

# MY STORY ..... *for* ..... GOD'S GLORY

*3 Ways to Embrace Your Trials  
As God-Given Opportunities*



MARY ELLEN COVINO



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The following message was given by  
Mary Ellen Covino at the annual luncheon  
for widows from Foothills Bible Church (FBC)  
in Littleton, CO on April 14, 2012.



I am honored and delighted to be here today to share my story for God's Glory! God has blessed each of us with a story in our Book of Life from the time God gave us breath to the time He takes us to His Heavenly Home. What chapter do you find yourself in today?

Let us pray!

*Heavenly Father, you have given us life in you! You have molded and shaped us according to your perfect Will. Our Book of Life is in your hands... filled with a journey of incredible blessings. No matter what circumstances come our way, may we keep our eyes on you... as you give us eyes to see... ears to hear your word... Give me words to speak to these precious women today... so that we may honor and glorify you! In Jesus name we pray!*

During this wondrous time of year, we are reminded through the Easter story of God's extraordinary love for us when He gave His only begotten son to suffer and die for you and me!

On Good Friday, God was tugged at my heart to watch the movie, "The Passion." How many of you have seen it recently? It had been a number of years since I had seen it in the theatre so I watched it with some friends.. I tried to watch it... of course my hands were coving my eyes most

of the way through. But for some reason I had a desire to intensely feel and see what Christ did for me! Those vivid images and sounds of His suffering continue to resonate in my mind daily...especially when I find myself going through moments of feeling sorry for myself.

There's no one that knows and understands suffering more than God himself when he opened His outstretched arms and gave himself up for you and me! And there is no one that is more dedicated to help us through OUR suffering, when we come to that chapter in OUR lives, than God Himself!

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It is through these times of suffering that we learn who we are...who we aren't... and who God really is! We can choose to be focused on OUR pain and suffering or we can choose to be focused on God and the good that results from our pain and suffering.

One of my favorite scriptures over the past several years has been Romans 5:3-4 *“We rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; character, hope.”*

Some of you here today have heard my story. How many of you happened to hear my testimony 2 years ago at the FBC

Women's Retreat? That happened to be 3 weeks after my husband Jim went to be with the Lord! It obviously wasn't me speaking...it was God who was carrying me through the entire time. Anyway, to give you a brief background...

In February 2006, my husband, Jim Covino, of 26 years of marriage, underwent spinal chord surgery. Little did he know that when he drove to the hospital that day, that he would never drive again, practice law, or come home to live with our daughter, Alex, who was 13 at the time, and me. During the first year following his surgery, Jim lived in 4 different hospitals then spent the following 3 years in a care center.

**Jim took the “dis” out of the word “disable” and was “able” to persevere spiritually, personally, and professionally throughout his colorful life.**

By the way, Jim became permanently paralyzed at the young age of 20 as a result of radiation treatment for Hodgkins Lymphoma. As a paraplegic, Jim took the “dis” out of the word “disable” and was “able” to persevere spiritually, personally, and professionally throughout his colorful life.

Following his surgery, Jim went from being an active paraplegic confined to a wheelchair for 39 years to becoming a quadriplegic confined to a power chair for 4 more



years. During this time, Jim experienced chronic respiratory failure, leaving him ventilator dependent. Jim developed a hole in his esophagus which resulted in him not being able to eat or drink anything for the last year and a half of his life, thus Jim was fed through a gastrointestinal tube.

On a day to day basis, we don't think twice about our ability to eat, drink, breathe, and walk, but as days grew into years, I observed Jim's life being stripped away from all the natural abilities that we so easily take for granted. Through the 4 years of Jim's pain and suffering, very rarely did I hear him complain of his situation. Jim fought the good fight until he met his Savior face to face on April 1, 2010, just 2 years ago, 2 weeks ago.

What was God's purpose in witnessing Jim's suffering? The example of Job frequently comes to mind...Job lost everything... his health, his wealth, and his children.

Job 1:20-21 states *"At this, (the news that all his flocks, herds, servants, and his ten children had been killed) Job got up and tore his robe and shaved his head. Then he fell to the ground in worship and said, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart.""* The Lord gave...Yes, *the Lord gave* Jim Covino an abundant life...*and the Lord has taken away*; (of course, Alex and I would've enjoyed more precious years with

Jim) but Job continues to say, “*May the name of the Lord be praised.*”

In the midst of Job’s trials, he humbled himself before the Lord and praised His name! Jim also humbled himself and praised God in his suffering. God continued to lead Jim as in Phil. 3:13-14 to *Press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God called him heavenward in Christ Jesus.*

We can’t control WHEN trials will come our way...As we all know, they Will come...But we CAN control HOW we respond to our trials! The response is OUR choice! The real issue is not what happens TO me so much as what happens IN me!

So, how do we respond to the trials that come our way? I like to think we can embrace our trials as opportunities... there are many, but I will focus on 3 today.

**The real issue is  
not what happens  
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so much as what  
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**The *first* way to embrace trials  
as opportunities is to draw you  
closer to God and His word**

Job did not allow his pain and suffering to draw him AWAY from God but rather draw him CLOSER to God. When we

focus our eyes on Him, He consoles and ultimately blesses us. People are blessed by reading His Word, by hearing His voice, or by seeing visible signs as reminders of God's presence. During the Covino faith journey, I have witnessed countless visible signs and symbols of HIS incredible love. I certainly never looked for these visible signs, but when they mysteriously and randomly came our way, I knew they were God ordained and sent for us!

One of the countless examples was the pillow case story. I like to share this story because it is so apparent that God was there when we needed Him the most! I will be brief since some of you have already heard this story.

Exactly one week before Jim went to be with the Lord, Pastor Bill and Jan came to visit Jim at the care center. Having a sense that Jim's earthly time was coming to an end, I asked Pastor Bill if he would anoint Jim with oil as a symbol of peace from the Holy Spirit. He agreed and opened with prayer reading Psalm 139 which states how God is ever present in our lives.

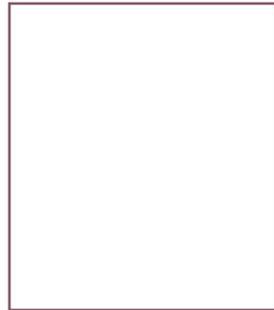
*"If I go to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wing of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast." Then it goes on to say, "All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be."*

We sang "Great Is Thy Faithfulness" then Pastor Bill proceeded to anoint Jim with oil. Jan and I watched as

Pastor Bill made a small sign of the cross on Jim's forehead. We all bowed our heads, as Bill began to pray. During the prayer, I happened to look up and notice above Jim's head on the left hand side of the pillowcase was an image of a cross. I continued to bow my head to pray, thinking that Pastor Bill must have made the sign of the cross on the pillowcase.

When we finished praying, I asked Pastor Bill, "Did you do that?" He said, "What?" Did you put the sign of the cross here on Jim's pillowcase? He responded, "No! I just made the tiny cross on Jim's forehead." We all were astonished to see that on the left side of Jim's pillowcase was an image that appeared like a cross or an angel and on the right side of the pillowcase was an image of a dove. Jan pulled out her camera to take a photo of what we saw, so that Jim could see it too.

Here are the photos. See what you think....



The images were not wet, and they were not there before we began to pray. (As you well know, Pastor Bill happens to notice everything...every fine detail...)What was the purpose of all this?

I believe that the presence of God was in that room....to give Jim a sense of peace... to give us a reminder that ultimately God is in control... that God works in mysterious ways...All for the purpose of drawing us closer to Him...to give Him all the Glory and Praise.

How do we embrace our trials? As an opportunity to get closer to God by His Power and His Word.



The *second* way to embrace trials as opportunities is to realize God will use it to purify and refine your faith

1Peter 1:7 states: *“These trials are only to test your faith, to show that it is strong and pure. It is being tested as fire tests and purifies gold- and your faith is far more precious to God than mere gold. So if your faith remains strong after being tried by fiery trials, it will bring you much praise and glory and honor on the day when Jesus Christ is revealed to the whole world.”*



Four months after Jim died, I found myself facing yet another trial to test my faith. I'd like to think our trials would come in isolated packages...one at a time, but this, unfortunately, was not the case!

Having just lost my husband, I found myself almost losing my daughter, Alex. 18 hours after having her wisdom teeth extracted, which was a very common procedure, Alex was rushed to the emergency room with a blood pressure of 63/30. She suffered a major infection which resulted in her being in the hospital for 4 ½ weeks. Alex had 4 surgeries to drain the infection, and consequently missed the first 6 weeks of her senior year in high school. Unfortunately, her facial nerve was damaged which resulted in her having a crooked smile.

Not only that, but last January, Alex was in a roll-over car accident, which thank God, everyone walked away from the scene, but the following month, Alex broke her arm in 2 places snowboarding.

I found myself asking, “God, how long are you going to allow me to pass through the fiery furnace?”

I found myself asking, “God, how long are you going to allow me to pass through the fiery furnace? I haven’t even had a chance to grieve the loss of Jim...and now I need to deal with the emotional and physical trauma of a teenager who was grieving the loss of her beautiful smile. As many of you know, dealing with a typical teenager extremely challenging enough!

In Mary Nelson’s book entitled, “Grace for Tough Times,” she states the fire of oppression will either cause you to

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burn up or help you grow stronger. If you choose to walk through the fire on your own strength, the flames will consume you. But if you invite the Lord into the middle of the fire, He will protect you. The flames won't touch you."

Another author observed in 1Peter 1:6-7 that "When God permits His children to go through the furnace, He keeps His eye on the clock and His hand on the thermostat. His loving heart knows how much and how long. God, the

goldsmith, allows this process until He sees His reflection in the purity of our faith.

Looking back, I see that God was protecting Alex and me through the flames and in the process refining my faith. He was definitely knocking on Alex's door... He got her attention for a while, but she, like so many other teenagers today have been pulled in so many direction falling in the path of living in the world's way instead of God's way. So we need to keep praying for our teenagers today!

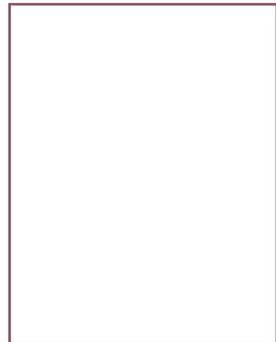


The *third* way to embrace trials as opportunities is to realize God will use it to dray you closer to others

2 Cor 1:3-4 says *“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble, with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.”*

This time last year, Leslie Collins, who is here today, introduced me to a support group comprised of widows who were brought together by God to encourage, support, and minister to each other. It wasn't until I attended a “Widow's Walk” benefit and saw the images of butterflies projected on the walls throughout the room that I began paralleling my life as a widow to the butterfly.

How easy is it for us, as widows, to slip into our cocoons and nestle there because it is safe and secure.... free of the outside world! The thought also occurred to me that if I cocoon as a widow too long, there is a chance of me rotting and dying. Then what good am I to my family, friends, and those that need me? What stage are you in now as a widow?



Last June, Alex and I traveled back to Cincinnati for my nephew's beautiful outdoor wedding. It was there that I experienced another God moment.

I was asked to do a reading from Colossians 3:12 about clothing ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience.... To let the word of Christ dwell in us richly... and whatever we do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.

After I returned to my seat, Ben and Kim exchanged their vows. I began reminiscing about the day Jim and I committed our lives to each other. I remember how alone I felt in the midst of such a joyous occasion...How many of

you have those moments of such aloneness in the midst of a crowd?

**It was as if God was saying, "I am here for you, Mary Ellen."**

Well, I happened to be sitting in my aisle seat, when suddenly the most beautiful butterfly flew right over my shoulder.

It not only flew a ways down the aisle, but it returned and flew over my shoulder again. It was as if God was saying, "I am here for you, Mary Ellen." In all my beauty and wonder...I am here for you!

Now you are probably thinking.... there are tons of butterflies out there and it could've happened to anyone. Well, prior

to that day, I hadn't seen butterflies in years, since they are quite rare in Colorado where we live! Maybe they were always there and I never noticed, or maybe God sent one just for me that day! Whatever the

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case, I believe it was a message saying, "Mary Ellen, it's time to burst out of your Widow's Cocoon or Woman's Cave" and blossom into the beautiful creature God meant you to be! Don't stagnate in your widowhood any longer! Reach out, minister, and touch more hearts for Jesus!

I have a gift that a friend helped me put together. Be sure to take more than one to give to someone else who may need encouragement today! This bookmark depicts a choice that we have as widows. You have a choice ...to embrace your trials as opportunities... to draw closer to God and His Word, to allow God to refine your faith, and to draw you closer to others. By focusing on serving others, instead of focusing on our suffering, we have the opportunity to share through the Holy Spirit, where our source of hope and comfort come from.

Let me read about the butterfly...

"The butterfly has for many centuries been depicted in Christian art as a symbol of the Resurrection. It is a sign of the believer's share in Christ's victory over death. As a very unattractive and earthbound worm, the little creature enters

its cocoon for a deathlike sleep... then it bursts forth from its “tomb.”

Where are YOU now in your widowhood? Are you cocooning or are you bursting out of your tomb. Jesus is Alive! He is Risen! He is Risen Indeed! He is Risen for you and me!

## *You can go on*

*You can shed tears  
that they're gone,  
or you can smile  
because they've lived.*

*You can close your eyes  
and pray they'll come back,  
or you can open your eyes  
and see all they've left you.*

*Your heart can be empty  
because you can't see them,  
or your heart can be full of  
the love they've shared.*

*You can turn your back on  
tomorrow and live yesterday,  
or you can be happy  
for tomorrow  
because of yesterday.*

*You can remember them  
and only that they're gone,  
or you can cherish their  
memory and let it live on.*

*You can cry and  
close your mind,  
Be empty and  
turn your back,  
Or you can do  
what they'd want;  
Smile, open your eyes,  
love, and go on.*



Poem by Donna Southworth

The last of sooo many God moments that I couldn't pass up sharing occurred when I was wrapping and packaging Jim's family gifts for the post office this past Christmas. I had to grab an address from the cupboard so I opened the door and happened to see a bright yellow folded piece of paper sticking out from a stack of papers. I don't know what made me pull it out, but I unfolded it, and couldn't believe my eyes! It was a poem entitled, "You can Go On!" Immediately, I cried out to God, "You gotta be kidding me! You have a wondrous sense of humor!" I had no idea where or when or who I received this poem from, but it reads:

## *“You Can Go On”*

*You can shed tears that they're gone, or you can smile because they've lived. You can close your eyes and pray they'll come back, or you can open your eyes and see all they've left you. Your heart can be empty because you can't see them, or your heart can be full of the love they've shared. You can turn your back on tomorrow and live yesterday, or you can be happy for tomorrow because of yesterday.*

*You can remember them and only that they're gone, or you can cherish their memory and let it live on. You can cry and close your mind, be empty and turn your back, or you can do what they'd want; smile, open your eyes, love, and go on.*

*Donna Southworth)*

*What choices are YOU making? God has a bright future for the future chapters of your life. As HE writes each new page, He assures us that He cares for us...He is with us...He has an Almighty plan for us...one that contains more fulfilled promises and a kaleidoscope of blessings. Rest in Him and surrender All to Him, our Blessed Savior!*

*Let us pray!*

Sweet Heavenly Father...

Thank you for the Power of the Resurrection  
and the gift of the Holy Spirit!

Thank you for all these precious women today.

Meet them where ever they are.

Embrace them with your loving arms.

If there is someone here today who is cocooning...

Shine your light on this person and give her  
the courage and boldness to burst out  
in beauty to touch the lives of others for YOU...

For YOUR Glory...

In JESUS name we pray.