

**Dear friends of Vital Signs Ministries,**

**September 2022**

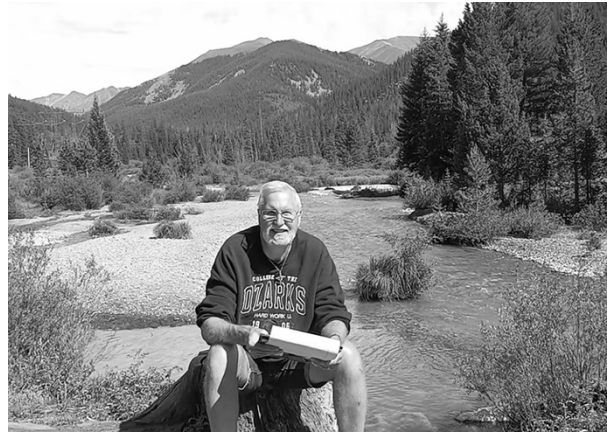
August has been incredibly intense for us, a month that has included thrilling mountain top experiences, the pain and sorrow of parting from loved ones, much-needed (and much-appreciated) encouragement from dear friends, and daunting tests for body and soul. Yet amid it all, there have been wonderful ministry miracles that underscore for us the greatness of our almighty God. “Oh, give thanks to the Lord for He is good, for His lovingkindness is everlasting. Let the redeemed of the Lord say so...” (Psalm 107:1,2a)



One of the “high” points of these last few weeks was God granting me the permission and the mercy to climb another Colorado 14er on August 6. It turned out that several obstacles needed to be overcome even before I got on the mountain but then the hike itself proved to be a very tough, 8-hour test. But the Lord gave me just enough protection, passion, and perseverance to get to the 14,265 feet summit of Mt. Quandary. And back down! There were many divine appointments on the mountain

that day -- some involving ministering to others, some with lessons I needed to learn, many which stimulated prayers and worship, and more than a few to simply drink in the beauty and exhilaration of the climb. Thank You, Father.

But the 14er climb was only one of the eight days spent there in my home state of Colorado and, believe me, we made the very most of our time. For instance, for use on the Vital Signs YouTube channel, we taped several mini-sermons with those inspirational mountains in the background. One of those we were able to transmit back to Omaha in time for the Aksarben Village Sunday afternoon church service. Our congregation there was



also able to watch a brief video tape I made at the Mt. Quandary summit. In addition, we read; we evaluated Vital Signs activities and planned upcoming ones; we enjoyed meals at some of our favorite Colorado cafes; and we prayed together along mountain roads and in the coolness of the deck of our condo. Finally, for the last couple of days of our Colorado stay, we switched condos and joined good friends Ron & Linda Scheffler and Mark & Benita Fichter. Together we shared many conversations and prayers, enjoyed meals at places like the Empire in Breckenridge and Ollie’s in

Frisco, had a very moving communion service, and made a few more hikes – Sapphire Point, Rainbow Lake, and a more adventurous one west of Hoosier Pass that Ron, Mark and I successfully managed. Those days were momentous and memorable indeed.

The next very significant event? We left the mountains early in order to make it to Arvada Covenant Church at 11 for the memorial service of Chuck Cooke (photo at right), the man who explained to me the gospel message in the spring of 1970. Moreover, Chuck and his sweet wife Gwen demonstrated to me the beauty and power of lives transformed by the love of Jesus. And with that explanation and example, I was persuaded to place my faith entirely in the finished work of Christ on the cross. We are deeply grateful to God for allowing us to be present for Chuck's homegoing celebration.



One area of the pastor's funeral sermon concerned the deep and enduring effects Chuck had on so many young people during his years as a Young Life leader. And, at one point, the preacher paused and said, "I'm told that Dennis Hartford is in the congregation today. Dennis, are you here?" He then recounted how, in my first meeting with Chuck at a Young Life meeting, I had brashly, scornfully asked him, "Do you really think you're doing anybody any good at all?" But the pastor then chuckled and explained that, despite that uncomfortable beginning, Chuck's ministry to me over the next several weeks would result in my receiving Jesus Christ as my Savior and beginning a thoroughly transformed life.

At the luncheon after the memorial service, a couple of people came up to us and related how frequently Chuck had told the story of the young man with a chip on his shoulder (but an ache in his soul) unexpectedly dropping into that Young Life meeting. And of how his invitation to meet me for lunch at Denny's on 6th and Wadsworth was accepted, leading to many other meetings. And how God's Spirit convicted this young thug of his sins and convinced him that Jesus had poured out His own life to secure his pardon. And then how that young skeptic had become a steadfast disciple of Christ, had married well, and had gone into a productive Christian ministry headquartered in Nebraska. Wow. As you might expect, I had to fight back tears in learning that I had been in some small way a blessing to Chuck Cooke, this dear brother to whom I owe so very much. Indeed, I am fighting back tears as I write this now. And beyond this, Gwen herself shared how much Chuck liked reading Vital Signs Blog and of how proud and pleased he was with our ongoing service to Christ. Thank You, Lord, for the treasure this will be for the rest of my life.



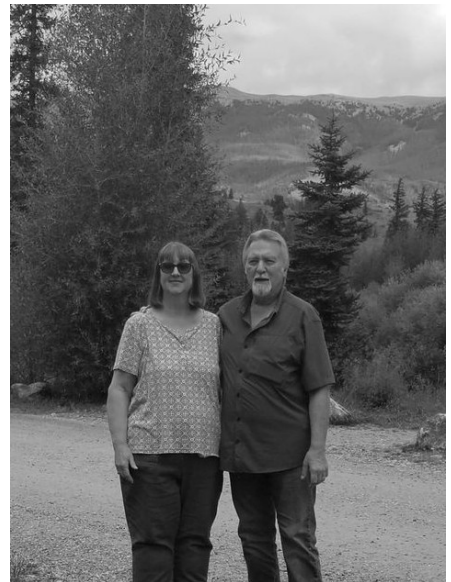
And now I must write with sad news about another reason for our recent tears. Early on the morning of August 18, my brother-in-law John Whissen (photo at left), the husband of my sweet little sister Sherry, passed away. Just two weeks earlier, we had spoken to John and Sherry on the regular Zoom call we conduct every Thursday evening with members of my family. John's back pain (which he thought was probably related to a herniated disc) was becoming so severe that he had scheduled a visit to the doctor. But the doctor's x-ray caused him to send John directly to

the hospital where they discovered his body was riddled with cancer.

We got this news while we were hiking down from Rainbow Lake with the Schefflers and Fichters. We joined hands together and prayed right there on the trail. And then we started changing plans so that we could head to Wichita as soon as possible. That meant a long drive across eastern Colorado and Kansas right after Chuck's memorial service. We stayed with Sherry that night and were blessed to spend some quality time with John in his ICU room the next morning. Indeed, John was completely lucid for that conversation with his pain remarkably contained. We talked frankly about the state of his soul, the glorious news of the gospel, and the unbounded grace Jesus offers to all who simply call on His name and trust the sacrifice for sin He provided on the cross. I explained how the decision of the thief on the cross to trust Jesus (and the Lord's assurance that by that simple act of faith, his soul would be received into heaven by Jesus Himself) illustrates that it's not religion, not ritual, not our record of rights overcoming our wrongs that God requires – it is merely faith that accepts the free gift of salvation.

"That sounds too easy, too simple, Denny," was John's response. Yes, I agreed. But that's because all the hard part was performed by Jesus. He suffered and died for us. He took our sins upon Himself. All that is required of us is to acknowledge with humility and gratitude His act of love and receive the free gift He offers. John understood, and as we prayed together, his emotional confession of trust in Christ lifted us beyond the confines of that hospital room to the marvelous love of God that transcends time. John passed away the following Thursday.

We ask prayers for both Gwen Cooke and Sherry Whissen in their mourning. However, I must also tell you that Sherry's loss presents a special set of problems. You see, my sweet sister, at only age 67, has contracted early dementia and, though she is relatively free from pain and even from anxiety or fear, she isn't really up to living alone. In fact, just a couple of months ago, John had retired in order to provide more constant care for Sherry. That responsibility now falls to her children, Heather and Brian. We have been richly blessed to see how they are stepping up to the challenge, but it is a big job which will force many changes in



their lives so prayers for them are in order too. Claire and I were able to return to Wichita after John died to spend time with Sherry (and spell the kids a bit) and, in the months ahead, I'm sure this will become a recurring feature in our schedule. Also, later in September, we will be bringing Sherry to Omaha to stay with us for a week or two.



So, my friends, you can see how the word “intense” that I used in this letter’s opening to describe our August is strikingly accurate. My 5th Colorado 14er. A truly mountaintop spiritual retreat with close friends. Chuck’s memorial service. John and Sherry. A lot of hours on the road.

And yet, if I had the space, I could write about a few more August items that were intense enough in their own right. The “When Swing Was King” shows we’ve presented this month...the lovely times we’ve had at our Sunday afternoon church service at Aksarben Village Senior Living...the prayers and public pro-life witness outside Planned Parenthood...visits from long-distance friends Bonnie Angster (Phoenix) and Dan & Hannah Tate and their kids (Washington, D.C.)...the in-depth study I’ve been doing for an upcoming sermon and an 8-week adult Sunday School class on the topic of spiritual disciplines...preparations for the VSM Book Brunch on September 10...and more.

You’ll certainly understand then why we could benefit from your prayers too and we are deeply and forever grateful for each one of them.



Until next month, let’s keep in touch through Vital Signs Blog, the VSM website, and our Facebook pages.

Blessings, dear friends.

*Denny*