



Psalm 9:1-2

I will praise you, O Lord, with all my heart, I will tell of all your wonders. I will be glad and rejoice in you; I will sing praise to your name, O Most High.

My name is Rose, and this is my story.

I have been brought up as a Catholic and have followed the teachings of the church all my life. I always try to do the right thing and to be a good person. I was competitive by nature, very focused and career-driven. My life went along its merry way.

Lupus

Then in 1990, I was diagnosed with Lupus, or in medical terms Systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE). Lupus is an autoimmune disease. The immune system, which normally protects the body, turns against itself and attacks it. It has no known cause, and as a result, no known cure. The disease can affect many different systems of the body and there are many different ways that it can affect people. In my case, it affected my kidneys. I was in hospital for 7 weeks and was very weak.

It was during this time that I accepted Jesus Christ as my Lord and Saviour. A friend of mine was a born again Christian and often visited me at the hospital. She shared God's Word and the miracles that she herself experienced in her life. There were times when she would also bring some of her friends from church to pray over me.

Years passed, and I've learned to live with this illness, and everything that it entailed: regular visits to GPs and specialists, monthly blood tests, a plethora of medication that I have take every day. There were periods of ups and downs- when the disease flared up which meant an increase in medication, and periods of absences from work.

It was certainly difficult, but through it all, I kept praying and calling on God's healing. I have learned to lean more on Him and His grace. Sure, there were (plenty of) periods of anxiety and fear, fear of the unknown future. However, there were certain passages from the Bible that stayed with me and helped me through these particularly tough moments-

Proverbs 3:5-6

Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; In all your ways acknowledge Him and He will make your paths straight.

Philippians 4:6-7

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God which transcends all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Jeremiah 29:11-13

“For I know the plans I have for you”, declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.”

Acoustic Neuroma

In late 2003, I noticed a persistent high-pitched ringing/hissing sound in my left ear. After various trips to specialists and tests, an MRI confirmed that I had an acoustic neuroma in my left ear, a benign tumour in the canal connecting the brain to the inner ear.

Once again I was presented with a fearful situation. When the doctor tells you that you have a tumour in your brain, you can't help but be very scared. I prayed so earnestly not only for God's healing but also for strength so that I could face whatever fate awaited me.

In January 2004, I consulted the specialist surgeon in this field and was so relieved after he advised that my tumour was quite small (only 4mm) and surgery was not necessary at this stage. The plan was to monitor the tumour by having a yearly MRI test.

Now, 5 years later, I still have the tumour but it's size has remained the same, and the specialist advised that it is unlikely to grow anymore. In fact, during my last consultation with him in December 2008, he advised that I don't require yearly MRIs now, and that every 2 years would be sufficient.

Praise God! He is always faithful and no matter how bad the situation appears to be, He is always with us, and is always in control of our lives and situation. Our God created us, He loves us, and He cares deeply for us. He will not let us go through anything greater than we can handle. And through it all He is always with us.

Isaiah 46:4

Even to your old age and gray hairs, I am he; I am he who will sustain you. I have made you and I will carry you; I will sustain you and I will rescue you.

1 Peter 1:12

In this you greatly rejoiced, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith – of greater worth than gold, which perished even though refined by fire – may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed.

My walk with the Lord continued but I feel that there is so much more that I need to learn. I longed to grow as a Christian. In 2005, I was blessed to have been introduced to the Bible Study Group at my work place, a wonderful group of people who have helped me and supported me.

Our weekly study of the Bible has not only helped my faith to grow, it has also helped my relationship with the Lord, by knowing Him through His Word. It's so easy to get caught up in the pressures of the workplace, deadlines, meetings etc. but at the end of each session I truly feel blessed, uplifted and encouraged. Setting aside that time to study God's Word, to know about Him, to talk to Him and to feel His presence, is as necessary as food is to the physical body.

Psalm 119:105

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path.

Hebrews 4:12

For the word of God is living and active.

In 2007, I was further blessed with the gift of speaking in tongues. I have witnessed people with this gift and have never thought that I would be given this wonderful spiritual gift (**1 Corinthians 14:2**). It was an awesome experience when I felt the presence of Holy Spirit over me (a sudden rush of warmth throughout my whole body) and enabled me to speak in tongues.

The best is yet to come*Varicella*

It was the middle of December 2008 - I had a list of things to do for the coming Christmas break, little did I know that I would not be able to tick off anything on my “to-do” list.

In early December 2008, my nephew had started showing signs of chicken pox. Perhaps it was sheer foolishness on my side that, even with this knowledge, I went to see my brother and his family before they went on their holidays overseas. I thought that I would keep my distance from my nephew and that I should be alright.

Two weeks after that, and just a few days before Christmas I started to feel unwell. I felt tiny “bumps” on my head and my back started to ache. By the next day, my stomach also started to ache especially after each meal. The pain grew progressively worse that even walking became excruciating. On the morning of 24 December, my parents took me to the local GP and it was confirmed that I had indeed contracted the varicella virus, otherwise known as chicken pox. The GP prescribed panadeine for the pain and antibiotics for the infection.

The pain became worse over the next hours and even the prescribed medication was not helping. On the morning of Christmas Day, I was taken by ambulance to the Calvary Hospital where I was given morphine for the extreme pain. I was subsequently transferred to the Canberra Hospital later that afternoon, and was put under the care of the head of the Infectious Diseases unit.

As it turned out, the infection was not only present on my skin but had also affected my internal organs: pancreas, kidneys, liver, bone marrow and lungs. An array of specialists at the hospital looked after me. They concluded that the seriousness of the infection was due to the fact that I have lupus and had been on immunosuppressive medication for a very long time (18 years). In other words, my immune system was so compromised that my body was unable to fight the infection.

I was put on very strong antibiotics to fight off the infection. and was confined to a solitary room because of my infectious state.

The stomach pain I was experiencing was because of the infection in my pancreas. I was put on a liquid diet only – orally and intravenously, so that my pancreas (which produces the digestive enzymes) could have the time to recover.

My liver was also badly affected. My liver enzymes had shot up into the thousands, when the normal reading is between 5-50. As a result, my face and body had a tinge of

yellow. I also had difficulties breathing because of the chicken pox in my lungs and I had to wear an oxygen mask.

The doctors were also quite puzzled why my blood count kept going down in spite of the continuous blood transfusions, when there were no visible signs of bleeding or pain that would indicate internal bleeding. At one point, my platelets (they circulate in the blood and are involved in blood clotting) went down to 2000, (the normal count is between 150,000- 400,000). This caused the doctors to become very worried, as there was a real possible danger of bleeding to death, particularly as regular blood tests were part of the monitoring of the infection, and there was that risk of the wound not being able to stop bleeding.

It was during one of these plasma (a blood product) transfusions that I had a severe reaction. It was the night of 30 December; it must have been halfway through the transfusions as I remember that there were a few more bags to go. My temperature climbed up to 41°C and I must have passed out, or was in and out of consciousness. I remember opening my eyes at one point and seeing the nurses desperately trying to cool me down with some cold towels and electric fan.

Suddenly, and somehow, I felt myself being “separated” from the chaos and the buzz of activities. I could see what the nurses were doing to me but I could not feel them physically.

Speaking to God

I then found myself in a garden of some kind, there was a hill and over the hill I could see that there was something bright. Next to me, there appeared a little girl, about 3 years old. She was wearing a white dress, her face was glowing and she had dark hair. I could not make out her facial features,

I don't know how, but somehow I knew that this little girl was my niece who passed away several years ago.

She took my right hand and was making a gesture for me to go over the hill with her. I don't think she even uttered a word, but somehow I knew what she wanted me to do. I told her that I was not ready to go with her yet as I needed to stay behind for my other niece and my husband. I felt that she wanted me there to play with her and to be with her; she was quite insistent.

I remember feeling quite scared and confused about the situation. I didn't know whether I should go with her or not. I then called out to God, “*God, what do you want me to do? Please help me!*”.

Suddenly, I heard a rumbling sound and the ground next to me started to glow in a bright red and orange colour. From it, a glowing figure, which appeared to be wrapped in a burning bright red and orange colour surfaced. Then came a very loud and powerful voice, and I knew that it was God who was speaking to me; He told me that my time has not yet come. He wants me to tell people about Him and His love for us.

During this encounter, I was also somehow reminded of the time when the disciples encountered a storm at sea and they were afraid. That scene “flashed” before my eyes:

Matthew 14:27-31

But Jesus immediately said to them “Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.”

“Lord if it is you”, Peter replied, “tell me to come to you on the water”

“Come” he said.

Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, “Lord save me!”.

Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. “You of little faith” he said, “why did you doubt?”

The message that God seemed to want me to take away from this is that, no matter what might come my way, I should always look towards Jesus, to focus on Him, He will protect me, He will make things right. I closed my eyes and saw Jesus looking at me, in the kindest, most gentle and loving way.

I must always remember Peter in the middle of the storm; that if I take my eyes off Jesus and focus on the circumstances around me, I will start to “sink”.

Hebrews 12:2

Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

I have long wondered how I would be able to describe what God looked like from what I saw and experienced. The wonder of His presence left me lost for words. And then I remembered that sometime ago, a document was sent to me by a friend from our Bible Study Group. In it were various descriptions of God taken from the Bible. The following descriptions capture what I have seen:

Ezekiel 8:2

...From what appeared to be his waist down he was like fire, and from there up his appearance was as bright as glowing metal.

Revelation 1:14-16

..His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace....His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance.

Intensive Care Unit

"Ms Ricabo deteriorated on the ward with a fall in platelet count, rising liver function tests, and lung involvement. She was admitted to the ICU on 30/12/08 due to respiratory failure." [hospital's discharge letter]

I had no awareness of time and yet somehow between my moments with God, I was also able to feel that I was being taken to the ICU, in what seemed like a flurry of activity.

When I finally came to, it was mid morning and I was in ICU hooked up to a breathing apparatus called a BiPAP, which helped to open my airways by delivering high pressure oxygen through a mask. The mask was very uncomfortable and very tight on my face. The very high pressure of oxygen being pumped through made me feel like I was drowning in a vortex of air. It also made my throat and mouth very dry.

The one-to-one care at ICU (ie, one nurse concentrates on the care of one patient 24 hours a day) somehow brought me a sense of security. I was weak and really felt unwell. All I wanted to do was sleep.

I had three arterial lines into my body: one on my left wrist where they could easily draw blood from (which they did on an hourly basis); one on my left leg, which apparently is a major artery; and one on my upper right arm, which went straight to the heart. They needed all these lines for my intravenous medication and other fluids.

The next few days in ICU were "touch and go". One moment I was getting better, the next I'd taken two steps back. I was always getting a fever and because my liver was not functioning properly, I was not allowed to have any paracetamol (Panadol) to bring the fever down. I also developed an extremely large haematoma (collection of blood outside the blood vessels as a result of an internal bleeding) on my left chest wall.

My niece also appeared to me a couple more times at my bedside but I felt that it was not so much as to want to take me, she was just there. I also caught a glimpse of two of my grandmothers who had passed away, watching me from a distance.

I had a few more blood/plasma transfusions, and it was during one of these that I again had an allergic reaction to one of the blood products in the plasma (cryoprecipitate). It was apparently so bad that at one stage they considered intubation (inserting a tube down my throat to assist my airways for breathing). This was averted as I responded well to the antihistamines that were administered. Thank you, God!

I was indeed very sick and was put on the critical list. At one point, the ICU doctors had gathered my family to tell them that there was a chance that I would not be able to make it.

But God is with me, and has other plans for me. There had been many miracles that happened to me while I was in hospital, including:

- my blood continued to clot in spite of the low platelet count, and in the midst of repeated blood tests. In one particular instance, when one of the ICU nurses took out my left leg arterial line, I started bleeding profusely; the nurse had to apply pressure on my leg for about 15 minutes and suddenly the bleeding stopped. Without God's hand on the situation, it could have ended in tragedy.
- in one CT scan there appeared to have been a problem with my spleen, however, on a subsequent scan the problem seemed to have resolved itself.

Psalm 86:12-13

I will praise you, O Lord my God, with all my heart; I will glorify your name forever.

For great is your love toward me; you have delivered me from the depths of the grave.

Onwards and upwards

Over the next few days, my condition started to improve and I was transferred to the general ward on 6 January to continue my recovery.

I had physio therapy everyday; I was very weak and even walking 10 steps on the spot was exhausting. I continued to wear my oxygen mask. My vision also got blurred.

With each passing day I was starting to regain my strength. I was able to walk around the wards by myself, albeit at a snail's pace. The amount of oxygen in my mask was also progressively decreased. It was a good sign as it meant that I was regaining my ability to breathe on my own. Blood tests also showed that my blood count was beginning to improve, particularly my platelets.

Finally, on 13 January, I was allowed to go home to continue my recovery at home, three days ahead of schedule. Following a month of rest, I was able to return to work in mid February.

Thankful

It is only because of God's love and grace that I am here today. He has a purpose for me and I want to fulfill that purpose, so that His name can be glorified.

It's amazing that in spite of the torrid time that I had in hospital, I knew and had faith that God is with me and that He won't let anything happen to me.

Even when things were not going so great, and my husband was overcome by worry and anxiousness, I would tell him to put his faith in God. These were times when I really relied and leaned on God's loving mercy and grace.

2 Corinthians 12:9-10

...“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”

Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. ...For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Every day I thank God for the gift of life, for my continued healing, for all the blessings that I am able to enjoy in this life. Everything that I have is from Him.

My liver function tests continued to improve. Furthermore, it would appear from the blood tests that my lupus is not active, in spite of being taken off most of my lupus medications since December.

Isaiah 49:13

Shout for joy, O heavens, Rejoice O earth;

...For the Lord comforts his people and will have compassion on his afflicted ones.

My ordeal has not only brought my husband and myself closer than ever, it has also helped my relationships with my parents and siblings. There is nothing like a crisis to bring people together.

My husband's faith has become stronger. And we are now going to church on a more regular basis. There is so much to be thankful for.

Romans 8:31

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

Hair loss.

In early March, 8 weeks since I was struck down by the virus, I noticed that my hair had started to fall out. A few strands at a time at first, but then it started to increase at an alarming rate.

This had caused me to worry and become anxious yet again. I longed for the day when I will no longer be bothered by trivial occurrences. God has rescued me from the depths of death, and here I was worrying about falling hair!

I consulted my GP and specialist about this situation, and they said that it was quite common for this to happen because of the great trauma that my body was subjected to when I was ill. They reassured me that it would grow back but could take some time.

I realised that it is the enemy, doing what he does best. He is a liar and it is his mission to cast doubts in our minds. Fear is not from God.

2 Timothy 1:7

For God did not give us a spirit of timidity [fear], but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline.

1 John 4:18

There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear.

My hair did stop falling; I noticed that the improvement occurred on Good Friday. Incidentally, I commenced drafting this testimony on that day.

Fear

For awhile there I felt overcome by the fear of the unknown future and my anxiousness. And I felt quite disconnected from God. I did not like feeling this way.

One evening I was listening to the teachings of Dr. Charles Stanley (founder and president of the In Touch Ministries and Senior Pastor of First Baptist Church in Atlanta Georgia).

He said that the devil attacks at his most “opportune time”. This would be (1) immediately after a great blessing or after prayers had been answered – because at this time one feels the least dependent on God; and (2) immediately before a great victory.

I knew that I needed to refocus my attention to God and His Word. I did not like the feelings of doubt and worry that I was experiencing. In the evenings before going to sleep, I devoted more time to reading God’s Word and in praying. I wanted to feel that peace again, the peace that can only come from God.

Matthew 11:28

Come to me all of you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.

Jesus said that God is aware of everything that happens, even to sparrows, and we are more valuable to Him than sparrows.

Matthew 10: 30

And yet even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don’t be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.

I found it amazing that the above verse “came” to me, in the midst of my anxiousness about my hair.

We are indeed very valuable that God sent His only Son to save us.

John 3:16-17

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.

For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world but to save the world through him.

Romans 8:31

...if God is for us, who can be against us?

In our lives, we will face problems and trials of many kinds. But God's promise to us is that nothing will defeat us, He will see us through the most agonizing of problems.

Disappointments will always come, but as a Christian I will choose not to be discouraged. I will trust Jesus to make it right for me; God is in control of my life and my situation.

Psalm 56:3-4

When I am afraid, I will trust in you; In God whose word I praise

In God I trust; I will not be afraid.

Mark 5:36

"Don't be afraid, just believe."

I must also realize that the trials I face are necessary for my growth.

Romans 5:3

...rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.

1 Peter 5:10

And the God of all grace who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast.

Romans 12:21

Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.

I must face each day with the assurance that God is with me and will see me through. There is a solution to every problem; I just need to look towards Jesus for the answer and He will show me the way.

Jeremiah 1:19

They will fight against you but will not overcome you, for I am with you and will rescue you” declares the Lord.

Our Lord is faithful and the Bible is filled with His promise of being with us always.

Isaiah 41:10

So do not fear, for I am with you;

Do not be dismayed for I am you God.

I will strengthen you and help you;

I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.

I have so much to be thankful for; I am alive, I don't have a life-threatening illness; my lupus seems to have gone into remission, my liver is healing. I have a wonderful, loving husband, wonderful and supportive family. So many blessings!

I pray that I will be able to fulfill my purpose in this life- to bring glory to our loving God.

Thank you Lord! Praise be to God!