

Martha Brunner

An Autobiography



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I was born a preacher's kid during the Great Depression in Pennsylvania. My dad talked a lot about the Rapture and, at the age of five, I was worried that the Lord would come back, take my parents, and leave me behind. Even then, I knew I was a sinner. One Sunday night, the invitation was given and I was the first one forward. I couldn't wait any longer. I still remember the joy of knowing I was ready whenever Jesus comes. As the Depression wore on, the offerings wore thin until there was nothing in the offering plate and therefore my dad got nothing for salary. It was a cold winter and I remember my dad putting the last shovel of coal in the furnace and saying, "Now let's pray God will send us more." A big truck drove up to the cellar window and started dumping coal. When my dad told them we couldn't pay, the answer came back, "It's all paid for." I also remember times when there was no food in the house. We sat at the table to ask for the food and a knock at the door sounded. When we opened it a big basket of food stood there but not a person was in sight. God was teaching me at a young age to trust Him and know that He supplies our needs. Even so, our family didn't know much about the victorious Christian life. Missionaries visited our church and home as far back as I can remember. I too wanted to become a missionary.

Growing up, I was a very bashful child. My dad always rebuked me after my Sunday School "pieces", etc. for not speaking up since no one could hear me. My mom and older sister were very outgoing and talkative and I learned to sit back and let them do it all. By this time, we were living in Perth Amboy and my dad was the minister of St. Paul's Evangelical Reformed Church. When I was in grammar school, one of the other ministers in town told my sister that I was abnormally withdrawn and should get help from a psychologist. When I heard about this, I just knew I could never fulfill my dream to be a missionary because I just didn't have what it took. So I resigned myself

to aim at being a teacher or something here in the United States, but God had other plans for me.

As I entered high school, I began going to the Jack Wyrzten rally in New York City, attending a Friday night Bible Study, HiBA (High School Born Againers) clubs with my sister and started going to Keswick Conferences. Soon the Bible became alive in my everyday life and I read it hungrily not because it was expected in my home but because I wanted to. I also began memorizing Scripture - a box of 375 verses - chapters and the book of Philippians. Bob Moon, a missionary from Columbia, came every Friday evening to teach our Bible study.

Sometimes, my mother, sister, a couple of ladies and I were the only ones there. He took us through the Bible showing how God used the foolish, the weak, the nothing, the least, to do great things for Him, based on I Corinthians Chapters 1 & 2, especially verses 26 - 31 of Chapter 1. It was Gideon, the least in his tribe and family, Moses, who said he couldn't speak, etc. Finally, the light dawned and I fell to my knees and prayed, "Oh God, if using these types of people brings glory to You, then here I am - send me to the Mission Field." I was only 14 years old then but I've never doubted His call since then. Us HiBAers were to carry our Bibles on top of our books all day in High School. When my fellow students asked me why- I was too bashful to give an answer so I typed out my testimony and made carbon copies to give them with a tract. When I graduated from High School I was voted the quietest in my class of 400.

By that time, the Lord had shown me He wanted me to be a nurse. Since my parents were unable to provide even one cent toward my education, I had concluded the best thing to do was enter a three year nursing program. Still, one of my teachers kept encouraging me to go to college. My sister was already in college and when she needed money

for tuition, I had sent her all I had saved from baby sitting. The Lord had supplied all her needs in miraculous ways but somehow I doubted He could do the same for me. I finally decided to put the fleece out (Judges 6:36-40) and asked God for a definite sign that He could and would supply my needs through college. When I arrived from school that day, my mother said, "A friend of ours stopped by and left \$10 for you - said she just felt God wanted her to." So on faith I went to Houghton College for two years in pre-nursing and three years to Cornell University, New York Hospital. God kept His side of the bargain and supplied all my needs - sometimes even through anonymous gifts. I also worked in the dining room, cleaning professors' homes and baby sitting. When I went to the interview to enter nurses training, my mother went with me and of course did most of the talking. They almost didn't accept me because they felt I had little initiative. I remember one day following the supervisor around during my first months there. She turned around, backed me up against the wall and yelled at me, "Miss Brunner, you have absolutely no initiative." When I went back to my room I fell on my knees and cried, "Lord you got me into this now you get me through it. You can use the weak and nothing. Okay, I trust you." He gently reminded me of Philippians 4:13, "I can do all things through Christ who strengtheneth me." He proved it then and throughout my life.

After obtaining my RN and BS, I worked as a public health nurse for a year. My main job was visiting new mothers and helping them start the awesome responsibility of caring for a newborn. The next year, I attended the graduate school of Columbia Bible College. I audited all the courses that I couldn't fit into my regular schedule. One solid year of Bible was the most important year of my life and also the most enjoyable. I spent another year working in the medical-surgical floor of a nearby hospital.

I began to get anxious because it seemed I was not getting closer to my goal of the mission field. I had looked into many mission boards but didn't feel led to any. One day, as I returned from work, my younger brother came bolting down the stairs to meet me with, "I know where you can go." He had just heard of the need for nurses at the HCJB [Heralding Christ Jesus' Blessings, a worldwide mission focusing on spreading the gospel through radio] hospital in Quito, Ecuador while listening to his short wave radio. When I wrote to inquire, I got an immediate response telling me that the doctor who started the hospital would be in Philadelphia the next week and could meet me there. I loathed driving in strange cities especially at night. I asked the Lord for His special guidance as a sign of His leading. Not only did I drive right up to the place which was a miracle in itself (I always get lost driving, even in my own backyard - just ask my kids), but I got there early and the appointment he had with another person had just been canceled so he could see me right then. He was very encouraging but did not pressure me about serving in Ecuador. I was very impressed with the opportunity since my interest had always been in Latin America and I had taken five years of Spanish in school and college. When I presented the opportunity to my mother she was very excited about the idea. This really surprised me since she always tried to discourage me when I presented any other mission. Oh yes, she was willing for her second daughter (my sister was already a missionary in Costa Rica) to be a missionary but when it came down to actually signing up with a mission I felt she was trying to avoid that. You see, she was a diabetic and on welfare and hated to see me leave too. Many of my friends suggested I was needed at home. So to have mother excited about me going was another miracle. (By the time I left for Ecuador, my mother was off welfare.) She died at age 66 of a sudden stroke but was well until then. So God took care of her. She didn't need me. I prayed much and felt led to send in my

application to HCJB. After I dropped it in the mail, I went home and prayed, "Dear Lord, give me the assurance if I'm really on the right track." I opened my Daily Light and read, "May 16 - I will bless the Lord, who hath given me a counsel. Proverbs 3:5-6 - Trust in the Lord ... and thine ears shall hear a word behind thee saying, this is the way, walk ye in it." When I was accepted, HCJB required a year of missionary internship in Michigan. There I was secretary to the Pastor, painted church walls, did teaching, discipling, door-to-door visitation, lived with different families and made some lasting friends.

By August 1958, the Lord had supplied all my support and outgoing needs. The theme song of HCJB is *Great is Thy Faithfulness*. That was exciting to me because it was Bob Moon's favorite theme at Keswick and Columbia Bible College and by then (and until now) also my favorite hymn. The Lord gave a life verse as well, "Faithful is He that calleth you who also will do it" which is 1 Thessalonians 5:24. Yes, if God was going to use the likes of me - foolish, nothing, weak, He would have to do it.

I spent a year in Costa Rica in language school. Four other nurses and I were to head for Quito after eight months but visas were denied. Much prayer went up and finally after waiting three months, we got a courtesy visa which said we could not practice nursing - absolutely not! When we got to Ecuador, the mother of the former president was in our hospital. He insisted on having North American nurses around the clock for his mother. The head doctor told him he had five sitting on the front step unable to work because their visas didn't allow it. He said, "You get them in here to care for my mother and I'll see they get permanent visas." And he did. Another miracle.

After working ten months in the Quito hospital, I was sent to be the nurse of a small one room clinic in Pifo - the site

of the transmitters. I was the only medical person in the whole valley between Quito and the jungle. The doctor came there once every two weeks for a morning and the rest of the time I was on my own. I had to diagnose and treat everything that came along from amoebas and worms to typhoid fever and whooping cough. I had to stitch up and wrap up all kinds of wounds and accident cases. One day, I was stitching up a long gash in a man's head where he got beat over the head with a guitar. The missionary engineer standing by remarked, "That's a great job you did, must have had lots of practice." I just looked up at him and answered, "Don't tell anyone, this is the first time I ever sewed a person." Another day a man was brought in in great pain. I recognized it as a strangulated hernia and gave him a shot of morphine so he could bear the one and a half hour trip over cobblestone roads to Quito. The president of HCJB and field director were having a prayer meeting with the missionaries and said they would take him in for me. All of a sudden the family of the man was pounding on the door and saying, "He's done for; gone." I soon knew what they meant when I looked at my patient. He was pale, not breathing and had no pulse. After giving him a shot of coramine and caffeine right through his thick clothes and poncho, I administered oxygen and artificial respiration for a full half hour while the missionaries stood around the truck and prayed. Finally, his eyes fluttered open, he took his first breath, look at me and said, "My pain is all gone." I thought to myself, "Man, and you almost went with it." He was taken to Quito and operated on and was fine. This was only one of many miracles God did as I began my ministry in Pifo. However, the town was not as a whole happy to have an Evangelical nurse in their midst.

One day, a woman brought her three and one half pound two week old granddaughter to me. This woman was like a "witch doctor" and after all her superstitious treatment had

failed, she decided to bring the baby and leave her with me so I would get blamed for the death instead of her. In the hands of the grandmother, the little premature baby had been burned very severely (perhaps to make her breathe) and as I peeled off the leaves, I could see (and smell) the ghastly infected wounds of the major part of her body. I promised the grandmother I would do my best with her but only a miracle of God could save her. She was too weak to suck, so I tube fed her, dressed her wounds, pricked her tiny upper arms (the only place I could find to inject her) with penicillin. Several times, she even quit breathing and I injected a heart stimulant and gave her oxygen to bring her around. All the time, I was praying for a miracle. Several days later, the grandmother showed up. She was taken aback to see the baby alive and improved. Well, instead of getting blamed for this death and "run out of town," the miracle brought many to my door to be treated. Eventually, this little baby, Elena, grew up antagonistic to me and the Gospel in childhood, but arrived at my clinic to deliver her first baby. Because of the extensive burn scars, her delivery was very difficult but miraculously, little Monica was safely brought into the world. As I related the story of the first miracle God did to save her as well as a clear Gospel presentation, Elena came to know Christ as well as her husband. Now little Monica is in fifth grade in our Christian school and recently, I had the joy of leading her to Christ. She is a radiant little Christian.

Many patients came to be treated but many others needed to be seen in their homes. So after the morning crowd thinned out, the afternoon could be spent going by jeep, horseback or foot. Emergencies had to be attended at the clinic or homes any time of the day or night. After delivering babies in mud floor huts with guinea pigs and little children running around my feet, candle wax dripping on the baby as I delivered it and unsanitary conditions, I decided to build onto my one room clinic so I

could have in-patients and some equipment to work with plus electricity. Although I had many chances to share the Gospel with my out-patients, it was a special joy to have my maternity patients with me and share in a relaxed atmosphere. I would do a Bible study with them each day during their three day stay.

Many people ask if I've had any courses in midwifery. Well, if you count experience, maybe I've had "the course." We've had about 3650 babies in our clinic (2350+ of which I've personally caught and many of the other deliveries I've supervised). It would take a book to write all the miracles God has performed but we have never had a patient die nor any baby die that I felt could have been saved even in the best of hospitals. I remember several babies that didn't take their first breath until one half hour after delivery. I gave them mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, oxygen by tube, and sometimes heart stimulant shot. I also prayed fervently. They didn't even suffer any brain damage since they grew up to be the smartest in their families. But best of all, I had the joy of leading many hundred of mothers to Christ plus many of the babies have grown up and come to deliver with me and come to know Christ too.

I was really excited when I delivered my first set of twins, but shocked when the mother tried desperately to leave one with me. She even named her Martha. She told me that twins were a curse. It was bad enough to have one more mouth to feed, but two at once meant God was really mad at you. Anyway, these Indian women didn't have enough milk to feed two babies being so malnourished themselves. They couldn't afford milk so when they gave them a bottle it was sugar water or thin corn flour mixed in an unsanitary bottle (the babies would then get dysentery and die). I didn't take all this seriously but later learned that little Martha did die. Another set of twins was born and

the mother put the firstborn on breast and the second on bottle. Weeks later, when I visited, the second was like an emaciated skeleton and died a couple of days later. After more such experiences, I learned this was true: Twins just don't live - either one or both die.

My clinic business grew so rapidly I couldn't keep up with it. Finally HCJB gave me their best nurse's aid to assist me. Lucrecia was herself a premature baby taken in by Dr. and Mrs. Ruben Larsan and her life was spared when they had worked in the jungle before co-founding HCJB. At the time she came to me she had been trained at the HCJB hospital and worked there several years; however, she had back problems and had been in a full body cast. She couldn't do much in a regular hospital but was a great help to me. She has been my right hand in the work ever since.

One day an Indian woman came for prenatal care. When I told her she was to have twins, she began to cry. She had had twins the year before and gave one away to a neighbor which later died. Her husband told her if she had twins again, he would kick her out of the home. She had plenty of other children too. Then an idea struck her. She asked if she could leave one with me. Already God had been working in my heart and I had decided I would really like to take one little baby girl to raise for the Lord. So I promised her I would take one if one was a girl. You can imagine my suspense as I delivered her firstborn twin (a boy) and waited for the second (a girl). She was mine. I remember the time while during nurses' training in the newborn nursery. I had come home and said to my mom, "I want one of those babies. I just love babies." Mom's answer was that I needed to get a man. My answer to her was, "Oh, forget the man, I just wanted the babies." When I took in Rosa, I didn't realize it was like eating peanuts; after one, it is hard to stop.

Rosa was a great joy to me and soon wrapped herself around my heart strings. When I left for a six month furlough in the US, it was very hard to leave her behind. I had made up a slide series on her, the home conditions that her family lived in, and the great difference in size and health between her and her twin. She was robust and running around at one year and four months but he could not even stand up yet. When I showed this series to churches and groups, so many came up to me afterward and asked why I didn't start a home to save these babies. I finally took a day of fasting and prayer to find out God's will. The answer was clear from everything I read that day - especially Isaiah 58. His answer was, "Yes." I returned to Ecuador and HCJB said, "No way. We are a broadcasting mission and already have a medical ministry. We can't take on such a project." I figured that was that. I really didn't want the responsibility anyway. In the meantime, I had taken on another little baby born in our clinic of a deaf and dumb mother who had been raped by a married drunk man. HCJB had given me permission to take on Ruthie but had warned if I took anymore, I'd have to resign to begin the home.

One day, Rosa became very sick. Lucrecia and I decided she had appendicitis. I drove into Quito to the hospital with her but the doctor assured me it was not appendicitis and sent us home with medication. When she continued to get worse, I went back to Quito at 3:00 am and again was told it was not appendicitis but to stay and admit her. After many tests, the doctors still felt that it was not appendicitis but decided to operate to see what it could be. By then, Rosa seemed at death's door. While she was being operated on, I was behind the hospital on my knees pleading for her life. "If only you will save her Lord, I'll begin the home for children even without HCJB - alone with you." When I returned, they were just wheeling Rosa out of the operating room. She was already calling, "Mommy, mommy." She

was so weak that they had given her very light anesthesia for the operation. The doctor said, "We did all we could; only God could do the rest." When the knife had cut into her abdomen, the pus shot up to the ceiling from a 48 hour old ruptured appendix. She even stopped breathing during the operation. The doctor said, "Only realize that 95% of the cases at this age (2 years) are found on the autopsy table." The God of miracles was again at work and in one week she was at home running around. Then I knew I had to keep my end of the bargain.

I began looking for property to buy for the home and clinic. Meanwhile, another set of twins was born: two girls weighing 2 pounds 11 ounces and 3 pounds. There seemed little hope they could live. I put them both in our one incubator and Lucrecia and I tube fed them every 3 hours around the clock. One night she would stay up with them and the next night I would. After a month, I felt like my head was not attached to my body since I was so tired. I had only gotten two or three nights' sleep since we always had deliveries on my nights off. Of course, when we got the babies up to five pounds, the mother couldn't care for two so she left Anita with me. Now that I had taken on the third child, I had to make my move from HCJB shortly. The Lord opened the way to buy an 11 acre piece of land across town with a house big enough to start for rent right across the street. The land only cost \$2500 - just a cornfield. By the time we had moved over, I had taken on my first boy. His unwed mother already had two kids and couldn't work to keep them fed with a newborn to care for. She locked up the two kids (ages 2 and 4) in a very small windowless room which was their home while she washed clothes for a living. She would come home late, give the kids a banana and some bread and put them down on their straw mat for the night. That was their life. I took David, the newborn, to save him from such a fate. That same year, I took two more baby boys. Lucho was five months old. His mother

had died of a brain tumor and he was almost dead when he was brought to us. He had bronchitis, diarrhea, and was vomiting, etc. He had to spend a month in the hospital in Quito before we could even get started with him. Meanwhile, Tim was brought at four days old. He was born in a government hospital and already had a severe case of diarrhea and vomiting. The mother was unwed and told she would have to leave her job and five year old girl if she kept Tim. Since it was December 24th and he was only four pounds, I called him Tiny Tim. By New Year's Eve, I sat by the incubator and cried the old year out and the new year in by praying to God to spare this little life. The next day, he ended up in the same hospital room as Lucho. Then came Carola from a widowed mother with a bunch of other kids she was unable to care for. Next Steve arrived. His mother was unmarried and already had two girls so she could not care for him. Priscilla was also a twin. So by the time Rosa was six years old, I had nine children.

After one and a half years of not taking more babies, I wanted to be sure of God's leading to continue. One of my patients told me about her neighbor who had recently delivered twins. I decided to visit the woman. Before I went, I knelt beside my bed and prayed, "Lord, if one of the twins name is Mark, I'll know he is for me. Mark was the name I picked out for my next boy. When I arrived at the hut I found the two week old premature twins in a bed full of junk and old clothes and very, very sick. I asked the parents if they wanted me to take one. When the answer was yes, I asked to see the birth certificate. The second born was named Mark. Talk about clear guidance! Yes, he was mine but I wasn't sure he'd still be alive when I arrived at the clinic. After a week, I went back to see the twin and realized he'd have to be taken too before he died. God miraculously saved them both. Then came Alicia, another twin. Then Patty was brought at two months by a mother with other children. Patty was full of infected sores

from head to foot and couldn't get cured in her home environment. Joe was left by an unwed mother, the sister of Steve's mother. Debbie, another twin, was born twelve days later. Her mother didn't want anyone to know she had twins and never told her own mother. After she left Debbie, it seemed like a futile fight to keep her alive. I'd spend two hours trying to get a couple ounces of formula into her and then she would throw up. I'd just sit there and cry for her. By five months old, God answered the prayers of many and she was okay. Six months later, Christy was born. Her dad was sure it was not his baby since the mother had run off with another man for a while. The mother begged me to keep her since she feared that the father would kill her if I didn't. The father said he didn't want her since he had too many girls already. Becky was born ten days later of an unwed mother. In fact, the mother never made it to the clinic; she was born in the street on the way. I had promised her I'd take the baby so the grandparents brought her and took the mother back home. That month we had six babies left to us but the other four we sent to the US for adoption. Besides the twenty children I took on to raise, I've sent more than fifty babies that I couldn't take to Christian homes in the US. Becky made the 8th baby I'd taken in one and a half years to go along with the nine children who were then three to nine years old. Within ten months, Danny's mother came to deliver. She and her husband were new Christians and had twelve children already. She just couldn't manage another and pleaded for me to keep him and raise him for Jesus. It is sad that none of their other children are following the Lord today, but as sincere Christians, they are very proud to have one who really is. The next year, Susan's unwed mother came to deliver. She had delivered before at our clinic and decided to leave the baby but changed her mind. That baby was now sickly and very poorly kept. The father of Susan was already married to another woman who was three months pregnant when

Susan was born. Neither the mother nor the father wanted to care for Susan so I was glad to take her. The last of my twenty was brought ten months later by her 17 year old father. He said the mother, that he was living with but not married to, dropped the baby in his lap that morning and said, "Here is your baby; I'm leaving." He heard I took babies so he brought her to me. He said he'd be back in a couple of months when he was 18 to sign the legal papers but I never saw him again nor ever met the mother. I signed her up as an abandoned baby. I was secretly glad they never showed up because she was such a doll I was afraid that they would change their minds.

While we were building the clinic, the two homes for the children, the house for Lucrecia, the guest house, the recreation building (used for Good News Clubs, etc.) and school buildings, Lucrecia and I had to draw the plans, obtain materials, hire workers and oversee every inch of these buildings. Construction seemed to be an ever present time consuming job. When I had nine small kids and eight babies, I remember myself painting the entire inside and outside of our second home (with thirteen bedrooms) in my spare time. I soon became ambidextrous so I didn't have to waste so much time climbing up and down ladders and didn't need breaks to rest an arm.

When Rosa went to the government school, she had no teacher for two months as no teacher was available. A boy in her class declared that he was put in charge since he didn't pass the year but was now more experienced than the rest. When the kids got out of line, he would bop them on the head with a big stick but he couldn't seem to keep control. When finally a teacher was provided, the government teachers went on strike for two months. To make a long story short, the only thing she got in her head that year was lice. So I decided to start my own school. I started with one building, fifty students, and no

government permit. It took another miracle to get the permit, being Evangelical. Now the school has 470 students. In 1980, I joined Berean Missions and they have been providing the missionary personnel for it since. I still enjoy teaching Bible and other subjects when necessary there.

The Refuge of the Good Shepherd (that is what our place in Pifo, Ecuador is called) has a wonderful outreach through the contacts of the home, clinic and school. Before joining Berean Mission, God had already used us to establish a church in the unreached neighboring town of Yarequi. It sure makes it easier to plant a church when you can take your family of twenty kids along to be assured of decent attendance. They also made a handy choir (the only choir!) for many years. Since we joined with Berean Mission, three more churches have been established in the Pifo Valley but many more are needed.

Where are the children now? My first, Rosa, graduated from Word of Life Bible Institute and Bob Jones University as a nurse and she is replacing me in the clinic and a hundred other responsibilities while I'm on furlough. This is her fifth year working at the Refuge. Ruthie has cerebral palsy but is a help in many ways. Anita graduated from a four year course at Rio Grande Bible Institute in Texas as did Lucho and Carola and all three are back helping in the work here as well as continuing their studies. Anita teaches in our kindergarten as well as attending the University in Quito. Tim graduated from Grand Rapids School of the Bible in the aviation course last May and, in August, married a girl he met there. They are seeking His will for their future. Steve will be getting his associate's degree in Industrial Drawing at Letourneau College in May and plans to head back to Ecuador. Priscilla graduated from Word of Life Bible Institute and is taking elementary teaching at Appalachian Bible College. Mike is working for

the school in the afternoon and studying in the morning. Mark and Alicia graduated from Word of Life Bible Institute last year. Mark is at Liberty University and Alicia is at Toccoa Falls College. Patty and Christy are in twelfth grade in Ecuador and hope to go to Bible school this fall. Joe, Debbie and Becky are now at Word of Life. Danny plans on Word of Life for next year and Susan (tenth grade) and Nancy (ninth grade) will be heading back to Ecuador with me in June to finish High School at the Alliance Academy.

All this sounds like a very smooth life. It would take a book, which I may write or have written someday when life slows down, to tell of the joys and sorrows, ups and downs, victories and battles, thrills and heartbreaks and buckets of tears through thirty two years of serving the Lord in Ecuador. "He that goeth forth with tears shall come again rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with Him" I've also learned in a very real sense that we fight not against flesh and blood but against principalities and powers.

I thank God for the solid foundational influence in my life of men like Jack Wyrzten, Bob Moon, Brandt Reed, and places such as Houghton, Keswick, and Columbia Bible College. I'm still foolish, weak, and nothing and feel completely incapable for the job God has placed me in; however, I bank on His continued faithfulness and promises. Yes, "faithful is he called you who also will do it."