

God's Faithfulness in the Jungle...and Beyond

2018 Global Outreach

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(Video): http://graciaburnham.org/files/Burnham_Intro.mp4

Good morning. I'm honored to be here. (*applause*) Thank you so much. There was a long night in October while we were held captive. By that time we had been in the jungle for about five months and we were getting to know the guys holding us captive, learning their stories. Some said they were coerced into becoming Abu Sayyaf members. You know, if a band of thirty Abu Sayyaf, with their guns and machetes came through your village and asked for three volunteers, it's pretty likely that you would come up with three volunteers to send with them rather than to make these mujahideen, these holy warriors, angry because everybody had heard the stories of what happens when you didn't comply with the Abu Sayyaf that came through—massacres, beheadings, looting!

One kid about eighteen years old had spent some time with Martin—I can't even remember his name right now which bothers me a little bit. His father was a poor fisherman. He had no education but he fell in love with a girl in a neighboring village, and in their culture the guy pays the dowry, the bride price. Her family was asking fifty thousand pesos—a thousand dollars or so—which might be a whole lot for some of us to come up with—but how much more for this kid whose family had nothing. So he decided to join the Abu Sayyaf in hopes that he would be around when a ransom payment was made and he could take his share of the money and go get married to his sweetheart.

This particular night we'd heard that the military was near so we had mobiled long into the night. We walked till about 3:30/4:00 in the morning and were just exhausted. We lay down in a field of grass to get some rest. There was dew on the grass; it was wet but we didn't care. We would have laid anywhere at that point. Suddenly the sky lit up almost like daylight and a parachute opened up and that light floated down to the ground near us. Anyone watching could have seen the whole group. Martin leaned towards me and he whispered, "Oh no! They've found us! That was a flare; they were just confirming that we were here."

I expected us to get up and keep moving because one of the unwritten rules between the Abu Sayyaf and the military was they never had gun battles at night—but no one moved. We were exhausted; we couldn't go on. Early the next morning, right at dawn, we heard the rumble of what they called sixbys—huge trucks with flat beds on the back and we knew they were full of soldiers. We got up and began moving out of the sheltered area to cross the valley into the jungle and within minutes we heard someone over in the trees yell, "There they are! Hoy! It's the Abu Sayyaf!" and the guns started blaring. Well, this is it I thought as we ran and dropped...and ran and dropped...our guards would tell us when to run, when to drop.

There was automatic gun fire everywhere. The pops of rocket launchers, people yelling, the smell of gunpowder but somehow we made it across that field and reached the edge of the woods and got behind some big, huge boulders. The group started arriving, and after awhile we went running down the trail into the jungle and when we stopped an hour or so later for a rest, I heard that that

“kid”—you know, the one whose name I can’t remember—was killed in the gun battle, shot in the gut with an M57 Mortar. I was devastated! He was this “kid”; he just wanted to get married, but now into eternity without God! I didn’t want to think about it but I couldn’t help but think about it, and the horrible situation we were all in and how things kept going from bad to worse for us. I was so scared and depressed, I just sat there and bawled. And then I thought, “Gracia, you need to get yourself together; we’re going to start walking again soon,” so I started to thank God for all the good things He’d done for us that day. We were still alive; we weren’t wounded. I had lost my big black burka-type headscarf that they were making me wear that was so oppressive and that I just hated. It had fallen somewhere out in the field when we were running and dropping, so now I could feel the wind in my hair again.

And I wonder if some of you here today were praying for me as I was working through that, that day. Many of you have said, “We prayed for you! God would prompt us to stop and pray,” and I never want to pass up the opportunity to say, “Thank you for praying for us. Every time you prayed, we needed it.” That day as I sat cross-legged on the ground, I realized that in every situation, if you look, there’s good, ‘cause God’s there in your situation and He’s good! No matter how hopeless things seem for you today, God can redeem your situation and give you peace. God has not abandoned you in your hard time. In fact, He has given you some precious promises!

Listen to the word of God for you today: “My grace is sufficient for you!”

Listen to the word of God for you today: “The Lord is near to the broken hearted. He saves the crushed in spirit.”

Listen to the word of God for you today: “I am the Lord! Is anything too hard for Me?”

No! Nothing is too hard for our Lord! When you are in an awful situation, look up! Keep trusting in the One who made you and is working all things together for good for you. People sometimes ask me, “What was the hardest thing about being a hostage?” The hardest thing for me was that I saw what I was really like. In one swift moment in time, everything I had except Martin was taken away from me, and when everything’s gone and you’re in an uncomfortable position, you see what’s really in your heart. I was born into a lovely Christian family. I became a believer in Jesus at an early age. I married this terrific guy who had an incredible gift of piloting airplanes. We decided we wanted to make a difference in the world. So we packed up; we left the American dream and we went to the Philippines where Martin flew food, medicine, cargo and people into some of the most primitive places in the world—and I was a pretty good person. I thought I was anyway.

But in the jungle I came face-to-face with a Gracia I didn’t want to see. I saw a “me” that I didn’t even want to believe existed. I saw a hateful Gracia! There were days I hated those guys for what they were doing to us, for the pain they were causing our family. I saw a covetous Gracia! When we were starving and I saw someone with food that didn’t share with us, I coveted what they had. I was filled with envy at them. I saw a despairing Gracia! “Nobody cares about us anymore! This has gone on for so long. Everyone’s forgotten us!” I saw a faithless Gracia! Here is a journal entry that I scribbled one day on some borrowed paper using a pen that barely worked—and this is not pretty. “This was a very hard day for me. Why does God keep me here to suffer day after day? I got almost hysterical one afternoon; Martin tells me not to give up. I try to be a good hostage and be patient,

and where has it gotten me? Eight and a half months and I'm still here! God is pleased to have me suffer—and I'm tired of it!"

Hebrews 4:12 says that God's Word is a discerner that looks at the heart and exposes us for what we really are. Nothing in all creation can hide from Him. Everything is open and exposed before His eyes. We might look together on the outside and we might have a whole lot of props that keep life going well for us. Here in America we've got lots of props, don't we? Beautiful homes, lovely families, careers, money—but God sees what we truly are on the inside...but God's good. He knows our frame. He remembers that we are dust and He loves us. He's on our side when we are weak and needy—and God didn't wait until I got my act together there in the jungle. Even as I complained at Him for keeping us there so long, He started to work in my heart. I asked Martin one day, "Where is the love, the joy, the peace, the contentment, you know, all those things that are supposed to characterize believers in Jesus? Where are those things because I'm looking at myself and I see the bad and the worse and there's no good!" Martin said, "Love, joy, peace—those aren't things you can make happen in your own heart. Those are gifts from the Holy Spirit of God. Let's ask for them." Well, I tried and failed to find those things in myself for months. So we started to pray for God to work good things in us and it seemed like we were either running for our lives from the military days and nights on end—totally exhausted—or we were in what we thought was a safe place and we were hiding out and we were laying low and were totally bored!

And every once in awhile in those days and weeks of boredom, a magazine or something to read would make its way into camp and we loved that. It gave us something to do. We especially liked *Reader's Digest*. We would read them until they fell apart. Martin would read them aloud to me; I would read them aloud to him. We really liked the jokes, and one day Martin read this one to me: It's called *Writer's Block*. "Having encouraged her class of eleven-year olds to use descriptive language in the story she had just asked them to write, my wife was disappointed when one boy used the adjective *big* to describe a castle. She asked the boy to be a bit more creative, and told him to re-write the sentence. Minutes later he was back at her desk. This time the sentence read, 'I went into the castle which was big, and when I say big, I mean big!'" We laughed too! A day or so later Martin said, "Gracia, I've been thinking about that joke and something Jesus said. He said if you want to be great in God's kingdom, be the servant of all. I think when He said *all*, He meant *all*! He didn't mean all but the bad guys holding you hostage. Then I watched Martin start to serve those guys.

There was this one kid—"Fifty-seven"! That probably wasn't really his name but that's what we called him. His job was to carry that M57 through the jungle. An M57 is heavy weaponry. It's a four or five foot long metal tube, and during a gun battle it had this tripod thing they would put it on. And they would put the mortars in the front and shoot it—in our case at the military. Well, Fifty-seven was always in a bad mood. I told Martin I called him Fifty-seven because for fifty-seven days in a row he had been in a bad mood.

One day we were in a gun battle. We had some casualties; so did the military. The Abu Sayyaf killed a medic, a point man, and a radio man which meant we gained a medical bag, a weapon, and a radio. Well the next day when no one was looking, Martin and I kind of went through that medical bag and sort of lifted some things that we thought we would need in the future—some pain reliever, some antibiotics, some anti-diarrhea medicine, and we hid that away amongst our stuff. Well, we learned that Fifty-seven suffered from headaches. That's why he was always in a sour mood, and

every time we would see him start to rub his temples, Martin would take him some of our stash of pain reliever. That kid's attitude toward us changed totally!

Not long after that they sent Fifty-seven out on a striking force. A striking force was a group of ten or fifteen guys they would send to another area of the island we were on to wreck some havoc in order to keep the attention away from our group. We never knew if we would see them alive again. Things didn't always go well for them. When Fifty-seven came back to camp, he was all smiles when he saw Martin. He gave him that two-cheeked Muslim greeting.

As we prayed, God began giving us the victories within ourselves that we were desperately asking for. He changed us in the jungle. He gave us love for them. We began to be concerned for them. He used everyday occurrences to show us their neediness, like a conversation I had with Nadeem one day. Nadeem was a young guy—probably sixteen...eighteen years old—and he spoke enough English so we could communicate a little bit with him.

One of the requirements of the Muslim faith is they are supposed to read their Quran every day. But when the Abu Sayyaf would read the Quran, they wouldn't read it silently to themselves like we do when we read a book. They read aloud. Only they didn't just read it, they had this beautiful sing-song, minor-key kind of a chant that they did. One would start in with his Quran reading and they would all think, "Oh, I haven't done my Quran reading today." They would all start in different books, different verses, different tunes—I called it choir practice. I kind of figured if the military really wanted to find us and rescue us, they just needed to open their ears during Quran reading.

One day after Nadeem was finished reading, I asked him: "Hey, what did you just read?" And his eyes lit up. He said, "Oh, I just read my favorite psalm!" I said, "Really? What does it say?" He said, "I don't know; it's in Arabic. I don't speak Arabic." I was shocked! I said, "Nadeem, you're reading words you don't understand?" The reason it was his favorite psalm was he had read it so many times he didn't have to think about it anymore when he read it. I said, "You know what you need to do? You need to get a Quran that has been translated into your dialect and then you'll know what you're reading." He said, "Oh no! No, ma'am! Then it would be corrupted!"

I realized that Nadeem is basing his whole life and eternity on a book that he's never read and is not likely to read. How is Nadeem going to hear the gospel without a preacher? We need some preachers—some people willing to go to the hard places! Oh, duh!! Maybe that's why we were in that difficult situation—to be a witness to some lost guys! Do we pray to the Lord of the harvest to send forth laborers into His harvest as long as it doesn't inconvenience me and mess up my comfortable life?

Here's a quote I found on Facebook, of all places, by a famous missionary, C.T. Stud, who could have had a comfortable life playing world-class cricket in England but instead chose hard places. He said, "Some people like to live within the sound of a church or chapel bells. I want to build a rescue shop within a yard of hell. Working within a yard of hell is not going to be a pleasant place. There will be lots of opposition there. But we need some people willing to go to the hard places and hard places is what's left in the world."

Maybe a people group would be classified as hard-to-reach because they're isolated. There are some two thousand language groups in our world who don't have any of the Scripture in their language. Many never had anyone come into their world and tell them anything. They don't know the basics of clean drinking water much less what the gospel is. Working in hard places is what Ethnos 360

does. Ethnos 360 is the new name for the organization formally known as New Tribes Mission. For seventy-five years NTM—Ethnos 360 now—has been working in isolated villages and there's still a lot to do. The job has to be done. The last tribe, the last man, and we need quality people to take the gospel there. You know God has always picked certain people to do a difficult work. I don't have to convince you with this job; God's going pick some of you.

Do you have the faith? The courage? The urging to say, "God, do you want me? Do you want my life? Do you want to use me to make a difference in the world?" A long-time term, sign-me-up difference, not to go on a short-term mission trip but a life-long career missionary—and to some of you God will say, "Yes, that's what I have for you. We need you on our team." Maybe a people group would be classified as hard-to-reach not because they're isolated but because of their ideology. They aren't going to be open to what you have to say. And it may not be a very safe place for you to live, but we need some people willing to go to the hard places.

Maybe you aren't in a position where you can go, but you have a heart for the world. So, you can pray! I heard someone say a while back, "When we work, we work. When we pray, God works." You can have a world-wide ministry with any people group that you choose without ever leaving your living room. Pray! Pray! Pray! You've heard the phrase: "Prayer needs no passport," —and prayer on this end is where the power comes from on the other end.

A sweet Mennonite lady visited with me after I spoke at their church one day and she said, "Gracia, you know what I do at night when I can't fall asleep? I don't count sheep anymore. I count Muslims:

One Muslim comes to Jesus...

Two Muslims come to Jesus...

Three Muslims come to Jesus. ..Oh Lord, may it be so for your honor and for your glory!

Four Muslims come to Jesus."

You have heard that Muslims all over the world are coming to Jesus, haven't you? My friend in Iran says: "It's like God is running a special on Muslims right now," and I wonder if what's happening in the Muslim world is an answer to some sweet Mennonite lady's prayer of faith at night when she can't sleep. "Pray! Pray! Pray!"

I want to give you an update on me and then tell you the rest of this story. There's always a rest of the story, right? I got a call two weeks ago when I was speaking in Michigan from the lead FBI investigator in charge of our case. He wanted me to know that they are closing our case. Since all the leaders of the Abu Sayyaf that held us captive are dead now...not ALL of the Abu Sayyaf are dead. They are alive and well, but the leaders involved in our case are all dead, so it's time to close the case. "Case closed!" he said. That was great to hear! That's the second case that's been closed on my account. In the first case, though, I wasn't the victim of crime. I was the criminal!

When I was a young child, I realized I was a sinner. I had broken God's law and the penalty for that is death. But then I learned that I'd been bought with a price—the precious blood of Christ. By faith I accepted what Jesus did for me. So Scripture says: "As far as the east is from the west, so far, has He removed my transgressions from me, which means the case folder labeled "The Sins of Gracia Burnham" is settled as well. Case closed—forever settled! Because I have the seal of the Holy Spirit on my life, the case folder will never be opened again—because He is faithful and true. Actually, if my sins were before me, it wouldn't be just one folder would it? But praise be to God, all my sins

were laid on Jesus and I stand forgiven—a much more important case to have closed than the one I heard about a few days ago. Right?

Do you know that hymn? (Gracia singing):

“Grace, Grace. God’s grace,
Grace that will pardon and cleanse within,
Grace, Grace. God’s grace.
Grace that is greater than all my sin.

The FBI is going to send an agent to bring some of Martin’s effects that they found at that final crime scene to deliver to me in person and I think we should have a thanksgiving party at that point. —sort of like you have a thanksgiving party when you meet here every week. Thank you, God, for closing the case on our sin and our death problem. We are so grateful and I am very grateful to have this kidnapping case closed as well. God’s good!

Well, you know some of the rest of our story—how for months it looked like our release was right around the corner and then something would happen and negations would break down again and we would be back to square one again and how that seemed like forever to us and how Martin died in the gun battle that rescued me. But I got to come home and raise my children. I think we have family photos. Our kids weren’t with us when we were taken hostage. They were with our friends, our neighbors on another island. We’d gone to work on Palawan. After we were taken hostage, the state department and our mission agency sent them back to live with their grandparents in Kansas. They’re grown now. My kids love the Lord; they’re involved in ministry (With pictures on the screens: “That is one showing us all together at VBS one night on the rare occasion when we’re all together; that hardly ever happens, and that one is me with all of my grandchildren.) And God’s been really, really good to us and my kids and I have asked people like you all over the world to start praying for our captors, and why are we surprised when God does something awesome and answers our prayer? I don’t know! Oh, me of little faith!

The rest of the story: Several years ago an American couple that works in a maximum security prison in Manila contacted me. They had gotten a hold of some comic books that our foundation printed—a comic book series—thirteen comic books on the lives of the prophets, those men that the Muslims believe to be prophets: Adam, Abraham, Moses, Elijah, David on through Jesus. I have a few of them here. We printed them in Tausug. Tausug was the language that many of the Abu Sayyaf spoke. So I have no idea what they say, but they sure are pretty and we were so proud of them. They gave the comics away in the prison and the guys loved them. They said, “Anything else you print we want to read.” But the interesting thing that’s happened is here is a bunch of guys that found out Gracia Burnham printed these. They’re coming to us saying, “We’re former Abu Sayyaf. We’re the ones who held them captive.” I said, “Find out their names. Maybe I know them.” Here came the names. Sure enough, guys we walked with, starved with, lived with—twenty-three or so of them in prison for the rest of their lives. There’s Zacharias who on May 27 burst into our room at Dos Palmas with his M16 and took us captive. He was so surprised to find out that our youngest son and him had the same name—Zachary, Zacharias—that we would name one of our children after one of their Muslim prophets—and we just let him think that!

Also in prison is Daoud, the guy that used to sit and talk with Martin when we would rest during our long days of hiking. Daoud’s job was to carry the solar panels through the jungles. The solar panels

would help charge the Sat. phones—the cell phones—so they could talk to the outside government negotiators. Daoud's wife and child had died in childbirth and since the economy is horrible in the southern Philippines, he found himself with no family, no means of support. He joined the Abu Sayyaf almost as a career move. Martin and Daoud would discuss all sorts of things from jihad, being martyred, and Daoud's hope and dreams. They talked at length about if Jesus was really raised from the dead or not.

Also in jail is Bashir. He was shot in the same gun battle that Martin died in, the one that led to my rescue. Bashir was unable to keep up with the group as they retreated down the river so they left him behind to fend for himself with five hundred pesos, ten dollars. You can't take care of yourself in the jungle. You can't buy anything and several days later the military found him. Gangrene had moved into his leg. It had to be amputated. He sends me notes every once in a while.

This American couple comes every other summer and we plan projects to bless the guys in the prison. One year they brought me this T-shirt that a bunch of the guys have signed. It says: Inmate Maximum. I said, "Will and Joannie, what am I supposed to do with that T-shirt?" "You can't wear it to the mall!" (*laughter*)

To make a long awesome story very short, so far four former Abu Sayyaf, no, five—I heard of this fifth one two weeks ago—so five Abu Sayyaf have come to know Jesus as their Savior. One of them, a very violent man with over twenty counts of murder against him, now a new person in Christ—a brother in the Lord! And we really can't believe what God's doing and we just keep praying. I wonder if you'd want to pray when you think of me and my story? Pray especially for Zacharias...Zachary, who's very hard and resistant toward anything having to do with the gospel. God can do anything, can't He? And it's not over till it's over! And I think God's let me be a small part of what's going on over there in the prison, just to encourage my heart because He loves doing good things for his children.

Had I known while we were going through our hard year in the jungle, that one day even one of those guys would come to know Jesus because of our experience, I think the days would've been easier to bear. I could kick myself now and say, "Would it not have been enough to trust a good God with the days of my life?" Can we begin to believe that God takes us in the hard situations not to crush us but so that we can learn to see His hand and learn to trust Him when He's doing a good work? And God's work is good 'cause He's good, and I've been encouraged that there can't be a harvest without seed planters and maybe planting seeds isn't always fun. Maybe planting seeds for you is downright uncomfortable; you don't see any fruit for your labors. You might wonder why you were called to plant seeds 'cause you're not even good at it. But all of a sudden you see what God's doing and I've been reminded that the seed that was planted in the jungle wasn't wasted. Others are reaping what we sowed ever so long ago. God can do anything, so, keep planting those seeds, my friend—those seeds of the gospel that Christ died for our sins, the seeds that God promised will never return void. When you feel like giving up, when you don't see any fruit, when you don't know what you're doing, just keep on. It's God that's going to do the work on down the road.

As I close this morning, can I tell you about Martin's gravestone? Martin always told us what he wanted on his gravestone. We all knew. The kids knew and then he died, and it came time to go to the monument company and make some choices and the kids said, "Mom, you know what you have to do, right?" But grandma and grandpa, Martin's mom and dad, will never allow it I said, "Well,

I'll go with grandma and grandpa; you stay home and pray. I wish you could see his gravestone; it has a beautiful tropical scene on the front, mountains in the background, a Nepal tribal hut; it has a Cessna aircraft landing on a short mountain strip by the little hut. It has Martin's name and his birth and his death date with the cross between those two dates to show that something very significant happened between them. On the back in smaller print, in quotes, what Martin always wanted on his tombstone. It says: "It wasn't pilot error," and his initials and a smiley face. (*laughter*) Martin didn't want to die in an airplane crash that he caused. You pilots, you can relate. Martin loved what he did. We are so proud of the monument to his memory.

None of us knows the length of the race we're to run. We're not told in the beginning. On every man's tombstone there's a dash between the birth date and the death date. I've heard it referred to as "*the dash between the dates*". Every tombstone has a small hyphen that represents a life. We only get one dash; no one gets two. There are no do-over's and everyone dies, so I'm encouraged again to live a life worthy of the Lord. The only thing that will last in eternity is what you and I do for God here on earth. So let's make the dash that we're given—one that really counts! And thank you for having me today. God bless you!