

Chapter 3

As if emerging from deep underwater, I came to semi-consciousness Saturday morning. I sensed people next to my bed, then heard the voices of a couple of close friends. I couldn't see them because my eyes felt heavy and hazy, but I recognized their voices.

"John, we're praying for you," said one. "You're going to be fine. You're going to make a full recovery. We believe God for that."

"Yes, the Lord's peace and restoration be with you," said the other. I nodded slightly to affirm and thank them. My eyes barely caught sight of a nurse in the room as well. On their way out, the visitors spoke a few words to her which I did not hear. Then they were gone. I fell back asleep.

A few hours later, I woke again, but this time was different. I found myself fully awake and thinking clearly. There was no sense of worry, only peace permeating my being — in spite of my obvious physical discomfort.

I must have really messed up on the jet ski, I thought to myself. I felt some large apparatus sticking down my throat, which did not feel good. Tubes were affixed to my arms, an IV machine and monitors. I couldn't move, and didn't really want to.

God, I don't know what happened, I prayed silently, but here's an opportunity to believe You for healing. I don't know details. I just know I'm going to get better. I don't have one ounce of fear, worry or doubt that You will heal me. The devil may have given me his best shot, but he got beat again. I'm going to whip him by standing on your promises.

I always try to approach life with a faith-filled attitude, seeing problems as opportunities to overcome, but in those moments my prayers felt super-charged. Little did I know that Wendy and so many were praying for me. By this time, less than eighteen hours after I crashed my XP Limited and went facedown in the lake, intercession was going up for me all over the world. Word had spread so fast. Even missionaries in other nations were praying and believing God for my recovery and healing. Had I known how the body of Christ in our region and beyond was rallying behind me, I would have been moved to tears.

But as Wendy drove to the hospital that morning, she had no idea in what condition she would find me. I had experienced lung failure, heart failure and possibly brain failure. *Would he be a vegetable?* she asked herself. *Was there brain damage? Would our lives ever be normal again?*

She took the elevator up to the fourth floor, and the nurses ushered her into my room. It was painted minty green and was just big enough for a bed, a bathroom, a small TV up in the corner, and a couple of chairs.

I was holding a clipboard on my bed and had already communicated with the nurses by writing on it, though my handwriting was terrible. Even under normal circumstances, people could barely read what I wrote. At the office they called it “Jo-lligraphy.”

Wendy walked in and sat down. I could see the anxiety and questions all over her face, along with a quiet resolve, and a faith that obviously brought her peace. From her point of view, this was a defining moment in our lives.

He’s awake — that’s good news, she thought. But what is his mind like?

“Hey, John,” she said. “How are you feeling?”

I didn’t know it, but the question was loaded with meaning. I was just happy to see her. I took the clipboard in hand. First I scribbled the words, “Big wave.”

Wendy nodded. *Okay, he has some faculties back. He remembers something. He can spell and write. It’s pretty elementary, but so far so good.*

The next thing really caught her attention. I penned the words, “Michigan plays at 3:30.”

If he remembers that his favorite team is playing today — he’s definitely okay! Thank you, Lord! she thought. That answer alone lay to rest all her major concerns. John’s going to live, and he hasn’t lost his mind!

I wasn’t done writing. I jotted a few last words: “It was worth it.”

“Oh, my gosh,” Wendy exclaimed in an “Are you kidding me?” tone. She shook her head. I smiled at her around my tube. There was nobody I would rather go through tough situations with than her.

Tori came in a little while later, face still puffy and tender. She was my football buddy in addition to my jet ski buddy, and we rarely missed a chance to watch the Wolverines destroy another team together. But first she burst into tears and hugged me as best she could around all my medical gear.

“I love you, Dad,” she said. “I’m so glad you’re okay.”

I wrote with passion, “I love you, Tori. You are so special to me.”

She grabbed the seat next to me and in spite of all our discomfort — Tori’s teeth, and my whole body — we enjoyed every moment of the Michigan, Notre Dame game. Wendy came back in and saw us together, all beat up and cheering, and couldn’t help thinking, *In the natural, this looks pretty pathetic, but in reality it’s one of the most beautiful things I’ve seen in a long time.*

The nurses had given me a fairly strong vacuum tool called a suction straw, the kind they use at the dentist’s office to suck extra saliva from your mouth when you can’t swallow it. Whenever Michigan made a good play I banged that suction straw against the metal tray, filling the room with a metallic ringing tone. It sounded like victory.

“So many people are praying for you, Dad,” Tori said at one point during the game. “In the waiting room, on Facebook, everywhere.”

She paused and smiled, which made her wince a little. “I didn’t know that many people knew you,” she said. I smiled back and hit my suction straw a couple of times against the tray in approval.

Michigan beat Notre Dame that day. It was icing on the cake.

Still in the early stages of recovery, my body was doing everything it could to repair and remove excess fluid, so I tired easily. Upside down in the lake, my gastrointestinal track had pulled in probably a gallon and a half of water. My sinuses had filled up with around a pint of water, so my ears felt full. At one point our family physician, Dr. Boldman, came to check on me. He hefted a bottle holding my urine, which was streaming out via a catheter, and said to Wendy, “He’s going to fill a lot of those.”

Is this what I’m reduced to? I thought, knowing I was a passive participant as my body lay there and leaked all kinds of fluids. Then I changed my focus and thanked God that I was alive.

Life-Preserving Principle #6 **When going through crisis, don’t look at the circumstances.**

Circumstances are fickle things — they can look dire one day and sunny the next. Operating in faith according to God’s Word tells us not to let what we see in the natural dictate our thoughts, words and actions, but instead what we see by our eyes of faith. One great man of faith said it like this: “I’m not moved by what I see. I’m not moved by what I feel. I’m moved only by what I believe.”

Hebrews 11:1 agrees, reminding us that “faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” (NKJV) Elsewhere, the Bible says that “while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal.” (2 Corinthians 4:18, NKJV)

So the things we see are only temporary and subject to change, but the things we do not see physically are real. Faith reaches out and lays hold of those things that Jesus provided for us in the atonement. Faith looks beyond the natural and sees the finished work or healing.

It’s very important to see yourself living out the promises of God you are claiming for yourself. You have to see it on the inside before it happens on the outside. The Bible calls this faith, and with it we not only receive the promises, but we please God.

Much of the liquid I was eliminating came from the IV fluids the hospital gave me to keep my blood pressure up. My lungs were traumatized and had the same kind of problem that premature infants have: a lack of surfactant, a complex mixture of lipids, proteins and carbohydrates critical to breathing function. My body was trying to re-manufacture it at a desperate pace.

That’s why, when Wendy stepped into the hall with the doctors to look over their shoulders at the X-rays that day, she saw something strange: a field of white where my lungs should have been. The doctors nodded soberly.

It’s like John’s lungs aren’t even there, she thought. *Now we know how to specifically pray.*

Word spread quickly through Wendy’s reports that I had awakened and was thinking normally. That was a great encouragement to the people in the church. One of them reminded us that for six weeks before the accident, I had preached a series on the names of God. Each week was a new name and a new promise represented by the name of God. People began recalling those Bible promises through the names of God — how he rescues, provides, supplies, and so much more — and prayed them for

my situation. “All those Bible promises were fresh and brand new for us,” one member said. “Somehow, God and Pastor John prepared us for this.”

Word also got around about the funny things I wrote on the board and how I was encouraging the staff at the hospital, even though I couldn't yet speak because of the tube. I found the nurses so encouraging that I couldn't help but give back to them. I especially enjoyed talking about the Lord and how life was so much better with him in control. It seemed to me that they were listening with more than just polite attention.

One person we chose not to tell about the accident was my mom, because she had dementia and might not have understood. But my sister Diana and her husband Randy drove over from Grand Rapids, came into the room, grabbed my hand, hugged me and prayed for me passionately. It was a special visit from the person who had first led me to the Lord.

On Sunday morning, a day after I had woken up, my oldest daughter, Julia, arrived after a marathon drive from Arizona. Upon getting the call from Wendy, she had thrown her stuff into the car and driven non-stop with Jim, her Beta fish in a cup, pulling over only to fill up with gas. She walked in my room and stood by my bedside.

Oh my gosh, she thought. He looks twice his size!

She glanced at Wendy. Wendy nodded and gave her a look like, “It's real.” I tried to smile as she glanced me over. I was amazed to see her there and wished I could greet her with words and a big embrace, but I had to write my thoughts down instead. Of all my kids, Julia is the most like me: high-achieving, organized, driven and capable of drawing others to pursue the same goal. When she was attending our church, half the youth group was there because of her.

She pulled up a chair and talked to me for a while. She looked weary from the drive but also relieved that her dad was communicating with her, and that Wendy and I were relaxed and peaceful about the whole thing. Julia had been planning to come home for a week of vacation that month anyway. She soon decided to stay for a month to help out the family in a way that really impressed and gratified me. There were phone calls to be made, emails to be written, people to be rallied, and home life to be maintained with the other kids. She stepped up and was a crucial source of strength to Wendy. Julia helped anchor our family in those days after the accident.

Another major help was Ted Milian, my right-hand man at the church. Ted was a former offensive lineman for the Edmonton Eskimos in the Canadian Football League. He won a number of Grey Cups with the team. We often had lunch together during the workweek. I had noticed that when Ted got a bag of potato chips with his meal, he always opened the bag up completely so it was flat, and ate the chips from a pile. I finally asked him one day, “Why do you do that? Why don't you stick your hand in the bag and grab chips from there?” He held the chips bag up next to his open hand and said, “Can you figure it out now?” I realized then that his hand was simply too big to fit inside.

Ted was a gifted COO who ran the business of the ministry and had a natural sense of how to lead people through crisis. He knew that if the leaders freaked out, the people would freak out. He also walked in strong faith and stood on the promises of God, so I was happy to have him in charge.

Still, his reaction upon first seeing me was like the others.

It looks like someone took a broken baseball bat and worked him over, he thought, staring at my swollen face and busted teeth. He's almost unrecognizable — disfigured, larger. If you pricked him with a pin I bet he'd ooze liquid for an hour.

I was glad there were no mirrors handy, given the way Ted and the others were staring at me. But I knew Ted was a fighter, like I was, and would stand with us all the way.

“Hey, John,” he said, moving toward my bed. “You know, there are easier ways to get testimonies than to smash your body on a jet ski.”

I chuckled in spite of the pain it caused in my throat. Ted often acted as a foil to my driven, focused personality. He joked with me in front of the other staff, which helped people to relax, and helped me not to take myself too seriously.

We discussed a few key things that needed to be done in my absence. Ted was already filling the Sundays ahead with speakers, calling people connected with our ministry to give them personal updates, and keeping the church steady by communicating well and encouraging everyone to continue praying for the miracle of my recovery.

Before he left, I asked for one more thing. I wrote the request on the board: “Bring in a bunch of healing promises from God’s word and put them on the wall.” Ted read it and nodded “Okay.” I had many of God’s scriptural promises memorized, but I wanted to be surrounded by them, to meditate on them and let them sink into my heart. At that point I had not yet heard the word that Harry and Cheryl Salem had received about my recovery — though I was certainly living it.

Life-Preserving Principle #7

When going through a crisis, keep God’s promises before your eyes, in your mouth and in your ears.

I learned early on in my walk with God that the crisis of life comes to us all. Jesus said in John 16:33, “These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.” (NKJV)

As long as we are alive on this planet, we will probably have something trying to affect us in a negative way. It’s important to understand that as Christians, we have been redeemed from the curse and it is our responsibility to enforce Christ’s victory in our personal lives. Jesus was crucified on a cross and took upon Himself the sin of all mankind, and He also took all of our diseases and sicknesses. The gospel of Matthew 8:17 says Jesus healed people “that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Isaiah the prophet, saying: ‘He Himself took our infirmities, and bore our sicknesses.’” (NKJV)

“Took” or “bore” in the Greek means “to bear or lift with the idea of total removal.” Faith reaches out and lays hold of the promises of God. Remember, regardless of the crisis or the trial or the sickness or the attack or the problem, there is absolutely nothing that God can’t heal or rescue you from.

The Psalmist penned these words: “I will bless the Lord at all times; His praise shall continually be in my mouth.” (34:1, NKJV) Notice the words “at all times” — when things are going well and when things are not going well. He went on to write, “Oh, magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt His name together.” (34:3, NKJV)

In every situation we have a choice to magnify our problems or magnify the Lord and His promises. In other words: we are to talk the solution and the promises of God over our circumstances, and not talk the problem. The Bible tells us that God inhabits the praises of His people. When the Lord enters the situation, freedom always follows.

Psalms 34:4 goes on to say:

I sought the Lord, and He heard me,
And delivered me from all my fears.

As we seek the Lord, He delivers us from “all fears.” Regardless of the circumstances in your life, God is bigger and greater than all of them. The psalmist ended with these words:

The righteous cry out, and the Lord hears,
And delivers them out of all their troubles.

Many are the afflictions of the righteous,
But the Lord delivers him out of them all. (34:17, 19)

Even though we encounter trouble in the world, the Lord will deliver us out of them all. Our part is to believe and apply God’s Word in every situation, and then expect the freedom, the breakthrough, the healing we desire.

Ted went back to the office and enlisted Eric, our worship leader and graphic designer, to select healing promises from the Bible and print ten or twelve of them on big, colorful legal-size paper. Ted brought them in the next day and taped them to the walls all around my room. Each scripture was a source of comfort and confidence, but one absolutely captivated my attention. Jeremiah 30:17 read, “‘For I will restore health to you and heal you of your wounds,’ says the Lord”.

I stared at that verse as if my eyes were glued to it.

I will restore health to you and heal you of your wounds. It was like God himself was speaking to me. I repeated it over and over in my mind, and literally felt faith and healing spread throughout my body. I now had a specific, living “now” promise from God for me, and I never got tired of repeating it in my mind. *I will restore health to you and heal you of your wounds.*

Yes, Lord! my heart shouted.

Joy bubbled up in me, and I was laughing on the inside knowing that this was the truth about my situation, not the daily doctors’ reports or even my own feelings. The facts boomed inside my soul: God would restore health to me and heal all of my wounds. Period. Nothing else could touch that. Once you hear from heaven, you know the final score, even if there’s time left in the game. Jeremiah 30:17 became my battle cry.

That battle cry was tested every morning at about 7:30 when the doctors gathered outside my room to discuss my recovery. I could look to my left through the ICU window and see them meeting: my cardiologist, Dr. Boldman, several other specialists — and Wendy.

The first time Wendy walked up and stood with them, the doctors looked at her as if to ask, “What are you doing here?”

“I’m his wife,” Wendy said. “I want to see the X-rays and hear what you have to say.”

They looked at each other, a little miffed at her presence, but unable to tell her to leave. The pulmonary specialist pulled out the X-rays. My lungs were still white.

“Just like before,” the specialist said. “No change.”

Well, more work to do in prayer, Wendy thought. *God, I know you will clear them up.*

“We want to keep him intubated,” said Dr. Boldman. “He seems to be responding well, even though I’m concerned about those lungs.”

I knew the doctors were having a tough time squaring the evidence on the X-rays of severely damaged lungs with the cheerful, increasingly-healthy-looking man in the room.

“We’ll know more tomorrow,” Boldman concluded, and the meeting disbanded. Wendy immediately sent word to friends and supporters: “John’s attitude and recovery are going great, but we need to keep praying for his lungs. The X-rays are white, white, white.”

The next day she joined their circle again. The new X-rays came: white. Nothing showed progress in my lungs.

“Hm,” said Dr. Boldman, then glanced at me in my room. He and the other doctors seemed baffled. I was totally alert and had already had some fun “conversations” with the nurses via my white board. I usually asked them how their shift was going and thanked them for all they were doing. One decision that made this possible was my refusal to have any sedatives, which would have rendered me less aware of the pain of the tube in my throat, but also less alert and sharp. I wanted to be in control of my faculties, to be having a real experience and real conversations during my time there.

Dr. Boldman seemed to be wondering how a guy with lungs like mine could be behaving like I was.

“Let’s see where we’re at tomorrow,” he said.

The next morning, too, Wendy expected the X-rays to be clear, but they were white again.

More work to do in prayer, she thought. On some days, she walked the beautiful nature trails surrounding the medical center and prayed for my healing before even coming in. By the time of the doctors’ powwow, her faith felt rock solid.

Finally, on day four, the X-rays caught up with the facts. Even Wendy could see dark places where the lungs were stabilizing and returning to normal function.

“Improvement,” said the pulmonary specialist as the other doctors nodded. Doctors aren’t the celebrating type, and Dr. Boldman in particular was reserved and somewhat stoic, though gentle and very professional.

“Good,” he said. “Progress.”

That seemed like an understatement. I knew my body was healing very rapidly, and that could only happen supernaturally. Wendy got the message out, “His lungs showed up on the X-rays today! Good news. They’re healing!”

The next time Ted walked in, he stopped for a moment and took a long look at me. His expression was different than before.

“You’re getting better,” he said. “For the first time, I can see it.”

I nodded. It was one thing to trust God in spite of the evidence; it was another to see a miracle manifest before your very eyes. I smiled, feeling like a living miracle.

“By the way,” he said, “Wendy’s doing very, very well. People believe in her. She’s tough. She comes across as easy-going, but she has guts. She’s doing a great job.”

“Thank you,” I wrote. “I agree 100%.”

On day three, another encouragement arrived from Lansing where so many of our friends were. A trusted intercessor sent word that she had heard from the Lord that I would experience complete healing. That brought a lot of comfort and confirmation to our whole family. With that and many other encouraging words and promises, we soldiered forward.

My next goal was to get my lungs functioning on their own — and get rid of that painful breathing tube. The nurses started by reducing the amount of oxygen I was receiving, and I responded well, for the most part. But when they pulled the tube out that first time, my oxygen level fell so much that they had to put it in again. Not only that, but my lungs were showing signs of pneumonia.

There's no victory without a fight, I thought.

But these events were like blips along a predetermined road leading to full, fast recovery. Within a day or so I was so strong that the nurses began talking about removing the tube again.

“Tomorrow’s the day,” a nurse informed me. “You’re going to have to learn to eat again.”

“That shouldn’t be hard,” I wrote.

She smiled and stopped to chat a moment.

“You know, your recovery is becoming legendary,” she said. “What blows us away is your attitude. Nobody acts like this when they came as close to death as you did.”

I nodded.

“Thank you,” I wrote. “I’m glad to hear it. Everybody’s help is making a big difference.”

I realized how encouraging it is for medical professionals to witness an amazing recovery, especially when a patient is given a two percent chance to live. God doesn’t just deliver victory to one person, but to everyone around that person. So it was a huge win for the RNs and I’m sure it raised their hope level for a long time after that. I can only imagine how many other patients benefited from the staff’s elevated level of hope because of how God was pulling me back from the brink of death.

On the evening of the fourth day, the nurses ever-so-slowly pulled the tube out. I felt it scraping against the inside of my throat, and it felt like it just kept coming. I was surprised how far down it had gone. Then the whole thing emerged — a corrugated, plastic tube. Massive relief settled onto my chest.

No wonder it felt so uncomfortable, I thought, looking at that beast. I had my throat back now.

As expected, I kept coughing up the junk accumulating in my lungs, so the suction device came in handy. My mouth and lips were swollen and scarred up. A plastic surgeon had already repaired my lip and there were stitches down my chin and mouth. My clavicle was still achy and bruised.

After an hour they gave me some Jell-O. It slid down my throat. Pretty quickly, my muscles reacted and began swallowing food as eagerly as I felt.

For the first time since Friday, I could talk — slowly and briefly, but it was quite a relief to express myself with spoken words instead of notes on a board. The first thing I did was begin reading those scriptures out loud, frequently. I was like a machine gun confessing the promises of God. I opened the Bible and read it as well.

“Lord, I thank you that according to Jesus Christ I am healed. That at the cross you provided and paid for my healing. That you rescued and redeemed me.” On and on I went, feeling strength restored to me even as I spoke. My favorite was still from Jeremiah: “Lord, you will heal my body and restore my health completely!”

What a gift it was to be able to talk and to sit up in bed. Walking, however, was surprisingly shaky at first. When I took my first steps I actually felt my legs tremble underneath me.

What in the world? I thought. I was unaware how quickly basic life skills are lost.

“Whoa, take it very easy. Take it very easy,” the nurse said. “Your attitude is great, but your body needs time to catch up.”

This nurse was a man and had the strength to help me with those first unsteady steps. My legs were sore, too, having been bruised and banged up in the accident itself. I made a point to get up every hour so my legs would get stronger.

The day they pulled the tube out I was resting and sitting up in bed, enjoying my newfound “freedom” when I opened my eyes from a catnap and saw the superintendent of our church’s district, Bill Leach. I was amazed. Bill was responsible for overseeing hundreds of churches in Michigan, and he had taken time to drive over from his office a couple of hours away to visit me personally. We enjoyed a meaningful time of conversation and prayer. When they left, Bill told me, “John, God’s healing you up. It’s incredible what’s happening. Use this time to listen to God. Let him give you direction — and just heal up and rest.”

It was great advice.

I was getting better by the hour. On Thursday, they transferred me out of the ICU and into a regular room. That evening they told me I was ready to go home, if I wanted — and I very much did. My X-rays were looking better every time. The pneumonia had not gone away completely, but my oxygen levels were great. I was still only around eighty-five percent healed, but I could finish my recovery at home.

Dr. Boldman came in for a final visit.

“John, how are you feeling?” he asked.

“Really good, considering,” I said. I was still coughing frequently, and my face and parts of my body felt bruised. But overall I felt healthy again.

“My chest still hurts a little bit,” I mentioned.

“That’s because the guy punched you a few hundred times,” Dr. Boldman said.

That makes sense, I thought, feeling the tender area where Brian’s fist had pounded me — and brought me back to life. My clavicle, too, was broken, but the doctors had recommended against surgery because they were confident it would heal on its own.

After our chat, Dr. Boldman stopped and leaned against the door of my room, staring at me. Then he began shaking his head. It was unusual behavior for him.

“What?” I finally asked, feeling disconcerted.

“We hardly ever, ever see anything like this,” he said. “With what happened to you, and the recovery rate you’re on. You were so mangled, beat-up and abused in this accident. But you’ve had a complete turnaround. Here you are leaving the hospital seven days later. We hardly ever see that.”

With that, he smiled and walked out, still shaking his head. To hear those words from such a well-known, unflappable professional surprised even me. In all our years going to Dr. Boldman for problems big and small, I had never seen him display such surprise and even emotion.

Of course, I had never walked through a miracle like this before. It was an inspiring thing to know in my heart what would happen, and see it unfold in real time. So many human opinions had been proven wrong in the process. I wasn’t brain dead. I had no lingering lung or heart problems. My mental state was just like it was before. And now I was going home.

On a sunny September afternoon, one week after the accident, hospital orderlies wheeled me in a wheelchair to our car. I could have walked, but I thought I may as well take advantage of the rest. They closed the passenger door behind me. Wendy sat in the driver’s seat, smiling and ready to go.

“Hey,” I said.

“Hey,” she said. “I love you.”

“I love you, too,” I said. “I’m ready to go home.”