

Covid-19 came close to home when Phyllis received the diagnosis of a 75% lung infection from the virus. Hospitalized for weeks and months of recovery required supernatural intervention. She called on God and felt His presence fill her room! Phyllis shares the guidance He gave to build faith and give peace through any pandemic or challenge in life.

**Breath from Heaven:
God's Presence in the Face of a Pandemic**

By Phyllis Benigas

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The background of the cover is a vibrant landscape. The top half shows a sky with bright sunbeams (crepuscular rays) breaking through a layer of white and blue clouds. The bottom half shows a lush green field, possibly a meadow or pasture, with a soft glow from the sun. The overall mood is one of hope and divine light.

BREATH *from* HEAVEN

God's Presence
in the Face of a Pandemic

PHYLLIS BENIGAS

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Chapter 1

PANDEMIC

*“I was facing death, and he saved me. Let my soul be at rest again, for the Lord has been good to me.”
(Psalm 116:5-7)*

Pandemic. Coronavirus. It happened so fast. I read about its potential through the media, just as I had learned about past infectious diseases. I didn’t expect it to impact my personal world. I never left home without my little bottle of hand sanitizer and already possessed a healthy space bubble as part of my behavior. I cautiously moved forward with this new threat in our world.

My husband Tom and I are missionaries to Europe, based in Brussels, Belgium. On weekends, we travel throughout the continent of Europe, ministering and assisting in international churches. We love it! We enjoy the multicultural connection in these churches and the delightful traditional worship that each culture brings as we worship together. During the week, we serve at Continental Theological Seminary (CTS), where Tom is the campus pastor, giving us the opportunity to mentor and encourage students from over 30 countries who are training for ministry. What a joy!

Suddenly our world, busy but always fulfilling, was altered just like the rest of the world. We canceled the daily chapel services we directed at CTS, classes went online, and church doors were closed. Many decisions were made the week of March 8, 2020, as governments in Europe began to stop travel, shut down businesses and schools, and confine their citizens to home.

Our weekend ministry in Malmo, Sweden, was canceled for March 13-15. On Saturday, March 14, I started to run a low-grade fever, felt achy, and fatigued. The following Tuesday, I called my General Practitioner, and he informed me that the hospital would take me when I developed breathing problems in addition to the other symptoms. On Friday, I called him once again and reported breathing problems, no appetite, and fatigue. He told me to go directly to the hospital for an examination. And so, the journey began.

Tom and I arrived at the hospital and went to the check-in desk. The receptionist instructed me to sit in the waiting room until she called my name and told Tom to leave the hospital the way he came in. I had no idea I would be admitted that day and brought nothing with me in preparation for it. I handed Tom my wallet and kept only my Belgian ID card, phone, and small purse. Little did I know that this was the last time I would see Tom for 21 days. Upon examination, I was admitted to the Covid19 ICU area, immediately put on oxygen, administered a nasal coronavirus swab test, and a CT Scan of my lungs. The doctor did not inform me of the results of the scan at the time, but later I learned my lungs were 25% and 10% infected.

My hospital experience to date was the delivery of two babies, but suddenly my world became one of IV's, blood tests, and nurses covered from head to toe with protective gear. The nurses brought food, but I had no appetite and couldn't eat. To keep my strength, I received nutrition through an IV, along with several other liquids. My prayer during these first few hours was for God to heal me and comfort Tom and my family. I have no idea what my *prayer language* was communicating to the Lord, but I knew He was listening.

On Tuesday, March 24, another CT Scan was taken of my lungs, and shortly afterward, a doctor came to see me. She looked me in the eyes, told me that the virus had gotten worse and that my condition was very grave. My lungs were 75% infected with the virus. When first admitted to the hospital, I was hesitant to allow the use of hydroxychloroquine because of heart issues in my family history. When the doctor asked once again to use this medicine, I said yes, yes, whatever it takes. She felt the only recourse was to put me on the ventilator. I asked her to call my husband and let him know, and she said she most definitely would do it.

On March 24, I was connected to a ventilator. I didn't know what this device entailed precisely or if it would last for a day or a week. Later in recovery, I was told that I was the first coronavirus patient put on the ventilator at this hospital. The doctor wondered if the anesthetic was sufficient and asked if I remembered any of it. And remember, I did. At that moment speaking with her, I recalled more than I desired, especially the initial connection.

It was absolutely the most frightening moment of my life, and all I could think was *what have I done, God save me!* I drifted in and out of awareness and lost all concept of time over the next six days. However, Tom was very conscious of time, every minute of it. He later told me he drove to the hospital every day while I was on the ventilator and sat in the parking lot so that he could be near me and pray. I don't think I need to express how much this means to me. We have a great love for each other, and I am blessed beyond measure.

During those days, Tom contacted all our family members and kept them up to date. Through Facebook, he gathered an army of believers from all over the world, asking them to pray for me. He posted almost daily, reporting and soliciting prayer. Our friends, people I had never met, prayer groups, churches, and missionaries prayed daily for me, and I believe that is why I am alive today. I know that God guided the doctors in the wise decisions they made concerning me. One doctor told me that I was the talk of the medical community at that point because I was one of the first in my age group to recover after the ventilator. It was early in the pandemic.

At one point, towards the end of my time on the ventilator, I remembered a doctor saying that the device had done its job. Someone approached me with what I thought was maybe a toothbrush with a strong-tasting substance on it and started to touch my lips and teeth. I didn't understand what was happening, and the substance began to choke me. I tried to push away the individual, and then before I knew it, I was slipping once again into that frightening world of the ventilator. The doctor called

Tom and told him they tried to remove the ventilator, but I became agitated and was reconnected.

Receiving this information was one of the most challenging moments for Tom during my illness. A few years earlier, his cousin was connected to a ventilator after heart surgery and became agitated when the doctors tried to remove it. He eventually died connected to it. Imagine the thoughts that flooded Tom's mind as the doctor spoke with him. He testifies that because of the many prayers on our behalf, he had the strength to refuse those negative thoughts and claimed victory for me. The next day the ventilator was successfully removed, and I was moved to ICU for recovery.

Don't stop reading here! As my story continues, God's faithfulness is revealed at every turn. It demonstrates the behaviors we can make a part of each day to carry us along while walking through life's challenges. As you read, you will see how the Lord guided my thought life and brought stability to my emotions. The response we give when facing a crisis is crucial to our victory, and I pray that the following chapters provide encouragement and guidance for any challenge you may face. My heart declares with David, "I've thrown myself headlong into your arms—I'm celebrating your rescue. *I'm singing at the top of my lungs*, I'm so full of answered prayers." (Psalm 13:5-6, MSG, emphasis added)

You are never alone. God is with you. And He will help you!

Chapter 2

HIDDEN WORDS

“I have hidden your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you.” (Psalm 119:11)

A Beam of Light

With the ventilator removed on the sixth day, my consciousness returned. I was extremely weak in body, yet my mind was very active. How do you pass the time in isolation, lying in bed for days on end? How do you control your thought process when faced with uncertainty and so many questions? I was sure of only one solution, and that was to ask God to help me.

From the first day of consciousness, the Lord was with me, answering my heart’s cry for help. Suddenly, Bible verses started to flood my thinking, each one bringing a peace and joy all its own. He brought back to my remembrance the dozens of verses I had committed to memory, even those I learned at my mother’s insistence when I was young. To inspire me to memorize, mom often quoted, “Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path.” (Psalm 119:105, KJV) Back in those days, the King James Version was her only option,

and I love those familiar words. Today, I am equally blessed by other Bible versions, including *The Message* version of this passage, which says, “By your words I can see where I’m going; they throw *a beam of light* on my dark path.” (Emphasis added) Another favorite verse of moms was, “Thy Word have I hid in my heart that I might not sin against thee.” (Psalm 119:11, KJV) She made sure I memorized at least one verse every week.

There were many other activities I would have preferred doing as a child other than devoting part of my Saturday to scripture memorization. However, at this moment in time—isolated in my hospital room with only occasional visits by nurses covered in yellow protective gear, surrounded by daunting medical equipment, IV therapy, oxygen therapy, and more tubes attached to me than I care to describe—those scriptures were the priceless *beam of light, hidden* in my heart, to guide me forward.

My church reinforced the scripture memorization protocol I received at home. When I could barely read, my Children’s Church teacher offered a special prize to anyone who would memorize an *entire chapter* in the Bible and quote it within the next couple of Sundays. I had memorized all the regular scripture verses that children tend to know at this point, but this task seemed impossible for me until I chanced upon Psalm 117. It was short and sweet, and with my mom’s help, I memorized it!

There were two or three of us who took the easy route and quoted Psalm 117, and we still received the prize, which was a miniature copy of the Book of John.

That teacher was going to get the Word of God into us one way or another! This easy strategy wasn't a bad idea considering the truth it delivered to my young soul.

Psalm 117 declares, "Praise the Lord, all you nations. Praise him, all you people of the earth. For he loves us with unfailing love; the Lord's faithfulness endures forever. Praise the Lord!" Psalm 117 is the shortest chapter in the Bible as well as the center chapter of the Bible. It may be short, but it declares two unchangeable characteristics of God: *God's love for us will never fail, and His faithfulness to us will last forever.* Furthermore, this love and faithfulness are not just for Israel, but *all nations*, Jews and Gentiles alike—Psalm 117 encourages the whole world to praise the Lord!

My theology at that young age in Children's Church was not much further along than God is Love, but I knew, to a measure, what love was and who God was. The fact that His love for me would never fail has stayed with me my entire life and has carried me through many discouraging moments, including the one I was facing. In that isolated hospital room, the truths of Psalm 117 undergirded me—God's love never fails, and His faithfulness never ends, regardless of my present circumstance.

Even though we grow more sophisticated in our theology as we age and hopefully more intimate in our relationship with God, the *foundation* never changes—God's love and faithfulness will last forever, and His love is for everyone. This message can touch the youngest of hearts, and I know they understand it just as

I did. We limit the impact God's Word can make in a child's life when we assume they would not understand.

The scriptures we memorize early in life become a part of our spiritual DNA, something to draw on throughout life. God's word hidden in our hearts is an unseen source that influences our response to everything we experience. Christian Neuroscientist Dr. Caroline Leaf explains it this way, "When we implant God's word into our minds, we fill our brains with the powerful environmental influence of God's love, which directly impacts mental and physical health in a positive direction."¹

I remember the first time I read the account in Deuteronomy 6 of Moses instructing the Israelites on the importance and impact of God's commandments. "Love God, your God, with your whole heart: love him with all that's in you, love him with all you've got! *Write these commandments that I've given you today on your hearts. Get them inside of you and then get them inside your children.* Talk about them wherever you are, sitting at home or walking in the street; talk about them from the time you get up in the morning to when you fall into bed at night. Tie them on your hands and foreheads as a reminder; inscribe them on the doorposts of your homes and on your city gates." (Deuteronomy 6:5-9, MSG, emphasis added)

Clearly, God's holy words were taken seriously by the Israelites. Sometime later in Israel's history, orthodox Jews carried out these scriptures literally. They copied verses, placed them in a small box called a frontlet, and wore them on their foreheads. They nailed copied

scriptures on the doorposts of their homes. Many still do this today during prayer.

We didn't practice these instructions by Moses in my home, but scripture verses were a part of everyday life, starting at breakfast. On the kitchen table sat a little box in the shape of a loaf of bread, and it held small cards displaying a scripture verse on each side. I understood that mom expected me to choose a card from *The Bread of Life* promise box every morning and read it to her. Her response each time was, "Oh, that's such a good one!" I remember thinking at times that it would be simply *impossible* to pick a bad one. Many times, the card was chosen while shoving down toast or cereal in a hurry to leave for school, but the exercise served its purpose. The Creator of the universe spoke a promise to me that I could draw from any time of the day. I learned early in life just how powerful His Word is to touch lives in a personal sense each day, just as it was doing now in my hospital bed.

His Word is Alive and Powerful

A former missionary to China attended my home church when I was a child. Doris was forced to leave China in the early 1950s when the Communist regime came into power. To abandon the Chinese people was a dreadful moment in her life, and she often cried and asked our congregation to remember the Christians left behind. She asked us to pray that God would protect them and that they would be a light in a very dark place.

Doris' only consolation was that over the span of her years in China, she and other missionaries had emphasized scripture memorization. Doris rejoiced over the scriptures hidden in the hearts of Chinese believers when Bibles were ripped out of their hands and destroyed. Reports today out of China reveal that the Church is alive and well and growing in that nation regardless of the suppressive government. This is possible because God's Word hidden in the hearts of believers is *alive* and carries an agenda all its own. "For the word of God is alive and powerful." (Hebrews 4:12a)

God's Word is personal, up to the moment, *measuring the thoughts and desires* of everyone. When these dedicated missionaries could no longer guide and teach, they believed that the memorized scripture fulfilled its destiny in the heart of each believer. "It is sharper than the sharpest two-edged sword, cutting between soul and spirit, between joint and marrow. It exposes our innermost thoughts and desires. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God." (Hebrews 4:12b,) In answer to Doris' prayer and the prayers of countless others, believers in China matured in their faith and kept that faith under the watchful eye of God's Word. Although the church went underground and persecution continued, the Church has flourished in China under communism. Christianity is the fastest-growing religion in China, and many believe there to be well over 100 million believers today.

Through the centuries, from the early Church to today, many people groups have experienced similar persecution. We read stories of how God's Word was

recorded long ago, hand-copied, memorized and passed along in communities, every word more precious than gold. This history passed from generation to generation should say something to us.

These accounts, along with my own hospital experience, confirm the value of His Word committed to memory. Currently, it's difficult to imagine not having a Bible at our fingertips, whether in print or online. But, yes, it happened to me in the hospital when I needed it most. We have no idea what the future holds for us.

The Comfort and Conviction of His Word

Through the years, I recalled scriptures from memory on countless occasions while encouraging a hurting soul, as Paul said in I Thessalonians 5:11, "Encourage one another and build each other up." (NIV) Words cannot express the blessing my daughter Mandy has been to me in this area. After I was released from the hospital and sent home to recover, her daily phone calls from the United States gave me the encouragement I so desperately needed. Straight from her heart and her time in prayer, she quoted scripture after scripture about the goodness of God. She quoted scriptures filled with the promises of God, and I would weep. Mandy, too, had memorized a vast number of Bible verses through the years, and they flowed spontaneously as she ministered to me. They brought life and hope as I struggled with complications from the virus, and I will always remember her spirit-led ministry as she *encouraged and built me up*.

Memorized scripture verses help us share the good news. “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.” (I Peter 3:15, NIV) We often feel inadequate or hesitant to share the *good news* with others, questioning our ability to express it or the acceptance of our message. However, I think we forget that when we *give the reason for the hope we have* in Christ, we link arms with the world’s greatest evangelist, the Holy Spirit, whose anointing graces both God’s Word and our message. This anointing is irresistible to those who are seeking answers.

We are adequate *and* have everything we need for our witness because “[The Holy Spirit] will teach you everything and will remind you of everything I have told you.” (John 14:26) The acceptance of our message is not our responsibility, but that of the Holy Spirit, “[The Holy Spirit] will convict the world of its sin, and of God’s righteousness, and of the coming judgment.” (John 16:8) The Holy Spirit brings to our remembrance God’s Word, we share its message, and the Holy Spirit does His job to convict. What a team!

Whether to bring comfort to a hurting soul or answers to someone seeking a Savior, His Word is what we need. What a joy it is when God’s Word seamlessly flows from my memory, without hesitation, with no risk of losing the best moment to touch someone’s life with that living Word from Heaven.

Now, while lying in my hospital bed, I, too, was touched by this *hidden* Word. Its continual encouragement prompted me to pray more than once that

I would again have the opportunity to share its wealth with others. I believed that God would raise me to do just that.

His Word is Supernatural—Always Hits Its Target!

“As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.” (Isaiah 55:10-11, NIV) God’s Word is supernatural, and it always hits its target!

I’ve heard many stories about the tenacity of God’s Word to touch lives when sent out to accomplish its purpose, and one such account comes to mind. I don’t remember all the details surrounding the story, but the *destiny* of a single Bible verse remains forever in my memory. A man in his fifties was going through a difficult situation. He was not a church attender and did not profess a religious belief but found himself remembering a scripture verse he had heard as a child of seven or eight when he attended Sunday School the first and only time in his life.

Desperate for help and unable to get past this verse, the man visited a church in his area and asked the pastor to explain what the verse meant. That day changed everything for Him! The pastor shared with him about the love of God and led this seeker to the Lord. What a great example of Isaiah’s words, “So is my word that

goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.” Over 40 years later, a verse heard in Sunday School as a young boy changed a man’s eternal destiny.

It cannot fail! Success guaranteed! I can testify that the living Word hit the target and achieved its purpose of filling me with hope and faith when I needed it most in my hospital bed. The scripture verses *hidden in my heart* brought hours of comfort and helped pass the many days in isolation as I recalled their truths. When we call on God to help us, He has an unlimited number of solutions for our problem. We need to trust Him for just one.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Author, speaker, minister, mom, and whatever hat is handed to her, Phyllis Benigas embraces life with a dependence on the Lord for His guidance, His wisdom, and His heartbeat. Her ministry will encourage yet challenge when necessary. And it will draw each one into a deeper, more intimate relationship with God.

The phrase *large Italian family* aptly describes Phyllis' early years at home in Minnesota, growing up with four brothers and two sisters. It was at the tender age of three, at her own request, that Phyllis was introduced to the Lord as she knelt with her mother at a sunny kitchen window and repeated a prayer of repentance. Neither recalls what precipitated her request that day, but following that prayer, she responded, with tears streaming down her face, "I feel so clean inside." Since that early encounter with the Lord, she follows His path with joy, grateful for His grace when her steps falter and for His guidance through difficult moments.

After attending North Central University, Phyllis married Tom Benigas, the love of her life, and has served alongside him for the past 49 years in ministry. They ministered as youth pastors in Minnesota, Colorado, and Florida. Tom and Phyllis directed the Peninsular Florida District of the Assemblies of God Youth Department

program, located in Lakeland, Florida, for 24 years. They enjoyed leading youth camps, statewide conventions, youth pastor conferences, outreaches, and youth mission trips, as well as ministering in churches.

Phyllis served on the Assemblies of God World Missions Board for a term and managed A/G missionary itineration in Florida for 22 years. It gave her great joy to assist missionaries in raising funds to return to the field of their calling.

Phyllis and Tom presently work as appointed Assemblies of God missionaries to Europe, serving at Continental Theological Seminary in Brussels, Belgium, where Phyllis assists with the student mentoring and counseling programs. They also work with the Fellowship of European International Churches, traveling extensively to assist international churches with preaching, seminars, and mentoring.

In 2008, she wrote a devotional book entitled, *Intimate Moments with the Shepherd – Guidance through the Challenges of Life*, published by Creation House.

With a personal ministry to women, Phyllis enjoys speaking at women's meetings, retreats, and conferences. She comments, "It is a delight for me to share with women the blessing that comes from stepping past our struggles, insecurities, and heartaches into an understanding of our purpose. Once we discover the fulfillment that comes from a daily intimate relationship with our Creator, our challenges no longer rob us of peace and joy but become the instruments of growth and character-building that God intends."

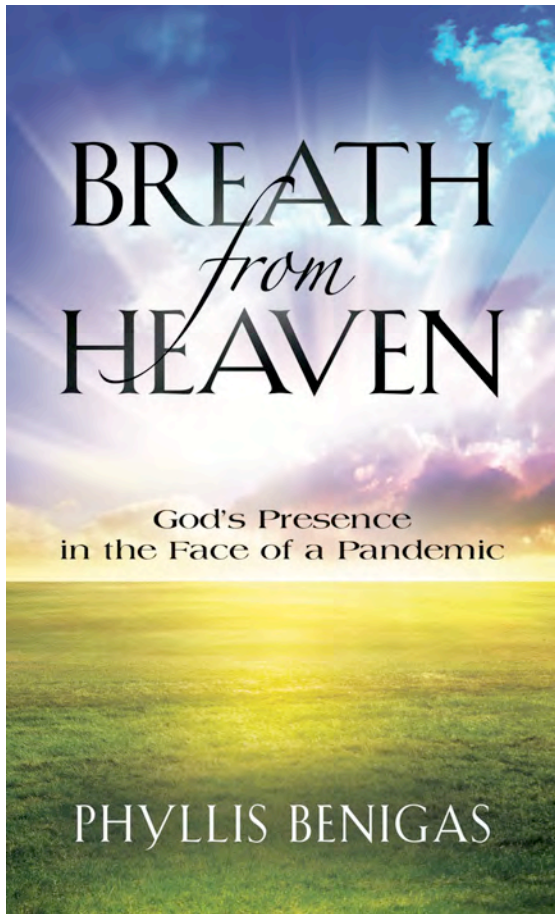
God's Presence in the Face of a Pandemic

Phyllis is proud of their two married children and four grandchildren who serve the Lord and minister with fervor.

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