

THE LAST WORD



Jamie Buckingham is author of 30 books, serves as senior pastor at the Tabernacle Church in Melbourne, Florida, is editor-at-large of Charisma.

The Greatest Serenade

I've missed the song of the whippoorwills in the early morning hours this year. Each year, since we have moved out into the pine trees in the rural section of our little Florida community, the whippoorwills have returned in February. Nocturnal songsters, they have serenaded me with their plaintive calls coming through the tall trees in front of our house, wafting their echoing voices into our upstairs bedroom long before dawn.

Last year they showed up in late January and stayed until early May. This year, perhaps because of the unseasonal rain and the constant problem of standing water beneath the trees on our 20-acre homestead, they have not appeared at all.

I miss them. Some of my fondest memories of childhood include the call of the whippoorwill. Growing up in the little town of Vero Beach on the Florida east coast, we lived in a rural setting not unlike where we are now. Lying awake in bed at night with the windows open, sleeping out in my little tree house on the edge of the orange grove, the night calls of the hoot owls and the whippoorwills, signaling each other back and forth through the tropical hammock were a part of all I held dear in childhood.

That was one of the wonderful bonuses when we moved out of the subdivision seven years ago to our rural acreage with trees and pasture. But we are not without morning songs this spring. A small convention of mockingbirds comes alive at dawn—joined by thrush and lark in beautiful harmony. These balmy days, with the daylight rushing at us with the arrival of spring, have given us freedom to throw open the bedroom windows at night. As sunrise approaches the chirping and singing beckons us back to life long before my mechanical alarm buzzes its raucous warning of pending day.

But all this is incidental to a far deeper song we are experiencing in our hearts these peaceful mornings. In early February Jackie's surgeon gave us bad news about lumps in both breasts. His preliminary examination led him to believe immediate surgery was necessary. The first step was surgical biopsy on both sides.

We prayed and felt we should not sign the release requested by the surgeon—a release which would have authorized him to perform radical surgery on both sides if the initial biopsy was positive. We wanted to walk through this slowly—one step at a time—with ample prayer support.

The surgeon reluctantly agreed. "It's your body."

The frozen section showed disease. Since we had not signed the surgical release, however, the surgeon requested a full pathology report.

I talked with the surgeon as Jackie was coming out of the anesthesia. He outlined the possibilities as we stood in the hall outside her room. It all depended on the final pathology report. But on the basis of the

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preliminary report he said one of three things would happen:

- I could take her home, let the incisions heal for a few months, then bring her back for surgery and treatment.
- I could take her home the next day, but bring her back next week for radical surgery.
- If the cancer was already in her system the only prognosis was death.

Jackie and I are part of a small group—a "home church"—which is part of our larger church body. We have been in covenant relationship with these four families for almost five years. As we waited on the lab report and before making any decisions, we submitted ourselves to the group—and to the Lord—in prayer. Jackie left the hospital and in the home of one of our friends we knelt before the Creator. There was laying-on-of-hands and anointing with oil in the name of Jesus Christ. As we gathered in the presence of a loving family I was aware we were part of something that stretched all the way back to the Alpha of God. Despite the threatening circumstances, we felt peace.

The final pathology report came four days later. The doctor called. His earlier diagnosis was misleading. The radical surgery he had projected was not going to be necessary.

It was a week later before we realized what had actually happened. Aside from the miracle—for which we praised God profusely—came the realization that had we signed the standard release, the surgeon would have gone ahead, on the basis of the first report, and removed both breasts. When he removed stitches from the biopsy incisions, the surgeon told Jackie she was a very "lucky lady." She smiled, and corrected him.

"Not lucky—but blessed. There is a difference, you know."

I'm not sure he does know. But we do. And while others have been called to walk through the deeper waters and emerge singing their song in the minor key of pain, we wake every morning with a melody in our heart far sweeter than the song of the birds outside our window. It is the song of resurrection life—new every morning. ↪