

In a world unraveling at the seams, people need hope that there's more beyond. Bob Hampton is living testament that the "more beyond" exists. The miracle-story that birthed Faith Family Fellowship Church could have been told by fellow parishioners, but not with the potency of the self-presumed defrocked minister.

THE CHURCH THAT MIRACLES BUILT

by Bob Hampton

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The Church That Miracles Built



Bob Hampton

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Prologue

I've never been caught up into Heaven by either an angelic escort or by a night dream. I've never witnessed a totally blind man gain instantaneous sight or an amputee sprout a replacement limb. I've never even heard of a casket lid ever flipping open and its former resident jumping out to conduct his own funeral. I've never experienced anything that defies the natural laws of science that can only be attributed to the powers of a supernatural Being. This said, I do believe in miracles of all kinds, but particularly of the more unremarkable variety that quietly slip in on us and too often pass undetected. I submit that if we're not primed with our heart's eyes, we will miss these Divine Love taps that remind us that God is alive, well and passionately interested in the affairs of a rather ordinary person like me - like you.

The true story I am about to share unveils two particularly remarkable miracles. But due to their stunning nature and precise timing, I suspect even skeptics may read away and scratch their heads bewildered. Oh, how I'd love for this tale to be the first step in a journey that lands the skeptic reader in a lifelong pursuit of the One he or she formerly doubted. But my equal hope, longs for the already-convinced to be encouraged in their faith-journey and propelled to look at life's circumstances with a more discerning eye. Why? Because in the invisible dimension cloaked behind the ordinary, God ceaselessly taps our spiritual shoulders with His Love. And every so often, He pulls off the dramatic that leaves our mouths agape and our hearts adoring.

To fully appreciate this story, however, it must be viewed against the backdrop of how for the past fifteen years, my life had been veering slowly, but steadily, off the track of what I was persuaded God had wanted me to do. Oh, not that I had caused this detour by stringing together a steady stream of poor choices, but rather like many of us, I had made one poor decision here and another there. Before long,

however, my life was unraveling at every seam. The year was 2002 when the demolition crew of adversities began ripping down the edifice of my life. Little did I know at that time that the Master Architect was beginning to reconstruct, not just a whole new life for me, but even a brand-new church from His tool bag of miracles.

Chapter 1

Gifted at Failure

The EMTs untangled my unscarred legs from the steering wheel before sliding me onto the gurney and into the ambulance. The driver then slammed his foot onto the gas pedal and burned rubber for the next 5 miles across Route 80E. The race to the hospital seemed especially short for me as I teetered on the edge of consciousness. We had barely arrived at our cruising speed when the attendant who was stabbing me with several saber-sized needles yelled out, *"Let's boogie; we're losing him."* (*"Did he think I was already unconscious??"*) Now to most persons in my predicament, this announcement would've probably been met with probable fear and a sure-heightened sense of trepidation. But for me, *"H-e-a-v-e-n spelled relief"*.

Guess an explanation is in order. I hadn't been involved in a car crash; nor had I been abducted with my captors tying me in some contorted knot to the steering wheel. The pretzel effect made by the amalgamation of the steering wheel with my lower limbs was a design of my own imagination. (*"Have I lost you yet?"*) Maybe I need to rewind the tape and fill in the narrative gaps.

For months, I had been wallowing in the throes of a feeling-sorry-for-myself depression. My life had been coming unglued at every seam at an ever-accelerating pace - again. I didn't know if I could survive even one more emotional upheaval. So, no sooner had I pulled onto the entrance ramp of Interstate 80 for my daily commute to work, when my heart played its gymnastics tricks on me - again. Doing handsprings and backflips across the interior wall of my chest, while beating to the melody of an ever-slowng funeral dirge, I began to get light-headed - again. Though my car kept a straight path, the road before me spun around as though it had morphed into a circus merry-go-round. Not a

comfortable feeling at 55mph. I deemed it wise to pull off onto the shoulder to spare other autos an unwelcomed meeting of the metals.

This occurrence had now become commonplace in my life over the past several months. And "No", I had neither a drinking nor drug problem. But given my recurrent symptoms, you would have presumed I had visited my doctor, "Right?" No, not yet. "Why not?" Because she might just have diagnosed my ailment and provided me the cure. You're baffled and wondering, "What is your problem?" When you're seriously depressed and you see what might be the last light at the end of your life-tunnel, you welcome it - gladly, with open arms and tangled legs.

In the ensuing chapters, we'll retrace what led to such dejection, but for now, it's sufficient to say I was ready to go. Correction - I was eager to go. So, I turned off the engine, placed the keys where they were inconspicuous, but could be found by whomever would retrieve my car. Then I sat back and waited for the angels to carry me off to where depression never gains entrance.

But this is where my story degenerates into an enigmatic dilemma. Now I can't say how the depressed atheist may have handled this circumstance. But I suspect he would've smiled with the satisfaction that within moments, he would've ceased to exist and "entered" the "abyss" of extinction. Nor can I say how the depressed skeptic may have faced this trial. Perhaps he may have exacerbated his heart palpitations and sped up the inevitable because of his fear of the unknown and imminent future. Quaking, he would've exited into the who-knows-where? I, on the other hand, am profoundly religious. And yes, I know the world houses over 20 major religions and a plethora of many minor ones dotting the globe. So, let me make it clear that I do not see my ultimate existence as being absorbed into and made "one" with the universe. I do not see my "end" being repeated over and over again in the reincarnation cycle of a "Holy Cow" existence. Nor do I

see my eternity ensconced by 36 pure virgins on either side of me. I believe in the Personal God reported in the Bible Who not only created us in His Own Image, but as revealed, has a specific and satisfying Plan for every person. Therefore, we should make it our life quest to invest all our spiritual energy into discovering exactly what that Plan is and doing all we can to make it happen.

So here was my profound conundrum: I believed God had sculpted me, complete with a blueprint for a specific purpose. Therefore, I should have been enthralled to enjoy such a privileged role in my infinitesimal corner within His Boundless Universe. But I was depressed - depressed to the point of wishing for death to snatch me away from my internal misery. Count on it: suicidal ideations plagued my daily routine on numerous occasions, blackening many a sunny day. But nope, I couldn't go there; I couldn't take my own life. Not that I was too scared to do so, but as disappointed as I was with myself, I was even less inclined to disappoint My Divine Designer. If I was one of His works of art on the highest rung of His Creation ladder, then how can I mar His masterpiece without thrusting my fist in His immaterial Face and in effect saying, "*You messed up!*"?

So, there I sat in my brand-new Chevy Tracker, lamenting over what I was certain was God's ongoing disappointment with me. I couldn't begin to count the number of times I had pled to Him to cart me off to His House of Bliss. The Bible teased me often with its consoling invitation to escape into Glory: "*He will wipe every tear from [my] eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever*" (Revelation 21:4, NLT). I loved the sound to that.

Now whether it was God's Holy Spirit prompting me or my own confounded and conflicted flesh baiting me, I don't know. But one of them convinced me to "barter" with the Almighty. (Probably not the Holy Spirit.) So, I offered a prayer that went something like this:

"Father, You already know what I'm thinking and how I've pled for over two years that You would take me Home. But if You're not finished with me yet - which I can't imagine as I feel I'm the personification of Failure - then You have 5 minutes before I call for an ambulance."

Nothing like pushing God into a corner under my terms and telling Him what the plan was going to be. Anyhow, this prayer set the stage for my pretzel-appearance. I was slowly ebbing away into the oblivion of unconsciousness, so I needed to ensure that I would still possess enough coherence to place the emergency call if God chose to preserve my life. I possessed enough mental acuity to know to place my legs over my head and let gravity do its thing. So, I hung my head over the passenger-side seat and "knotted" my legs in and through the steering wheel. I kid you not, I didn't cheat on even one second from this bargain. I remember fixating my eyes to my wristwatch. The first minute slowly ticked by, then a second and a third - with my cognitive clarity ever fading. By the fourth minute, my ability to focus was winding down faster than my watch. The fifth minute seemed to drag on interminably, but seared into my memory bank, I can still see those final ten seconds tick off vividly. Barely lucid by this point, I recall this *"Aha!"* moment when I felt more than a tad disappointed that Heaven would have to wait - at least for the next several minutes. Fortunately - or not - 911 on a touch screen is easy. Despite my slurred speech over my cell, the ambulance arrived in less than 5 more minutes and we were soon breaking the sound barrier as we raced in the direction of Pocono Medical.

I don't believe I ever lost consciousness as I vaguely recall being wired up to every cardiac piece of equipment and intravenous drip available in the ER. My blood pressure was falling off the gurney, only to be underperformed by my pulse. For the next few hours, my life teetered on the precipice of the afterlife. After my fluttering heart stabilized and my condition was upgraded from "Critical" to "Fair," the

emergency team of doctors deemed it in my best interest to send me to another hospital that boasted one of the region's best cardiac-care units.

I guess this was comforting news, except for all the unanswered questions regarding my now uncertain future. Wouldn't you know, I'm going to live, but be incapacitated with a compromised heart for the rest of my life - and now, I'll probably live to be a centenarian. Great.

Between traffic accidents, sports injuries and a slew of sicknesses, the ER was spilling over with needing-to-tend-to bodies. When I was wheeled inside, there wasn't a single ER room available. The EMT's transferred me from their ambulance gurney onto the lone gurney in one of the hallways. Then I was stationed there until an attending physician could break free from his parade of patients. Meantime, a nurse saw that my gurney was in the way. It was impeding the flow of doctors and nurses scurrying between ER rooms. Not only so, all my equipment required an electrical outlet. So, she started to roll me - but to where? the only room available in the ER - a walk-in prostheses closet. She positioned me right in the center of the room, where all around me I was being stared down by artificial arms and legs, wall-to-wall replacement limbs. She then assured me a doctor would soon be in to see me as she shut the door behind her. I told her to shake a leg - she had every shape and size to choose from. She exited around 6:30pm.

At 7pm, the night shift came on duty; except for me. Somehow during the transfer of patient information, my name disappeared from the roster. At 1:30am, a nurse happened upon me, and with an incredulous, yet horrified look, she asked, "*What are you doing in here?*"

"Window shopping for a surrogate limb - if I ever need one." No, I didn't really voice that. But was she kidding? She didn't really think I wheeled myself in there, did she? Within a few moments, my room was flooded with staff and apologies. They even treated me to a mis-steak dinner.

Something else transpired during those seven "lost" hours that I never told them about. They were already embarrassed enough and fearing a lawsuit. Now this is not me, but they didn't know that. Picture yourself in my place, in that supine position - for seven hours - with IV cocktails flooding your veins. Yep. I had to pee - even before the day shift left! Now keep in mind, I was strapped down; I couldn't go (in both senses) anywhere. I know what you're thinking, "*Why didn't you yell for help?*" The simple answer is, I was drained of energy from the day's events, the door was shut, and I had no call bell. My shout might barely be recognizable as a loud whisper. By 9 o'clock, I'm squeezing my legs together and performing all sorts of other bladder-restraining maneuvers. 9:30 came and with it the contemplations of "*Why not just let go?*" Now I didn't want to be the one embarrassed - nor did I want to lay in my own Swine Lake.

At 9:30-something, I had made my decision; one that showcased my improvisational skills. I scanned the wall, shimmied my gurney toward my selected target and plucked out of obscurity the first-ever elbow-bedpan. With precious little time to spare, I had cradled it where it needed to be and soon I was thanking the Lord for that pause that spells relief.

Problem solved - well, not totally. Where do I empty my "relief"? There's not even a trash can in this room, much less any lavatory facilities. The irony of the moment seized me. I repressed the urge for hours and devised this ingenious plan, only to spill my "relief" all over me in the middle of the night. Process the obvious here. The only way I was going to prevent spillage was to cradle my elbow all night long while staying awake. But I was already beyond tired from my long and adventuresome day. I did well. Necessity proved once again the mother of invention; it also proved the father of perseverance. Now think me crazy, but at 1:30 when I was discovered, I hid my "relief" under my sheet. What was I thinking? Who knows by this time in my ordeal? I

think it was more than just embarrassment; I believe it was for fear I might be charged with some rare-cited hospital misdemeanor for *wetty* larceny. What I do know is that I cradled my greased elbow till morning when a friend of mine arrived and I transferred the not-goods to her. She disposed of the evidence, scrubbed my "savior" and tucked it under my gurney. I'm sure some nurse eventually found it and wondered what it was doing on the floor. (I'm hoping she never reads this book.) No doubt she washed, sterilized and remounted it on my wall of shame. I've often wondered who might have benefitted from the extra elbow grease – uh, never mind.

I learned much later, in fact, 6 months later, when I made a repeat performance of this my debut hospitalization, that it was no cardiac infarction that almost did me in, but the "silent killer" of carbon monoxide poisoning. Hindsight betrayed the greater wisdom to lift weights with sufficient spatial separation between me and a kerosene heater in a well-ventilated space. Duh.

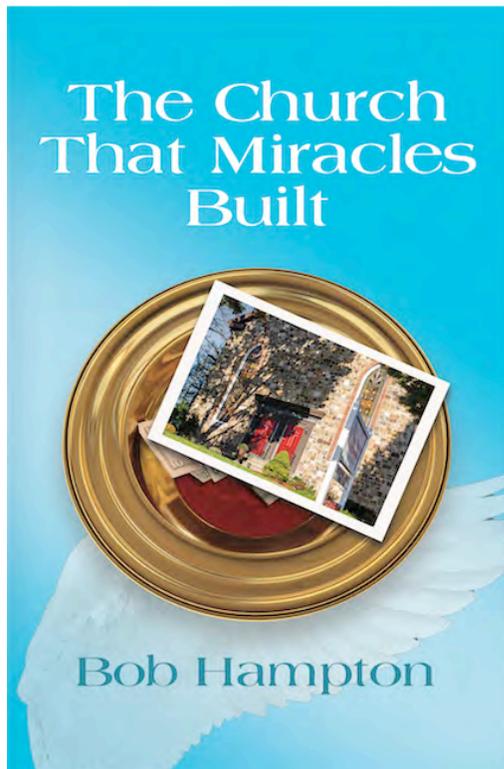
As lucidity returned, I deduced that God wasn't finished with me yet. I got that, but discovered in the aftermath that failures would continue to haunt my plans.

There's a movie I must have watched a dozen times or so and will see it a dozen more. Despite knowing the outcome before I ever watched the film, and the outcome has never flinched with any of my repeated viewings, *Apollo 13* still captivates me. Who will ever forget that non-negotiable decree during the height of the crisis from Flight Director, Gene Kranz? He said something we all wish would always be true in every area of our lives: "*Failure is not an option!*" Reality, however, proves to be far less gracious.

I remember the noted radio preacher, Chuck Swindoll, once offering these perplexing words that have resonated and stuck with me ever since. He said, "*Our problem isn't that we've failed; it's that we haven't failed enough.*" What he meant is that failures provide this

marvelous opportunity to learn life lessons more quickly and more profoundly than successes. Well then, given this formula, I must've been poised to have been very successful, the prize float in a parade of failures. I agree with Mr. Swindoll. I don't remember having received many good grades during my schooling. And yes, I did have some. But I sure do remember the "F" I received for my 8th grade book report on "*Gone with the Wind*" and the "37" I received on a 10th grade Social Studies test. Now a "37" would be an acceptable score if it had been out of a possible "50". No, I earned a "37" out of a possible "100". "*Is there such a grade as an F--?*" I don't remember the hits I contributed to our high school baseball team - and I should because they were so few and far between. But I do remember my last at bat my senior year, striking out with the bases loaded on a 3-2 slider. (*What high school pitcher throws a 3-2 slider with the bases loaded???*) I don't remember many of my first dates during those traumatic teen years, but I do remember my last date with each of those 11 girls who dumped me. I obviously learned a lot in life - because I failed so often. Some would argue I'm gifted at failure.

But these failures are inconsequential; these failures are of such minor import in the perspective of the whole of life. For the flight crew of Apollo 13, however, failure translated into disaster, whether from being hopelessly lost in space until the oxygen supply dissipated or to disintegrating upon reentry into the earth's atmosphere. Failure can be catastrophic. But it can also be instructive - and should be. In my life, it has been just that - a lot. So, though Gene Kranz's dictum applied during that *failed* trip to the moon, but *successful* ride home, failure isn't always a bad thing. Our success-driven culture has immunized us from accepting any kind of failure. I believe we have done our people a disservice because I am fully persuaded that "*failure is an option*".



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