



IT HAPPENED TO ME

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Gripped by My Identity in God

Luke

For as long as I can remember I have had a deep and abiding fear about losing one of my children to death. I know we're not supposed to find our identity in our children, and I work hard to avoid that pitfall, but it's tough. As a pastor I've stood too often with heartbroken parents at the head of tiny caskets and shared words of comfort I knew were not adequate. At least not then.

I have openly told both my church and children about the nightmares I have about my kids staying out too late and becoming road-kill for some inebriated fool. It was torture to see Luke, our oldest son, drive the family car away for the first time. As I lost control of 16 years of successful protection, I secretly feared if I lost a child I might somehow lose my faith too.

I got used to him being out on the road after a while, but for some reason simmering under the surface was a certain something I couldn't put my finger on. Even when Landon, our second son, began to drive, my fear stayed focused on Luke.

In August 2004, Luke headed off to Moody Bible Institute to prepare for pastoral ministry. I was rejoicing ... and relieved that he was leaving his car at home. It was hard to see him go, but he was thriving and I was thrilled that we would meet up at our church camp for Labor Day weekend. He retrieved his car and picked up a friend for the 250-mile trek to the Michigan campground just north of Grand Rapids. I was already in Grand Rapids for some ministry-related meetings. Suddenly, in the middle of an afternoon meeting, I had a strong prompting in my spirit to call Luke and was a little anxious not to reach his cell phone. *He's on the road and probably out of cell range*, I thought.

When the meetings ended, I jumped in my car for the final 30 miles to Camp Harvest. As soon as I got on the road I reached for my cell phone and tried, again unsuccessfully, to contact Luke. Moments later my message notification rang, and I smiled to think he had been trying to reach me at the same time. Instead the message was from Kathy. She was only a few minutes from the camp and in a disconcerting tone asked me to call her immediately.

"Luke's been in an accident," she said, (and, for a second, my heart stopped beating.) But he's OK." How do you know? What happened? Where is he? I fired off a round of questions, and she calmly gave me the number of a motorist who had seen the accident and stopped to help.

I quickly pulled over, took the number down, and dialed this Good Samaritan. Alan answered and explained that Luke's car had flipped multiple times on the freeway and landed wheels down in the ditch. No other cars were involved. Luke had apparently blown out a tire and lost control of the vehicle. The boy traveling with him was not hurt, but Luke had several cuts and both were taken to the hospital in an ambulance.

I thanked him for his kindness, breathed a prayer of gratitude for God's mercy, and called Kathy back. I met Kathy at the exit just up the freeway, and she joined my car as we rushed back to the Grand Rapids hospital to retrieve our son . . . we thought.

We were not prepared for our first sight of Luke in the hospital. He was on a gurney behind a curtain by the counter in the emergency room. His head and chest were covered with blood, and he was crying out from the pain. He wept when he saw us—tears of sorrow, tears of grief and pain, mingled with his own expressions of thanks for God's mercy in sparing his life. Examinations revealed a number of lacerations from where his head struck the pavement through the shattered driver side window. Glass was imbedded in his skull, but the doctor felt his recovery would be full.

State police then arrived at the hospital and concurred that the SUV had rolled over at least three times, landing right-side up in the ditch. The car had burst into flames in the engine, but others had pulled Luke from the vehicles and put out the fire.

X-rays revealed nothing of concern in the neck region, and we were greatly relieved when the doctor announced Luke's release several hours later. Though Luke was still in much pain, we were hopeful. However, when he tried to get up to leave, the throbbing in his neck became excruciating. After several exhausting and extremely hurtful attempts to rise, the doctor feared an injury the X-ray had not revealed and ordered an MRI.

Before the hour was out, the diagnosis was in: "Three non-displaced fractured in C2, the second vertebra below the skull."

"He broke his neck?" we asked in shock and disbelief. "Yes," the doctor said. Normally a trauma of this sort displaces the broken bones, causing paralysis or death. C2 is the only vertebra that has an appendage the size of a small thumb extending vertically

toward the base of the skull, the doctor explained. It is this “thumb” that our head rotates around, and in Luke’s case it was completely severed in the accident and yet “not displaced.”

“He is very lucky to be alive,” the doctor told us.

Together we heard the news that Luke would have to wear a halo device for eight to 12 weeks and see a specialist in Chicago about further surgery. Kathy and I huddled in grateful prayer around our firstborn son, still in so much pain, still covered in blood, and we worshiped the Lord for mercy shown and undeserved. In a few minutes they asked us to leave as they lightly sedated our son, and drilled four holes in his skull to attached the device that would keep his neck immobilized for the next three months. It was almost 2 a.m. when we left him at the hospital and drove in grateful silence to the camp.

We awake early to a flood of caring contacts from those who love our family. By God’s grace, Luke was released for an ambulance ride to Chicago on Labor Day, and within a week he was sleeping well and gaining strength. As the son of a radio preacher he had hoped for some anonymity at Moody, but it was not to be. His halo made him a little hard to miss as he commuted to campus and a supportive, praying student body continually encouraged him.

Our first visit to the doctor produced another MRI and the fear that if the bones shifted without healing in this area with such limited blood supply, a surgery would be necessary to screw the broken pieces back together. It was a very tough autumn. Luke slept on our recliner for 15 weeks, and the halo did not come off until December 15. But the Lord gave him grace and was clearly shaping his character with a full-size chisel.

Through diligence and perseverance and in spite of pain, Luke completed his semester at school, and much more importantly, we deeply believe, God spared our son. We

all learned a lot—some of which is still too tender to talk about. What I can tell you is that worship has reached a new volume in each of us.

Luke is a gifted worship leader and youth leader in our church. He loves to sing and lead others in praise, and someday he wants to preach. Those are commitments between Luke and his Lord, and by God’s grace I don’t ever want to get caught “between the hammer and the work.”

If God had sovereignly chosen to allow our son to suffer, who am I to say no? Just a fraction of further pressure or an increment of movement on Luke’s neck, or if the car had landed upside down, or if the first car to come along had not extinguished the fire, or if the neck bones had splintered as Luke was pulled from the wreck, or . . . and our son would be the Lord. I have thought and prayed often over these past few months, wondering if I would have passed the test of faithfulness had the Lord chosen to take our first son home. I know firsthand how essential it is that we base all of our identity in the Lord Himself. I know this because . . . *it happened to me.*