

# Jon's adventure

Fred Sigworth, March 2007

February 6, 2006. The phone rang just as Vicky and I had gone to bed; our old friend Bruce Graham was calling from India. "Jonathan is alive, but he's had a very serious accident," Bruce said. "He's had head injuries, but he's awake. Right now he can't move his legs. He's being seen at Landour Hospital, and we're planning to take him down the mountain to the bigger hospital in Dehradun."

Vicky and I prayed, claiming God's promises and asking for his will to be carried out in the life of our son Jon, who had recently turned 19. Besides praying and informing Jon's older brothers Nate and David, there was little that we could do from the other side of the planet. At 2 am we were awakened by another call from Bruce, now at the hospital in Dehradun. The doctors wanted to know if Jon's braces needed to be removed from his teeth before he could be put into an MRI machine. I guess braces are not that common in rural India! I called a colleague who runs Yale's MRI center; the answer was no, they didn't need to be removed.

Bruce called us periodically as decisions were to be made: to take Jon to New Delhi, to try to have him flown in a helicopter, and finally, with the airport fogged in, to take him on the eight-hour ride by ambulance to New Delhi. Our neurologist friend Raju recommended that Jon be taken to the Indian Spinal Injuries Centre, the premier hospital for such injuries in southern Asia. Any course of actions Raju recommended we were very happy to endorse!

Jon was studying for a semester in India with the Insight program. This is a study program of world history and religions that he was taking in a "gap year" between high school and college. Insight's base for the semester was Mussoorie, a town in the steep Himalayan foothills. Mussoorie is one of the "hill stations" established in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by the British to allow them to escape the Indian summers. The town clings to steep, rocky hillsides, and the houses where the Insight students were staying could be reached

only by narrow footpaths. The class that morning was to discuss a Bible text, Romans chapter 8. Jon was late for class, so he rode a borrowed mountain bike on the footpaths to his class near the center of town, about a mile away. At a bend in the path he skidded and tumbled over the edge. His bike was caught in the branches of a tree, and he fell down the nearly vertical hillside, landing headfirst on a pile of rocks.

The place where Jon fell was hidden, and normally no-one would have found him for an hour or more. It was however near Landour Hospital, a small mission hospital, but at that time the Christian staff was having their morning devotions. Two Hindu workers however were outside taking their smoke break, and saw Jon tumble headfirst down the cliff. They hurried with a stretcher and fetched Jon, undoubtedly saving Jon's life as he was unconscious and bleeding heavily from his head wounds.

The Insight class was discussing Romans 8:28--All things work together for good to those who love God and are called according to his purpose--when the phone call came from the hospital. The hospital staff heard Jon call for "Christy" in his delirium, and figured that this would be Christy Graham, who was with the Insight class.

Meanwhile Dr. Jim Henderson, a missionary doctor at the hospital, was stitching up Jon's head and checking his neurological signs. Jon couldn't move his legs, could only barely wiggle one toe. Jon asked Dr. Jim, "will I be able to walk again?" "I can't say for sure." "Well, that's okay. I can glorify God in my life whether I can walk or not."

While Jon was being driven the 300 kilometers to Delhi, we made plans to join him. Vicky should be the one to go; she's the mom and also the one of us who can better handle sleep deprivation and emergency situations. Jon's older brother Nathan would also go to Delhi. Nate is a Dartmouth College student, and had just returned from spending his winter break in Hyderabad, where he had been working on a documentary film. Nate was not unhappy to return to India, but in the end he missed his winter term at Dartmouth, serving as our local support person and Hindi interpreter. Vicky and Nate

stopped in New York to pick up a visa, and, nineteen hours after we received the first phone call, they were on the plane to Delhi.

Jon arrived late at night at the hospital, and the next morning went into surgery. A renowned spinal surgeon from the U.K., Dr. Krug, happened to be in town for a scientific conference, and assisted in the surgery. Jon's injury was between the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> cervical vertebrae, just below the level where he would have to be on a respirator. The surgeons were able to preserve the spinal root that innervates his wrist muscles, but his fingers were paralyzed, as was everything below his arms.

Jon's recovery was difficult. He would wake up with nightmares that he was falling, and he would think his legs were in one position when in fact they were in another. He would have trouble coughing, he had high fevers, and he developed bedsores. In the meantime a friend from my church told me that she had heard a word from the Lord: Jon would have a difficult time, due to someone's mistake, but he would be all right. This word turned out to be a huge encouragement to me when I heard that, due to a nursing error, Jon had developed bacterial meningitis. This confined him to bed for two weeks with a very high fever.

About a mile from the hospital is Jawarlal Nehru University. Nate made contact with the Christian student group there, and before long the students had made a sign-up list, so that one or two of them would always be there to watch Jon through the night. Also within walking distance of the hospital were the families of two nationally-known Christian leaders. The author C. B. Samuel came regularly to visit Jon and Vicky, and the pastor and counselor John K. John reserved a bedroom in his apartment for Vicky to catch up on sleep.

The JNU students would spend the nights, reading *Lord of the Rings* to Jon and carrying on long discussions about theology and politics. A year later I was taken aback when Jon greeted one of these students on the phone with an insult in Hindi: *ap pokel he*, you're

crazy! Jon and the students had become such good friends, that the old arguments were just continued were they were left off!

Meanwhile I was in Connecticut, trying to do a little bit of work while in a swirl of activity. I was calling about health insurance, sending off packages and transferring money to India, and collecting many offers of help. Nights I would cry and wish we could just rewind the tape and re-run the events of that Tuesday morning. I went to our church prayer meeting and asked for prayer for my two paralyzed sons: Jon, and also my oldest son David, whose years of paralysis--from mental illness--was similarly debilitating, but not so visible.

I would be thinking about the ramifications for Jon's life, how so many things will be so much more difficult, and so many of his dreams will be taken away. And then I began to sense, as if looking through a doorway into a very great distance, that something very mysterious and potentially very good was happening. I have not experienced the death of a close family member, but I imagine that this might be a little taste of the grief and God's promised comfort of people who lose a loved one. I concluded that God must have something very special in mind for Jon. He must have a very high calling.

For me the sound-track for this time is a song by Michael Card, based on Ephesians 2:10:

Life is a song that we sing with our days  
A poem with meaning more than words can say  
A painting with colors no rainbow can tell  
A lyric that rhymes either heaven or hell

Isn't this the most important thing, what kind of song we sing with our days? This is to be the challenge for Jon and for us.

Jon, I learned later, was listening again and again to a song from Switchfoot:

Crooked souls trying to stay up straight  
Dry eyes in the pouring rain  
The shadow proves the sunshine  
The shadow proves the sunshine

I continually reminded myself how amazing was Jon's case. Many young people have fallen from the footpath where he was riding; he is the only one in recent memory who survived. He should have been killed in the fall, and surely would have perished except for the hospital workers taking a smoke break. Help appeared from so many quarters: advice from our friend Raju, the surgeon who happened to be visiting, the students who held watch, Vicky's nurse-friend who came to provide essential advice, and on and on and on. Whenever I started to cry, "Why should this happen to *my son*?", it was replaced with "Why should all this happen *for* my son!"

Jon has a sweetheart Sara, another Insight student. Someone in her church had told her that she would experience a great tragedy this year, but it would turn out well. This certainly helped her when, in California, she heard the news about Jon's accident. She has been a faithful friend and wonderful support to Jon through the whole experience.

After five weeks in the hospital in India, Jon was flown back to the U.S., where he spent another ten weeks in a rehab hospital in Connecticut. In June he moved into his newly-adapted room at our house. He kept up an intense schedule of exercise and therapy through the summer and into the school year.

Jon is doing very well now. A year after his accident, he is in his second semester as a college student. He is very excited about school, he's a member of the Connecticut Jammers, the wheelchair rugby team, and he greatly enjoys encouraging other patients with injuries like his.

This past January, for his winter break from college, Jon wanted to return to India. "Are you sure you want to go?" I asked, worried about the psychological effects of returning to

the places where so much was lost. “Of course, Dad!” So Vicky and I took Jon back to the hospital in Delhi, along with his friend Sara. For two weeks he intensively counseled and encouraged the other patients in the hospital, in the same way that he’s been encouraged by his friends. Jon says, “I’ve fallen into an unreached people group!” and Vicky has had many opportunities to summarize the message this way: “The center of our faith is that God uses bad things for good. God used the death of an innocent man to rescue many people, and bring them into relationship with them. He can use the tragedy in your life for good too.”

Why do bad things happen to good people? To make them better!

At the end of our stay we traveled to Mussoorie, the mountain village where Jon had his accident. “Are you really sure you want to return to Mussoorie?” I had asked Jon. His answer: “Of course. I don’t have any bad memories from there. I don’t remember anything from my fall!” Jon especially wanted to visit Donnie, an eight-year-old boy with whom he’d become close before his accident.

“Your son is so *strong*,” people say to me. Yes, he is strong, but that is because our God is extremely strong. Jesus said, “In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.” (John 16.33)

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I don’t like roller coasters. I don’t like being terrified, and I don’t like being entirely without control. The path of the roller coaster is determined by the rails, as long as those little wheels stay on them, and as long as the little axles stay intact. My family’s experiences in the past few years have been very much like a roller coaster ride. What has happened to us has been very mild, compared to what many people go through. Some of those gathered here have been through longer and deeper trials. So why am I talking about our experience? Maybe this will serve as a small reminder, or just an existence proof, that very much good can come from what would seem to be a

catastrophe. This is because a very strong hand is holding the little wheels safely on the rails.