

## Two modern-day true stories of God offering His guidance

It is not impossible but very rare that God will speak to us in audible words. One thing is for sure; God hears and answers every prayer even if we don't always understand His answer. In responding to our prayer, God wants to offer us guidance in many and various ways. The most important thing is that we take time for prayer and are open and available to Our Lord. As Jesus tells us, "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you" (Matthew 7:7).

### Story 1 'Four Mysterious Visitors' by David Waite

Last Christmas got off to a promising start. Alison and I and the children – two of our four were still at home – had picked out a tree and its lights were twinkling merrily in the living room. I had lit a fire to take the edge off our raw English air. And then-twelve-year-old Matthew hesitantly asked me a question that would have been perfectly natural in any other household: "Dad, would it be all right if I put on some Christmas music?"

"Of course," I said, too quickly.

I braced myself. As strains of "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing" began to fill the house, a familiar gnawing sensation grew in the pit of my stomach. *Not again*, I thought. Christmas carols were one of the triggers that could inexplicably bring on a severe anxiety attack. I slipped out of the living room and met Ali in the hallway.

"Are you all right?" she asked. I shrugged. "Do you want to turn off the music?"

"I can't do that," I said. I went upstairs to my office. Work should keep my mind occupied. I tried to focus on a newspaper feature but succeeded only in staring at the impatiently blinking cursor.

I had hoped the old fears would not plague me this Christmas. All my life I had been beset with vague apprehensions and the awful depressions that followed.

The roots weren't hard to find. Born premature, forty-nine years ago in the village of Styal near Manchester, I spent the first three months of my life fighting to survive. I had been born with a shortened and twisted right leg that, later, made walking difficult. In my first week at school a girl pointed at me. "You're a cripple!" she said. She hobbled off in a perfect imitation of my limp that set the other kids laughing.

Being lame of body was not half as bad, though, as being crippled in spirit. My mental woes may have been inherited. My granddad suffered from free-floating fears and so did my father. Dad was so tense that he and Mum were in constant rows, yelling at each other, slamming doors, hurling crockery, then continuing the battle with silence that could last for weeks.

My first serious depression occurred in my early teens. Dad was the village bobby and on his salary we couldn't afford psychiatric help, even if he had believed in it. Antidepressant drugs were in use by 1960, but I was wary of trying these early experimental medicines.

There were glimmers of hope. I became a Christian at eighteen, and for a while I believed this commitment might help me get better. It didn't – not for more than thirty years. Of course I prayed about my anxieties, always in private because I was far too shy to bring up my needs at church.

When I married Alison I hoped I was beginning a new, healthier chapter. But along with the joy of a wife and a growing family came responsibilities that made the problem worse. Six weeks was the longest I could go without suffering an acute anxiety attack. Little things set the explosions off. A bill coming due. A Christmas carol. The family was ready to leave for church one summer day when I realized my cuff links were missing. It didn't matter because I was wearing a short-sleeved shirt, but I held us up until the cuff links were found.

I was spoiling things for everyone. The best I could do was keep out of the way while depressed. Soon I was spending days on end in my room, as my family waited for me to come around again.

Then on the fifteenth of December, a few days after the renewed battle with Christmas carols, I was putting my good foot, the left one, on a step when I stumbled. Searing pain shot through my leg. Within an hour I could not use the leg at all. It was just the kind of incident that usually sank me into a depressive state. Ali offered to pray not only for the leg pain but also for the funk that would almost certainly follow.

*What good would prayer do?* We had asked God to help us so often. But this time He was about to answer, and in a fashion I could never have anticipated.

Ali prayed for me and my leg did get better, but not the signs of oncoming depression. That evening, just ten days before Christmas, as we were getting ready for bed, Ali remembered that because of the cold weather she had not opened the windows as she usually did to freshen the room. She picked up what she thought was an air-purifying spray and sent a mist all over the room. But the spray turned out to be sore-muscle balm with a dreadful menthol smell that I've always hated.

"Whew!" I said. "I'll have to sleep in Daniel's room if I want to get any rest." Our oldest son Daniel was in London and his room was empty.

I kissed Ali goodnight, walked to Daniel's room and turned down the spread on his narrow bed, which was right up against the wall. I climbed in, turned out the light and lay there staring into the darkness. I was unusually warm and comfortable but still fretting about sorts of things . . . bills, a close friend in the hospital, an assignment that was due.

At first, the way you can sometimes sense a person looking at you, it seemed to me someone was in the room, focusing attention on me. I thought Alison had stepped in. "Ali?" I whispered.

There was no answer, not a rustling of clothes, not a stirring of air, and yet I knew beyond doubt I was not alone. A friendly presence was near me, at the head of the bed. Had Daniel come home unexpectedly? I whispered his name. Nothing. Maybe it was one of the younger children. "Matthew? Caroline?" No answer.

Slowly I became aware of a second unseen being in the room, this one at the foot of the bed. It seemed to me the two creatures were facing each other. And then I knew there was a third presence too, and a fourth one, these last two facing each other on the left side of the bed . . . impossible since there was no space between the bed and the wall.

I wanted to call Ali, but there was something so benevolent, so full of promise about the four lively presences that I didn't want to do anything that might risk driving them away. I lay perfectly still, strangely warm and expectant.

And then – how did I know this, since I could not see them? – the four creatures began to move toward one another, two on each side of the bed. Their progress was slow and deliberate. They passed one another, turned and repeated the traverse three four, maybe five times. Every time their paths crossed I felt as if I would burst with joy.

Then abruptly the room was empty. I knew it was as surely as I had known a few minutes earlier that angelic creatures were there. The room was back to normal and I was alone again, yet still filled with ineffable joy. *Should I go tell Alison? But tell her what? That I had been visited by four beings I couldn't see?* Still debating, I fell into a deep sleep, the best I had had in years.

By the time I surfaced, the children had already left for school. "You'll never believe what happened last night," I said to Ali. I told her as best I could about the mysterious visitors God had sent me. Alison did believe it and was delighted at my newfound joy and peace, though perhaps wondering, as I was, if this calm would last for more than a few days.

Our doubts were misplaced. I enjoyed every minute of the Christmas season. December was followed by a long gray January and February, two months that in the past had been times of distress but were filled with an exultation new to me. The joy even survived a devastating bout I had with the flu. Winter gave way to a spring, a summer and then an autumn of freedom.

Though I can't be sure how long this freedom will last, I am beginning to believe the victory is permanent. It's not that I've shed pressures like bills and problems at work. But today I confront these issues with a positive attitude unlike my past fearfulness.

Christmas is once again just around the corner. Thanks to my heavenly visitors, I'm anticipating another joy-filled season and I am going to make a statement to that effect. This year I have bought a present for the entire family, a small but very special gift I hope we will use a lot . . . a CD of the world's best-loved Christmas carols.

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## Story 2

### *'Prisoner of Silence' by Shirley B. Bard*

My husband and I were sitting on the couch watching television. But my mind was on something else. I grabbed my pad and pencil and scrawled a quick, pleading note: "How much longer will I have to go on like this?" After months of living with a postoperative trachea tube in my windpipe, unable to say a single word out loud, I was beginning to give in to despair. My husband, no stranger to my impatience and frustration, could only pat my hand.

It's hard for anyone who's never been left voiceless to realize what it means to be reduced suddenly to writing down all your thoughts and feelings, especially if you have three adolescent children who need you. You can't use the phone. Even Terri, our little fox terrier, looked baffled when I snapped my fingers for her to come inside. I lost my sense of smell. At restaurants I was embarrassed to have to point to what I wanted on the menu. My whole life was off-center.

This was not my first go-around with a trache tube. My throat trouble began with diphtheria at age two, when my life was saved by an emergency tracheostomy. A hole was cut in my windpipe at just above the spot where a top shirt button would be, and a short metal breathing tube was inserted. Again, when I was five, complications from measles made another trache necessary. Each time the tube was removed after a few weeks. But the pain and fear of being unable to speak or breathe naturally never left me, and as I grew up through the years of hoarseness and recurring throat infections, I lived in dread of another tracheostomy. By the time I was forty-three, the scar tissue had so thickened that my breathing passage was reduced by sixty percent. And so it was that my last reconstructive surgery had been unavoidable. Now if all went well I would never need a trache again.

A few days later I was back in my surgeon's office for a follow-up. I knew by the look in Dr. Thawley's eyes after he'd examined me that all had not gone well.

"Shirley," he said gently but gravely, sitting on the edge of his cluttered desk, "the surgery has not been what we'd hoped."

My eyes widened. What did he mean? I wrote on my pad, "The trache will have to stay in longer?" underscoring "longer" and battling back tears.

"You have an infection. You'll have to go back in the hospital for a while," he told me. But then he went on to explain how my rebuilt trachea, made of grafted skin and bone splinters, had not healed properly. Dr. Thawley paused. "Shirley, I'm afraid you will have a trache for a long time – probably the rest of your life."

A verse from Job shot through my mind: The thing I greatly feared has come upon me. I wanted to scream, yet no sound could come out. I was a prisoner who, expecting a reprieve, had suddenly been handed a life sentence – in a dungeon of silence.

I spent the following days and nights doing jigsaw puzzles in my hospital room, as if I were trying to fit together the scattered pieces of my life. And I prayed, but the tone of those prayers had changed. They were tinged with bitterness.

I believe prayers are more than just thoughts. I feel prayer is fully formed communication with God, and so with the trache I'd gotten into the habit of not just thinking my prayers but actually writing them down. Now I found myself writing prayers like, *Lord, how could You do this to me? I thought You loved my. But You've taken away my voice so I can't even praise You! Why won't You heal me?*

Yet no answer came.

One night I looked up from my puzzle and watched listlessly as the other bed in my room was rolled out. Then a nurse pushed in a high-sided crib with a sleeping child in it. She explained that my new roommate was a two-year-old girl who'd had a trache put in after surgery. "You two will get along fine," she said, smiling. "Her name's Amy."

I watched Amy sleeping before I drifted off myself. Her heavy, silent breathing soothed me. But it also dredged up memories of my childhood struggles with a trache. At least hers will be coming out, I thought.

The next morning Amy played forlornly with her toys. Every so often she'd stare into space. Finally she stood up in the crib, curled her small fingers around the bars and looked out at me. Big, sad tears rolled down her cheeks. Her little shoulders quaked and air sputtered through her trache tube. If ever I yearned to hear the wail of a child's cry it was at that moment.

I slipped from my bed and went over to the crib. Reaching through the bars I put my arms around Amy and pulled her close. I wanted to tell her that she would be all right, that her trache would come out in a few days. But we were two people trapped in silence.

I began to cry. Not just for little Amy but also for myself, maybe mostly for myself. *God, how could You do this to me? How?* My arms fell away from Amy and my head leaned limply on the crib, as if a huge weight pushed me down. My tears splashed on Amy's bare feet.

Suddenly I felt the gentle touch of a hand on my head. Amy. With childish awkwardness she'd reached over the crib rail to soothe me. And all at once I knew that no words could ever have conveyed such tender comfort.

I went home not too long after that, as did Amy. One day I was leafing through my notebooks when I came across some of the prayers I'd scrawled in the hospital. It's one thing to cry out to God. But my angry words were actually written down on a page in black and white: "God, how could You do this to me?" I wanted to tear it up. God had heard my prayer, and answered. He'd sent a little girl who showed me that sometimes even words are inadequate to express our deepest human needs.

“Lord,” I wrote hastily, “forgive me for blaming You. I give myself to You now, trake and all.”

From then on, each day, God taught me a new language: how our marvelously expressive eyes can command attention, laugh, tease, cry, rebuke, empathize and sparkle with love. He showed me that my voicelessness forced me to be a listener, to care about what people were saying. I wrote down my words; I measured them more carefully, more kindly. And I found that simple human touch can be the most powerfully reassuring communication of all.

One day about eight months after surgery I felt cool air in my throat. I placed my finger over the trake hole, forced air up through my vocal cords and discovered – I could speak. The next day in his office, Dr. Thawley shook his head in amazement. “I’ve never seen anything like it,” he said. Contrary to the doctor’s expectation, my trachea continued to heal slowly and was eventually strong enough for me to breathe without the tube. Yet I knew that an even more amazing healing had taken place deep inside my soul.

Today I no longer need my pad, pencil or trake. But certain things – my children’s eyes, my husband’s touch, my friends’ voices – all mean so much more to me now. I still write down one thing, though. My prayers. And every day I thank our loving God, who always hears us, even when we can’t speak.

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### **Questions to ponder:**

**Question 1:** Underline the place/places where the person received guidance. Briefly describe how the person received guidance from God.

**Question 2:** How did this story affect you?

**Question 3:** Does it remind you of something in your own life?

**Question 4:** Did you find it consoling, challenging, comforting? Why?

**Question 5:** In reflecting on one of these true, modern-day stories, what is the take-away for you?