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Trial by Fire

THE PHONE CALL came at 2:00 a.m.

“This is the North Ridgeville Fire Department. Flames are shooting twenty feet above the roof of your factory. We’ve called volunteers, but they don’t know your plant. Is there anything that can explode in there?”

I shook myself. Was this a bad dream? The caller repeated the question, and I realized it was no dream. The company was really ablaze! When I arrived at the plant minutes later, I was stunned. Our warehouse was engulfed in flames. My first decision—almost automatic—was to go in.

The firefighters reluctantly followed me into the eerie, acrid blackness as I pointed to key doorways and areas where volatiles were stored. Flames had now consumed large sections of the metal warehouse and were headed toward the manufacturing area with its wooden roof structure. If that went, with all our

machinery and equipment, I knew we were out of business. My worst fears surrounding the decision to keep the company in the family would be realized.

We moved to the front of the building, snaking our way through piles of smoldering cardboard and melted hulks that had been die-cast aluminum oil burner housings. If we could drive the flames back, maybe we could spare the plant and offices. It was our only hope. After two hours that seemed like an eternity, we found we were winning. The main flames were extinguished, the small fires put out.

As the morning sky caught the sun's first rays, the full extent of the damage became clear. It was horrendous. Burned remnants of ceiling insulation hung like black stalactites around the exposed steel beams which, in turn, had been twisted in the intense heat like strands of licorice. Acrylic plastic parts had been miniaturized—shrunk by the heat to a fraction of their former size. Debris, completely unidentifiable, lay in great smoking heaps all over the floor, while a pungent, eye-burning vapor permeated everything.

Singed But Still Standing

How close we had come to a total loss of the company became clear as we surveyed the charred wooden beams of the main plant roof structure. The fire had spread all the way from the warehouse to the plant, yet critical machines, though coated with an ugly brown tar, were operable. Files and important records were intact, even though the foul smoke had left its pungent residue everywhere. With a prodigious effort by employee teams working

around the clock and suppliers who rallied to our urgent calls, we were able to fulfill each and every customer commitment on schedule. We needed a miracle, and we received one!

Destiny, I was learning, unfolds this way—in moments, in miracles. In one moment, death. In another, an inferno. But close by, provision—silver linings amidst black clouds. Miracles. Life, when it becomes an unforgiving anvil against which lessons are hammered home, can devastate and dishearten; but that same anvil can also forge character and produce hope.

To me, keeping the business going became more than economic necessity. It was a cause. I didn't realize it at first. But Dad's death, then the fire, convinced me this business *had* to continue. For whatever reason, and whatever the company's destiny, I had been set at the helm. As painful as these experiences had been, they were producing an understanding of larger truths—truths which would be essential in achieving that destiny.

An insight from that same speaker who had originally challenged me to explore the Bible helped me to understand more clearly how God was working in my life:

Vast areas of Scripture will never be meaningful to us unless we go through the experiences for which they give insight. It was for this reason that God allowed all of his servants in Scripture to experience conflicts, and it is for this reason that we go through them as well.

The Other Side of the Mountain

For me, the difficulties I had encountered were only gradually opening up insights into the Bible and into the ways God works

in our lives. But valuable lessons were being forged.

Dad's death, though it seemed so untimely, caused me to develop a dependence on God in ways I never would have otherwise. This upheaval probably accelerated my maturing process by years, helping me to learn to pray and to trust God more completely—not to mention the on-the-job crash courses in finance, marketing, employee relations and plant floor supervision that were essential to keep the company going.

The devastating fire also helped me see that we mustn't become overly secure with temporary things. I realized that factories, machinery, even customers can be here today and gone tomorrow, as can homes, bank accounts and friends. We could install sprinkler systems (and we did!), take out more insurance and exercise normal safeguards. But I was growing in the conviction that God has designed life so we can never be fully secure without him.

During those trying times I found a verse in the book of Proverbs which helped me stay properly focused. Here is what it said: "Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths." I realized that as I committed my ways more fully to God, he would watch over me and over that which I held dear.

His amazing care became even more evident in an incident that happened the summer following the fire.

Humpty Dumpty's Greatest Fall

Carolyn, our second child, had been born midpoint between

Dad's death and the fire. She was a year old at the time of the incident. I still tremble a bit as I recall what happened. We were driving north to our summer cottage with Wendy's dad, by then a widower. He had a new car, and we were unfamiliar with the door locks. We all thought the rear doors were locked.

As we sped along the Canadian superhighway, Carolyn was peacefully playing in the back seat (there were no baby carseats yet) with a soft, homemade Humpty Dumpty doll, a pillow stuffed with old nylon stockings. To our horror we turned to see the rear door swing open, ejecting Carolyn to the road beneath.

Providentially, we had just gone onto an unpaved section of the highway that was under repair, forcing us to slow to a crawl. Carolyn hit the packed dirt, clutching her Humpty Dumpty doll, which wonderfully cushioned the blow. Moments later we were lifting her into our arms, her tender body hardly scratched.

Each time we thought about it, we were overwhelmed that on that two-hundred-mile trip, all but a mile or so at high speed, that door flung open when it did! Never had we so dramatically seen such divine protection.

Naturally, we were more careful with locks after that, but more importantly, we saw one more evidence that trusting our ways to the Lord was not just a spiritual exercise but a very practical, sensible thing to do. For reasons beyond what we then understood, he really was helping us on the road of life, working around us in myriad ways we couldn't see.

It was almost as though an Invisible Hand was at work.