

The Smile

The Smile

A Story of Friendship and Victory

Susan Mason



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Poem written by Cheryl Stephens on page 123-124 was used with permission from Mickey Stephens.

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Acknowledgments

It was five A.M. on a January morning in 2004 when God woke me up with the outline for this book. I sat at my desk to write down every word He spoke. I'd had a desire to write a book but never a topic, not until now. I asked my husband his thoughts and just as I suspected, he supported me completely. "Honey, you can do anything that you put your mind to," he insisted. He went as far as to encourage me to take one day a week off from work just to write. Thank you, Barry, for your sacrifice and support; you are the man who taught me that all things are possible with Christ.

I thank my children—two of God's most precious creations—Diana and Beth. Thank you for enduring me in all my humanity. Christ continues to develop Himself in my life, in spite of me, and you both get to observe the process. I doubt there is any better spiritual education God could have given you. The two of you

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are a light for Christ in an otherwise dark world, and you both have a glorious future in store for your lives. Believe Him and embrace it!

Within days of receiving the outline for the book I contacted Sharon Cosgrove. Sharon and I met through Cheryl, and she once commented, “If you ever write this story I want to help.” Sharon, you are the gift God gave me to once again embrace sweet sisterly fellowship. You are the counselor He chose to help me process my grief and the teacher He has used to instill in me a love for words. In all your modesty you know what you have brought to this work, and for all of that and more I thank you.

I must thank Cheryl’s husband and children. You have lived a lifetime thus far in what you have suffered, yet are blessed to have such a precious woman in your heart. God loves each one of you more than you will ever know. May His love heal, restore, and renew your zest for life—that same zest your wife and mom had.

My deepest thank you belongs to my heavenly Father. He truly performs miracles in our lives and *The Smile* is just a sample of His work. He made a way for this story to be told, when in my mind there seemed to be no way. He has been my guide, my teacher, my encourager, my listener, my speaker, my broad shoulder, my hope, my future, my ever present help, and through it all, He has become my best friend. Lord, you are my God. To you this work belongs, and I am forever grateful.

Introduction



Seize the day, my friend! With Jesus Christ, all things are possible. This became a truth in my life by way of the most beautiful love story I have ever known. God changed me through a friend named Cheryl. I called her “beautiest,” because to me she was more than “most beautiful.” Simply stated, she was the beautiest! She knew that who we are is fully dependent on God and that the only good in any person is the presence of Jesus. And today, there is not one cell in my being that does not resonate with this truth.

Through the circumstances over a five-year period in my life, God convinced me that I can do all things through Jesus Christ. Today, I can say that there is absolutely nothing that, together with God, I cannot overcome. Nothing! Not rejection, not depression, not addiction, not illness, not accident, and not disease. Not even death.

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My desire is that you will come to know this same truth for yourself. I want you to know Jesus in a more personal way through the telling of this story.

This book is not a chronological account of two friends. No, it is the sweet story of two lives crossing for God's ordained purpose. I marvel at God and His perfect ways as I recall these years of my life, and I sometimes wonder if I will ever be used by God like this again.

If I could make one wish for you it would be that you experience Jesus in your life. God has "set eternity in the hearts of men" (Eccl. 3:11). And I am one who has sought after Him. I pray that you will draw closer to God through the telling of this story and perhaps experience anew all that He has for you.

Believe

Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved—you
and your household.

—Acts 16:31

Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and
the life. No one comes to the Father except through
me.”

—John 14:6



Cheryl, Summer 2003

Chapter 1

His Perfect Gift

Don't be deceived, my dear brothers. Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like the shifting shadows.

—James 1:16-17

If God was going to heal me, this side of heaven, I really think He would have done it by now,” Cheryl said with a curious, yet playful grin. Propped upright in a small hospital bed, her gown hung loosely over her frail body. “God must have something really awesome in mind.” Cheryl spoke confidently, resting her head back against the bed pillow. I was amazed, even after this day of intense suffering, that Cheryl could believe that God’s desire for her was complete healing.

Each evening I bathed, massaged, and rubbed peppermint lotion over Cheryl’s cancer-filled body. With the lights low and the room quiet, I rubbed and she

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talked. I always paid attention when Cheryl spoke, and now, facing her death, I listened as though each word might be her last. Together, we struggled to relieve her pain and make sense of life. Often, in these moments, she emptied her thoughts out for me to gather.

Cheryl had been diagnosed five years prior with end-stage ovarian cancer. She had endured two operations and three years of chemotherapy. I watched as Cheryl lost all the hair on her body and the skin on her hands and feet. Her mouth blistered inside and out, and it was impossible for her to swallow. After repeated colon surgeries, the last year of her life was spent in the bathroom. Literally, her body eliminated itself from the inside out. The weight loss was unimaginable.

On this particular night, she received a cocktail of medications. The drugs eased her pain from ever-increasing tumors in her abdomen and gave Cheryl a spirit of elation. Anyone not knowing she was ill would have thought she'd been drinking, never guessing that mere hours before she'd been in horrifying pain. In this moment, her mood, unlike any I had seen in Cheryl, shocked me. She rarely took alcohol or even nonprescription drugs, and I didn't know what to make of it. But, as I allowed myself to enjoy her pain-free moment, I was able to relax into her mood. Why not? We both deserved a night off.

It is amazing to recall, but I spent five uninterrupted hours with Cheryl that evening. The phone didn't ring, and not one visitor came by. An evening alone was unheard of because of the amount of people that loved Cheryl. People were attracted to her vibrant spirit, and

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dozens of visitors a day were at her door. Phone calls too numerous to count rang into her room. An uninterrupted evening together with Cheryl was my privilege.

I don't know how it happened, but I found myself lying next to Cheryl in bed. My arm rested against the mattress under her neck, so that she nestled deep into the crook of my arm. She was so close that I could smell her, crisp and clean like fresh linen. Even after days in a hospital bed, she couldn't help but smell like Cheryl. What a difference, to find her so vulnerable physically. Cheryl's sense of propriety and control would never have allowed her to be touched so tenderly. But she was dying, and God knew she needed to be held.

"I am so glad that God allowed us to become such good friends," Cheryl whispered.

"Oh, beautiest," I said, "He really has displayed His awesome power in our lives. He has a perfect plan, and I know we can count on Him." My heart lifted in gratitude at the thought of our Savior, yet before me lay the truth of my life. My Cheryl, the greatest love I had ever known in a friend, lay dying. Death was looking more real with each passing day.

When I drove into the hospital parking lot earlier that evening, I became trapped by my emotions. Darkness consumed me. What if Cheryl dies? What if I am left alone? What if I can't live without her? What if I never find another friend? My thoughts spilled together in a jumbled river, and feelings swirled inside me. Then, suddenly, the radio caught my attention with a song that went something like ... *We can cry and say goodbye with*

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hope...it's not the end. We can grieve and believe that we will see you once again.

I took a deep breath and slowly released the air as if forcing the river of fear out with it. "HOPE!" I declared in a loud voice, while scrambling with tear-dampened hands to find pen and paper. I remembered Cheryl quoting the promise, "We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure."

"Hope!" I called again. As I wrote down those heaven-sent words I cried out to my Savior, "Thank you, Father, thank you for this hope!" At once, the river of His peace flowed through me.

Lying there with my beautiest, who was temporarily free from all pain, I whispered, "I was thinking, if you die from this cancer and go to heaven, you will get to be with Lisa." Cheryl's younger sister, Lisa, had gone home to Jesus just two years prior from a five-year battle with breast cancer. What heartache Cheryl had suffered, yet Father God stilled her aching heart with a dream. In the dream, Cheryl and Lisa were in heaven, floating on lily pads in a big beautiful body of water. The water glistened, and the air sparkled. Their bodies were radiant, the picture of life. No words were spoken between them because when their eyes met they fully knew and were fully known. There was no shame. No guilt, no pain, no sin, only peace and beauty to behold. Cheryl delighted at the thought of being with Lisa. Her face glowed with the possibility of a sweet reunion. "Having you in heaven could only add to the joy that Lisa is now experiencing with Jesus," I suggested.

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Lisa and Cheryl, Fall 1998

Quiet filled the room as we drifted off into our own thoughts of heaven, glimpsing for a moment into the great unknown. Cheryl and I had spent many hours exploring our thoughts of heaven. She once told me, “In heaven there is no sin, Susan, so we won’t have to struggle with it any longer!” She smiled, “What a relief and a joy! Remember what Paul wrote in the book of Romans? When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. Can you imagine the joy in a life with no sin present? I long for that life.” Her longing to be with God and to hear the words, “Well done” became more apparent as she fought for life. I saw a truth burning in her—a desire for freedom from sin and sickness and pain. I witnessed our Father drawing her to Himself. And my Cheryl was ready.

Our minds were quickly brought back to the present when the nurse walked in the room. She paused

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and grinned, to see us all snuggled up in bed together. “Cheryl,” she spoke, “you have the greatest friends. They are precious, just like you!”

“I know!” Cheryl cooed. “Isn’t God wonderful?” My heart fluttered to think that I was her special friend. I about giggled at the thought of being caught all snuggled up in bed together, but it passed quickly. For then I realized that the events of death aren’t measured as the events of life. Such sweet communion suspended time for this one perfect moment.

Once the nurse left the room, I shared another thought. “You know, if you do go home from this, I don’t think that it will be too long until your daddy will be there, too.” Rocco, Cheryl’s daddy, was eighty years old and battling his own failing health.

Cheryl joyfully enveloped the idea of her daddy being with her in heaven. She nudged her way deeper into my arms, like a child with her mother. If the feeling of this moment had been food, I would have declared it Thanksgiving dinner, such a feast of love it was. I desired to fill myself with more, yet felt stuffed beyond what I could handle. That presence of sisterly love would prove to carry me through the days ahead.

Feeling close, I dared to tell Cheryl my fears. For five years we had carried each other’s burdens, even finding a way to encourage each other when we ourselves were discouraged. Yet in her weakness over the last months, I couldn’t broach this dark fear in my heart. My voice trembled, and my eyes swelled with tears.

“I don’t want to live here without you,” I confided. “I have no other friend who I can share this love for

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Jesus with. You don't understand. There is no one who will ever be as excited to see what God is doing in my life as you've been. No one!"

"I feel as though I should go out and find someone to take your place!" The tears dripped from my face. "I know you can't be replaced, but I don't want to be without you."

And then God gave my friend great wisdom to respond. "Do not fear, do not even look for a friend," she said. "Look to Father God. He will give you who you need and what you need exactly when you need it." Her voice was bold; her courage brought comfort to my fearing heart. In the stillness, her words and God's truth settled over me.

I rose up from the bed, consoled. "I thought of something you may want to give me!" I said, responding to her question days earlier.

"And what is that?" she asked playfully, repositioning herself in a now less than comfortable bed.

"I would like to have the privilege of tending to your body. You know, do your hair and makeup? I want to be certain that your final presentation to this world is as you are—beautiest."

Cheryl gushed with enthusiasm. "I would love to give that to you! In fact, we can even practice doing my makeup!" We were two school girls again, arranging a slumber party. But in reality, it was her funeral we were planning. Thinking of me, Cheryl turned somber. "Are you sure you can handle this? I don't want you to set yourself up for added pain."

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“I am very sure. In fact, I am the exact person to do it.”

And so we agreed!

Our evening came to a close as generously as it began. The drug had done its work in releasing Cheryl from her constant pain and giving us back the heart connection we had lost. Snuggling into the warmth of her bed, her long lashes rested gently against her cheek. And now, as I studied each feature of her shrinking frame, my mind traveled through the years that brought us to this place.

Cheryl once remarked of knowing me, “I feel as though I have known Susan my whole life.”

Had I not been so warmed by her comment, I may have thought to add “that’s because I’m just now coming into my life.” Through Cheryl’s love for Jesus, she showed unconditional love to me. She had a way of speaking the truth in love that freed me to relate to others. That love, in turn, pushed me to grow in Jesus.

From the start, our friendship had been a beautiful blending of two different personalities. Cheryl, an extreme extrovert, never met a stranger. It would always amaze me when Cheryl would speak to a friend. She didn’t just say hello; she caught up. What’s more, when she said hello to someone she didn’t know, she expressed that same curiosity and concern for him or her as well. She even spoke to people I thought she didn’t need to speak to. She truly went out of her way to be sociable, to be friendly, and to show God’s love.

I, on the other hand, have not always been that friendly. My mom scolded me as a child because I

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wouldn't say hello. I wouldn't even speak to people I knew. Insecurity and fear played a role in my timidity. I found myself challenged by Cheryl's warmth. She once told me, "We should smile or speak to everyone we see, because you never know what is going on in their lives. They may have had a gun to their head this morning." That statement impacted me so much that I confess I now happily embarrass my children when I speak to everyone. The checkout girls at the store chime when I get in their lane with, "Oh, here comes the friendly one."

I believe it challenged Cheryl that I was more adventuresome than she. I love a good escapade and have had many in my short life. I surprised Cheryl one summer day, telling her, "Wear an old swimsuit, shorts, and sneakers cause we are going out to have some fun." Cheryl was in between chemotherapy treatments, and her health was up to a day of adventure. I picked her up in an old Chevy van with inner tubes loaded in the rear. It looked like something out of the sixties.

When she saw me, she freaked. "Where are we going? What are we doing?" she demanded.

I laughed, realizing I was the one in control of this situation. In a calm voice, I answered, "Beautiest, we're just going tubing. We get in the tube and we float down the river. It will be wonderful. Come on, I brought you a blueberry smoothie to drink on the way. Get in, and let's go have some fun." Apprehensive, yet trusting me, she climbed in.

The drive to the river set us free. The summer breeze seemed to blow all of our cares out the window. Our minds relaxed to a time long ago, when no cancer existed.

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Life was wonderful, carefree, and easy ... until Cheryl saw the river. The water was swift and dark, and Cheryl cowered. "We're getting in there? That water looks dirty! How can that water be safe?"

I shook my head and smiled. "It's a river, and that's how it's supposed to look. So, in Jesus name, we're getting in!" We threw our tubes in at the shoreline at my command and then turned our backs toward the water, took a deep breath, and fell in. It was scary at first, I'll admit, and it took some talking for me to convince her that the water was safe. But as the summer sun warmed our bodies, I think we both agreed—it was the perfect day!

Cheryl relaxed that afternoon, resting her head back on the inner tube. I watched her, in all her enjoyment. I cried tears of contentment to know this day brought her joy. We shared our thoughts and our silences as the day floated by, and by day's end, Cheryl had grown to love the river. She even took a turn on the rope swing, plunging fifteen feet into what had now become the safety of the river. I like to think that Cheryl became a little more adventurous and I a little more loving as a product of our relationship.

I once read this quote from Anais Nin, "Each friend represents a world in us, a world possibly not born until they arrive, and it is only by this meeting that a new world is born."¹ Cheryl most definitely opened the door to a brand new world in my life.