and balancing on my knees like a baby was also a part of my physio program. 'How do babies do it?' I wondered as I struggled along. However, the more I practised, the better I became.

Learning to transfer from my wheel-chair to the work-out bench was quite a task because it relied heavily on balance and arm strength, something that I had very little of. Away from my wheel-chair I felt very insecure, like a tortoise without his shell, but it was something I had to overcome in order to be able to get around and get on with life.

The physiotherapists did a marvellous job, and were quite gracious, regardless of the occasional outbursts by frustrated patients. It would not have been easy to work with spinal patients because we can all at times be overbearing, impatient and demanding.

On one particular occasion, I saw a patient take one of the physiotherapists to task over a certain matter. The physio kept her composure well considering the verbal tongue-lashing she received, but I could tell she was upset by it, doing her best to cover up the tears.

There were also times of recreation, like the first game of table tennis I had played since the accident. It was hard enough being confined to a wheel-chair, let alone the added problem of having limited use of my arms and hands. As I could not grip the handle, the bat was attached to my hand by a glove. The paraplegics adjusted better than the quads because they are perfectly normal from the waist up. It was no fun seeing the ball whiz past my nose on each serve, and whenever I was fortunate enough to get bat to ball, it went flying off in all directions. As one who used to play the game with everything I had, I sadly lost interest after the first set.

On another occasion we had an archery lesson, using real bows and arrows. A net was placed at the end of the gym room and targets were placed on it. After being given instructions, we
sat in our wheel-chairs in a line, then aimed and fired. My goal was not so much to hit the
target, but to shoot the arrow without piercing someone, including myself! It was all good
fun, but for the time being, I preferred to leave the archery to Robin Hood.

During the doctor's weekly visiting rounds, I was asked how I was enjoying my occupational
therapy classes. 'Well ... ' 'How many have you attended?' the doctor asked. 'About three
sessions,' I replied. 'Only three sessions! Why is this so?' he asked sharply. I proceeded to
explain that by the time the day shift nurses arrived on duty, it only gave them about an hour
to get the patients up, fed, dressed and ready to go for the morning.

'Well, this is definitely not good enough. Something will have to be done about this,' he
exclaimed. And something was! Instead of being woken at 7.30 am, my day began at the
crack of dawn. As soon as breakfast was brought in to me, I scoffed it down as fast as I could.
Cold toast and lukewarm tea was not what I was used to, but it just had to do. After being
helped to shower and dress, an orderly would wheel me over to the occupational therapy
room.

As my fingers had very little movement at all, I began by picking up small wooden discs and
then placing them on pegs. Squeezing play-dough was not too exciting, but it all helped. I
was also given a pen and paper to write with. This was the first time I had picked up a pen
since my accident. To me this was a momentous occasion because at one time it looked
unlikely that this would be possible. 'Now what can I write? I know,' I thought,

"For God so
loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not
perish but have eternal life." (John 3:16). What a great encouragement it was to know that
God loved me.

As the days went by, my physiotherapy was getting well under way. After a lot of exercising,
followed by many visitors, I was very tired by the end of the day.

On one occasion after all my visitors had left and I had retired to my bed around 9pm, Kerry
popped in for a chat. Visiting hours were over but this did not deter him. As he was in his
ambulance uniform, I assumed that he had just finished work. I was always pleased to see
him because we always found something good to laugh about. We talked about the fun we
both had together before the accident. It seemed just like yesterday that we were on holidays
at the beach and having the time of our life in Kerry's boat. The midnight Trivial Pursuit
games were also a highlight, as were the bags of candy we would consume. There were other
times when we would challenge each other to a wrestling match. I used to fare very well in
the contest, but I am glad for my sake that it was only in fun. Kerry is quite a big guy, who
would certainly have no trouble in looking after himself.

As it was well past visiting hours, Kerry decided to go before he was asked to leave. Before
leaving however, he said to me: 'Rob, one of these days you're going to walk again, I really
believe it.' He then took a pen from his top pocket and wrote on the wall next to my bed these
letters: R.W.W.A. Curiosity got the better of me and I asked: 'What does this mean?' He
replied: 'Rob will walk again.'
I was amazed by the many occasions that I had to witness to the nursing staff, directly or indirectly. The continual exercise work-outs in the gym were certainly paying off. On one particular morning after breakfast, the nurse on duty came around to see what progress I was making and to get me going for the day. This nurse had not seen me since the early Ward 7 days, when I had no movement at all. Because she remembered me as being paralysed, she was about to help me to get up. As I turned over in my bed, she jumped back in shock because she was not expecting me to move around like that. 'What's the matter?' I asked. Apologising and nervously laughing, she said: 'I didn't expect to see you moving around like that, especially when I think back to what you were like.'

On another occasion, a night staff nurse came around about 12 midnight to check on the patients. As I had not seen her before, I assumed that she was filling in for a nurse who was away. Seeing that I was awake, she began to talk to me. I noticed that she was troubled, and strangely enough the subject got around to God. She informed me that her marriage was on the rocks and that her four year old son was in the middle of it, and being badly affected by it. Apparently her husband was involved in a fanatical and forceful religious group which seemed to emphasise God's justice and judgment to the extent of neglecting God's mercy and forgiveness. Unfortunately, instead of the father recognising that his son was at a stage where he was building a world view, a way of looking at life, he should have been emphasising to his son who God is, and that Jesus is his best friend who loves and cares for him.

Instead of doing this, he filled his son with fear and presented God not as a loving Father, but as a big Ogre ready to pounce on and to punish him whenever he made a mistake. Obviously this was a concern to this nurse, his mother, and she did not know what to do. I began to explain to her that her little boy is special to God and that he should be taught not fear Him, but to love and to trust Him. I told her that I would pray for her family. With a tear in her eyes, she thanked me and then went about her duties.

One morning while a nurse was attending to the wound on my leg, I was listening to the Bible on my cassette player. The nurse said to me: 'Would you mind turning that off?' Thinking that it might have been distracting her from her work I said: 'Okay then, but why?' 'I don't like listening to the Bible, I don't believe it,' she replied. Her reply made me feel quite angry and I said: 'Well, I'm going to turn it on again.' And so I did! I then commenced to quiz her concerning her attitude toward the Bible. Reluctantly, she said that she was a Catholic but had been turned off the church because of the gross hypocrisy that she had both seen and experienced. Whether this was true or not, I cannot confirm, but I was sure of this: that she was a very bitter and hard person, and something obviously made her that way. Her heart was not open to the Gospel, and sadly, I wonder if it ever will be.

Before being discharged, spinal patients were encouraged to go on an excursion for the purpose of exposing them to life outside the hospital in a wheel-chair. It was decided that a group of us, including the physiotherapists, nurses and social workers, would go to the National Art Gallery in Melbourne. After a twenty minute train ride, we arrived in the city. I had come to the city many times before but never in a wheel-chair. There were many people around, and I was feeling very self-conscious and at times embarrassed. The art gallery was very interesting and the paintings were superb. Oh, how I would have liked to have been half
as talented as the artists whose work was on display, but I would have had enough trouble just holding the brush let alone creating a masterpiece.

As I was still not strong enough to control the wheel-chair, Simon the social worker helped push me along. I remembered coming here as a student in secondary school. Little did I know then, that ten years later I would return, confined to a wheel-chair. There were people here from all walks of life. While some would look at you and smile, others would pass by and stare. 'Haven't they seen a person in a wheel-chair before?' I thought to myself. I saw the ease with which people were walking around and wished I was in their shoes.

After a couple of hours we left the art gallery and headed back to the railway station. The train trip back was fairly crowded because we were travelling in peak hour. I was a bit nervous because unlike the seats, the wheel-chair was not bolted to the floor. Had there been an accident, there would have been a pile of scrap metal in the corner of the carriage, with me most likely on the bottom of it!

Before I could go home on regular visits, the occupational therapist and the physiotherapist accompanied me to inspect the house to see if any renovations were needed. This was an exciting day because it was my first time home since the accident. As we were travelling along I soaked in the familiar sights. There was Kentucky Fried Chicken, the hospital where I had my appendix removed, and of course McDonalds. Although I wore a neck brace, I was still a little nervous in the car. As we approached the house, one of the first things that came to mind was: 'The last time I was here, I was perfectly normal.' I looked at the spot where I would usually park the motor bike, and of course it was not there now.

Bev and her dad greeted us at the door. The occupational therapist wheeled me into the hallway, where I stayed for most of the time. As the occupational therapist and the physiotherapist did a tour of the house, I sat and reminisced about the good times. I remembered when I would chase my dog, 'Buzy', through the house, and walking up the hallway without a worry in the world on the day of my accident. Before we left, Bev opened the back door and let Buzy in. He was excited to see me and I gave him a big hug. I sure did miss him. 'Well it's time to go now Rob,' said the occupational therapist. I did not want to go back to the hospital. This was my home, and I wanted to stay, but we said our goodbye's then headed back to the hospital. Getting a taste of home was all the motivation I needed to inspire me to work hard at my rehabilitation and to get out of the hospital.

The only renovations the house needed was a ramp at the front door and one leading into the bathroom. Bev's father, wasting no time, got to work and had it completed before my first home visit.

Kerry Power arrived early on Saturday morning to take me home for my first day visit. I was, understandably, over the moon. After putting on my neck-brace, Kerry wheeled me out to his Ford Cortina. It was a good reliable little car, but I suppose it had to be, considering Kerry's driving. Getting me in and out of the car was quite a job. As Kerry bent down, I would place my arms around his neck and then use whatever strength was in my legs to stand up. I would then slowly turn around and then be lowered into the passenger seat. Although Kerry did not complain, I am sure this must have been a strain on his back, but being an ambulance officer, he must have been used to this kind of work.
When I arrived home, I was wheeled into the lounge room. After having coffee and fruit cake, Kerry left, giving Bev and me a chance to be together. For the first time in four months Bev and I were alone together. During this time we chatted, watched some sport on the television, and ate. Kristy was three months old at this stage. Although I was limited in my movement Bev would put Kristy in my arms as I sat in the chair. It was such a joy to be holding our beautiful little girl. She was a sight to behold.

Being in familiar surroundings seemed to give me an appetite. The more day visits I had the more cheerful I became, and the more weight I put on. The nurses noticed the change, and they encouraged me to do it as much as possible. As Christmas was soon approaching, we were looking forward to spending more time together. After a lovely dinner, I kissed Bev goodbye and headed back to the hospital. I always made a point of getting in before curfew, which was 9 pm. As I lay on my bed exhilarated, I thought about what had taken place during the day. My mind was perfectly active. I only wished my body was as well. The lights went out and I fell off to sleep.
Chapter 5 - A Special Christmas

A week before Christmas, Ward 17 had its Christmas party. The patients' families, the nurses, orderlies and doctors were invited. It was a special night and a real treat for the patients. The main meal was roast meat on a spit and it was thoroughly delicious.

Because of the large number of people, moving around was almost impossible. Once you found a spare space on the floor, you claimed it. On the other hand, being in the wheel-chair gave me an automatic seat. Balancing a plate on my lap as well as trying to hold a drink was quite difficult. After a couple of hours, the noise and the crowd got a bit too much, so Bev and I retreated to the storage room with my family. It was like going from the extreme to the sublime. Around 10 pm, things started to quieten down. My family decided to leave and then Bev accompanied me back to my room and helped me into bed.

After Bev had gone home Lindsay, the ward clerk, came along and started chatting with me. He was such a nice guy, and he was always willing to go the extra mile for a patient. While he was buttering some dry biscuits for me he said: `Are you going home for Christmas, Rob?'

`I'm not sure,' I replied. `What do you mean, that you're not sure?' `Well, nothing's been mentioned to me,' I replied. `Well ask!' he said.

The next morning I spoke to Debbie, the nurse who was assigned to me, and expressed my desire to sleep at home on Christmas Eve and then spend Christmas Day with Bev, Kristy and my family. `But do you think you'll be able to cope?' she asked. `Yes I do,' I replied. `All right then, I'll arrange it,' she said.

On the Saturday, three days before Christmas, Bev, Kristy and I went to the Power's home. Once again it was nice to spend time out of the hospital. Kerry's house is surrounded by many trees. It was such a good environment and different to the four walls I spent so much time in at the hospital. After a lovely meal, we spent the rest of the evening talking, laughing and drinking hot tea. Realising that the time was getting on, Kerry drove us back to the hospital. We arrived there a little before 9 pm.

After Bev had got me all settled for bed, a nurse came in and said: `Rob, you are wanted in the lounge area.' `Who would want me at this hour?' I thought. Hurriedly, Bev helped to dress me and then wheeled me down the corridor and into the lounge. As we approached, I looked and got the surprise of my life. About twenty members of my church had come along with their musical instruments to sing Christmas carols to me. It was good to see so many of my friends. I was quite overwhelmed and humbled by their visit. It must have been difficult for them seeing me sitting there helpless. I felt that some found it hard to relate to me, not because they didn't want to, but because they didn't know how to. I mean, the Rob they once knew was an energetic on-the-move person, not one who was confined to a wheel-chair.

As they started to sing, I couldn't help but sense the presence of the Lord in the room. I so wanted to stand up with them and bellow out the praises of God, yet I was unable. I tried to join in but found it too difficult because of my breathing problem, so I sat there with Bev, holding her hand. As I had not attended church since my accident, it was the next best thing.
After carolling for about thirty minutes, the group said goodbye and then left. They could have stayed all night as far as I was concerned, but they had others to sing for.

After a long day, I finally got settled for the night. It was so reassuring to know that I was loved and that the Lord had not forgotten me. It was the most memorable Christmas carols service I can remember.

I woke up the morning before Christmas bubbling with excitement, knowing that I was going home for Christmas. Being a week day, things went as usual. I got dressed, had breakfast (cold toast and luke-warm coffee), and then attended my morning occupational therapy and physiotherapy sessions. After lunch, I had another ninety minute work-out in the gym before Bev and Kristy arrived. Bev helped me to get everything prepared for my first overnight visit. Before too long, I was wheeling myself out to the car with Bev following close behind with the pram. After settling Kristy in the car, it was my turn. I placed my wheel-chair next to the passenger side door. As Bev leaned toward me, I would put my arms around her neck for support and balance. I then lifted myself up using my legs and shuffled around until I could sit in the seat. I knew this was strenuous for Bev and quite unfair to her, but she never complained.

When we arrived home, Bev put on the kettle and we enjoyed a nice cup of tea. About to take my medication, I realised that in all the excitement I had forgotten to bring it home. I quickly placed a call through to the hospital and informed them of my plight. Lindsay the ward clerk, as reliable as ever, said that he would bring them across when he finished work. This was typical of him - nothing was ever too much trouble.

About an hour later there was a knock at the door. It was Lindsay. He came inside and stayed for a chat (he was never lost for words).

After dinner, Bev and I sat on the sofa in front of the television and watched 'Carols by Candlelight.' This was a yearly event, when the best secular singers and entertainers in the country would come together on Christmas Eve for two hours of carols. Although it was entertaining, I couldn't help but wonder whether those who were singing about Jesus really meant it. It seems to me that the original Christmas message, that Christ came to earth in order to save mankind from sin, has been replaced by a humanistic ideology of peace to all and the brotherhood of man.

In many churches today, political peace marches and humanistic propaganda have been substituted for the true meaning and purpose of the Gospel. It is hardly any wonder that some churches are closing their doors due to the lack of numbers. They have ceased preaching a 'living Christ,' in order to be accepted by society.

Around 11pm we headed off to bed. The last time we had both slept in this room together was the night before the accident, fifteen weeks before. Up until then we had only spent one night apart in five years of marriage, and that was when Bev went to hospital for an operation. Bev helped me out of the sofa and sat me in the wheel-chair. She then wheeled me into the bedroom and helped me to undress. The bed at home was a lot lower than those in the hospital and a bit softer. As I needed a firm bed to sleep on, Bev's father placed some chip-board under the mattress to give me extra support.
Because I was still extremely weak, Bev would have to set the alarm three times a night to wake up, get out of bed and turn me either onto my back or onto my side. This was done so that I could avoid getting pressure sores. Each time I was turned, the pillows on my bed had to be positioned differently. By morning Bev was extremely tired. 'How can she keep this up?' I thought. Not only did she have a three month old baby to care for, but a quadriplegic husband as well.

As I look back now I still cannot imagine how Bev coped, but fortunately for my sake, and with God's help she did.

I can now see what Paul meant when he said: 'I can do everything through Him who gives me strength.' (Philippians 4:13)

Bev was well aware of God's support, and this seemed to sustain her.

Christmas morning arrived and I was so happy to be spending the day at home and not in the hospital. Unlike years gone by, this Christmas was going to be a lot different as it would be my first in a wheelchair.

After breakfast we cleaned up and headed off to my sister's place to join the rest of the family for Christmas lunch. The four of us loaded ourselves into the car - myself, Bev, Kristy, and of course Buzy, the dog.

As I have a very large family, Christmas lunch was always quite hectic. The roast pork, lamb and chickens were cooked to perfection, as were the potatoes. A shortage of food was never a problem, and there was always more than enough to eat. As it was my first Christmas being disabled, my family fussed about me and made me feel special.

After lunch it was time to exchange the gifts. This was a lot of fun, especially for the children. Kristy was given clothes, a doll and some money. Bev bought me a sheep-skin covering for my bed. It served a dual purpose of keeping me warm at night as well as cutting down the risk of getting bed sores. I bought Bev a dress.

In the afternoon the brothers-in-law and nephews would usually engage in the traditional game of cricket. But now, instead of me running around fielding the ball, I was resigned to sitting on the sidelines and being a spectator. Something that once came so easily was now only a memory.

Starting to feel tired, I was wheeled inside and had two of my brothers-in-law carry me into the bedroom and put me on the bed. It was all too easy for these two big burly guys. I was like a feather in their arms. I rested my head on the pillow and after two hours I woke up. It was now late afternoon and time to go to Kerry and Christine's place for dinner. My family walked me out to the car and helped me get into the car from the wheel-chair. We waved goodbye, then drove off into the distance.

It was about a twenty minute drive to the Powers and we were looking forward to seeing them. I didn't eat too much for dinner as I had eaten enough for lunch. Later on, we sat in the lounge room and talked. Kerry was forever picking my brains and asking me very deep
theological questions. As I never knew what he would come up with next, he always kept me on my toes. What? Why? How? Where? were words he used all the time when we discussed the things of the Lord. After three hours and many cups of coffee, I headed back to the hospital with Bev and Kristy. No sooner had Christmas come than it was nearly over.

My first Christmas as a new father was certainly not what I had planned. Never did I think three months earlier that instead of enjoying the Christmas holidays at my father-in-law's beach home, I would be stuck in a Melbourne hospital, unable to walk.

Although at times I felt robbed, I was thankful to God that I was still alive, and blessed with a wonderful wife and daughter.
Chapter 6 - A Dream Come True

At the age of 14, after experiencing some turbulent early teen years, I began to regularly attend church again. Although I had strayed for a time, those early days in Sunday school had set a foundation in my life that would one day pay off. My world started to change as I focused my direction on Christ, and accepted His will and way for my life. Unlike my school days, reading and prayer was now a priority in my life. Each day I prayed for thirty minutes and read ten chapters of the Bible. What an impact this had in my life!

I was also given a copy of the book: ‘The Cross and the Switchblade', the story of a young country preacher, David Wilkerson, who went and ministered to the street gangs in New York, resulting in decisions being made for Christ and the eventual establishment of Teen Challenge (a Christian drug and alcohol rehabilitation centre). I found myself totally enthralled by the story, and the way in which God used a person who was willing to count the cost and give his all for the Gospel.

‘That's for me,' I thought. From that time on I had a consuming passion to go to the USA and work at Teen Challenge.

Soon after getting married, Bev and I finished Bible college. We then made plans to go to the USA. I initially sent off two letters, one to Youth With A Mission and the other to the headquarters of Teen Challenge.

For the next few weeks we kept a constant vigil over the mailbox. When we saw the mail man arriving, we would dash down from our first floor apartment and race to see what had come. We first received a reply from YWAM informing us of a five month Discipleship Training School they were running. We later heard from a Teen Challenge centre in North Carolina, but nothing concrete eventuated from this. After evaluating the two options we decided to head for Texas, to YWAM.

Before leaving, we had to tie up the loose ends. As we were in desperate need of finance we had to sell our car, which we had bought for $800 after we were married. We advertised it in the local paper and sold it for $600. The next thing on the list was the furniture. As time was against us, we were not in a position to hang out for the best price, so we had to sell the things for less than they were worth.

The hardest thing to do, especially for Bev, was to sell our wedding presents. The sentimental value was worth more to us than the actual price of the items. We went to a local market and hired a table to sell our goods. We watched them go one by one, but we looked at it all as an investment in the work of the Lord.

It was now September, 1981. After saying our goodbyes to the family at the airport, we took off for the adventure of our life. As we had many stop-overs, the flight took about 26 hours. Our last stop was Dallas airport, where we arrived about 12 midnight. We were met by a friend of my sister, and were taken to her parent's home to stay the night, and what an eventful night it was.
Before I went to bed, I decided to use the toilet. The bathroom was situated between our room and another bedroom, with an entrance into each room. As I pulled the lever on the toilet, I noticed that instead of the water flushing, it started to rise and pour onto the floor. Not wanting to wake the person in the adjacent room, I said: `Bev, come quickly, the toilet's overflowing!' We immediately grabbed the towels to soak up the water before it gushed into the next room. Finally we managed to get the situation under control. By the time we made it to bed it was 1.30am. We prayed and laughed ourselves to sleep. Before we left in the morning, Bev asked Mrs Wilson where she could put the used towels. `Just give them to me,' she said. Bev embarrassingly passed them to her, wringing wet. Mrs Wilson didn't say anything, but she must have thought that us Aussies had peculiar showering habits.

The next day we headed off to the YWAM headquarters at Lindale, Texas. It was a beautiful property known as the `Twin Oaks Ranch.' `What a great place to spend five months,' we thought, as we drove in. But little did we know that our DTS was going to be held a few miles away in Tyler. `Have you seen the other property yet?' asked the YWAM staff member. `No,' I said, `what's it like?' `You'll soon see,' he replied. I didn't like the tone in his voice and I wondered what would be in store.

When we arrived, we understood why this was going to be the final DTS here, and why the buildings would soon be demolished. After brief introductions, we were shown to our room. It certainly was not `The Hilton.' Besides not having any carpet, it was also small and cramped. Bev sat on the bed, looked at me with tears in her eyes and said: `What are we doing here, Rob?' `Things will be okay Bev, you'll see, it will all work out.' She smiled, but I knew it was going to take a bit of convincing.
When Sunday arrived we were looking forward to going to church. Finding a good church was simply a matter of trial and error. The first place we attended was called the 'Lighthouse Assembly.' It was a small congregation of approximately 30 people. We could see that these people were really enjoying themselves. They sang to their hearts content and were certainly not ashamed to show their emotions. They were real Southern folk, and proud of it. The four part harmonies were really something to hear, and the preaching was something else. The pastor of the church was a real fiery preacher who took no time to work up a sweat. He commenced his message with a question: 'Do you have any dust on your Bible?' By the time he finished you certainly got the message. A dusty Bible was an indication of a book not often read. It certainly hit home.

After the service the minister came over to Bev and I and introduced himself. He looked as though he had just taken a shower with his clothes on. Even his tie was saturated. I am not sure if he preached like that all the time, but if he did he would certainly be heading for a cardiac arrest. Although we enjoyed the ministry here, the couple who took us were unable to continue attending so we were stuck for a lift.

For three months we attended lectures which were intended to prepare us for an eight week field trip to El Paso. As the people here came from different denominations it made things quite interesting, especially when discussing theology. We were all biased toward our own pet doctrines and were not going to budge.

January had arrived and now the group was heading off on an over-night bus trip to El Paso to begin our field experience.

After enduring the conditions at Tyler for three months, I thought that nothing could be worse, but was I mistaken! The accommodation at El Paso was a sight to behold. A long rectangular building was divided into small rooms about three metres long and two metres wide. There were no beds provided, only mattresses, which we had to borrow from a Christian organisation after we had arrived. There was only one block of toilets and showers,
which we had to share. The men would shower during one part of the day and the women the other. This seemed to me to be a bit primitive, but it was this or nothing. Although I didn't enjoy roughing it like this, God certainly used it to shake me out of the comfortable Western life-style I was so accustomed to.

Due to our visa situation, Bev and I did not go for day trips into Mexico like the others, but stayed in El Paso and walked the streets, knocking on doors in order to share the Gospel. As we were so close to the Mexican border, many of those living in the area spoke Spanish. In order to communicate with them, Bev and I had to learn a bit of Spanish:

**ME LLAMO ROBERTO I MY ESPOSA ES BEVE**
My name is Robert and my wife is Bev

**SOMOS CHRISTIANOS Y**
we are Christians and

**ESTAMOS TRABAGANDO CON EL GRUPO**
are working with the group

**JUVENTUD CON UNA MISSION**
Youth With A Mission

**TIENES UNA BIBLIA, UN NUEVO TESTAMENTO**
do you have a Bible or a New Testament

**EN SU CASA?**
in your house?

If the reply was 'No,' then we would say:

'**NO QUESTA NADA, GRATIS.**'
no cost, free.

We became so fluent and convincing that many people we visited would reply in Spanish, not realising that our vocabulary was limited. As well as being fed by some, others invited us in for coffee, being interested in our work. Most of the homes were neat, but certainly not of
Beverly Hills standard. Some of the people were quite poor and were overwhelmed when we gave then a Bible, but for others it was the first one they had owned. I remember on one occasion we went to a caravan park to give out Bibles. There was an old man sitting outside his caravan soaking in the sun. 'Do you have Testamento?' I asked. 'No' he replied. 'Then please take this one sir, at no cost.' In half English and Spanish he thanked me, and then reached into his pocket and pulled out a few cents, which was probably all he had, to pay me. 'No questnada, no cost,' I insisted. When Bev and I passed by 30 minutes later, there he was reading the Bible, perhaps for the very first time.

For something to do of an evening, a group of us would walk to the stores to get a bite to eat. As it was not a safe environment, it was always wise to go in pairs, as I found out. One evening Dave, another guy doing the DTS said: 'Come for a walk Rob, we'll go get ourselves an ice cream.' After a while we started to head back home. The street was dark and dusty, and you could hear a pin drop. As we approached an intersection we noticed a car coming to the right of us. Not wanting to keep him waiting until we crossed, we motioned to him to go ahead. As he drove off he gave us a rude sign with his fingers and then parked a little way down the street. Dave looked at me and said: 'Did you see what I saw?' 'I think so,' I replied. We continued walking and thought no more about it. When we were about 30 metres past the car, we heard the ignition start, then the headlights came on, and off he took heading straight for us. Thinking we were goners, we jumped out of his path and he then kept going. A bit shaken, we quickly headed back before we got into any more trouble.

As our DTS was coming to an end, we had to decide what our next move would be. Although we had enjoyed our time with YWAM, our heart was with Teen Challenge. Before I had gone on the field trip, I had written to the TC director, reminding him of our previous application from Australia. He replied informing us that he was looking forward to us commencing at Teen Challenge.

The bus trip home to Tyler was a memorable one for a few reasons. After packing the back of the bus with all our suitcases and travel gear, we finally hit the road. The whole group was looking forward to getting back to a somewhat more normal life, especially after sleeping on a dusty mattress on the floor for eight weeks.

About five miles from El Paso, the border patrol had set up a temporary check station to look for illegal Mexican immigrants. This seemed to be a never-ending headache for the US Immigration Service. I can still remember seeing Mexicans fleeing Mexico and crossing the border. They would wait on the busy highway for a break in traffic before making their move.

Our bus was stopped and a big burly officer came aboard and said: 'Are you all American citizens?' 'No,' replied Ken, the leader of our group. 'We have a couple from Chile, and a couple from Australia.' 'Well, I'll need to inspect their passports,' he demanded. 'Our passports,' I said, 'are in our suitcase which is somewhere down the back of the bus.' 'Then get it,' he said, sternly. I could see that Ken wasn't too impressed, because it had taken long enough to pack the bus, without having to unpack and then pack it again. Finally, I presented the passport to the patrol officer. He took a quick glance then arrogantly said: 'Okay, on your way.' I know he had a job to do, but after all we went through, he could at least have said thank you.
Besides the bus being old, it was also very run down. This explains why we were breaking down so often. Thankfully, we made it safe and sound back to Tyler, although later than we expected.

Upon returning to YWAM we said goodbye to all the friends we had made, then caught a Trailways Bus to Greater Piedmont Teen Challenge, in Greensboro, North Carolina. When we arrived, we were introduced to the staff and students. It was all a dream come true. I had finally made it, and I was going to make the most of it.

**Teen Challenge** was situated on a nine acre campus, with a large administration building, a recreation room, a chapel, and a three story dormitory which included a large cafeteria and kitchen. Approximately 20 young men were in the program. The day commenced at 6am, when I would go from room to room in the dormitory and wake them up. Within fifteen minutes, they had to be dressed, have their bed made perfectly, and be lined up for breakfast. I would then do a quick inspection, and if their bed was not up to standard, then I would tear the sheets and blankets off, and then inform the person that he had to miss breakfast and make his bed again. This certainly didn't make me popular.

The rest of the day was made up of Bible classes, work duties, recreation (basketball, swimming, weights, etc) and personal devotions. The weekend was a time of relaxation, shopping, and family visits. The guys would spend a minimum of five months at this induction centre, and on completing the set requirements, they would then be transferred to another Teen Challenge campus to learn work skills.

During my time here I applied for and received my ministerial credentials from the fellowship to which I belong. It was a great thrill and I was now ‘Pastor’ Rob Brown.

After a hard year’s work at Teen Challenge, Bev and I decided to go back to Australia. We loved our time in the USA, but were now looking forward to coming home.

With only a couple of months left at Teen Challenge we started our preparations to return to Australia. All was going well. We had booked our airline tickets and knew what day we would arrive back in Melbourne. However there was one important thing we were not sure of - where we were going to live.
Bev and I went to prayer about the matter and committed it to the Lord. We knew that somehow He would work it out. A few days later one of the staff members ran over to me and said: 'You have a phone call from Australia.' As I always looked forward to a call from home, I dashed over to the dormitory, raced up the stairs, burst through the staffroom door and, out of breath, said: 'Hello.'

'Rob, it's Jeff speaking.' 'Jeff!' I exclaimed, 'how are you doing?' As I hadn't spoken to Jeff for well over a year, his call came as a surprise. 'I heard on the grapevine that you and Bev are planning to return home. I'm calling to say that you and Bev are welcome to stay with my wife and I on your return.' For a moment I could hardly believe what I was hearing. 'Lord, You sure work quickly,' I thought, as I told Jeff how it was only recently that Bev and I had prayed about this matter. Not wanting to cost Jeff an arm and a leg, we finished the call and I then ran to Bev to tell her the good news.

'But what are we going to do about a car?' we thought. That was going to be a problem because we simply had no money to buy one. We knew that God wanted us to go home, so we again committed this need to Him. Later that evening, I received another call from Australia. To get two overseas calls in one day was quite a treat. 'Hello Rob, it's Jeff again. I forgot to tell you before that you can also use my car while you are staying with me.'

By this time, Bev and I were totally overwhelmed by God's provision, and we knew with full assurance that He had everything under control.

We arrived back at Melbourne airport to a warm welcome from our families. It sure was good to see loved ones again and to be back on familiar turf.
Chapter 8 - A New Ministry

The senior minister from my home church, on hearing that we had returned, offered me a job on staff. I assumed the position of youth minister and was also the chaplain of the Christian school.

Once again we had experienced God's provision and it confirmed to us that our move back home was the right decision.

Having been married for five years, we decided it was time to start a family. As I was only paid part-time from the church, Bev had to work in a nursing home to help make ends meet. I decided to get a day job and to do my ministry duties and study during the evenings, so I went to a hospital in the city and filled out a job application form. Two weeks later I received a phone call and was informed that a position had become available and I was required to come in for an interview. After meeting my boss, he showed me around the hospital and explained what my work entailed. I was accepted and started work as an offset printer. As I had never done this work before I had to learn from scratch. Great responsibility went with it, but I enjoyed the challenge.

Mark, my boss, was one of the best persons I have yet worked for. He was a kind, considerate man, who was well liked by all his staff. There wasn't anything anyone would not do for him. He would even allow me to attend the monthly minister's fellowship meetings held on Friday mornings. Just the same, I would make up the time difference. As well as enjoying the work, I found that God gave me many opportunities to witness for Him.

It had been the first time in eight years that I had worked full time in the secular field. I now look back on that experience and see how beneficial it was. I think that far too many ministers get so caught up in their own little world of ministry that they lose touch with, and forget what it is like to be in the real world. There is a real danger when ministers isolate themselves from those in the world, especially considering that they are the ones we are supposed to be winning for Christ. In fact I think it would be good for some ministers to climb down from their ivory towers and relate to, and rub shoulders with the 'real' people.
Having been in the ministry for a few years now, I was soon to assist in a church in the country. I was beginning to feel a bit stale, and had become disillusioned by the things which were supposedly being done in the name of Christ, yet were certainly not Christian. I had been disappointed and hurt by things both said and done to me. I wanted something to happen in my life and needed a new direction, but I didn't know exactly where to start.

So one evening, feeling very discouraged, I went to bed. Not feeling tired enough to sleep, I lay on my back and prayed: 'Lord Jesus, show me how much You love me, do something unique in my life.'

A few days later, He answered my prayer in the strangest possible way as I lay motionless on my back and heard those fateful words: 'Hang in there mate, you're going to be all right, an ambulance is on its way ...'
Chapter 9 - DISCHARGED FROM HOSPITAL

As Christmas was well and truly over, it was now back to the grind at the hospital. The early morning starts allowing me to get to my programs on time were certainly paying off.

Over the weeks, my hands (especially the right one) started to respond to exercise. One day, Michelle, the occupational therapist, said: "How would you like to make a table and chair for Kristy?" I thought that was a great idea. "When can I get started?" I asked eagerly. "How about now?" she suggested.

The only other time I had made a table was during my woodwork class at school. But things were greatly different now because I did not have the use of two good hands. I knew it would be difficult, and I did not want to bite off more than I could chew, but the thought of making something for my little sweetheart, Kristy, was all the motivation I needed.

As the wood for the chair had already been cut to size, it was 'simply' a matter of gluing it together. As I had not done anything constructive for the past couple of months, it felt really good to be finally doing something creative.

When the frame was stable, I had to weave the seat from sea grass rope. As the rope was attached to a piece of wire (similar to a large needle) it made the task of weaving a lot easier. Although this took a lot of patience and time, it was good therapy for my fingers.
One afternoon, my father decided to come along to watch me making the chair. As I was nearing the end of weaving the seat, I found it a bit more difficult to pull the rope through. Seeing that I was having a little trouble, Dad said: ‘Here, give me a go.’ Hesitantly, I did. When it came down to delicate things like this, my dad was as gentle as a bull in a china shop. As the rope would not budge, dad did what came so naturally -- he pulled the rope hard, and as he did it snapped. I looked at him and knew he felt bad. ‘Don't worry, it can be fixed later,’ I said.

Once the chair was completed, I started on the table, without any help from dad. I started out with a piece of chip-board 50cm square, then I proceeded to glue hundreds of small rectangular wood strips onto the chip-board. It wasn't just a matter of placing them anywhere -- they were to be put down in a particular way to make a pattern.

Once the glue had dried it was time to sand it down. This was done in a small adjacent room in order to contain the wood dust in one place. With the sander in my hand I would carefully and methodically sand away. Fortunately, the occupational therapy department had an electric sander, so it took no time at all to have a smooth surface.

The table was now starting to take shape. One of the orderlies helped me put the legs on. All I had to do now was to apply a few coats of varnish to it. I felt like an artist putting the finishing touches on his masterpiece. This all took just a few weeks, but considering the limited movement of my fingers it was a real achievement just to finish.

Bev was unaware that I was making the table and chair, so it came as a pleasant surprise. Kristy has made good use of the table and chair, and each time she does, I feel a fresh sense of satisfaction.

Another aspect of my occupational therapy was to teach myself how to dress, something which was much more difficult than it seems. Because I was still very weak and had little movement in my legs, I had to dress while lying on my back on top of the bed. As my hands had very little movement, the task was even more difficult.

What seemed so easy once upon a time was now a time-consuming hassle, and no longer a simple case of slip this on and do this up.

My first attempt to get dressed took me about twenty minutes. My clothes were placed neatly on my bed and it was now up to me to do the rest. I felt as helpless as a baby as I struggled to put on my socks. Each time I moved and put on an article of clothing, it seemed as though I had just been through a wrestling match.

When I had finally finished, I was so exhausted that I wanted to go back to sleep. It was such an ordeal, like trying to get dressed with my hands and feet tied up.
All of the patients wore tracksuits because they were the most practical piece of clothing to wear, being not only loose and easy to put on, but also saving time changing during the day when going off to the gym. My Adidas and Nike's got a good work-out, but managed to survive.

I tried to avoid wearing shirts with buttons because of the time involved and the difficulty in doing them up, and since I could not tie shoe-laces, runners with velcro straps were the order of the day.

Fortunately as time went on and I got stronger, getting dressed became less of a problem.

Previously when I was taken out on a home visit I was given assistance getting in and out of the vehicle. But now it was time for me to learn how to transfer from my wheel-chair into a vehicle without getting any assistance.

At my physiotherapist's request, Bev brought our car in one afternoon and parked it outside the rehabilitation gym. Maxine wheeled me out of the gym around to the passenger side door.

After putting the brakes on the wheel-chair, I removed the foot-rests so that they did not hinder my transfer from the wheel-chair into the car.

While one end of the transfer board was placed under the cushion of my wheel-chair, the other end was put on the car seat.

Carefully, I slid my bottom onto the board and slowly moved across until I reached the passenger seat. 'Well done!' said Maxine. 'Now try it again.'

After three successful attempts, Maxine, realising that I was tired, congratulated me and called it a day. I felt so happy that my hard work was being rewarded and recognised.

The wheel-chair I was presently using was quite heavy and was the property of the hospital. Because of this, a light-weight wheel-chair was going to be specially built for me. Because the spinal patients were various sizes, a couple of light-weight chairs were brought into the hospital so we could be fitted for it and given a test ride.

Although I was a bit nervous at first, I started to get use to the light-weight model after a couple of spins around the room. I immediately sensed the difference between the chair I had used regularly and this light-weight one. What a contrast it was! It was like comparing a tank to a Ferrari. I even got to pick the colour of my choice -- blue, my favourite. As it took some time to make them, I had to wait a number of weeks before I could get one.

I was now going home each weekend and enjoying every minute of it. As my legs were getting stronger, transferring from the wheel-chair to the sofa was not such a problem now, and this made things a lot easier on Bev's back.
One evening while watching some television with Bev and her father, I said to them: 'How about both of you getting on either side of me and lifting me up so I can try to walk?' They got out of their chairs and came over toward me. While they grabbed one arm each, I used my legs to push up as they began to lift me up from the sofa. 'Walk me over to the lounge room door,' I said.

Carefully and steadily, I put one foot in front of the other, and walked towards the door. Although I was wobbly, slow and lacking in co-ordination, I was still walking, and that was something I had not done for many months, and was never expected to do again.

After reaching the door, they guided me back to the sofa where I sat down, exhilarated and exhausted. It felt as though I had just run a marathon. Bev could not conceal her joy as we both praised the Lord for His goodness in our lives.

On the Monday when Bev, Kristy and I arrived at the rehabilitation gym, I did not immediately mention my walking exploits to Maxine. I thought she might have been upset as I attempted this without her supervision.

That morning however, Maxine said: 'Seeing you have a certain amount of strength in your legs, how about trying to take a few steps?' 'Well, um, I already have.' I then proceeded to explain what had taken place over the weekend. Looking stunned, but pleased she said: 'That's great. How about doing it again?' 'All right, I'll give it a try.'

Maxine then asked Gary the orderly to assist her. Although Gary was not a physiotherapist, I felt as though he knew just as much as they did. After helping me out of the wheel-chair, I proceeded to take steps with them on either side guiding my way.

As I walked inside the gym, I was well aware of being watched. I could see the look of desperation in the eyes of the other patients confined to their wheel-chairs, as they saw me walking around ever so slowly.

This made me feel very sorry for them. Although I knew that they did not resent the fact that I was walking, and that they would have been happy for me, I knew that they would have given anything in order to change places with me. Just to be able to stand and stretch would have been enough for them.

After I was taken once around the inside of the rehab gym, they returned me to my wheel-chair. 'Well done Rob,' said Maxine, 'that's a good start.' Inside, my heart was thumping with excitement. I felt so privileged that God was taking such an interest in me, yet at the same time I was humbled because I knew that it was only through Him that I was able to do what I had done.

After my physio session, Bev and Kristy accompanied me back to our little room in ward 17. 'Bev,' I said, 'did you notice the look on the other patients when I was walking in the rehabilitation gym?' 'Yes I did, and I can't stop feeling sorry for them,' she replied.
Noticing that my knees were over-extending when I walked, Maxine made an appointment for me to see Peter, who worked in the orthotic department. After taking some measurements, Peter had the knee braces ready in a matter of days. I gave them a test run and immediately noticed the support they gave to my knees. Although they were bulky, they could be worn under my tracksuit pants, without being too obvious.

As my physiotherapy was going ahead in leaps and bounds, Maxine had me working in the gym at every spare opportunity. If I was not on the exercise bike, you would find me either doing leg exercises on the floor mats or crawling around on the floor.

Now that I was taking steps, it was important to build on that and to strengthen my legs and improve my balance. Maxine thought it would now be a good idea to try me out on the parallel bars. I wheeled myself over to the parallel bars and put my wheel-chair brakes on. ‘Now Rob, I want you hold on to the bars and then stand up,’ said Maxine.

Nervously, I sat forward in the wheel-chair. I took hold of the bars, then with all of my strength, I pushed up with my legs. As I started to take steps, Maxine was standing in front of me just in case I got into any trouble or fell over.

After reaching the far end of the bars, I turned around and headed back to the other end, in the direction of the wheel-chair. ‘That was good Rob,’ said Maxine, ‘we’ll continue this procedure during the other sessions.’ Each time I used the parallel bars my confidence increased as well as my stamina.

As all was going well on the parallel bars, Maxine decided to start me on a walking frame. Fortunately, it was not a difficult piece of equipment to use. After taking two steps, I would lift the frame, move it forward, take the next step, and so on.

On my first attempt I managed to walk about ten metres before tiring. Although to the fit and healthy this would not seem like much, to me it was the achievement of a life time. Whenever I had visitors, they were delighted to see me standing up and taking steps, especially my family. It also gave me a real thrill to ‘perform’ in front of them.

After a week of using the walking frame, I graduated to elbow crutches. Although the elbow crutches did not give me the same support base that the frame did, it was a good indication that my balance was improving.

Instead of being restricted to the gym, Maxine began taking me for short walks around the hospital grounds. This was more difficult than walking inside because I had to adapt to the different types of surfaces. If I was not walking up the asphalt road, I was walking down the brick path or stepping over stones.
As I was steadily improving on the elbow crutches, Maxine decided to try me out on the walking sticks. After getting up out of my wheel-chair I tried to take some steps, but I couldn't keep my balance. Although I did not fall, I soon would have, had I persisted with the walking sticks.

Seeing that I was not ready for the walking sticks, Maxine put me back on the elbow crutches. I couldn't believe the difference between using the elbow crutches and the walking sticks. At the time I thought to myself that these were too difficult to use, and that I could not see myself using them in the near future. It was simply a matter of balance, and this would only be improved by more exercise.

As I had now had a little bit of experience walking on flat surfaces, it was time to try some steps. In the gym there was a set of steps with a rail to hang on to for balance and safety. It was hard work lifting my knee up and placing my foot on the next step. Slowly but surely I went up and down the steps. It was a far cry from the days when as a child I would tear up and down the stairs at school, but I managed to get through without a mishap.

Maxine, wanting to get the best out of me took me outside to a set of concrete steps. There must have been at least twelve of them. I made sure that I was not going to rush because the last thing I wanted was to trip over and end up in a heap at the bottom of the steps.

Knowing that I would be very tired after this, Maxine brought along my wheel-chair to take me back to the gym. Although she worked me very hard, she never put me in a situation that would endanger or cause me any harm.

January was a very good month for Bev and I for more than one reason.

First, I had a visit from my solicitor. 'By the way Rob,' he said, 'Have you thought about where you are going to live when you eventually leave the hospital?' 'Well, for the time being, Bev and I will be staying at her father's house, until we find a place of our own,' I said.

'Are you still planning to go to the country and assist Bev's brother in law, Alan, in the church there?' he asked. 'Yes,' I replied. 'If that's the case, then why don't you call the real estate agent and ask him if the house you initially wanted is still on the market?' he said. As it had been nearly five months since we had to let go of the house, I had simply assumed that it would have been sold, but it seemed like a good idea to find out what the situation actually was.

When I saw Bev next, I told her about the conversation I had had with the solicitor and she decided to call Mr Kilkenny, the real estate agent at the first opportunity -- as soon as she arrived home.

'Hello Mr Kilkenny, do you remember that last September we bought a house but unfortunately had to pull out of the deal due to my husband’s motor accident?' 'Of course I remember, Bev, and how is Rob doing?' he asked. Bev told him of my progress and our plans for the future.
'The reason for my call, though,' she said, 'is to find out whether that little brick house we were going to buy is still for sale.'

'Well Bev, you're not going to believe what I am about to tell you. When you called last September to tell me of Rob's accident, the house was again put on the market. For a few months we had no-one interested in buying it and then out of the blue, an elderly lady, after inspecting the house decided to buy it.'

'Oh, is that so,' Bev said sadly.

'Yes, but a strange thing happened,' he said. 'After the settlement period had expired, and just before she moved into the house, I received a phone call from her niece informing me that her aunt had died, and that the family wanted to put the house on the market.'  'Well in that case, we would like to buy it, again,' said Bev.  Bev could not wait to tell me the good news. The next day when she arrived at the hospital, she told me the whole story.  We were amazed by the timing of everything, and the fact that the elderly aunt had passed away just before she moved into the house.  Without reading too much into it, we thanked the Lord for His provision.

Secondly, during this time my progress had surprised everyone. By now I could walk at least fifty metres on the elbow crutches before needing a rest. However, for most of the time I still required the wheel-chair to get around.

And finally, I received some very important news -- something I had been wanting and waiting to hear for months.

On one particular Wednesday afternoon while I was eating lunch, my two youngest sisters, Kerry and Jody paid me a visit. Bev had recently arrived at the hospital with Kristy, and was wheeling her in the pram along the corridor in the direction of the dining room.

On her way, she met up with Dr Unger, one of the doctors who worked on the spinal ward. He was a lovely man who always had time for a joke and a laugh, and always made a point of saying hello to both Bev and Kristy. 'Well, Bev, how would you like to take Rob home, for good?' he asked with a smile. 'Take Rob home! I'd love to!' 'Do you think you'll be able to manage with the baby and all?' he asked. 'Yes, yes,' Bev replied. 'Okay then, I'll arrange for Rob to have his discharge meeting on Friday.'

Bev, as excited as ever, quickly tried to find me so we could rejoice over the good news together. When Bev came into the dining room I looked at her with a smile and said: 'Guess what?' Thinking that I was going to surprise her, Bev said: 'I know, you're coming home with me!'

My discharge family meeting was on Friday afternoon and was quite a contrast to the interim family meeting in November.
The spinal unit doctor, the ward nurse, the social worker and Maxine the physiotherapist all attended and gave their reports concerning my progress.

Dr Unger, who chaired the meeting, began by saying that the breaks in my spine had healed well, along with the burns I had received in the accident. Both the physiotherapist's and the occupational therapist's reports were also encouraging. 'Robert, you've worked extremely well and hard at your rehabilitation and have achieved an enormous amount over the past few months,' they said.

The social worker's report was another testimony of the Lord's great work in my life. 'Robert,' he said, 'both socially and psychologically your adaption to your injury has been excellent. Your family has been a source of great strength and support and in turn, your positive attitude and motivation towards your rehabilitation has been a great encouragement to them.'

During the meeting my mind went back to the interim family meeting in late November. There I was laid up in bed, in great pain and hardly able to move. That was when I was told that I would be in hospital for at least another 6-8 months.

Hearing this news had been a real let-down, and I could see how much it had upset Bev. Yet now, only two months later, the same people were at my discharge meeting giving a glowing report of my rehabilitation. Praise the Lord!
Chapter 10 - The Outpatient

After saying goodbye to the staff at the discharge meeting, Bev wheeled me out to the car. As Bev had taken most of my things home during the week, there was very little I needed to take with me.

As we drove out of the hospital and past my room on ward 17, I seemed to experience a sense of freedom. I suppose it could be likened to a person doing his time and getting out of prison. As the past five months had been the worst experience in my life, I cannot say that I shed a tear as I left. Although I was now leaving the hospital behind, I was still taking with me a lot of memories, both good and bad.

But now I had a far greater challenge to face -- to fit back into society with an obvious physical disability. However, nothing could prepare me for such a change. The world in which I lived prior to the accident would now be different, not because it had changed, but because I had.

Although I was no longer a resident in the hospital, I would continue to come in to the rehabilitation gym and the occupational therapy department five mornings a week as an outpatient.

After the meeting, we drove to pick up Kristy who was being baby sat by a friend. Sandra had been a great help and encouragement to both Bev and I. Apart from the many visits that I received, she would at times come to the house and collect Bev's washing and then return it. We could not have done without her support.

It was so good to be coming home, for no longer was it to be the two of us (Bev and I), but the three of us. As expected, Kristy took up a lot of Bev's time, so I had to be considerate by not being too demanding on her. Kristy was such a wonderful baby, and a joy to both of us. Although I could not take her for a walk in the pram, pick her up, or do most things that a father could do for his child, I still could talk to her, and be there for her.

Being an outpatient and living at home also meant that Bev did not have to waste a lot of time going to and from the hospital. There would be no more loading and unloading the pram from the car, bringing in food for me, watching me exercise or spending hours in the little store room.

No longer would she have to work around visiting hours and to share me with the doctors, nurses and a multitude of visitors.

While at home, I would wheel myself into the bedroom where my books and typewriter were to do some study. Not being able to write well and not being strong enough to pick up heavy books, I became very frustrated. I would have to call out to Bev for assistance, which I knew this was time-consuming for her.

‘There must be an easier way to study and to take notes,’ I thought, ‘But what is it?’
As I was spending a lot of time at home, Bev bought me an exercise bike which kept me busy at night. Over the weeks I clocked up countless kilometres and my hard work was certainly not in vain.

Occasionally, Bev would take me out into the street and together we would go for a little stroll along the sidewalk. As I was still reliant on the elbow crutches, Bev would follow behind me with the wheel-chair in case I got too tired. Fortunately I never needed it, mainly because I did not walk too far from the house.

As an outpatient, my morning started around 6am. After eating breakfast, I would shower and get dressed. Around 8.30am I would phone for a cab to take me to the hospital rehabilitation gym, which was only about 15-20 minutes away. Before I left the house I would make sure that I had my neck brace on, and also had my elbow crutches with me.

Then Bev would wheel me out to the street and we would wait together for the cab to arrive. When it did, Bev would help me into the passenger seat while the cab driver put the wheel-chair and elbow crutches into the trunk. After kissing me goodbye, Bev would attend to her many chores at home while I headed off to the gym.

On one occasion while waiting by the front gate, I decided to stand up out of my wheel chair and bend my knees. After about five minutes of this my legs were getting tired. Trying to do a couple more, I went down too far and fell on the ground. As I was unable to get up, Bev ran inside to get her dad to help lift me back into the wheel-chair. While this was taking place, the cab had arrived and the driver seeing me on the ground, got out of his cab and helped me into the chair. I got out of that unscathed, but it certainly shook me up.

After many trips to the hospital, I was convinced that there were no two cab drivers alike. Some of them were fascinating, interesting, and polite. Others were boring, rude and terrible drivers. Fortunately I had more of the former than the latter.

I do remember on one occasion needing to be picked up from the casualty area of the hospital and be taken home. When the cabby arrived, he noticed my condition and was very obliging. As he went to shut the trunk of his car after putting some of my belongings into it, the corner of the trunk hit him on the forehead. Immediately he grabbed his head which was in great pain. As he took his hand away, I saw blood spurting out from the cut.

Immediately he grabbed for his handkerchief and held it against the wound in order to stop the bleeding. 'Okay mate,' he said, 'I'll drive you home now.' 'No way,' I said, 'that's a nasty cut and it needs urgent attention. Quick, go to casualty.' Not only was I concerned for him, but the last thing I wanted was for him to pass out at the wheel endangering both of us.

Holding his blood-soaked handkerchief to his head, he grabbed his two way radio and called for another cab to come and get me. After apologising to me, he quickly ran into casualty to be examined.
I found out later from a nurse that the cabby had split his head open and required stitches. I couldn't believe what I had just experienced. Here was a man bleeding, obviously in a lot of pain and distress, and thinking only of me and not of himself.

On the other hand, there was one cabby who must have thought that he was an Indianapolis driver. As he sped along the road weaving in and out of the traffic without using his indicator, I sat holding my neck and bracing myself for the worse. As my life flashed before me, all I could think was: 'Lord, help me.'

Finally I arrived home, shaken, but at least in one piece.

I also had opportunities to share with the cab drivers about the Lord, and the wonderful things He has done for me. Many would ask what had happened to me, and then give me a lecture on the dangers of riding a motorbike. I would then quickly jump to my own defence by pointing out that if car drivers would learn to indicate before turning, then people like me would not end up in this condition. Although seeing my point, they were not convinced. It seems that all those who ride motorbikes are stereotyped as being careless maniacs or trouble makers.

On one particular occasion, while I was being driven home from the hospital, the cabby -- a rough, abrupt looking man -- asked what had happened to me. I told him that I was involved in a motor-bike accident. "Well," he said, "not too long ago a motor cyclist crashed head-first into the cannon outside the local RSL." "Oh," I said, not letting on that it was me. As I did not want to get another lecture and maybe end up in an argument with him, I let him continue. This indicated to me that my accident was no secret.

Generally, I would arrive at the hospital about 9am with the cab driver taking me as close to the gym as possible. He would then get the wheel-chair and elbow crutches from the trunk of the car. After placing the wheel-chair as close to the passenger side of the car, I would then hold on to the door, stand to my feet, shuffle myself around in front of the wheel-chair and then sit down. The cabbies were generally more than willing to help, and I guess they also felt sorry for me.

I would then wheel myself into the rehabilitation gym. First I would put myself on the workout table and go through my stretching routine. From here I would use the weights on both my arms and legs. After this I would get down on my knees on the mats on the floor, and with my arms to the side of me, crawl along the floor. This was a good exercise to strengthen the muscles around my hips and waist.

Maxine always made a point of taking me for a walk, not only to help build up my stamina, but also to correct anything that I may have been doing wrong when walking. As my right knee was getting stronger, it was no longer necessary to wear the brace around it. However, as the left knee was still weak, I continued to wear the brace.

Seeing that my walking and endurance was improving, the order for the light-weight wheel-chair was cancelled. As I was not planning to use it, I saw no sense in wasting the money on having it made.
In occupational therapy, I was introduced for the first time to a computer. Because I had limited use of my hands and fingers, and found writing both slow and tedious, the therapist thought it would benefit me to learn how to use it.

As I had never used one before, I initially found it all quite daunting. But the more I used it, the better I became. 'This would be the answer to a big problem I had,' I thought. I can still remember in the early days of Ward 7 looking at my fingers and thinking that I would no longer be able to pick up a pen and write sermons or Bible lessons again. But now this would again be possible with the use of a computer.

Dr Unger was fantastic on the computer and encouraged me to get one. Because I was covered with Transport Accident Commission, he wrote a letter to them explaining how this would benefit me. However convincing the TAC that I needed a computer was easier said than done. Like all insurance companies, you have to go to extreme lengths to prove the validity of your needs.

Initially, not wanting to cough up the money, they suggested buying me a cheap tape recorder so I could first dictate the message and then pass it on to a typist to type at the expense of the TAC. I could not understand their reasoning because not only would this be time consuming for me, but the cost of paying a typist would soon surpass the cost of a personal computer. Finally logic prevailed, the TAC 'saw the light' and decided to supply me with one.

The Transport Accident Commission was also responsible for paying for any renovations to my home that were related to my injury needs. In order to evaluate what was needed, a day was arranged for Bev and myself, the physiotherapist, the occupational therapist and a TAC representative to visit our new home in the country.

As we were not legally the owners of this home for another two months, we had to stop at the real estate agent's to get the key to the front door.

We all arrived at the house around 1pm. Once inside, a thorough inspection of the house took place. I was asked to perform a number of tasks inside the house to see if any adjustments had to be made. I was asked to open the bedroom doors, then to pull the cords on the curtains to see if I could manage. Then it was off to the bathroom to make sure that I could get in and out of the shower and to see if I was able to turn the taps on and off.

By this time my legs were getting tired and needed to sit down. Maxine thought that rather than using the wheel-chair, it would be a good idea for me to walk through the house using the elbow crutches. But she had not realised that the house was empty with no furniture or chairs to sit on. So while the others continued their inspection outside, I had to spend the rest of the time sitting on the only seat in the house, the toilet. If anyone needed to use it, it was tough -- they just had to wait.
After the inspection, it was decided that the TAC would consider paying for a single carport, and for a section of pathway to the front and back door, from where the carport would be built. As the house was built on a concrete slab and was low to the ground, ramps were not needed.

Although these additions helped, the TAC were certainly not willing to throw their money away. I found that getting the TAC to pay for anything was like trying to get blood out of a stone, and what was more infuriating was that some of the representatives who were to determine what spinal patients needed had no medical or nursing background.

At times they seemed to be typical bureaucrats, both impractical and illogical, and more interested in saving money for the organisation than meeting the needs of those they are supposed to be helping.

One hour later the inspection was over. We took the door key back to Mr Kilkenny and the returned to Melbourne.

As we were soon to make our move to the country, we arranged to have Kristy dedicated at our church before saying our final farewell.

As I had not been to the church for nearly five months, I was understandably a bit nervous. I knew that all eyes would be upon me and that I would be the centre of attention. To make matters worse, my left knee brace broke the night before and I was unable to wear it. I was not sure how I would go getting up the steps to the platform without it, but I had no other option. When we arrived at the church, we immediately took our seats about seven rows from the front. The service soon started with some bright and uplifting choruses. Before too long, one of the pastors came forward to the microphone and said: 'I have great pleasure this morning in welcoming back Pastor Rob Brown, his wife Bev and their lovely daughter Kristy.'

I grabbed my elbow crutches, stood to my feet, and then together we made our way forward. As we did, the 500 strong congregation applauded and gave us a warm welcome home. After climbing the steps to the platform, I sat down on a chair facing the congregation. Feeling very self-conscious at this point I tried to look calm, but inside I was a bundle of nerves. I looked around the congregation and tried to spot familiar faces. Obviously, in the time I had been away new faces had been added to the church.

The pastor then prayed for Kristy, as Bev and I dedicated her to the Lord and into His care. As the pastor handed me the microphone, I briefly began to share with the congregation what had happened to me in the accident, and how the Lord had touched my body and raised me up. You could have heard a pin drop, such was the interest in what I had to say.

I thanked the church for their prayers, encouragement and financial support. Before going back down the steps to my seat, Bev and I were presented with a book in appreciation of our service to the church.
When the meeting had closed, we were flanked by friends who wished us well for the future. We were certainly going to miss the family here at Northside, and especially the children, whom we had spent much time with. Although we had fond memories of the past, we were now looking forward to the future, to what God had in store for us.
Chapter 11 - Little Country Church

During the last couple of weeks, Bev was busily packing boxes all in readiness for our move to the country. Over the years, we seemed to have accumulated a lot of possessions. We were amazed by the amount of junk we had stored away, especially souvenirs. As I had been in the ministry for a few years now, I had managed to accrue quite a number of books. These were my prized possessions, so I made sure that they were packed properly. Like all moves, it is the fiddly little things that seem to take the longest time. With a disabled husband to look after and a baby to care for, the last thing that Bev needed was another big move. In our five years of marriage we had moved five times, so by now we were old hands at it.

One of the elders in the church at Northside had a large van and offered to move our belongings. We had arranged for some people to be at Bev's father's house to help Jim load the van. After ninety minutes, everything had been packed and we were ready to go.

As Bev drove our little Toyota steadily along the highway, Jim was not too far behind us in his van. An hour later we turned off the highway at Broadford, where we were to start our new life.

When we arrived at the house, we were pleasantly surprised to see some members of the church waiting outside. Alan, the pastor of the church, had arranged for them to welcome us, and also to help move us in. After some brief introductions, everybody pitched in and started to unload the van.

As I was unable to help, I sat in the lounge room and supervised each person, telling them what went where. Bev had marked each box with the appropriate details, and this made my directing much easier. As it was only a small house, the empty spaces started to fill very quickly. Sometimes it felt like we were living in a shoe box, but it was our home, and we loved it.

While the last few things were being taken off the van, Bev made some sandwiches for the hungry workers. By the time they had finished, they all looked tired and hungry, and watching the way they scoffed the food down, I could see they had worked up a healthy appetite.

As the others had left by now, Jim, looking rather content, said: 'Well, I must be on my way now.' We thanked him, and then handed him some money to cover his time and costs. 'No way,' Jim said. I tried to convince him to take it but he would not budge. 'Accept it as from the Lord,' he said with a smile. Jim was a nice person and this was not the first time I had been on the receiving end of his generosity.

Being on our own for the first time in months, Bev and I started to feel a little insecure. However, knowing that we had made the right decision we knew that God was going to look after us.
As we both looked at all the boxes scattered on the floor, we thought: 'Where do we begin?' As it was now getting late, the bedrooms were the appropriate place to start. Once the bed was made, it was a case of putting away and hanging up the clothes.

While Bev was busily attending to Kristy's bedroom, I was trying to tune in the television. Now that we were in the country, we were unable to get Melbourne stations without a special aerial, so we had to make do with the local product. Because the reception was not too good, I could only manage to get two channels. Even then, depending upon which channel we wanted to watch, Bev would have to run outside and turn the aerial in order to get a good picture. Although this became quite monotonous, it was simply a matter of take it or leave it.

Finally, after a long day, Kristy was fast asleep, and Bev and I were planning to do likewise. As tomorrow was Sunday, and our first service at the church, we wanted to be bright-eyed and awake.

When we heard Kristy arousing we knew it was time to get up. Fighting her way past the boxes in the hall and the lounge room, Bev eventually reached the kitchen and made some breakfast. As there was still a lot to unpack and get in order, we would have liked to give church a miss that morning. But as the people knew that we had arrived, we felt obliged to put in an appearance. However, with hindsight, it would have been easier on Bev if we had commenced our involvement the following week.

Always a stickler for time, we wasted no time in getting ready for church. 'Quick Bev, you better hurry,' I would say, 'we don't want to be late on our first day.' Nothing seemed to fuss Bev. Whenever we had to go out, she would always be the last to be ready.

Whenever I would look for her, there she was putting on her makeup. 'You look good enough, Honey, c'mon let's go,' I would say. I could not stand being late, and to be kept waiting was worse.

But now I had to remind myself that Bev had three to help get ready, and not just herself.

I walked myself out to the car as Bev was getting Kristy. Kristy looked beautiful in her pink dress. When we arrived at the church, I noticed by the car park that people had already arrived. This impressed me greatly. 'There's nothing like a punctual congregation,' I thought. Bev parked the car out the front of the police station, which was located next to the church.

As I started to walk in with my elbow crutches, a policeman who was outside said: 'You're not looking too good, are you?' I looked at him and smiled, but inwardly thinking: 'If you think I look bad now, you should have seen me a few months earlier.' Although he was not trying to be nasty, his comment was a little insensitive.

As we approached the front door of the church, we could hear the congregation singing to their heart's content. As it was just before 10.30, we were surprised that the service had already started, so we quickly took our seats.
During the service, Bev, Kristy and I were given a warm welcome and I was asked to say a few words. I thanked the people for their prayers, love and support since my accident, and told them how much Bev and I were looking forward to ministering here, and getting to know them. Although we had only been in Broadford for two days, the people made us feel part of the family.

After the service Alan said: 'It was so good to see you this morning, at one stage I thought you might have been too tired to come.' I explained that I hadn't realised that the meeting started at 10am, but still felt a little embarrassed and did not make that mistake again.

After meeting the other members in the church, we made our way home for lunch and then had a bit of a sleep.

Over the next week we used the time to properly settle in and sort out all our gear.

Chapter 12 - Accepting the Challenge

Not wanting to push me into the deep end of ministry too quickly, Alan asked if I would like to take a weekly Home Fellowship meeting. Feeling as though I needed the challenge, I agreed to do it.

At these meetings, we would sing some choruses; have an hour of Bible study, followed by supper. As it was a fairly informal occasion, it gave those in the group good opportunity to invite neighbours and friends. Newcomers often enjoyed these gatherings because they did not feel like they were under the microscope nor that they were in 'church.'

The first evening, Alan came along and introduced me to the group. They were a zealous bunch of people, the majority of them being new Christians. Because they had a real hunger to know more about God and His Word, they couldn't get enough Bible study. As I always made a point of finishing on time, they seemed to appreciate this and looked forward to the following week.

Over the months I saw tremendous growth in each of their lives, and looked forward to them sharing their experiences during the week. The questions they asked were intelligent and meaningful, and this clearly indicated the development that had taken place in their lives.

As I started to regain my confidence, Alan asked me if I would like to preach one Sunday morning. Reluctantly I agreed, not because I didn't want to preach, but because I found it so physically demanding.

Firstly, standing in one spot for 20-30 minutes was murder on my legs. I found it much easier walking than being stationary. Secondly, as my intercostal muscles were affected by my accident, and all my breathing was diaphragmatical, I would lose my breath and start gasping for
air. To have sat down and preached would have solved the problem of standing, but I was just not comfortable ministering this way.

So I decided on a compromise. As the platform was three feet high, I leaned against it, enabling me to sit or stand at leisure.

My first attempt at preaching since the accident was quite memorable. I was so nervous before the service that I was vomiting. I was feeling terrible and wanted to call Alan and tell him that I could not make it. However, not wanting to let him and the church down, I went ahead and preached.

While sitting in my seat I was more anxious than I had been on my wedding day. Mid way through the service, Pastor Alan called me forward to the pulpit.

I grabbed my elbow crutches, stood to my feet and moved forward.

I opened my Bible and looked at the congregation.

'Would you please turn in your Bible to ...'

Although still very nervous, I got off to a reasonable start. However, five minutes into the message I started to lose my breath and began feeling dizzy. I tried to control my breathing but it did not work, and eventually I stopped speaking and tried to regain my composure. As I looked at the congregation, I found it difficult to focus on their faces, everything seemed to be a blur.

'Oh no,' I thought, as I remembered that this used to happen to me when first sitting up in the wheelchair. I felt quite stupid. Here I was, supposed to be bringing a message of hope and victory, yet looking pale and feeling like death warmed up.

Finally, after a few good deep breaths, I continued with the message and managed to conclude it without too many distractions.

At the end of the service I received a favourable response. This encouraged me no end, but I did not want to go through it again. What discouraged me most was not being able to preach as I could prior to my accident. Although the content of my message was just as good as before, my delivery was not, and that's what disheartened me. As a pastor I felt that I had something to contribute, but as a preacher I felt all washed up.

When I arrived home I had some lunch and then relaxed. 'I just can't do it, it's too hard,' I said while sipping a cup of tea. 'I noticed that you were struggling Rob, but what you preached was very good,' said Bev. 'If only God would heal me,' I thought.

Not too long after we arrived in Broadford, the church was organising its own tent crusade, featuring a well-travelled evangelist. The church had been preparing this for a number of months and was now ready to go.
Pastor Alan asked if I would be prepared to give a testimony if called upon. I agreed. Alan then called the two local newspapers who came to interview me about my recovery. It also gave me the opportunity to give the tent crusade a mention.

The articles were well covered and the headlines read:

'Miracle -- Rob's on His Feet,' and 'Remarkable recovery by Pastor Rob.'

The meetings went for the whole week with the tent being filled most nights. This was quite remarkable considering it was now winter and very cold. To help keep us warm and cosy, straw was placed on the ground and a large blow heater was used.

The meetings were well received, with many new people attending. One of those attending was the minister of another fellowship in the town. He did not come in order to join in, but to check us out and to see what we were doing. Since he could only manage attendance figures of fifteen people in the morning service and half that in the evening service, he was quite amazed by the number of people who came.

A week or so after the crusade, I attended the monthly ministers' fraternal. About seven ministers from various denominations would meet together to discuss what each of our churches was doing in the community and to discuss ways of working together. As Alan had other commitments on a Friday morning, he asked me to go on his behalf. I was not sure what to expect, but I soon found out.

As I was about to give a report about the crusade, one elderly pious man looked at me with an arrogant wry smile and said: 'I suspect that you did not get many at the meeting.' Hoping that I would say yes, he soon got the shock of his life. Before I could answer him, the minister who came to investigate the crusade said: 'No, on the contrary, the meetings were good and they were packed out.' 'Oh, oh,' said the old minister, as the smile quickly disappeared from his face.
Chapter 13 - Getting Stronger

By now my physiotherapy was going ahead in leaps and bounds. First thing in the morning after breakfast, I would do my stretches for thirty minutes. As we didn't have the advantage of having Bev's dad there to mind Kristy while Bev followed behind me with the wheelchair, I now had to go it alone.

Not wanting to bite off more than I could chew, I started with walking up and down the sidewalk in front of our house. This provided me with a secure flat surface, and it also allowed Bev to keep an eye on me while attending to Kristy and her many chores.

As we lived on the main road, many would observe me as they drove past in their cars. I was aware of being watched and this was an added pressure on me. After 15 minutes of this, I went inside and had a rest.

I continued with this routine for a few days before venturing out on a more challenging walk. The next time I walked to the end of the street, which was only the next house up. I then tried it again, and again, and realised this was not all that difficult.

As I was growing in strength and confidence, I decided to walk around the block. This was going to be my biggest challenge to date because not only would I be walking on different surfaces (concrete sidewalks, grass and loose stones) but I would also be going further than I had before, and I would have been out of Bev's supervision.

It took me about an hour to walk the block and when I arrived home I would go straight to the sofa to have a sleep. I continued with this routine for about a month, and as I did I had opportunities to talk to those in the neighbourhood. One retired man offered to do any odd jobs that were needing to be done around the house. Another man said that whenever I got tired and was wanting a drink, I could come right on in to his house. One day we received a knock at the door and it was the gardener at the local community centre, who had brought along a bag of mushrooms he had just picked. He was another one whom I had met on my walks. These country people were so very friendly, and they could not do enough for us.

After a couple of months, I was more stable on my feet and was ready to put away the elbow crutches for the walking sticks. Not only did I decide to stretch my wings further and attempt to walk an extra block, but I also attached weights to my ankles to make me work a bit harder. These weights were rectangular bags filled with sand that were wrapped around my ankles and attached by velcro. The bags came in different poundage so the stronger my legs became, the more I increased the weight.

As well as taking an extra hour, it would also involve crossing the road by myself. Although I look forward to a challenge, I was concerned about falling over on the road and not being able to get up again. Anyway I bit the bullet and went for it.
Not only were the walks good for me physically, they also gave me the opportunity to talk to God and to think about things. I also used the occasion to listen to both Christian music and the Bible on my mini cassette recorder. This not only ministered to me but it also broke the monotony of the long walks.

On one particular occasion, I remember thinking to myself as I was walking, whether such a great God actually was aware of me struggling around the streets of Broadford on my elbow crutches.

Ironically, about that time, after just crossing the street, I fell over on a gravely portion of sidewalk. As I was in a quiet back street, the street was deserted and there was nobody in sight to help me. Trying to get up, I fell back down again. I was simply too tired to move. I felt a bit silly sitting on the ground, but there was nothing else I could do. I was just thankful that I had not injured myself.

About one minute later, an older lady and her daughter came out of their front door to get into their car. They saw me and asked if I needed help. After I had explained what had happened, they took hold of one arm each and pulled me up.

I thanked them and then continued on my way. As I was reflecting on what had just taken place, a Bible passage came to mind.

'Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.' (Matthew 10:29-31)

How silly I was to think that God might have forgotten me, but on the other hand, it's sure nice to be reminded that He hasn't.

Getting a little bored with walking around the same block, I decided to venture out and put a bit of variety into my walks. I would get Bev to drive me in the car to different locations around the town. From here Bev would leave me and I would then walk home. Not only did I get to see more people, but I also started to know my way around the place.

One warm afternoon, I decided to walk along an area where on one side of the road there were factories and on the other there were paddocks. After being dropped off, I hadn't walked twenty metres before I was attacked by a hoard of flies. There was nothing I could do to deter them. It got so bad that I was unable to walk because they were all over my face preventing me from seeing where I was going. It reminded me of the movie where humans were set upon by killer bees. To be killed by bees would be understandable, but to be massacred by flies would be embarrassing, let alone unbelievable.

Eventually I made my way across the road to one of the factories. Fortunately a lady was there ready to go home. I explained my plight and asked could I make a phone call to Bev in order for her to come and get me. Feeling sorry for me, she then insisted on driving me home. I gratefully I accepted.
When I arrived back home I thanked the lady then walked up the driveway. Bev, getting a surprise to see me home so soon, rushed to the front door and said: ‘What's wrong Rob? Why are you home so soon?’ ‘I'll explain when I get inside, honey,’ I replied.

Needless to say, I never took that route again.

As well as the good things about the walks there were also the bad. Just around the corner lived a cheeky little dog, Rex. When I walked past his house, he would run up behind me, bark and snap at my feet. Although the dog never bit me, at times he came close. Unfortunately it was an undisciplined dog and it caused a lot of problems.

One particular wet winter afternoon, I received a visit from the vicar from the Anglican church. He was a nice man who also had physical problems. As his shoes were muddy he left them outside the front door. When he was leaving, he noticed that one of his shoes was missing. I had an idea who took it, and told him where it should be. Needing to get to his car, he put on one shoe then hopped across the front lawn trying to keep the other foot dry. This must have looked quite comical to those passing by in their cars, and Bev and I could not help but burst into laughter.

Finally making it to the car, he drove around the corner and there was Rex with his shoe on the front lawn of the house.

In the course of conversation, one of the men in the church told me about an elderly gentleman he saw riding an adult, three-wheeler pushbike. ‘What a great way to exercise, I must look into this,’ I thought.

Wasting no time, I contacted a few bike shops in Melbourne to see if they had heard of them, and to my delight they had. After getting a few quotes, Bev, Kristy and I went to the city to inspect the bicycle.

When we arrived at the bike store, we were taken through to the back of the store. Of the hundreds of bikes I saw, there was my three wheeler, and this had to be transported in from interstate. After having it assembled, the shop assistant demonstrated how it worked and then, with the help of Bev, lifted it onto the roof rack of our car and tied it down.

When we arrived back at Broadford, I decided to take the bike for a spin. Nervously I handed my walking stick to Bev and cautiously put myself on the bike. Slowly I commenced peddling up and down the driveway. It felt so strange to be riding on a moving object again, and it was so different to riding the exercise bike. Although I did not fear falling off the bike, I was concerned about it tipping over, even though with three wheels, one at the front and two at the rear, this was highly unlikely.
After mastering the driveway and sidewalk, it was now time to hit the road. When I considered
the motorcycle accident I even surprised myself by venturing out on the road again. Although
we lived on a busy street, there was an access road which kept the traffic away from me. Also,
the other streets were very quiet with little traffic.

Initially I rode the same route that I walked. Obviously it did not take me as long to get around
on the bike, so I went around and around until I tired. I was fascinated by the peculiar looks I
received. I mean, it's not every day you see a grown up young man riding a three wheeler. As
far as I know, I was the only person in the town with a bike like this. It was great fun and it gave
me an element of independence. As long as I kept away from biting dogs and the cars I was
fairly safe.
Chapter 14 - My Yearly Check Up

Once a year I was required to come back to the hospital for a check-up. Although it was only a few hours out of my day, I would have preferred to have been elsewhere. The first thing I had to do was to fill out a questionnaire.

This covered such things as: What medication are you using?; Are you experiencing any physical difficulties?; How are you coping socially?; etc.

Next I was taken to the xray department to check that I had not developed any kidney stones or other abnormalities causing dysfunction.

After taking off my sweater and rolling up the arm of my shirt, I would place myself on the xray table where a doctor would carefully insert a needle into my vein. Contrast dye would then be administered into the bloodstream to show up the kidneys.

Having the needle put into the vein was bad enough, but when the dye was put in it was an experience I will never forget. Suddenly I would feel nauseous and hot, as if I was burning internally. This sensation lasted about thirty seconds, then slowly subsided. It was wise not to eat anything before the event or else it might all be brought up.

After this I would make my way, along with the xrays, down to the spinal clinic to talk with an occupational therapist, a physiotherapist, a social worker, and finally the doctor, who would examine the xrays.

I was always glad to get the all clear, and I thanked God for sustaining me yet another year.

When making my way out of the hospital, I bumped into Jean, a Christian nurse who had worked on the spinal unit. We exchanged pleasantries, and then spent a few minutes filling in a few months. Just about to say goodbye, Jean said: 'I have something interesting to tell you, Rob. About a week ago, at the nurses station, your name came up in conversation. One of the nurses who had attended you said that she felt sorry for you because of your expectations to walk again, and the obvious pressure you were putting yourself under. I waited for her to finish and said: "Well, Rob is walking, isn't he?" To this there was no reply.'

Although this was not the general feeling of most of the nursing staff I had had contact with, it did reveal that there were some who were sceptical and who thought that I was 'unrealistic' for thinking that God could help me walk again. I wondered whether this was that same nurse as the one on Ward 17 who vehemently opposed me having my Bible cassette tapes on, but I guess I'll never know.

But what I did know was that God had done something very special in my life, and on account of it, He has touched the lives of many others, whether they liked it or not.
Chapter 15 - Rob Will Walk Again

Late one evening I received a phone call from a lady who used to attend Northside when I was a pastor there. She was a very caring person and she had visited me when I was in Ward 17. She explained that she knew a young man by the name of Peter who had recently become a paraplegic in a motorcycle accident.

She asked if I would mind paying him a visit. I told her that I would. As all the driving was left up to Bev, I went to see him the first time we needed to go to Melbourne.

As I hadn't been out of the hospital for very long, I did not look forward to going back. When I arrived at Ward 17, I went directly to the staff office to enquire where I could find Peter. The ward clerk proceeded to give me directions. 'You go down to the end of the corridor, turn left, then turn right, then left again, and you will find Peter in his bed.'

'That's familiar territory,' I thought to myself as I slowly made my way along the corridor. I followed the ward clerk's directions to the letter -- and came to my former room. As I stood in the doorway the memories came flooding back. I looked in the room and saw a young man lying in the same bed I had been in.

'Hello, are you Peter?' I asked. 'Yes,' he replied. I made my way over to his bed and sat down on the chair. I introduced myself, and told him the reason why I was here. He then mentioned that Mrs Parker had told him that I would pay him a visit.

Without being there too long, I noticed that Peter was very bitter. He couldn't understand why he had to go through so much suffering. He could not imagine going through life being unable to walk again. Not wanting to interrupt, I sat there and listened.

As he spoke, I sensed his hopelessness and despair. 'What can I say to comfort him? What can I do to help him?' I thought. After pouring out his heart he asked me about my accident. Although he appreciated the visit, I knew that what I had to say was not getting through to him, and unfortunately he seemed to be drowning in his own misery.

While we were talking, my eyes wandered across to the side wall near the window. Right there staring me in the face was RWWA (Rob Will Walk Again). My thoughts immediately went back to the night when Kerry came to visit and wrote that on the wall. I thought it was quite ironic that of all the people to visit and of all the beds in the hospital to be in, this had to be the one.

Never in my wildest dreams on that November night, in bed and unable to walk, did I picture myself walking into this very room, and to the same bed six months later, to visit a spinal patient injured while riding a motorcycle.
After saying goodbye to Peter, I left the hospital with a heart full of gratitude toward God. I wondered whether the visit was more for my benefit than it was for Peter. Maybe God was reminding me of how bad a condition I was in, and how far I had come. Anyway, this meeting had a real impact on my life and if I didn't know it before, I surely knew now that God was for me, and that He had everything under control.
Chapter 16 - Learning to Drive

As the burden of transportation was left entirely up to Bev, I felt that it was time to get behind the wheel again. Those long drives to and from Melbourne would really tire Bev out. At night it was worse because she would ask me to talk to her in order to make sure that she kept awake.

I made a telephone call to the occupational therapy department of the hospital to arrange to have driving lessons. Before I could take lessons, I first had to meet with the occupational therapist to have an off-road assessment. Here she checked my movement and muscle strength in order to establish what alterations to the vehicle were needed for me to drive.

So early in the morning, Bev, Kristy and I headed off to the hospital in Melbourne. I meet the occupational therapist about 10.30am. She walked me over to a garage where there was a mock vehicle set up. While I was in the driver's seat, she sat in the passenger's side.

She asked me to perform the very same things that a `normal' person would do in a car, such as: putting on the seatbelt; operating the T-bar, using the indicators, wipers, lights, etc. Most important was to see whether or not I needed additional help using the brakes and accelerator.

As I had sufficient strength in my legs, alterations were not necessary. However, as my hands and fingers were not functioning properly, a spinning knob was attached to the steering wheel to help turn it.

For those who do not have the use of their legs, hand controls are fitted to the car. As one hand is on the spinning knob attached to the steering wheel, the other hand is on a lever which will either brake or accelerate the vehicle.

Once the occupational therapist had determined what I did and did not need, she contacted the driving school and booked me in for lessons. My first driving lesson was to be in two weeks and I was so looking forward to it.

When I arrived at the hospital for my first lesson, the occupational therapist and I waited at the rear of Ward 17 to meet the driving instructor. Max was a rather large man and very understanding. I could see that I was not the first spinal patient he had taught.

The car that I was to take lessons in was a blue Ford Telstar. Before we got going, Max attached the spinning knob to the steering wheel. It didn't take long to get used to driving with it, and I also found the car quite easy to handle.

After driving out of the hospital, Max proceeded to give me directions. To my advantage I was familiar with the area, so this boosted my confidence. As I had not driven a car on the road for nearly two years I was a bit rusty.

As I travelled at a fairly slow pace, I noticed how dangerous some people drove. If they were not breaking the speed limit, they were chopping and changing lanes without indicating.
After forty five minutes, Max said: 'That's enough for now Rob, you can head back to the hospital.' I couldn't believe that forty five minutes could go as quickly as it did. Just before I reached the hospital, I had to stop at the traffic lights. While there, I looked at the other cars around me. When the green light appeared, I took off.

After passing through the intersection, Max asked: 'What was the colour of the car that went past in the other direction.' 'White,' I replied. Max did not explain why he asked that question and I didn't ask him, but I had a suspicion that he was testing my observational skills.

When I arrived back at the hospital, Max arranged to meet with me another three more times before I went for a licence. This meant coming down to Melbourne on each occasion.

The big day had now arrived. Max thought it would be a good idea for me to have a lesson before the driving test. Everything was going well and I did not have a worry in the world. Max said: 'Okay Rob, how about driving to the testing station? By the way Rob, do you have your licence with you?' 'What licence?' I replied. 'Your driver's licence,' said Max, looking rather concerned. 'Oh, no! It expired some time last year. Since I couldn't drive I didn't renew it,' I said. With that news, Max, looking as though he was ready to have a heart attack said: 'Quick. Pull over. You shouldn't be driving. I could get into a lot of trouble for this.' When I stopped, big Max and I hopped out of the car and changed seats. I don't think Max had moved as fast in all his life. Watching Max all flustered made me chuckle to myself, but I am sure that he didn't see the funny side of this.

When we arrived at the testing station the first thing I did was to fill out some forms. After that, I had to have an eye test. Once that was over, it was out to the car again to commence the driving test.

The licence tester was an older man and was very kind to me. After he gave me directions, I proceeded with great care, making sure I did everything properly. As we had got off to a late start, there was no time to test me parking the car, so I headed back to the testing station. The tester hopped out of the car, looked at me and said: 'You've passed.'

I was so relieved to hear that, and even Max, after his earlier ordeal was happy. Now that it was over, all I had to do was to buy a car to drive. As I was now only licensed to drive an automatic vehicle with power steering, I was unable to drive our current car.

Because of this, I approached the TAC and asked would they consider contributing. However, before they were willing to pay for a car to replace the one that we presently had, they wanted us to find out whether it was possible to convert our manual vehicle into an automatic, as well as having power steering and air conditioning fitted.
Even to a novice like myself, common sense would indicate that this would be an impractical and costly operation to perform on a twelve year old vehicle. However, from past experience, this request from the TAC did not surprise me. So Bev, Kristy and I would have to go to a Toyota dealer in Melbourne to see if the proposed changes to the car could be accomplished.

After I had explained to the mechanic what had to be done, he informed me that the alterations were not possible, and even if they were, the cost involved in converting the vehicle as well as adding the other accessories would end up being more expensive than the total price of the car.

When I notified the TAC of this, they said that they would be willing to pay for what it would have cost to have had the car done, which was six thousand dollars. By using our Toyota as a trade-in, we could now afford to buy a car for $9500.

Back to Melbourne we went, this time to haggle with used car salesmen. After spending a considerable time at one car yard, Kristy (who was now two years old) had had enough, and so had Bev. Not finding anything to buy, we headed back to Broadford, tired and worn out, to return another day, only to face more frustration. The cars we looked at were either too expensive or too outdated, and to make matters worse, the TAC wanted us to send them the quotes before they would authorise payment, which meant that while this was taking place, the car could have been sold to another buyer.

The long days were quickly taking their toll on us, especially Bev, considering that she had to do all the driving as well as trying to keep Kristy occupied. As a result of this, I decided to call the TAC and tell them that what they were expecting us to do in order to buy a car was wearing us all out.

The TAC, realising how difficult this was for us, had a change of heart. They told me to get what we could for the price and not to concern myself with sending in the quotes. This was a major relief, and it took enormous pressure off us.

Fortunately, we finally managed to buy a station wagon from a car yard in Melbourne. Now, instead of Bev having the driving responsibilities, I did. It felt great driving home along the highway, and it also gave me a sense of independence -- something that was long overdue.
One afternoon while sitting in the lounge room preparing a Bible study, there was a knock at the door. Bev opened it and Reg, one of the men from the church was standing there. `Is Rob home?' he asked. `Yes he is, come in,' said Bev.

I was surprised to see Reg because he did not visit me too often, possibly because some of our theology was incompatible -- in fact miles apart -- and when we did discuss different topics, sometimes the atmosphere could be cut with a knife.

In the early days we were in a small prayer meeting together. When the meeting finished, he approached me and asked could he pray for my legs (thinking one was shorter than the other). I thanked him for his concern, but declined his offer, not because I didn't believe that God could heal me, but because I had no witness in my heart that this was what God was wanting for me at this time.

Then with a smile Reg said that he would like to break my walking sticks (I suppose as an act of faith). This certainly did not impress me. It was not as though I liked being confined to using walking sticks, but I had no other option.

After five minutes of chit chat, Reg finally got to the main reason for his visit. Looking at me, he said in all sincerity: `Rob, I have come to tell you why you had your accident.' `Here it comes,' I thought. `The reason for your accident is because you were out of God's will!'

My initial reaction was anger, and I wanted to throw him out of my house, but my disability didn't allow me too. I quickly composed myself, took a few deep breaths and said: `Would you please explain how you came to that conclusion?'

He proceeded to use certain proof texts to support his case. It was a pity however that the passages of Scripture he was quoting had been taken out of their context.

For a man who prided himself on knowing the Bible, he certainly didn't know how to 'Handle accurately the word of truth'. As far as I was concerned, he was in desperate need of a course in hermeneutics (the science and art of Biblical interpretation).

After Reg had finished making me feel like an unloved sinner, I began to share some things from my point of view.

The most obvious person to start with is Job. Job was a good man yet he suffered greatly. He did not go through his trials because he was wicked, or lacked faith, or because he harboured secret sins in his life. The reason why God allowed Job's sickness and tragedy was not because Job was out of God's will, but because God wanted to reveal to Satan how a righteous man would react to adversity. Job's testing was not in order to destroy him, but to prove and strengthen his character, for even Job recognised the value of the testing he went through.
'But He knows the way that I take; when He has tested me, I will come forth as gold'. (Job 23:10)

I then proceeded to talk about Paul. There is no doubting that through Paul, God had performed many wonderful acts of healing. Yet there was an occasion when Paul 'left Trophimus sick in Miletus' (II Timothy 4:20) Why would Paul, who had prayed for many who were diseased and afflicted, leave Trophimus sick? I do not believe that it was because Paul did not pray for him, but rather that God chose for His good reason not to heal Trophimus.

Then there is Timothy. Obviously from what Paul had written, Timothy was suffering from a stomach ailment. 'Stop drinking only water, and use a little wine because of your stomach and your frequent illnesses.' (I Timothy 5:23)

Paul did not accuse Timothy of lacking faith, or being out of God's will. He rather encouraged him to take some wine for medicinal purposes.

Although being confronted with these examples, Reg, being set in his ways, would not listen. We ended the discussion on good terms, and agreed to disagree.

For the first time since my accident, like so many other Christians, I had been condemned for having a disability. We are accused of lacking faith, being out of God's will, or both. We are also supposed to be living life at a level below what God would want us to live.

But this is not the case. There have been many Christians past and present who have suffered greatly through persecution, physical sickness, or disability, yet have been greatly used by the Lord and have been wonderful testimonies of His grace and power.

I can recall one afternoon on Ward 17 while resting on my bed after a gruelling session at the gym, a lady in a wheelchair came into my room. 'I am sorry,' she said, 'I'm looking for a friend and have obviously come to the wrong room.' We then introduced ourselves and started talking. In conversation, I found out that Evelyn was also a Christian and had become a paraplegic as the result of a motor accident.

Evelyn attended a church that placed an over-emphasis on healing and health. To be sick was simply not an option, and to admit you were ill was considered to be a negative confession and a lack of faith. She began to share how she believed that the Lord would heal her and that one day she would walk again. Although I admired her faith and determination, I was concerned whether her faith was based on what God had said He would do for her, or on her assumption that God had to heal her.

I did not share my healing experience with her, not because I was embarrassed or too shy, but because I did not want her to feel any less loved by God as a result of not yet receiving her healing.
I feel sorry for Christians who believe that God is going to heal and intervene in their problem when He chooses not to. Although they confess health and claim the promises, they seem no closer to receiving their healing than when they first started praying for it.

Whose fault is it? Is it a case of lacking faith? Does the person harbour secret sins in their life, hindering God's healing? Or is it possible that it is not God's will to heal them?

There are those who are quick to point out that to pray: 'Thy will be done,' in reference to healing is a lack of faith. However, a close look at the Bible clearly shows that 'faith' should not be separated from God's will. If something is not God's will, then it cannot happen regardless of how much faith one might have.

For any doctrine of healing that teaches, as does the Faith theology, that 'we don't have to wait until the Spirit wills' is not true faith. Call it metaphysics. Call it positive mental attitude. Call it magic. But don't call it faith. 1

In some cases, God will even allow a Christian to face death in order to fulfil His purpose and will.

CHAPTER 18 - A New Direction

After spending two years in Broadford, the church decided to relocate to another town. As most of the congregation were travelling from that area to Broadford each week, it made sense for the church to move. Since this would be quite a distance to drive, and there was no ministry opportunity for us at Broadford, we decided to sell up and to move back to Melbourne and attend our former church.

During our first week back, we had a meeting with Pastor Smith to discuss ministry options. As eager as I was to get involved, I still had to keep up with my physiotherapy, so I chose to start with one thing at a time.

My first task was to teach and co-ordinate the Christian Living Program for Northside Christian College. As I had done this five years earlier, I already had a good idea of what was required. To get things up to scratch, I had to read a number of books in order to prepare a curriculum for the students to work from.
I had organised that each term a class would cover a different subject, which I found was more interesting for the students and also introduced them to diverse topics.

Because two of the classrooms were on the next level, I had to walk up a flight of stairs. In order to arrive on time, I had to leave for class a few minutes early. Although this would tire me out, I counted it as part of my weekly exercise routine.

On one particular morning while going to class, I accidentally tripped over and fell on the tiled floor, hitting my head. Attempting to get to my knees, I found that one of my legs would not move.

As panic had gripped me, I lay there not knowing what to do. My thoughts immediately went back to my time in the hospital when I was unable to move. 'What has gone wrong?' 'I hope I'm going to be all right,' I thought.

Still on the cold hard floor I said: 'Jesus, please help me.' I tried to get up again and this time both legs responded. Slowly I got to my knees and then to my feet. I am not sure why I was unable to move my leg. I may have hit a nerve when I fell, which caused a temporary loss of movement.

Although a little shaken and a bit sore, I made my way to class, and what began as a minor setback, ended in a major victory.
Now settled in my teaching responsibility at the college, I decided it was time for me to finish my tertiary studies.

After being at Northside for a couple of years, the church began a program to train Christian professionals who desire to serve God at home or overseas. Being asked to be part of the teaching faculty, I had to prepare and set aside time to prepare my lessons.

Finding it difficult to stand and lecture, I had the tables and chairs rearranged in a way that brought the group closer together. Instead of looking at the head of the person seated in front, it was now eye to eye contact, which made it conducive to discussion. Unlike the lecture method of teaching, the discussion method allows the group to share their thoughts and to express their opinions in a more personal way. Also, as I have problems with my breathing, it released me from doing all the talking. As time went by, it was such a joy to see these brothers and sisters growing in the Lord and in His Word.

Between preparing lessons and study guides, teaching students and adults, as well as completing a BA, I was rather busy. As I rarely went to bed before midnight, Bev was forever telling me that I needed more sleep. So active is my mind that at times I have to force myself to get some sleep, and that may be after staying up until 2am.

As I was now gaining in confidence and stamina, Pastor Smith asked if I would like to take the communion service one Sunday morning. Hesitantly I agreed. After my exhausting preaching experiences in Broadford, I was not too keen on the idea. Being nervous, and not knowing how I would do, I didn't sleep well the night before. As I tossed and turned in bed, my thoughts were firmly fixed on the task set before me. Although I had prepared the message well, my concern was with my breathing, as well as not making a fool of myself. As the last time I had preached in the church I had no physical disability and was able to move about at ease, I felt as though I had a lot to prove.

When it was time for communion I made my way across to the pulpit. In front of me was a sea of faces, a far cry from the forty people who crammed into the little hall in Broadford. I took the microphone and began to deliver my message. After five minutes, and nearing the end of my talk, I started to lose my breath. This was not noticeable to the congregation and I was pleased to be finishing before I became dizzy. Once partaking of the emblems, I handed the service back to Pastor Smith. Taking my seat I began to break into a hot sweat. I am not sure what brought that on but I was thankful to have made it through without anything going wrong.

On another occasion I was given the task of commenting on whether God is fair by allowing Christians to suffer? After my experience taking the communion service, I had second thoughts about going through with this. However, not wanting to let the pastoral team and the congregation down, I bit the bullet and went ahead with it.

As I was preparing my reply to the question, I couldn't help but reflect on the past, and what God had done in my life. At times during my preparation I would pause for a few minutes, and with a
heart full of gratitude, thank God for His unconditional love and faithfulness. I arrived at the Sunday evening service feeling extremely nervous. After twenty minutes of choruses, I was called forward to the platform. Grabbing my walking stick, I slowly made my way up the steps, aware that the nervousness which had so gripped me only minutes before had subsided, and I was feeling quite confident.

I walked over to the pulpit, placed my walking stick on the edge of it, took the microphone and commenced talking. While speaking, I was aware that I was not experiencing the problems of the past. There was no dizziness, nor loss of breath. The longer I spoke, the more I grew in confidence. After seven minutes, I had finished giving the explanation to the question and then took my seat on the platform. I was astonished by what had just taken place. Instead of being overpowered by anxiety, I experienced an overwhelming peace. Everything went well. My response was clear and well presented, and I knew that it was much appreciated. Such was the case that after the service, some of the congregation approached the senior minister and expressed their desire to hear more of me.

What an encouragement this was!
Chapter 19 - My Graduation

It was now three years since I commenced my BA and I was now ready for my graduation. This was to be a special occasion because never before had I worked so hard to achieve something of any significance. I remember being interviewed in the hospital by a reporter who asked what the future held. I replied that my future would be better than the past, even though I knew he would not print that statement because he didn't believe me. This made me even more determined to succeed and prove him wrong.

Pastor Smith had arranged for the Australian director of the Bible College to fly down from Sydney to award me and a fellow minister our BA degrees in Bible-Theology.

Although I wanted to keep my achievement a low key affair, Bev was quickly calling my family to tell them the good news, and arranging a celebratory lunch after the graduation service.

Bev, Kristy and I arrived at the church early Sunday morning. To say I was excited about graduating was an understatement. It felt so good to accomplish something significant since the accident. I went into the office and was fitted with the graduation gown, hood, and mortar board. I didn't look bad, even if I say so myself. While waiting for the service to start, I sat in the front. I was aware of people looking at me, and I would nervously smile back. After the formalities, I was called forward to the platform. I walked up the steps, turned and faced Reverend Morgan. He congratulated me on my achievement and handed me my certificate. He also made special mention of the fact that my disability had been no handicap in fulfilling my ministry for God.
The congregation responded with applause. While this was occurring, I noticed my family sitting in the second row and could see that Bev and Kristy were so proud of me. What a special moment that was. When the service had concluded, there was no shortage of well wishers shaking my hand. Eventually I made my way out to the car and went home to celebrate with my family.
Chapter 20 - The Newspaper

When I arrived home from church, the telephone rang. Bev answered it and came running quickly up to the bedroom. 'There's a newspaper reporter on the line. He'd like to speak with you.' I picked up the phone in the bedroom. 'Hello Pastor Brown, I'm Tony Spencer from the Melbourne Sun. I received a message from a member of your family saying that six years ago you featured in our newspaper as a result of a motor accident, and that today you had your graduation service.'

'That's correct,' I said.

'As I would like to do a follow-up story on your progress and achievement. Could I get some details from you, and also send a photographer to your home to take some photos?' 'Yes,' I replied. During lunch, my family presented me with a graduation gift, a pen with my name engraved on it. It was such a surprise, yet typical of them. It was late afternoon when the photographer arrived. By this time my family had left. Wanting to get the right picture, the photographer asked if I could put on the graduation gown, hood and mortar board. As I had borrowed these from the director of ICI, I had already given it back, so she had to come up with another idea for a photo. After taking some shots of Kristy and I inside the house, we all took a drive to the church for more snaps. By now, Bev, Kristy and I were very tired and looking forward to a well earned rest. Although this was very exciting, there was no guarantee that the story would make the paper. We would just have to wait and see.

Early next morning the alarm went. When Bev awoke, she put on her dressing gown and quickly ran out to the mail box to get the paper. Like a flash she came bursting into the bedroom and turned on the light. 'Rob, wake up, you and Kristy are in the paper.' Blurry eyed, I sat up and tried to focus on the paper. Kristy, hearing the commotion, jumped out of bed and ran up the hallway into our bedroom. Happy to see her face in the paper, she took the article to school for show and tell. Her grade one teacher then put the clipping at the front of the classroom. Not wanting to be left without the article, Bev went to the local newsagency and bought ten newspapers. You would have thought that she was about to use it as wallpaper. It was a lovely photo and an equally good write-up.
Over the next couple of days, I received cards and phone calls from people I had not seen or heard from for many years. It was so good to hear from them again. One letter in particular which meant a lot was from a former Sunday school teacher of mine whom I had not seen for many years. This lady really loved God and cherished His Word.

'Dear Robert,

This is just a little note of joy and praise for having met you once again (in the newspaper). Many times in recent years I have asked of news of you from different folk and now I have discovered how you are and what you are doing. I rejoice without limit to know that you are living by the grace of God, and for His glory.

There is a higher value in the universe than our deliverance, and that is God's glory. Sometimes our troubles are more precious to God than our deliverance. If we presume what the answer to our prayer should be, we may miss God's alternative answer.

How often I have prayed for you Robert, you must have suffered much, but oh the Company you have shared in this, your relationship with Jesus has entered a dimension few of us experience.

What a beautiful story the photo and the article in the paper presented. What a privilege to be able to see it!

May Jesus be always with you dear Robert, and your family too.

Yours in Him, sister Bridie.'

Like the accident, the Lord certainly used the newspaper article, and it proved to be a wonderful testimony of His grace and power in my life.

As I now look back from the time of my accident to the present, never in my wildest dreams did I think that I would experience such a journey of faith.

So, thankyou Lord for loving me, for doing something unique in my life, and turning this tragedy into triumph!
Chapter 21 - Update 2017

Although I was unable to attend the birth of my daughter Kristy, on July 15, 2012 I had the pleasure of walking her down the aisle on her wedding day!

Presently, I am an ordained minister, a Chaplain in a busy Melbourne hospital, and teaching Bible at a Christian College.