



## The Story of Job...and Scott and Janet

*Bless the Lord who crowns you with tender mercies (Psalm 103, NKJV).*

I recently spent a week at a Christian conference where I preached six messages on the Book of Job. It's hard to imagine Job's incredible loss. It happened so far away and so long ago. The deaths of his ten children are recounted in only two sentences. What were their names? How old were they? We know nothing.

There is a modern-day Job story, I told my listeners, as I recounted the story of Scott Willis, a Baptist minister, and his family.

It was November of 1994. At the time, I was teaching at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, located in Northern Illinois near Interstate 94 that connects Chicago with Milwaukee. Janet and Scott Willis were on that highway headed toward Milwaukee to visit one of their nine children. With them were their six youngest.

Suddenly a piece of steel flew off a truck and struck their van, causing it to explode in a fireball. Burned to death were Ben, 13; Joe, 11; Sam, 9; Hank, 7; Elizabeth, 3; and Peter, 6 weeks.

Like Job, Scott and Janet were numbed with shock. Job sat in silence with his friends for seven days before he exploded in anger. For the Willises, the time frame was longer but they felt many of the same emotions as Job did, not only anger but severe depression that brought on thoughts of suicide and fear of insanity.

The story behind the horrific accident made headlines in the years that followed. The truck driver, it was learned, was not a competent driver and had paid a large bribe for his commercial license. But his bribe, investigators discovered, was only one in a far-reaching scheme that went all the way to the office of George Ryan, Illinois Secretary of State. Ryan had gone on to become governor and had even been nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize.

It was only after his election and his acclaim as governor that Ryan was charged with having taken kickbacks from the bribes, using the money to purchase a villa in Jamaica.

Over the course of a decade the investigation led to prosecution, and in 2006, he was convicted and sentenced to a six-and-a-half year prison term.

Before Ryan was sentenced, the Willises received a \$100 million-dollar settlement that they used to set up a foundation for ministry worldwide. Their own lifestyle continues to be very modest.

In the end of the Old Testament story, Job has ten more children and more wealth than he previously had. It almost sounds like a *happily-ever-after* ending. For the Willises, the pain never ends. But life goes on.

In 2006, Janet published a children's book, *A Dad's Delight*. It's the story of Hank, a little boy who absolutely loves the game of baseball—so much so that he ignores the sign against a rental building that says in bold letters: NO BALL PLAYING NEAR THE BUILDING.

He breaks a window and has to face his father, who sternly reminds him that someone has to pay for the window. But his father uses the incident as an object lesson of Christ's forgiveness and paying the debt for our sin.

In her colorful and wonderfully illustrated book, Janet Willis profoundly captures a moment of tender mercy:

*Then Hank watched as Dad bent down, found the ball, and carefully brushed off the broken glass. "I'll pay for the window, Hank. Just sign the ball." And Dad put it up on his bookshelf.*

Here is a book highlighting God's mercy written by a mother with a wound in her heart that will never heal. Yet amid the pain she recognizes and holds on to the tender mercies of life. □

—Ruth A. Tucker

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