

Gracia's testimony of God's Faithfulness



Who would have thought a few short years ago that I would be doing things like writing articles for a Missions Magazine! I was perfectly content to live in a small barrio in the Philippines with my jungle pilot husband, Martin, and my three children. My daily tasks were simple: keep Martin going so he could fly for our co-workers who labored in the tribal areas, home school the kids so we didn't have to send them to boarding school several days' travel away, and provide meals and housing for visitors and colleagues who passed through our area. We loved our ministry and our life overseas. We loved each other and our Lord Jesus.

Then came May 27, 2001. Martin had to go to the southern island of Palawan to fill in for another New Tribes Mission pilot and I decided to go with him as he would have a heavy flying schedule and would need help. We left the children with co-workers and told them that we would return in one week. But life doesn't always go as planned – and we were taken hostage by militant Muslims while on Palawan.

For the next year, we lived with the Abu Sayyaf in the jungles of Basilan – running from the military, sleeping out in the open, starving, bathing in rivers, watching the atrocities that this group of men inflicted on others, all the while wondering if we would ever see our homes and families again.

It was a hard year – physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

Physically, I learned that a woman in her forties can hike with guys in their twenties and keep up if she has to. Mind you, I am a city girl. I don't even like to camp! But day after day, God gave me the strength I needed to keep going.

Emotionally, Martin kept my spirits buoyed. He just had a way of encouraging me! There were days when I felt like I was going to lose my mind from the stress of being in a hostile environment for so long – especially during and after gun battles. Those were terrifying as bullets whizzed past our heads as we hugged the ground. Would the bullets find us this time? We were “lucky” for the first sixteen gun battles.

Several times during that year, I decided that I'd had enough. I was done being a hostage! I wouldn't move another inch! They could kill me if they wanted to but I was finished! Martin would ever so gently encourage me. "Gracia, what would the kids say if you could pick up the phone and talk to them right now? They would say, 'Keep going today, Mom, cause tomorrow you might get to go home'." What would I have done without Martin's encouragement? God only knows.

Spiritually, my roughest lessons were learned in this area. I think the hardest thing about being held hostage was that I saw what I really was. In one swift moment of time, everything I had – except Martin – was taken away from me. And when everything is gone and you're in an uncomfortable position you see what is really in your heart. And what I saw in mine was not pretty.

I had always prided myself that I was a pretty good person. After all, we had left the American dream to go overseas as missionaries, hadn't we?

But in the jungle I came face to face with a Gracia that I really didn't want to see, a 'me' that I didn't want to believe existed. I saw a hateful Gracia. There were times that I really hated those Muslim for hat they'd done to us – for the pain they were causing our family. I saw a covetous Gracia. When we were starving and I saw someone with food, I would covet what they had. I saw a despairing Gracia. "Nobody cares about us anymore. This has gone on for so long that everyone has forgotten us!" I saw a faithless Gracia. Here is a journal entry that I scribbled on some borrowed paper one day.

"This was a very hard day for me. Why does God keep me here to suffer day after day? I got almost hysterical in the afternoon. Martin tells me not to give up. I've tried to be a good hostage and be patient and where has it gotten me? 8 ½ months and still here. God is pleased to have me suffer and I'm tired of it!"

Hebrews 4:12 says "God's word is a discerner that looks at our hearts and exposes us for what we really are. Nothing in all creation can hide from him. Everything is naked and exposed before his eyes." NLT

And God in his faithfulness began to change me.

As the months rolled on, we began seeing our captors as the needy kids that they were. My hatred was replaced with concern and even love for them. Contentment and joy began to grow in my heart as I began acknowledging God's goodness to me on a daily basis instead of looking at the trials. God never leaves us as he finds us and I am so glad for his work in my life during that year!

After 376 days as hostages, in gun battle #17, Martin was killed. I was wounded but rescued that day.

When I got home to America, I learned that God had been touching the hearts of countless believers to pray for us. 4,000 people attended Martin's funeral! Many of them said that they would love to know what God was doing in our lives in the jungle while they were praying. So I got busy and wrote the story of our captivity, *In the Presence of My Enemies*. Imagine my shock when it landed on the New York Times bestseller list. I never expected that.

Then Tyndale began asking for a second book. A second book? I didn't have anything else to say. One friend said, "Gracia, it would be a shame for you not to tell us what you learned from your experience. How did God change you? Maybe something you have to say can help someone else who is going through a hard time." So I wrote *To Fly Again*, another neat story of God's incredible goodness in my life.

I am living back in the States now – in Kansas. My children are grown. My eldest son, Jeff, is following in his father's footsteps. He is a missionary pilot in Botswana, Africa. He is married to Sarah, a New Tribes Mission missionary kid. They have two little children, Tristan and Vanessa.

My daughter Mindy also married a New Tribes MK from Paraguay, South America. Mindy and Andy have finished training with New Tribes Bible Institute and are deciding what their next step in life should be. They have a little boy named Felix.

Zachary, my youngest, is at Calvary Bible College in Kansas City, MO. Calvary Bible College is where Martin and I met. We were married in their beautiful chapel there. Zach is studying Bible and Music.

I travel and speak a whole lot. My heart is still on the mission field and I would count it a privilege to be able to return there someday. Until then, I take the opportunities I am given to challenge people to make their lives count for God's glory.