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Beyond the questions, God is good

BY SCOTT HARRUP AND JOYCE PRYOR

Sunday, Aug. 3, 2003, found Mark Thallander driving to Maine during a New England thunderstorm. The rain followed him from Worcester, Mass., where he had played the organ for the morning service at a local church. It refused to let up as Mark crossed the state line and neared a friend's home in Ogunquit.

The Worcester presentation came on the heels of Mark's participation in a *Revivaltime* re-enactment at the Assemblies of God's General Council in Washington, D.C. Mark served as pianist for the *Revivaltime* radio broadcasts from 1968 to 1970 during his years at Central Bible College in Springfield, Mo.

Even with the storm, the 100-mile drive seemed safe enough. Mark was borrowing his friend's Toyota 4Runner. A wet highway should have been par for the

course for the SUV.

Mark had almost reached his destination. As he began to exit the turnpike, the 4Runner hydroplaned, hit the guardrail and fell into oncoming traffic on its passenger side.

Glass, dirt, rain and blood were streaked throughout the interior. Mark, partially hanging by his seat belt, tried to support himself with his right arm against the passenger door. He was conscious and his mind was racing. He could clearly hear a woman's voice telling him to turn off the engine, to keep talking to her, to remain alert and hold on. Help was on the way, she assured him.

Mark never saw the woman. The emergency personnel did not meet anyone at the crash site.

Mark's seat belt had shredded his left arm, ripping it from his shoulder. By the time he reached the hospital in Portland, he had

lost half his blood. Even as Mark told doctors how vital his arm was to his profession, they were asking him to sign an amputation release in case they could not save it.

As Mark went under anesthesia and the doctors explored his injuries, there was no question Mark's life could only be saved with the removal of his arm. The muscles, tendons, blood vessels and nerves were beyond repair.

"The surgery team decided we had to go ahead with the operation," the plastic surgeon told Mark's friends when they arrived at the hospital.

What could be more catastrophic for a gifted musician than the loss of an arm? But that wasn't the only trauma Mark would face. Recovering from surgery, he learned his father, 3,000 miles away in Stockton, Calif., had fallen and broken his



Mark Thallander Foundation photos

Mark Thallander continues to organize sacred music concerts and perform across the country.

hip the day of the auto accident. A week later, Mark's father died.

George Wood, general secretary of the Assemblies of God and Mark's former pastor, invited him to stay in his home in Missouri during his rehabilitation. Mark ended up doing his rehabilitation in Maine.

During this time he communicated with friends and family via e-mail and through a Web site. The prayers, kind words and visits helped encourage Mark. Friends began composing music for one hand and two feet as well as organ duets for three hands and four feet.

Mark did miss the funeral service for his father. However, music from his compact disc

was played at the service — conducted by Pastor Eugene Kraft of Lakeview Assembly in Stockton, Calif. — and Mark listened to the service from his hospital bed on a relative's cell phone.

Lesser men would have crumbled. Mark, buoyed by the prayers and support of brothers and sisters in Christ across the country, made a remarkable recovery. His rehabilitation came with challenges such as a sense of imbalance and phantom pains. He learned how to do daily tasks. Something as simple as opening a jar required a completely new approach.

In addition to Mark's life being spared, miracles continued. A Southern California disc jockey

raised more than \$50,000 for a new arm, and Mark played an organ duet at his father's subsequent memorial service. Mark has also played at major churches in Southern California, including the Crystal Cathedral where he ministered as organist for 18 years. He is a regular guest at Central Assembly of God in Springfield, Mo.

God's grace is powerfully evident whenever Mark, 56, is at the organ. The story of Mark's loss is multiplying his audiences' spiritual gain wherever he gives a concert. The Mark Thallander Foundation is

reaching out to communities across the United States to affirm and inspire church musicians, choirs, clergy and congregations through festivals, concerts and seminars.

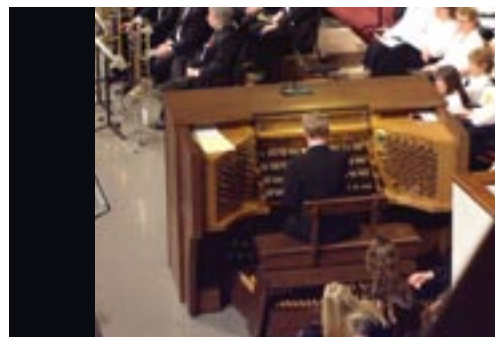
Many questions naturally arise regarding the physical aspects of any accident. And then there is the really difficult spiritual question that trumps across every mind and trumps all the other questions — the question no one wants to ask — Why did God allow this to happen?

There are all kinds of answers. Mark doesn't pretend to have the ultimate solution. Nevertheless, all followers of Jesus Christ have the right — indeed the obligation — to ask the question. We need to probe in prayer and scour the

SURVIVING TRAGEDY:

Scriptures to read the thoughts of others who also work and struggle with this question.

Why? Because it is in the asking,



Friends have composed music for one hand and two feet for Mark Thallander.

in questioning, in the engagement of the intellectual powers that He gave us that God is blessed. Why? Because it is in this way that we

get to know Him better. It is in struggle and strife that spiritual growth takes place.

We have a big God. Divinity is not insulted by inquiry. He doesn't get His feelings hurt because we want to understand. He's not angered by our honest concerns. He's the God of the universe. He can handle it.

In the midst of our questions, His healing presence and His divine love never diminish. Our Lord identifies with us as One who was "a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief" (Isaiah 53:3). He is the One who asked "My God, why ... ?" when He endured the greatest trauma in history.

Mark Thallander's triumph in the face of tragedy was rec-

ognized when he was given the "Life's Not Fair But God Is Good" award from the Crystal Cathedral. Inscribed on the award is this verse, which has become so meaningful to Mark: "... afflicted ... but not crushed; perplexed but not driven to despair; struck down but not destroyed" (2 Corinthians 4:8,9, NRSV).

It is a verse for every believer who, with God's help, has faced tragedy ... and overcome it. **tpe**

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E-mail your comments to tpe@ag.org.

How to overcome losing a limb

How does a person live like they once did minus the limb they once had?

Defining the new normal will be a journey of adjustment and discovery. The journey takes place on all levels. Practically speaking, the person will be going through a process of discovering how to do tasks with one hand or one arm, etc. whereas before they used the two. Emotionally and spiritually the journey is much more individual. Defining the new normal will mean reconciling the loss of that arm or that limb, readjusting and answering key questions: What can I do? What does God have in store for me? How am I the same? How am I different? What would God have me accomplish now?

We do a disservice to people of trauma when we tell them they will never be the same. For example, my nephew was paralyzed two years ago at age 18 in a car accident. His arms are the same. His mind is the same. His heart is the same. But his legs no longer work. So he still loves to play guitar, drive the car, write music, and share the same sense of humor. He's just in a wheelchair. So he's learning, and we all do, how to adapt and to move into the new normal by experiencing what the new routines involve and walking each day with the Lord.

It is not easy and there are many unknowns. Each person comes to reconciliation in his or her own time frame. For my nephew, it's taken two years to believe that his legs from the waist down aren't going to work anymore like they used to. God has been faithful. My nephew is beginning to believe this is true and beginning to believe God's purposes will be made known.

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mark thallander recordings

Mark Thallander has played internationally on both radio and television — as a pianist for the *Revivaltime* radio broadcast and as an organist for the *Hour of Power* television ministry.

Crown Him!

50 piano hymn improvisations including *Crown Him with Many Crowns*, *May Jesus Christ Be Praised*, *All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name*, *When I Survey the Wondrous Cross*, *To God Be the Glory & Amazing Grace*.

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35 organ hymn arrangements on a 127-rank Casavant pipe organ including *Joyful, Joyful*, *We Adore You*, *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*, *Now Thank We All Our God* & *For the Beauty of the Earth*.

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Mark Thallander performs hymn and gospel song improvisations, solo organ repertoire, plus organ with brass, organ with orchestra, and music for two organs with Frederick Swann.

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- * information about current social concerns

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