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Rebekah's Story

Nathan Shinabarger

I'm coming down the stairs, and I overhear my mom on the phone.

"Ohh no.." I hear mom utter faintly, as if to herself.

She quickly hangs up and orders "Everybody in the car! Rebekah just stopped breathing."

Ninety seconds later, I'm in the car with two of my five siblings and my mom, and we're rushing down the driveway. We race down the county roads; the trees passing us in a blur of color, until we make it to the highway where our mom really lays on the gas. Mom issues an order to my brother.

"Noah, get my phone. Call daddy."

Noah obeys and hands the phone off, but dad doesn't pick up at first. Mom calls again, and he still doesn't pick up. She knows better than to get upset right now, so she focuses on the road, and we keep rushing forward. When we come to the stoplight before the hospital the light is red but, mom rushes into the turn anyway, and grabs the nearest parking spot she sees. In a frantic rush, we arrive at the third floor – the Surgical Trauma Intensive Care Unit – uncomfortably familiar with the hallways and back stairways through the hospital. We burst through the unit doors, and are met by our younger sister, Elizabeth. She'd been staying with our second oldest sister, Rebekah, who was in critical condition. Yesterday the room had looked so nice, with countless gift baskets from caring friends, and cards expressing others' prayers, but now we only see a medical team swarming around her bed. She's lying there, unconscious, with a ventilator forcing air into her lungs. We watch anxiously from the sidelines as the medical staff run more tests on her. Families of friends gather outside, but we're emotionally too wasted to see them. Our family alone together gets in a circle, and we cry and pray.

* * * * *

Rebekah's medical complications had begun about a month previously. I was in Thanksgiving day chapel and I had been planning

on leaving right after chapel to eat quickly and study, so I sat alone in the back. In the middle of worship, I felt my phone vibrating. I looked down and saw that my mom was calling. Typically, my mom had been very aware of chapel times, so to receive a call at that time was odd. I stepped outside into the coatrooms to take the call.

“Hello?”

“Hi, it’s Elizabeth. Mom really wants you to be praying. Rebekah’s still sick and is feeling awful. We’re taking her into the ER now, and mom’s afraid something is more seriously wrong with her. She’s crying and its a mess.”

I made a point to talk to Rebekah briefly, told her I loved her, and to hang in there because I had a gift for her when she could eat again. I talked to mom who feared Rebekah was having kidney failure or maybe even had Crohn’s Disease, but it’s wasn’t clear yet.

I hung up the phone, and my heart sank. God is a jealous God, a God who desires our all, and here I felt Him beginning to test what I treasured most. I was scared by what God might allow to bring me to fully rely on Him. I feared the worst.

I headed back into chapel, but a dark fear had settled on me. As I walked back into Chapel, I heard the song ‘Count Your Blessings’ beginning to play. The joyous music played as everyone enthusiastically sang along, but I stood in the back, frozen with a fear of what the future held. As I weakly tried to mouth the words, the song reached the chorus ‘count your blessings name them one by one...’ I felt hot tears burn down my face as my mind wandered, and I paused to name each of my siblings. I realized my biggest God-given blessings are people and they’re my siblings.

Noah and I returned home for Thanksgiving, and Rebekah was still sick. She’s had been feeling a bit better though, and wasn’t hospitalized. The doctors determined she had *clostridium difficile* (c-diff), and decided to run tests for Crohn’s. Overall, it looked like she was going to be sick for about another week and then start getting better. Despite the contact precautions, I hugged her goodbye, and headed back to Cedarville.

A week later I headed into finals week, and Rebekah still hadn’t gotten better. Near the end of finals, she was admitted to a hospital for sharp intestinal pain and they ran more tests. The tests

were inconclusive however, so the doctors continued to pin the pain on the c-diff.

After finals, we returned from Cedarville to Rebekah in a regular hospital unit, still awaiting test results, on a restricted diet. Shortly thereafter, they discovered that Rebekah had a bowel obstruction and after an exploratory surgery, determined that a part of her small intestine had constricted and died and would need to be removed. After the surgery, she seemed healthy for two days, but began having sharp intestinal pain again. Another exploratory surgery revealed what had just been healthy intestines had also died, and needed to be removed. Between surgeries, Rebekah's blood pressure sharply dropped and she had to be resuscitated. To watch her more closely, she was moved to the Cardiovascular Intensive Care Unit.

In order to combat this unstable state, she was put on a sleeping medication that was supposed to sedate her for 24 hours. Shortly after surgery, our family began to wander around, and I stopped and asked if it'd be good to pray. To our amazement, we saw Rebekah's face trying to move. The muscles were mostly suppressed, but she was trying to nod her head yes, so our family took the moment to pray. God had pushed me, and was testing me, but I knew he was still in control. Both of these surgeries were relatively simple operations, and promised a quick recovery.

After her intestinal surgeries however, Rebekah healed much slower than expected and was transferred to the Surgical Trauma Intensive Care Unit. After three exhausting days of poor recovery there, we received the chilling call, that she had stopped breathing and rushed to the hospital.

* * * * *

As we stand outside the hospital room waiting, our dad shows up, still in scrubs from his own surgery, and we receive the gritty detailed medical report of our sister's condition. She had an unexplained neurological event, probably a seizure, which led the medical team to further investigation. She's still suffering from seizure like brain activity, so the physicians put her into an induced coma. Her bowel is continuing to die, and now her liver is failing. It's firm, indicating the enzymes that clean up the bloodstream aren't filtering enough, and when the computer tries rendering a chart of her enzyme levels, the jagged lines go above what the computer can

even display. With a failing liver, the medical staff decide to check her lactic acid levels, and find them higher than they've seen in nearly any patients before, meaning Rebekah is probably sustaining permanent mental damage.

Our family walks together outside the large double doors of the unit, where we meet close friends and church family who have come to support us. We gather in a circle and pray, each prayer bringing tears, but building our hope and trust in our heavenly Father. We open the Word, and let it speak into our broken hearts, reading its eternal truths. Later, outside the unit, I sit to eat a cold vegetable stew some friends had brought, but I don't feel particularly hungry. The food just rests unsettled in my stomach. I had always seen situations like this happening to others, but never believed they could happen to me. God however, can act through anything to draw us closer to Him.

Within the day, the medical staff decide Rebekah needs treatment at a more advanced medical facility, and decide to fly her to the Vanderbilt Medical Center. The days following prove to be an emotional rollercoaster with times of great promise, followed by times of desperate hopelessness. We drive to Nashville with dreary tired eyes, arrive at the hospital, and ride the elevator up to the eighth floor. We turn the corner, and see the waiting room where we'll spend most of our time for the next few days. The stale air hangs heavily in the room, only accompanying the weighty feeling people are already bearing as they enter. The room has a nice window that allows light from the outside, but on this overcast day, the light seems gray, muted. The soft plinking of the gentle rain on the metal and windows outside is the physical representation of this storm our family has been fighting so long. Sometimes pouring, sometimes pausing, but usually slowly falling, continually, the storm not improving, generally getting worse. I breathe wearily, with countless days of stress and poor rest behind me, and untold amounts ahead. I unload my backpack next to a chair in the corner, though it could be any, they're all empty. No other visitors come this time of year. I head out of the room towards the other end of the hall, through double doors and under an overhead sign reading Medical Intensive Care Unit. My mother meets my siblings and I wearing grief on her face, but trying to stay strong. She leads us with a slight degree of urgency around the unit to my Dad. He looks at us, and

hugs us all slowly, with a face bearing deep understanding of the medical situation, and its gravity. We gather all around as Dad gives us the medical briefing.

“They’re going to look at Rebekah’s gut and see how much they think is viable, and what can be saved. If there’s enough there, they think they can save her, but otherwise..” he swallows, “this is probably it.”

Our family slowly absorbs this truth over the next few minutes, suddenly realizing just how valuable these moments we have with our family are. We all gather around Rebekah, gazing into her still face, minds flashing back and remembering days when she was still moving, when her face still smiled. My siblings start pouring out apologies to Rebekah in the realization this may be a final moment with her, now deeply remorseful of all the moments we were selfish and put ourselves first. Our hearts break as we leave the room, allowing the surgeons to perform their assessment.

We head to the waiting room, and pray earnestly, asking ultimately for God’s glory, thanking Him for the family we have, and begging for His healing touch. Seemingly an eternity later, the doctor comes back from the bedside operation to report.

“We can’t make any guarantee, your daughter is in an extremely unstable condition, but we think there is enough viable gut there that we can work with it. It isn’t going to be a quick road to healing, but I think we can get there.”

Incredibly thankful, but also exhausted, my siblings and I head to the nearest hotel that evening to sleep. It’s a cool December night and as we go to bed, we realize it’s our eldest sister’s birthday. In two weeks, it’ll be Rebekah’s birthday. We pray she makes it until then, but more than anything else, we pray that God glorifies Himself in all that happens. That is all Rebekah would ever want, and God has brought us to a point where we can truly desire this too. Over the next two days, Rebekah’s health continues to fluctuate, until she unexpectedly has a stroke in her frontal lobe. For several days, our family and prayer network had been praying God would make it clear whether He was calling Rebekah home, or if she still had time to serve on earth. This stroke seemingly provides a clear answer, even if it is one that pains our family deeply. When the MRI results come back, they don’t show any medical cause of a stroke, which leads us to view the stroke as a clear movement of God’s hand.

The medical staff sustain hope for her recovery however, so after another long day, we head back to the hotel.

At 3AM, a shrill phone ring pierces the darkness of our hotel room. I glance at my screen, and it's Dad calling.

"Hey" I answer.

Dad just says, "Rebekah isn't doing well, you all should come in."

"I'll get everyone and we'll be right there."

I stumble to turn on the bathroom light, and announce "Rebekah's crashing again, Dad says we need to come in."

Rachel goes next door to wake our Aunt and Uncle, and we all grab sweaters and hop in the van. At this point, we're all too emotionally weary and tired to even process what we're going in for. We drive in silence, arrive, and with a hurried walk make our way through the hospital, straight into her room, where Dad explains the situation.

"Rebekah was doing okay, but really started crashing at 2:30 and never really pulled out. She isn't doing well, her pressures are dropping, and they can't medicate her any more because of her fluid levels. This might be it."

We cry bitterly and cling to each other tightly, wishing for anything in the world to wake us up from this nightmare we are living, but we know nothing will. We grab Rebekah's hands, bloated from liters of excess fluid and failing kidneys. Through teary eyes, we look at her still face, which once was so full of life. The doctor comes in, and proceeds to list a number of heroic measures that could be attempted. Dad talks with him and ensures him that we're sure of her eternal destiny and that we will be reunited with her, and don't need any heroic measures. The nurse turns off her medication sustaining an induced medical coma to make her somewhat conscious.

We pray. Dad's voice is usually strong, his figure confidently leading the path. Today, his voice cracks, his confidence shattered, he breaks down in tears, crying out to our heavenly Father. With tightly gripped hands, we continue to pray. All hurt and wandering, we come to find our only rest in the perfect and holy character of God.

We read Psalm 139, Rebekah's favorite Psalm. Its words provide both comfort, and pain, sadness and hope. More than anything, its words provide truth.

Where shall I go from your Spirit?

Or where shall I flee from your presence?

If I ascend to heaven, you are there!

If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!

Parts of the psalm are comforting, and remind us that we can never be separated from God's presence. This brings even more comfort, knowing that Rebekah, in the midst of her failing health, even in the midst of a stroke, is not separated from God's all present, all powerful, and all loving Spirit.

*For you formed my inward parts;
you knitted me together in my mother's womb.
I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.*

Other parts of the psalm are nostalgic, sweet, but in a bitter way. It talks of how God intimately formed Rebekah and of how mysterious life is. With such an awesome God, the one who knitted us together, it becomes a challenge to not struggle with why God doesn't continue to hold her health together. It is clear that He can, for He formed her, but why doesn't He?

*in your book were written, every one of them,
the days that were formed for me,
when as yet there was none of them.*

The psalm pushes us to realize that even these hard days are not out of God's control, but have long been in His plan. While to us this time comes completely unexpected, we realize that this comes as no surprise to God, for He is the one who has written this story. lead me in the way everlasting!

This ending line perhaps more than anything else is hard for our family. Ultimately, we all want God to lead us to everlasting life, but in this passing moment, our hearts strongly yearn for Rebekah to stay here on earth instead. As our dad reads it, his voice pauses, and he tries to push through without sounding weak, but inwardly we all feel weak.

We have hymnals with us, and sing Christmas carols at first, and then hymns. They encourage our hearts with truth. Sometimes we make it through a song with strength, other songs reduce our family to further tears. Our eyes all slowly watch Rebekah's heart rate begin to fall. It started at 132, but off her medication, her pressures begin failing and her heart rate slowly declines.

Eventually, as we end a hymn, our family watches her heart

rate drop from 17, to 15 until a few beats later we see the dreaded flatline. No more induced breaths from the ventilator. No more songs to sing. No more time to spend with Rebekah. A sense of priceless loss enters the room, filling our hearts with the realization of all our fears and tearing our hearts with a deeper pain than we ever imagined. In the midst of this however one more thing resonates in the room, more strongly than the rest: God is in control, and we can trust Him.

Medical staff begin to enter the room, and Dad signs a few papers. We have the nurse take a picture to document the moment. We head back to the hotel, pack up, and begin heading home. It's Christmas morning.

The drive home is long, but silent. Our family sits in a numbed shock, unable to know what even to say, what to think, what to even pray. I sit there for a time alone in my thoughts, and in the still drone of the road succumb to sleep after weeks of so little.

The next few days are filled with consoling phone calls, and planning for her funeral. Our family remains in this numbed shock, but as the planning continues, this shock slowly begins to wear off. The next few days, we greet hundreds of people impacted by Rebekah's living reflection of Christ. That weekend, the funeral comes and we have a hard time fitting everyone within the church walls.

We sit numbly in the funeral, holding fast to God's control. Rebekah's death shook so much of my world. Places, sounds, smells, all 'ruined' with associative memory so strong that now they only bring pain. Indeed, there remains only one thing that Rebekah's death did not shake: the power of my God. Despite my world crumbling and falling apart, God truly gave me strength to surrender fully to Him. My faith is tested through the fire of such a trial, but ultimately only strengthened.

The following weekend we drove to bury Rebekah. The day was bitterly cold, sharp wind racing across the plains of Ohio, and we huddled to stay warm as a friend delivered a gospel presentation. We place Rebekah in the earth, but only for a time. Truly the day will come with trumpet sound when Rebekah, and all those who have died in Christ will be risen again, in bodies untarnished by sin, free from the weight of the curse forever.

At first I didn't understand how through death, God could silence a servant of His so great, who so boldly proclaimed His

gospel. Ultimately, we serve to glorify God right? How could God silence someone so clearly doing that? In God's perfect sovereignty however, he did not silence Rebekah, but rather magnified her testimony. Through Rebekah's death, people were able to witness a soul reliant on Him, even unto death. Not bitter, but overflowing with gratitude for the opportunity to serve such an awesome God. Rebekah's death illustrated that when our lives have been lived wholly as a reflection of the gospel, our death speaks more loudly than our life ever could.