

# Finding Comfort in the Father's Arms

By Bonnie Buckingham Ranzino

**G**rief. I never really understood what that word meant until this past year. I know grief is normal following the death of a loved one. But I wasn't prepared for an entire year of hurting and crying and missing my dad, Jamie Buckingham. For months, my heartache was so great that all I could think was *Lord, come and take us all.*

But then my heavenly Father intervened in a special way.

Earlier this year, I was invited to a ladies retreat on beautiful St. Simon's Island in Georgia—all expenses paid. Even so, I hesitated to accept until someone approached me with a word from God that I was supposed to go. How could I turn that down?

There were about 60 women present at the weekend retreat. Some I recognized; most I didn't know at all. Just to be safe, I chose a seat next to my sister-in-law Kathy at the opening session.

During that morning meeting, I became more and more skeptical that this weekend would help me. These women seemed slightly crazy—doing silly skits, joking and giggling—not at all what I expected at a retreat. To make matters worse, amid all their laughter, the only thing I could do was cry.

As the evening meeting began with praise choruses, I found my safe seat by Kathy. I especially miss Daddy during worship times; he so loved to worship the Lord. I could picture him playing the tambourine I had given him for Christmas, or reaching his arms up toward heaven as if to touch the face of Jesus. As soon as the worship started, so did my tears.

The speaker that night read from a notebook some prophetic words the Lord had given her months before. Though I recognized that several of those messages were for me, I couldn't control my tears and bolted for the ladies room. After regaining my composure, I headed back to the meeting, but in the hallway I ran into Teri, a friend from Atlanta.

Our conversation soon turned to my dad's death—and how I was coping with his loss. Teri asked if I felt that my grief was normal. I had no idea what *normal* grief was. I told her. Since I'd never lost anyone close to me, I had nothing to compare it to. After listening for a while, Teri asked if I could release my dad to the Lord. I didn't know what to say—I thought I had done that when Daddy died. As I considered her question, I pictured that final scene in the hospital.

I had stood by Daddy's hospital bed for hours. Every time he struggled for air, I would lift his head from the pillow to

help him breathe. There was such an evident struggle between Daddy's spirit and body. His spirit wanted to leave and go to God's presence; his body was fighting to stay.

Finally, following my mother's example, each family member spoke aloud to release Daddy to the Lord. When it was my turn, all I could do was whisper, "Daddy, it's OK to go." After all of us released him, his spirit at last soared free.

Teri's question made me realize that I had reclaimed what I had once released. I didn't want to give up Daddy. And I was afraid if I let go of my grief, I would be letting go of all my precious memories of him.

As we talked, the Holy Spirit showed Teri that a spirit of grief had come upon me. While God wanted to comfort and heal me, she said, He couldn't because I had closed Him out.

Though I realized what she said was true, I still couldn't seem to "let go" of Daddy. Teri suggested I again release Daddy to the Lord. With much difficulty, I pronounced the words: "Daddy, I release you into God's hands."

Instantly I felt something "break" inside me, starting in the pit of my stomach and welling up until I was sobbing uncontrollably. Teri held me and prayed, taking dominion over the spirit of grief in the name of Jesus. As it left, I immediately sensed the loving arms of my heavenly Father envelop me as I had never experienced before.

The next morning, through many more tears, I shared with the group what God had done for me. Though I still hurt over my dad's death, God is healing my pain. I know that I'll always miss Daddy—I can't help it; I wish he were here. But now I realize that I can crawl up in my heavenly Daddy's lap to be comforted.

At church today we sang: "I will enter His gates with thanksgiving in my heart, I will enter His courts with praise. I will say this is the day that the Lord has made. I will rejoice for He has made me glad."

On February 17, 1992, the Buckingham family gathered around the hospital bed of their beloved Jamie and ushered his spirit into heaven while singing that very song. It was the hardest thing I've ever done but also the most precious.

Today, for the first time since my dad's death, I was able to sing that song and to be truly glad. I know where Daddy is—in God's presence where he always desired to be. ■

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