



Do You Have Faith?

by Brett Chambers

Thy faith hath saved thee; go in peace.

Luke 7:50 (KJV)

Do you have faith? It is a question we're often asked, but how often do we think about what it really means. In 1999 I experienced a life-changing trauma where, along each step of the way, an act of faith enabled me to survive.

After a 20-year career in broadcast media I found myself in graduate school and surviving on a series of freelance production jobs. On Thursday September 17, 1999, I was contacted by an independent production company. My job for the next several days was to shoot video for Carolina Power & Light (CP & L) in some of the areas devastated by Hurricane Floyd which came through Eastern North Carolina the prior two days. Floyd, a category three hurricane with winds up to 130 miles per hour, was 580 miles wide. When Floyd hit the coast of North Carolina and dumped between 15 and 20 inches of rain in some areas of the state, residents had just begun to recover from Hurricane Dennis ten days earlier, which left six inches of rain.

Along with a Cindy Carter, a freelance producer, I was to acquire and archive video for use in training, marketing, and public relations. It seemed like a simple and routine assignment, shooting video of restoration efforts including pictures of the damage, the CP & L employees offering relief and aid to those directly affected, and the restoration of power lines. This routine assignment turned into a life altering experience.

When I met Cindy, a petite, eclectic woman with colorful hair, we did not know we were expected to use our own vehicles for the shoot. My van needed work, as did Cindy's car, so we decided to rely on the comfort of a rental vehicle rather than driving our personal vehicles.

When we arrived at the airport rental facility, we requested a sport utility vehicle and the rental agent offered a relatively new Isuzu Trooper. When he asked me about purchasing insurance I jokingly agreed to purchase the insurance that would cover the vehicle if I returned without the keys. At the time I didn't realize that this decision was only one small part of my preparation for what was to become.

I loaded my belongings, all of my research not only my master's thesis, but for every class I was taking that semester, my trumpet, clothing for a few days, my personal mini-DV Video Camera and my bicycle flashlight into the Emerald Green Isuzu Trooper along with the equipment from the production company. Cindy and I were on our way to a shoot that was to last for three days.

Goldsboro, North Carolina was our first stop. When we arrived in the city, we observed some standing water, but all-in-all it didn't look that bad. We watched kids riding their bicycles in water that came up to their seats in the parking lot of a day care center. While strange and interesting, we just chalked it up to a fearless act of play.

We stopped not far from the parking lot to shoot what is known in the industry as “B-Roll” of trees which had been uprooted as a result of Floyd, downed power lines and flooding – normal hurricane aftermath. We started out using the production company’s camera, but there was no battery in the recently repaired camera. My mini DV camera came in handy.

After shooting some footage, we got back into the Trooper and began driving through Goldsboro. As we drove down Royall Avenue, we saw standing water in the road and decided to turn around. After shooting what we could, we decided to go to our second stop, New Bern, North Carolina.

Not knowing the way to New Bern, we stopped at a convenience store for supplies and directions. We were told the way we could go if the hurricane’s devastation hadn’t closed roads. Royall Avenue was recommended to us so we headed in that direction.

After tuning the radio to the audio channel for NBC to hear *Frasier*, we noticed that Royall Avenue was now completely dry. I used the yellow lines in the street as my guide for staying on my side of the road. After 9 p.m., it was very dark outside and because the power lines were down as a result of Hurricane Floyd, there were no streetlights. As we drove down the incline the water got higher and eventually the yellow lines disappeared.

“Brett, we’re in water!” Cindy exclaimed as I looked to my sides and above me. The current from the floodwater had washed away the earth and asphalt beneath the bridge and our two ton rental vehicle was heading down, engine first into the water.

“Do you have faith?” I asked Cindy.

“Yes. Now what?”

Quickly I rolled the windows down and unlocked the doors. I knew that everything, windows, door locks, etc., were electronic in the vehicle and we had to act quickly before the water shorted out the electricity. I was even more concerned that we had been charging batteries in the center of the front seat and the possibility of electrocution entered my mind.

“If we have faith we won’t panic, if we panic we’re dead.”

“OK Brett,” Cindy said as I helped her get out of the vehicle to safety.

It is often said that one sees their entire life flash before them during near death experiences. I had a flashback of a Boy Scout camp activity. While fully clothed, we were instructed to jump into the water and remain for what seemed like an eternity.

“Relax, don’t panic. It’s not the water that kills you, it’s the panic,” were the words I heard my Boy Scout Camp Counselor telling me. The water was just below my nostrils, I was completely submerged, and it was dark. My door was slightly ajar as I stuffed my cell phone, pager and bicycle flashlight into my shirt. Calmly but earnestly trying to get out of the vehicle, I found myself stuck. “It’s not the water that kills you, it’s the panic,” were the words I heard once

again. Relax Brett, don't panic. I tried again to get out of the vehicle but couldn't move far when I realized I had forgotten to unfasten my seatbelt. As I was swimming away from the vehicle my glasses were washed away. I have a difficult enough time seeing without my glasses in the daylight, with blackness surrounding me my vision was not impaired, it was impossible.

Fortunately, the water was even with the bridge so I easily found the surface. "Cindy, where are you?" I called when I didn't see or hear her on the bridge. I removed the bicycle flashlight from my shirt and saw that she was still in the water, on the other side of the truck. After I got her to safety we took inventory. We were in shock! How did it happen and how did we survive?

I didn't realize at the time how pertinent my question, "Do you have faith?" was but it was a mere act of faith along each step of the way that enabled Cindy and me to survive. Enveloped in darkness without my glasses, through faith I reached up and pulled myself to safety. I was able to save Cindy because I had brought a waterproof flashlight rather than my regular flashlight.

As we stood on the bridge shivering and immersed in darkness I saw a light in the other direction. I flashed my flashlight and a police officer who was barricading the road on the opposite side of the bridge from which we were driving called to us, asked if we were all right and then radioed for a search and rescue team.

The firefighters assisted Cindy to the boat, as by now the water was up to the thigh of my 6'5" frame. They first offered to take us to the hospital—actually they encouraged us to be taken to the hospital. We refused. We wanted to get home as soon as possible but Raleigh-Durham was not in their jurisdiction. They offered their regrets and instead took us to the Carolina Power & Light Command Post.

Once I reached safety and warmth, I had another thought provoking experience. I sat in the Command Post where the gracious employees offered us food, dry clothing, and warm blankets and thought about whom I should call. Not wanting to alarm my parents at the time, I decided not to call them. I sat there and thought about all of the friends and relatives who had me listed as their emergency contact, but I had no one. I tried to reach my daughter but she wasn't home. Neither was my pastor.

My portable life—my entire semester's work including thesis-related research, clothing, trumpet, and video camera—were with me on the trip. They got submerged, but I resurged. I was fortunate to be alive.

When I returned to the comfort of my home and showered vigorously, I made special note not to turn on the television. I wanted some peace and solitude. As I sat down and checked my e-mail, Miriam Thomas, a news anchor and close friend, was on-line and asked me if I had time to talk. When she called, she told me how taxing the evening had been. She and her co-anchor had remained on-the-air following the newscast because there were two search and rescue helicopters out trying to locate missing people from the storm. When Miriam finished relaying

this information to me she asked how I was doing. I told her I was almost the third search and rescue team, and then gave her the details of my night.

Two days later, Cindy returned to Goldsboro with another cameraman to complete the shoot. She went to the site where our rental vehicle was submerged and noticed that the water level had receded greatly. A police officer told her she had to leave the area because of the danger and began telling her about what happened Thursday night.

"I know," Cindy said. "I was in the vehicle."

"See the tags there?" the officer asked. "That's your vehicle there."

"It isn't," Cindy replied. "Our vehicle was a rental and the tag number started with a 'R.' This one starts with a 'G.'"

It was then, two days later, that the authorities realized another driver had the fateful experience of being submerged. Sadly, this person was still in the vehicle. She left her home on Thursday to check on her mother. Due to the storm, telephone lines weren't operating so her family thought she had arrived at her mother's. As far as her mother knew, she was at home with her family. No one knew to look for her because no one knew she was missing.

Sunday while in church, my pastor asked me to testify about my experience, which I did reluctantly. It was fresh in my mind, but I wasn't ready to relive it. After church I checked my messages on the cell phone and had been called to the station where I once worked for an interview. During the interview, the reporter played footage of the area where the rental vehicle went under and the car which was discovered on Saturday being recovered. I was amazed to learn that someone else experienced the same fate as Cindy and me, only this person wasn't fortunate enough to survive.

While leaving the station I ran into Tony Debo, a sports reporter who survived a helicopter crash a few years earlier. He relayed to me that he had been having recurring dreams about falling from the sky. I too had been having recurring dreams about flying down the street to save someone. Our dreams ended when we experienced our trauma.

The following Sunday after church I stopped by *Starbucks* and picked up a copy of the *Raleigh News & Observer*, which featured coverage of the hurricane. In the middle of a page was a picture and small feature on the woman in the car that was recovered the previous Saturday. I grabbed my latte, the newspaper and went home to read the story in my solitude.

While reading the paper, something came over me and I was led to look her mother up and contact her. She and I were born the same year, she and my daughter share the same birthdate, and she was married and the mother of two children. When I spoke to her mother I was able to provide some details about her daughter's death that only Cindy or I could provide. It brought her some closure.

Five months later, while on a retreat where I was assisting a friend in Puerto Rico, I spent some time reflecting and journaling on a legal pad about my experience. My reflections became a

letter to God, which included confession, concerns, and how this experience shaped me. When I finished this letter, I balled it up and put it into the ocean. It was then that I felt a weight lifted from me.

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About the Contributor

Brett Chambers is a native Washingtonian living in Durham, NC. An instructor in Mass Communications and Education Technology, he is active in the community promoting ways to use the arts to enhance learning skills. Brett has a daughter, Arielle, who motivates him to create more opportunities for children. He believes that God is within each of us...we just have to quiet our own voice to hear His word.