Dear Brothers,

Scripture is filled with intriguing stories for life. Jesus was the ultimate storyteller. You and I use His stories every week to share great truths with His people. Without the Old Testament and Gospel writers sharing these with us and the whole world, they would be lost forever.

You have precious stories that you have never shared or have shared only with a limited audience. When you die, chances are that these stories you have experienced will be lost forever. What a shame! I don’t want that to happen! Therefore, I would like you to submit, for our Emeriti Pastors’, Wives’, and Widows’ Retreat, **three** stories that stand out in your life/work experience so that they will not be lost.

I would like your permission to read some of these selected stories at our retreat. Please submit your stories and sign the sheet giving me permission to utilize your story(ies).

I, \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ give permission for my story(ies) to be read at our Emeriti Pastors’, Wives’, and Widows’ Retreat and/or possibly be included in a book to be published. I give Frank Graves permission to alter the grammar, etc. without taking away from the point and story line of these stories.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Print Name \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

To prime your pump, I am including three true stories as examples of what you will hopefully submit. I would like full participation. If you feel uncomfortable writing your stories, have your spouse, children, secretary, or friend do it for you. You dictate!

**STORY I**

In the 70s/80s, before Hippa laws, whenever I went to the hospital to visit parishioners I would speak with my parishioner’s nurse and, hopefully, doctor about their condition. This would help me to minister to them. On the day that I was visiting one of my very ill parishioners, I happened to catch both her doctor and nurse. The parishioner was in Intensive Care. Both of them said that my parishioner was gravely ill. They stated that she was in a coma and would not leave the hospital. What a shock!

 I entered her room with a heavy heart. Standing quietly beside her bed, I fervently prayed for her and, more than likely, spoke a Bible passage or two. I simply stood there meditating and shaking my head about her future.

 All of a sudden she woke up and, with a surprising smile on her face, she greeted me very distinctly and coherently with, “*Well, hello pastor!”* Then she proceeded to tell me, with great emotion, “*I just saw a white figure come through the wall and speak to me.”* Mind you, she was unconscious. Needless to say, I was stunned. The medical staff had just, minutes before, told me that under no uncertain terms would this lady leave the hospital. Now she had not only woken up, but she was speaking to me as if nothing had happened to her. Somewhat speechless, I asked her very pastorally, “*Was the figure frightening or comforting?” “Oh, very comforting,”* she enthusiastically stated. “*Well, what did the figure say?”* I asked quizzically. Quickly she responded, “*He said that I was going to get better and go home.”* Guess what? She did!

**LESSON LEARNED**: As I was praying something else was happening. I couldn’t see it, but my parishioner could. It was none other than God, Himself, or His holy angel assuring her that she was going to completely recover and leave the hospital. She was certain of that. There is another world that many of us cannot see. It is a powerful other world—God’s realm. She could see Him perfectly. I couldn’t. God comes to us to reassure and strengthen us in ways that most people would disdain. I have learned, over the years, to pay attention to these powerful experiences. This was wonderfully real to this woman. Who am I to dispute it? God came to many of His people in both the Old and New Testament in dreams and visions. God can and continues to do whatever He wants to lift us up and draw us close to Himself. “*Is anything too hard for our God?”* (Gen. 18:14).

**STORY 2**

 On April 18, 1980 Kathy (my wife) returned home from her job and I (Craig) from my afternoon calls. Our children (Sheri, Amy, and Craig II – 18 mos.) wanted to ride along to take our babysitter home. I decided to get a cup of coffee for the drive and left my car door open. As I came from the house little Craig ran into the street, looked back at me, and laughed.

 At that instant, an oil truck ran over him as though he were a tiny rag doll. I stood frozen. I whispered, “*Oh, my God.”* Then I ran. He lay twisted and motionless, blood covering his mouth, nose, and both ears. I couldn’t find a heartbeat. Sheri screamed, “*Daddy, is he dead?”* I couldn’t answer, knowing he was. Kathy yelled, “*Somebody, call an ambulance!”* while I carried Craig to our driveway.

From the moment Craig was hit, God’s almighty power was there. Our neighbor gave Craig mouth-to-mouth resuscitation and his heart began beating. The firemen whisked us to the ambulance. Though Craig gasped once during the trip, his little chest was literally caved in. My left hand had cupped Craig’s head and was full of hair and blood. Later we learned that my hand had served as a pressure point over a five-inch gash across the left side of his head. The Dr. said, “*It’s real bad. We must fly him to New Orleans. Brain surgery is our only hope.”* No one really believed Craig could live.

 Two hours and 15 minutes after the accident, the Air Ambulance lifted off with tiny Craig surrounded by life supports and paramedics. We thought we had seen him alive for the last time. My wife and I did not blame each other or God, nor did we bargain with him. We trusted in His mercy and knowledge, confident He had a plan. I even mentally prepared Craig’s funeral sermon, though I knew I couldn’t have preached it. Fearing brain death, we prayed that God would either take Craig or restore his health.

 At the hospital, Kathy immediately asked, “*Is he dead?” “No,”* was the answer. Dr. Clinton Miller, chief of pediatric neurosurgery at LSU Medical Center and three other specialists described Craig’s condition as grave. He had massive head injuries, but brain surgery was not indicated. Furthermore, by God’s grace, Craig had received sufficient oxygen, suffering no cell death. His ribs were broken. His left lung had collapsed and his right lung was punctured. He needed a seconded chest tube. His spleen was ruptured. Though the doctors spoke carefully, none expected Craig to survive.

 Southern Baptist Hospital employs over 4,000 people, but we remember it as a silent, empty tomb. We remained with Craig 24 hours a day. The staff encouraged us to talk to him and to touch him. As part of the healing team, we watched monitors, helped suction his lungs, and learned other care.

 On Saturday, Craig’s brain swelling peaked, and on Sunday his vital signs stabilized. Christians across the country prayed for Craig. But on Monday a blood clot appeared at his skull base. Miller said that could kill Craig, but so would brain surgery. We prayed! In the morning a CAT scan showed clear! God had said “Yes” again. One week after the accident, a plastic surgeon performed jaw surgery, a three and a half hour procedure that caused massive facial bruises. Craig remained unconscious. Every hour of that second week was dramatic. Twice in one night, Craig almost drowned when mucus clogged the respirator tube. Eleven days after the accident, Dr. Miller encouraged us for the first time. He said it would more difficult for Craig to die.

 The doctors and nurses shared their surprise at this obvious miracle. The next evening, Craig suffered massive convulsions. In the morning, Dr. Miller told us to pray that these only signaled a reduction of the brain swelling. They stopped that evening. At the third week, we heard tremendous news. Craig’s ribs began repairing perfectly, his spleen restored itself, and both chest tubes were removed. The doctor told us that we would need to re-teach him everything. Recovery might be fast or slow and we would need months to determine what Craig could see and hear.

 Beginning the fourth week, Craig developed “ICU-it is,” hallucinating and flailing his head, arms, and legs. In constant light for 20 days, poked and probed almost constantly, he suffered from sleep deprivation. When Dr. Miller placed him in a private room, we were elated. Craig slept through the night. But the following

evening, the doctor reported that Craig had developed pneumonia in his left lung. A pulmonary specialist ordered him back into PICU.

 On the third Sunday after the accident, I conducted services in my home congregation, calmly reported on Craig, and included him in the prayers. By the fourth Sunday, I prayed God’s will to be done, promising to praise Him whether Craig lived or died. My voice broke and I wept. Behind me, I heard the sighs and sobs of our beloved congregation. That was tough. Miraculously, the pneumonia dissolved within a week. They removed the oxygen tent and returned him to a private room.

 Craig was now fully conscious, but we noticed that he seemed to favor his right leg. On May 27, Dr. Miller said Craig could go home. But I stretched Craig’s legs apart and he howled in pain. The next morning, x-rays showed Craig’s right leg fractured inside the hip socket, meaning new and extensive surgery. The break had cut off the blood supply. Craig’s leg might never grow. We feared this surgery the most. The 41/2 hour surgery resulted in a cast from Craig’s waist past his knees. Though 75% of the bone was restored, we would know in 6 to 9 months if his leg could grow.

 Almost 2 months later, we took Craig home -- hospitalized for 50 days, 30 of them in ICU, 6 surgeries, 12 different doctors, and a motel bill amounting to more than $70,000. All this was taken care of by generous givers. I am overwhelmed when I remember the significant, wonderful things people did. We wrote thank-you cards for months. Miraculously, little Craig recovered fully.

**LESSON LEARNED:** Every heartbeat belongs to God. When our lives are turned upside down by the events and experiences of life, God has this wonderful and uncanny ability and promises to turn them right side up again. He did that with the widow of Nain’s son and Jairus’ daughter. He did it casting out 7 demons from Mary Magdalene and He did it with the disciples. Thank God, He does it with you and me as well. Even in death, He promises to turn things right side up again in the miraculous and glorious resurrection. Praise God in all things!

**STORY 3**

1975 WAS A VERY CHALLENGING YEAR. I was the associate pastor. The lead pastor that was called lasted one year. Things were not good. It was one of the most, if not *the* most difficult year of my ministry. Besides that, my wife had a great deal of trouble sustaining a pregnancy. Altogether she endured seven pregnancies. Our third pregnancy continued for 23 weeks. At that time my wife went into labor and bore little Jennifer Joy. She weighed 1lb. 2oz. This was the year the Neonatal Intensive Unit was introduced at our hospital. I baptized her shortly after birth. At only 11 inches long, she fit in my hand gently and wonderfully. After baptism, we laid her on the counter top in the delivery room. I asked why they didn’t at least cover her up. It was cold in the room. Their response was that she would soon die.

 We went into the Recovery Room and were pouring our hearts out to God as we grieved her loss. All of a sudden a doctor came into the room and declared, “*Your baby is doing fine.”* We looked at him with the startled expression and said, “*You have the wrong people. Our baby is dead.” “No”,* he said. *”Your baby is a fighter and we have taken her up to Neonatal Intensive Care.”* Wow! From the depths we went to having great hope. However, when we would ask questions of the doctors, they really couldn’t answer them definitively. “*What is her blood volume? What is her pulse supposed to be?”* They didn’t have tubes small enough to fit her and what she needed.

There were times when I would stand by her incubator and watch her tiny body. All of a sudden she would turn blue and the nurses and doctors would rush to her aid. Sometimes they really didn’t know what to do. They had never dealt with a baby that small.

 During that same week I had something occur that had never happened before and never has happened since. Not one, but two families came into my office asking my blessing on their teenage daughters’ abortions. For one of them, this was her second abortion. Even though I did not agree with their decision, I assured them that I would do my best to be their pastor and deal with them as lovingly as I could.

 My wife and I wanted to be parents in the worst way and we thought that we would be good ones. It was so easy, it seemed, for these teenage girls to get pregnant and to sustain a pregnancy to term, and here my wife and I were struggling big time. On top of that, our little daughter was struggling profusely to hold on to life. It was a roller coaster ride for four seemingly long days, and then our daughter died. We were heart-broken! Finally the doctor said, “*That’s enough. Let’s consider adoption.”* We did and, 13 months later, we received a beautiful 6-week-old daughter. A wonderful blessing!

 My wife went on to have two more miscarriages. Finally the doctors figured out what was happening. The babies were not getting enough blood to the placenta to nourish them in the womb. So, when my wife got pregnant for the seventh time, the doctor gave her a drug to expand her vascular system to the placenta. That did the trick. The doctor, however, told me that I could lose both my wife and the little baby, because my wife was born with only half a uterus. The doctor explained that if the uterus could not expand enough, it would rupture, possibly killing her and the baby. But God had great mercy upon us and, 9 months later, a wonderfully healthy baby boy was born to us.

**LESSON LEARNED:** Throughout this period of experiencing a tough pastorate, getting pregnant, then losing the baby, all while ministering to those getting an abortion, we trusted that God’s will be done. We truly believed, and do so now, that all things work together for good to those who love God. Never did we get angry with Him or question His wisdom and will. We have been able to help others experiencing something similar.

 Also, during that extremely difficult year, I learned that God tests us. I truly believe that God was testing me to see if I would be a sincere, loving and understanding pastor who would be able, even when experiencing personal struggles, to deal with and meet the pastoral needs of His sheep, His people.