

The Best is Yet to Come

By Nicole Mattson

Terry, a single father, was facing the challenges that go with that title, working hard as a literature evangelist and caring for his only daughter, Jamie, age 4. Life was difficult, with long hours spent on the road. He had been raised in an Adventist home, but Terry rejected the Lord's plans for his life and began drinking at the age of 15. But now, after years of alcohol abuse, he had recommitted his life to the Lord. His wife at the time, unwilling to accept these new changes in his life, left the home, leaving behind broken-hearted Terry and Jamie.

Everyone could feel Terry's pain as he struggled to bring Jamie up in a loving Christian home. There was just one thing missing: the companionship and helpmate of a wife and mother. Knowing that Terry needed a change of scenery and a get-a-way, Terry's father invited him to accompany him to the Wisconsin Camp Meeting in 2000 to pick up his step-mother and catch a few of the meetings. To Terry's happy surprise, Mark Finley was the speaker. As he clung to the words of the message one evening, Mark looked straight at Terry, pointed directly at him, and said, "Has your wife left YOU for unbelief? The best is yet to come!" Terry never forgot those words as he struggled through the next few years of life.

Meanwhile, I, as a single mom, had returned to Andrews University to finish my elementary education degree and strike out in the work force. My three boys, Tyler, Seth, and Coty (then ages 14, 13, and 9), were active and challenging as I struggled to work, go to school, and raise the three loves of my life. Finally, in December 1999, I finished my degree and began searching for a job. I subbed in the area schools until hiring time came for the Adventist school system, usually in late March.

In mid-January, Tyler complained of a dull ache in the middle of his back, right between his shoulder blades. He had spent some time on a trampoline that autumn, so I attributed it some unknown injury. X-rays and doctor's visits didn't reveal anything significant, but the pain increased and Tyler became frustrated. One morning, things went rapidly downhill as he fell out of the shower, unable to put his feet underneath him. As he staggered into the doctor's office again, I knew something was terribly wrong. I was watching him lose mobility almost overnight. He was normally a funny, happy, bright child full of vim and vigor, but things were different now.

The doctor was at a loss, but he knew that further diagnosis must be sought. As we left the office that Monday morning, I was apprehensive about what the following days would bring. An MRI on Tuesday revealed a tumor in the spinal canal, about 2 inches in length, lying right alongside of the spinal cord. The pressure on the cord

was causing nerve interruptions and forecasted damage. The neurosurgeon wasted no time as he bumped 17 people from his schedule to operate that Friday morning. Tyler did well after surgery, with no apparent further damage. Tests revealed that the tumor was benign, dubbed “an aggressive fatty tumor in a bad place!”. We were pleased, and began to make plans for our future. I landed a job at Battle Creek Academy, and it felt like life was really starting for us.

Just one year later, in March of 2001, returning pain and more tests revealed the tumor had returned with a vengeance, this time taking the shape of a donut around the spinal cord and pinching off the nerve pathways. Because of the serious nature of the tumor, we were sent to the University of Pittsburgh to have it removed. After a spiritual and tearful departure from friends and family we flew to meet with his new neurosurgeon and the rest of the team. Surgery left Tyler in remarkably good condition with no nerve damage. I never forgot the words of the God-fearing neurosurgeon though: He said that he didn’t think this thing would kill him “yet”. I pushed those words back into a far corner of my mind, though they haunted me every day. All of the doctors involved agreed that radiation was necessary as a follow-up, and so we returned to Battle Creek and began the process. Months later, Tyler was playing basketball and coping as well as anyone expected. An oncologist was involved this time around, and she lovingly told us at our quarterly check-ups that she wouldn’t sleep until 3 years had passed. I pushed these words, too, way back in my mind, unwilling to think in this way.

Terry continued pursuing the Lord and praying for someone to share the rest of his life with. Jamie was getting older, and he knew that he wouldn’t be able to fill all her needs as she reached young adult-hood. Kind-hearted and concerned people tried to find just the right young woman for Terry, and he genuinely tried to have interest in some of the prospects. But each time he would take a relationship to the Lord, he knew that something wasn’t right, and that the woman in his life at the time just wasn’t the one that God intended for him. Discouraged and lonely, he attended the Men of Faith seminar that fall of 2002 at Great Lakes Adventist Academy. In desperation, he cried out to the Lord, pleading with Him to send someone to speak words of encouragement to his aching heart. Just then, a young pastor toting his Bible walked by, and Terry felt impressed to call him over. After a wonderful conversation and earnest prayer, Pastor Daniel Meza told Terry gently to “stop looking”. He said that it might even be a year from now, but that God would send the right person.

Right on schedule, just one year later, the aide working with a student in my classroom asked me if I was interested in meeting someone. Actually, I really wasn’t. I was content, feeling God’s presence in my life and busily working at the school. The same response was solicited from Terry, but Carol, the aide, felt the Holy Spirit impressing her beyond control that we needed to meet. She talked to each of us about the other, and finally Terry was curious enough to attend a band concert at the Academy. As I walked through the crowd vending food with my son Coty, I soon heard someone asking if they could purchase a burger from me. I

turned and looked into a stranger's eyes that captivated me with their seeming familiarity. Terry introduced himself officially to me later that evening, and I was surprised to find out that he was the one that Carol had been trying to get me to meet. We talked briefly, but I felt the incident would be soon forgotten. Not so simple! On Monday when I saw Carol at school and told her that we had already met and that I really didn't think he was interested in anything further, she wouldn't settle for that. She went right home, called him up, and wanted the "scoop!". It turned out that not only was Terry interested, but he was anxious to get to know me better. We soon found ourselves talking everyday, asking God to lead in our relationship and spending much time in devotion, Bible study, and prayer. One evening as we read a devotional over the phone together, we read a passage that the author had titled, "the best is yet to come". At that time, he told me about the previous incidents where that phrase had been presented to him, and we were both moved as we felt God leading in our lives.

Terry strongly felt that I was the one God had been saving for him, and he declared his love for me. All of the kids were unsure, watching closely and reserving judgment. God had been leading as Terry's prayers were answered: he had prayed for a wife that would study the Bible with him, be his prayer partner, and that would uphold the same moral standards that he had. Although all these things he seemed to have found in me, as he approached the time when he wanted to propose, he prayed earnestly that God would reassure him that I was indeed the right one for him. One evening a short time later, we attended a vespers at the Tabernacle. It was a satellite broadcast of Mark Finley, the same meeting that Terry had attended at the Camp Meeting years before in Wisconsin. As Mark repeated the words, "the best is yet to come", Terry felt God urging him to move ahead with his plans to make me his wife.

A November wedding had been planned, but as the summer was in full gear, I had been so busy that everything seemed overwhelming. Terry and I decided after much prayer that a small, private wedding was the answer. At the time, he was an elder in the Hastings church and had a key to everything there. With permission and a few days planning, we were to be "secretly" married in the church on Friday, August 1, at 9:00 a.m. in the morning. I had also arranged to be re-baptized earlier that morning, struggling with memories of a path I had followed for a short time after my divorce and my first baptism. Just 4 others were present as I put my past behind me, including a set of dear friends, Pastor Ortiz, and his fiancé. As we arrived at the church, Terry and I were shocked to see the words that had been placed on the church marquee outside. "The Best is Yet to Come" was the title for that week's sermon, yet no one knew about our wedding arrangement or the budding story behind that phrase. We smiled with tears at each other, feeling the Lord's gracious presence and approval as we committed our lives to each other and through Him. As our lips touched for the very first time at the altar, we did indeed know that God was real.

While on our honeymoon, we were preparing to have a boat ride tour of the channels leading to the ocean in Florida. As we waited on the dock, we talked and laughed, unaware of any activity in the sky. Looking up after a few minutes, a sky-writing airplane was just leaving the end of a message in the sky right in front of us. It said, "Love God". We looked at each other and smiled, once again feeling like the Lord was just an arm's length away. Upon returning to Battle Creek, the family had arranged to have a small reception for us at the Urbandale Fellowship Hall. Carol, the sweet soul who had first introduced us, did a beautiful job decorating. We were admiring the decorations and the garden scene that was displayed when we both were shocked to look closely at the sundial that she had placed in the center of the scene. Inscribed on the outer edges of the dial was that now familiar phrase, "the best is yet to come". Once again, we were amazed, but somewhat puzzled about how meaningful this phrase was in our lives. We knew there was no coincidence about this reappearing so often.

About a month later, an elderly woman at the church, June Ragel, approached us with a card. She explained that she hadn't been able to attend the reception and had been unable to catch us at church. We thanked her, took the card, and went home. Later, as we opened the card, we were in awe as we read the enclosed poem that she had chosen to include. Its title: The Best is Yet to Come. Our hearts were racing knowing that God was giving us a very special message.

The next three months were harried as we tried to blend our homes, hearts, and happiness. Things were going fairly well until Terry felt impressed that God was warning him about a storm that we were about to go through. He spoke to him through prayer and study, only to find that the warning seemed more earnest than he first thought. When we received a call while grocery shopping from Coty telling us that he had just sent a golf ball through the back window of Terry's new car, Terry lovingly gritted his teeth, remembered the warning, and patiently loved Coty through his error. He then breathed a sigh of relief, thinking that we had made it through the storm in fairly good shape, just a \$500.00 deductible! But the real storm was just beginning to brew.

My heart was heavy as I considered Tyler's life at this point. He was in his senior year of high school, and he still had made no claims that Jesus was his personal savior. I was worried that if he didn't commit before he moved on to college that he might never do so. I asked Terry to pray with me, and we came to the school chapel one evening to pour out our supplications before the Lord. We pleaded that God would somehow intervene in his life, you know...get his attention before it was too late. As we cried and prayed, we felt a holy peace that only God can give. He is in control, unmistakably.

One evening while having what my family lovingly refers to as a "sock-folding party", I was deep in thought over the issues of that day. Everyone else had left the room, leaving the television on. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a Dodge Ram commercial playing and heard the familiar music that goes with their "like a rock"

theme. I was half paying attention, but my heart stood still as I saw that familiar phrase once again shown on the bottom of the black screen. There it was! “The Best is Yet to Come” was boldly printed in white letters. I’d never seen that before on a commercial of any sort, and have yet to meet anyone else who has ever seen this, but I saw it. Completely shocked, I told my husband and family what had happened.

In late November, we had our last of appointment for Tyler’s scheduled checkups for the 3 year period. This one would give Tyler his final stamp of approval from the doctors. He had suffered pain over the last year, sometimes extreme pain, but tests had revealed that things were clear, so they attributed it to scar tissue buildup. We had the last MRI one afternoon and immediately went to see the oncologist. Without having the results of the MRI yet, she looked Tyler over and told him how well he was doing. She prescribed some pain medicine for the bad times, and we were on our way. About a week later I received a call late in the evening. The oncologist hadn’t been worried about Tyler and had taken her time in reading the results of the tests. The new MRI showed that not only had the tumor returned, but it had spread to areas in his chest cavity. To make matters worse, they now could see in the MRI from the year before where it had started spreading outside the canal at that time. They hadn’t seen it because it wasn’t following its usual pattern and no one was looking for it out there. Further tests revealed growths in the pelvis and hip bone area. She was now referring to it as cancer and said that something must be done right away. Plans began for a return to Pittsburg.

Before we left, I had a bad feeling about everything. I think God just talks to mothers sometimes in ways no one can explain. I don’t want to call it a vision, but as I looked out the window one day as we were making preparations, I “saw” my husband helping to build a ramp out of our house. That meant only one thing to me: Tyler would not be walking when he came home. I was so impressed that I sat the family down while Tyler was absent and explained to them the likelihood of this happening.

With heavy hearts, we recounted all that God had done for us so far. We recalled those words that had been repeated so to us so often and in so many ways and found peace knowing that God sent us that message for a time such as this. Our first Christmas as a new family found us separated across the country. Seth, Coty, and Jamie spent the holidays in Florida with Terry’s mom as Terry and I took Tyler to Pittsburg for another surgery. On December 22, we prayed once again with the doctor for Tyler’s health and restoration. He assured us that he would do for Tyler what he would do for his own son, but gently stated that he was going for life, not necessarily “quality of life”. Whatever that meant, I didn’t want to know! Just 2 short hours into the surgery, he sat us down to give us the beginning of some hard news. When he had tried to open up the area, he fought hard with scar tissue and bone fusions. He had to press hard on the drill and had grazed the spinal cord. He said that Tyler would most definitely have some “weakness”, but there was no way to know until after the swelling went down, etc., what the extent of the damage

would be. (Weakness was later defined to be paralyzation) The second string of news after surgery revealed that they were unable to remove all of the tumor safely, so we still weren't finished with this ugly thing.

The next days were a blur of Tyler's reaction and depression, endless doctors and tests, and the shock of this reality. This was Tyler's senior year of high school, and he had a formidable mountain to climb. God is good though, and he placed some angelic nurses in our path that loved Tyler and helped him to keep his spirits up. Still, though, I didn't see Tyler appealing to God for help or strength. We continued treatment at a rehab facility in Grand Rapids where they proceeded to teach Tyler how to live life in a wheelchair. There was only one problem: he didn't want to accept this idea and didn't care about learning the ropes. One evening, after a particularly frustrating day, Tyler was on the phone with his girlfriend. I was absolutely exhausted; the emotional wear-and-tear, the traveling, the sleepless nights on hospital cots with machines beeping, the thoughts of the uncertain future, and the separation from loved ones was just about more than I could bear. I told Tyler that I would be right back after retrieving the laundry from the family care room down the hall. He replied impatiently, "WHAT?", so I repeated the statement and left the room. As I exited, I overheard him tell his girlfriend, "Sometimes my mom is such a pain". That was the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back. I broke into an angry flurry of tears, unleashing all that I had tried to restrain. I sobbed my way into the family room where chairs, tables, and magazines were strewn about. I sat down and wept until I couldn't breathe. A voice inside of me said, "Pray". But I couldn't, and so I told that voice that I was tired of praying, that I had had it, and I was giving up. Again the voice said, "Pray". Angrily, I shut out the voice and grabbed the first magazine I could get my hands on. As I viciously turned the pages of the AARP magazine I had grabbed, I stopped for whatever reason on a certain page. As I looked down, I saw the words printed on the bottom of the page. I ripped them out, took them back down the hall to Tyler's room and posted them on his bulletin board across from his bed. He was off the phone by now, and I told him what had happened. He looked at me like he didn't know what to believe, but I did. Terry and I wept as we felt God's hand cradling our broken hearts.

We knew that the days ahead would be rough, and we were right. Tyler was able to slightly adjust, getting by in his school work and clutching onto anything that made him feel normal. His loving brothers, step-sister, and step-father helped transport him across ice and snow while I resumed teaching. He went to Physical Therapy several times a week, and at one time he actually was regaining some strength in his legs. However, deep concern remained because he still had a piece of tumor at the very tip of his spine that even cyberknife radiation had been unable to destroy. So, plans were made to begin chemotherapy at the beginning of the summer. He went through graduation ceremonies with his class but didn't receive his diploma because of one incomplete for a required class. We began chemotherapy, and the rest of the summer was a nightmare full of mouth sores, nausea, increased numbness and the impending news that chemo wasn't doing anything but making him sick. The pain

was increasing all of the time, and the spasms he was experiencing were about putting him over the edge. We all spent a lot of time with him, watching movies and reading to him when he was too ill to get out of bed. Terry devoted his time to reading *Steps to Christ* with him and I read words of encouragement from the Bible and anything I could get my hands on. One day, I was reading to him out of the *Ministry of Healing*, and I read a passage about how God wouldn't heal us or take things out of our lives just so we could go back to living our sinful lives. These words really hit home, and Tyler looked at me and said, "It's true. I would go back. So if this is what God has to allow to save me, then I'll do it." Over the next few weeks, Tyler proclaimed his love for Jesus and his hope that the best is yet to come, and was baptized with his younger brother, Seth, that summer. We wept with joy for answered prayer and the presence of our loving Savior.

With resolute, Tyler faced the most challenging of days. Still dealing with the side effects of chemo, he endured increasing pain and daily setbacks. We were in and out of the hospital 6 times between June and August, sometimes for a week or more at a time. We would jokingly ask in our family how "Job" was doing. Bless his heart, he went through so much! In late August, he had a pain pump placed in his abdomen to help with the awful nerve pain he was experiencing. We faced the dim prospect that the tumor was really growing. Just 10 days later, we were back in the hospital facing the news that infection had set in and the pump would have to be removed. There was really nothing more that could be done, so we were sent home facing other news: Our new friends would be a team called Hospice. The only saving grace was that one of Tyler's best friends' had a mom who was a Hospice nurse, and she lovingly requested Tyler's case. He was so happy to have her! It made things almost bearable. Not one of us at this time was thinking about the reality that Tyler might die, but God revealed to me somewhere in this time that we only had 6 weeks left. The latest MRI tests, however, showed no new growth in the area. We decided to make the best of things, and Tyler resolved that he wanted to live until Christmas. Despite the impression that he only had 6 weeks left, I was confident that he would live until Christmas, nearly 3 months away.

November 15 came on a Monday. Tyler would be 19 on the 16th, just a day away. My sister Michelle, an angel that loves my kids like they are her own, asked if Tyler really wanted her there for his birthday because she had already missed a lot of work with visits and was feeling a bit stressed. He replied, "Oh, yes, Chelle! You have to come". And so she came. On Tyler's birthday, she had just arrived late in the afternoon and Tyler was dozing heavily. The day before, he had been a bit grumpy and complained of a sore throat. When I told the nurse this, she checked him over and said we should keep an eye on him. When she returned on Tyler's birthday and saw him sleeping so very heavily, she told my sister and I that either he was getting sick or this was the beginning of the end. We looked at each other in disbelief and determined that was definitely not the case. As the family gathered around Tyler's hospital bed a short time later, we tried to lovingly wake him up to greet him with all the birthday surprises. He could barely pull himself out of his rest, and the first words out of his mouth were, "Mom, I'm afraid". I said, "Hey,

there's nothing to be afraid of. We are all here! Happy Birthday", and on and on as mothers do. But he said, "Mom, I'm dying". I think the floor fell out from underneath me. It was all we could do to continue the conversation, but we all knew it was true. Tyler remained conscious for about 2 hours, and in that time he asked for every phone in the house. After he said his tearful, heart-wrenching good-byes to all of us, he called everyone he could think of to not only tell them good-bye, but to tell them that he loved them and that he wanted to see them in heaven. I know that none of these people will ever forget that call, although some of them at the time were so shocked that they didn't know what to think! Can you imagine?!

Tyler then slipped into a comatose state for the next 36 hours, just 6 weeks after we had left the hospital for the last time. During this time, he would speak out sometimes, saying all kinds of things, but incoherent to our words. He was, however aware of our presence, and if I left the room to go to the bathroom or anything, he would repeat over and over, "Mom, mom, mom" until I returned. As he lingered in this terrible state, we were reassured of Tyler's commitment to the Lord. It was as though Satan were trying to steal his salvation right out from underneath him. He cried out several times, "Satan, get your ugly face out of here! Jesus is my King!" We repeated to him that he was secure, that Satan could not have him, and that the best was indeed yet to come.

Tyler died on November 18, just two days after his 19th birthday. We sought the comfort of family and friends as we read the birthday cards that he never read. My son, Seth, and his friend had written a song for Tyler, and the words kept ringing in my head. Somehow, we made it through the funeral as Buddy Houghtaling sang the song that suited the situation so well, *The Last Trump*. We had inscribed on Tyler's tomb, between a picture of Jesus and Tyler's senior picture, the words that had held us together throughout this whole ordeal. I had told Tyler that I intended to do that, and I asked his permission. He had loved the idea, although these things had been most difficult to talk about. He is buried in the Rutland Township Cemetery outside of Hastings where his tombstone marks his place of sleep in Jesus.

The story doesn't end here though. The days ahead were tough, of course. Our first year of marriage had been such a challenge. I know it was only by the grace of God that we were able to withstand this terrible storm. But the winds of strife were still blowing as we tried to adjust to all that had taken place. A few months later, an elderly gentleman in our Sabbath School class lost his wife. We had been to the hospital and prayed with them both, so when he asked Terry to be a pallbearer, Terry graciously accepted. The next day at school, one of my previous Kindergartners (now in first grade) approached me with a picture that she had colored for me. I smiled and thanked her, barely glancing down at the picture of Noah's ark and the big giraffe in the corner. It wasn't until later that I actually took a good look at the picture and read the big black letters that had been printed by the company on this coloring book page. "The Best is Yet to Come" jumped off the page at me and zapped me. I felt God speaking to me again, and I would need this reminder. Just a few days later, I found myself sitting by myself in a pew in the

same room, at the same funeral home, where I had just months before seen the body of my son lying at the front of the room. As the tears streamed down my face, the same pain returned and I was reliving my son's funeral as if it were happening all over again. It was incredibly painful, but I was comforted to know that God saw this coming and loved me so much that he reminded me of what I needed to hear.

The next year brought us in search of a home to start a new beginning and try to make the best of things. We searched in desperation, finding only disappointment after disappointment. A friend of mine stopped in my classroom during this time and said she had read a story that reminded me of her, and she thought I might like it. Maybe you've heard it. It's the story of a woman who knew she was dying and requested that she be buried with a fork. When asked why, she replied that she knew in heaven she would have her "dessert", as the best was yet to come. Once again, I was reminded of that God was holding us very near. A few weeks later, we were hooked up with people from our church who needed to sell their home to answer a call for pasturing in Canada. The house was perfect for us, and we have settled in nicely there and love our little home.

We visit Tyler's grave often and are reminded of the promise that God has given us. But the promise is for you too. The best is yet to come, on earth and in heaven for those that love the Lord. As we face turmoil and struggles that seem insurmountable, be sure that He is ever near and is in complete control of our lives. He loves us so much that He wants nothing more and nothing less than to see each of us in the heavenly kingdom. I have peace knowing that my son rests in the Lord. Only God knows if Tyler would have accepted Christ any other way, but I think not. God allows only in our lives what He can work for good, and it is good. Tyler rests in Jesus and I am assured of his salvation, he was a powerful witness to many, and my family has a thirst for heaven that we may not have had any other way. Our students are no different. As we teach and pray for each one, we must boldly commit their lives and ourselves to Jesus and know that someday the reward comes with Him. We may not see the difference that we make now, but rest assured, The Best is Yet to Come.