

TODAY'S **Christian** LIVING

Encourage • Equip • Engage

Love Without Limits

Nick Vujicic feared
he would never
marry — but God
had other plans

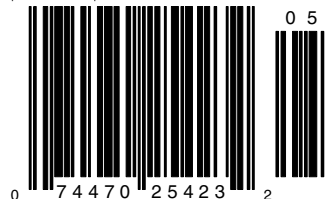
Course Correction

Noted sports
psychologist “Dr. Mo”
finds new life in Christ

In His Embrace

Angie Smith's
greatest test of faith

\$4.95 US/\$5.95 Canada



May 2015

In His Embrace

By Peg Carmack Short

For those who don't know Angie Smith's story, it is easy to look at her and think she must be so blessed in life — and she is. Angie is beautiful and talented, a best-selling author and a well-known speaker. She has a good, loving, and successful husband, Todd Smith, lead singer and founder of the Christian band, Selah. Angie is also the mother of four precious children, as she puts it, "Here are on earth." These children are twins Abby and Ellie, 12; Kate, 9; and Charlotte, 4. Yet her family story isn't complete without mentioning that she has another child, Audrey, who weighed only 3 pounds and 2 ounces at birth and lived only a few hours before going home to be with her Heavenly Father. However, Angie says, "Those few pounds and few hours changed everything in my life ... every situation is colored now from having had her."

What the Smiths learned then, and are still learning some five years later, is a story of God's love and how He carries us in His embrace as we journey through our life on earth.

But long before Audrey's story began, God's plan was already working in Angie's life, preparing her for what was ahead. Angie was not raised in a Christian home, although, she hastens to say, "I have an amazing family." As she shares in her recent book, *Chasing God* (B&H Publishing Group © 2014), "I had a fantastic childhood. I was raised by people who loved me and believed in me, never giving me reason to feel unloved or unwanted."

Finding Jesus

That contentment was almost a stumbling block to Angie's finding God. Life was good and she was happy. Angie wasn't rebellious toward God, but thinking about Him just wasn't really on her radar. At least not until Angie was 23 and a chain of events led her to finding God and eventually having a personal relationship with Him.

While she was in graduate school in Nashville, Angie says, "I had a phone call that my dad had been diagnosed with cancer. At that point, they told us he only had a few months to live."

Shaken by this news, Angie returned home to Cincinnati to be with her family and see her dad.

Reflecting on this time, Angie says, "The Lord has always been sort of dramatic with hitting me over the head with things because I think I'm stubborn and I need it."



*“He has chosen
not to heal me,
but to hold me.*

*The more intense
the pain, the closer
His embrace.”*

- Joni Eareckson Tada

She was so distraught about her father's condition and pending death that Angie says, "I made a bet with God that if He would heal my dad, I'd find out about Him."

On Christmas Eve, her dad received a phone call from his doctor's office saying, "We don't really know how to explain this, but we can't find a trace of cancer anywhere in your body."

Angie's dad is still well some 15 years later.



Photography by Lee Steffen

Angie took her bargain with God to heart. Because her dad's background was Catholicism, she called a Catholic church and found that they were starting confirmation classes the next night. Consequently, she started the classes and, a year later, was confirmed. But, as she explains, "I would say I was trying to understand who God was and had pursued Him from an academic standpoint, but I didn't have a relationship at all."

However, all of that was to change when some girlfriends invited Angie to come to a Bible study. "I didn't even know what that was," Angie says. "I brought the only Bible I had, which was a *Precious Moments*. I went and did the Beth Moore study *Breaking Free*."

It was shortly after finishing this study that Angie accepted the Lord as her personal Savior. The Lord also led her to know Him better when the same girlfriends who had invited her to come to the Bible study, invited her to go to a singles retreat. Again, she had no idea what that was, and thought it sounded terrible. Despite this, she gave it some thought. "I had been in a really difficult relation-

ship for a long time (six years) and was entering that place where I realized some things weren't healthy in my life," Angie says. "So I thought, why not?"

A Model of Christian Love

Little did Angie know how the "why not" would have a lasting impact on her future. At this retreat, she met her now-husband, Todd Smith, who was leading the worship there. As she says, "It is kind of a neat thing that God brought Todd into my life in those early days. He showed me what someone who really loved the Lord looked like and he [Todd] modeled that really well for me."

Todd, who grew up in a Christian home, was the son of missionaries in Zaire, Africa (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo). His grandparents had also been missionaries there. Thus, he had grown up in a legacy of faith that he chose to follow. Unlike some who stray from their upbringing, Todd says he never questioned his biblical teaching. Rather, he was grateful for his rearing because he felt his experiences helped prepare him for his career in Christian music.

Todd and Angie were immediately comfortable with one another so, she says, "I was able to ask him questions about his family life and faith and his experiences in the church." As Angie learned from Todd and observed his walk with the Lord, she says, "All of this helped form that relationship in me."

A Time of Testing

In less than a year after meeting, Todd and Angie were married and their future looked rosy. But as so often can be the case, their "happily ever after" was soon to be tested. Angie quickly became pregnant, but then, around nine weeks into the pregnancy, she miscarried. It was the first time the Smiths had to face the loss of a child, but, sadly, it wouldn't be their last.

Left shaken by the fact that their joy about being pregnant was so short lived, Angie began to have concerns about whether she would ever be able to have children. But she was quickly blessed with a second pregnancy and, this time,

the Smiths discovered they were going to have twins. However, this pregnancy was also fraught with difficulty. Angie went into labor at 25 weeks and was in the hospital for 10 weeks fighting to keep the children from being born so early. "The Lord gave us what we now see as a miracle," Angie says. "The odds definitely were not in our favor."

The twins were born at 35 weeks. Though they were small, they were healthy. Ellie weighed just enough that she was able to come home, but Abby had to stay in the neonatal intensive care unit for a couple of weeks before she was able to leave the hospital. But soon the children were thriving. Three years later, another little girl, Kate, was born. At last, Angie felt they had the happy little family she had dreamed about.

Devastating News

When Kate was nearly 2, the Smiths were just starting to talk about another child when Angie realized they were going to be parents again. They were delighted. The family excitedly began planning for the birth of the little girl they decided to name Audrey Caroline. Then, 20 weeks into Angie's pregnancy, an ultrasound revealed the heartbreaking news that there were numerous problems with Audrey's development that, in the physician's words, were "not compatible with life."

The doctor explained that Audrey did not have functioning kidneys and there was no amniotic fluid. Her heart was so enlarged it took up 80 percent of her chest, so there would be no room for her lungs to grow. There were other problems as well, and the doctor sadly delivered the news, "This child cannot survive."

Stunned by the report, Angie could hardly take in what he was saying. Much of that day became a blur as Angie and Todd talked with doctors and then a genetic counselor. But even in her confused and desperate state, Angie says she felt the Lord urging her not to succumb to her fears.

The Smiths prayed throughout the night as Angie says, "struggling with what was the best way to parent our daughter."

That first night, there were concerns that carrying Audrey might be painful for the baby. But the next day they learned that would not be the case and that there was nothing that would affect Audrey negatively. Knowing that, Angie and Todd felt there was no question, but that Angie would carry Audrey.

Throughout the rest of the pregnancy, the Smiths and their children used their time to love Audrey and tried to do all the things they would want to do with her if she'd lived. Ultimately, they knew she would be born and they would have to say goodbye. It's almost beyond imagining what it must be like to carry a child and know you are going to have to plan a memorial service for her at the same time. As Angie would later share in her blog, written as her way of dealing with this difficult time and helping to update others, "This is the darkest time of our lives, no question. But there is unspeakable joy in knowing how God will use this for His glory."

A Catalyst for Ministry to Others

This was in 2008, and, in hindsight, one can see how prophetic these words were. Angie's ministry — her writing and speaking, her ability to reach out to others in grief — grew from this experience. Each step of the journey has taught Angie more about God's love. Angie says, "I see everything differently now. I also think I anticipate Heaven differently. I have something else there waiting for me that has put a longing in my heart."

To commemorate their daughter, Todd wrote the song, "I Will Carry You." The lyrics of the song include, "So I will carry you while your heart beats here. Long beyond the empty cradle, through the coming years, I will carry you all my life, and I will praise the One Who's chosen me to carry you."

Not only did Angie carry Audrey to term, but, throughout the ordeal, God carried Todd and Angie. Though Angie

says she still sometimes struggles with fear and has to fight not letting all the "what ifs" of life become so big they overwhelm her, she is able to trust Him. Because of her experiences, she says, "I have a better glimpse of what's on the other side and what I'm pressing on to get. I can look back and see the hands of faithfulness and how He provided when there was no way out."

As Angie and her family have learned, in those darkest hours, when life seems painful beyond imagining, God is still there, loving them, pressing them close and embracing them. †

To learn more about Angie's books and Audrey's story, visit her blog, angiesmithonline.com. Angie shares the complete story of Audrey in her book, *I Will Carry You, The Sacred Dance of Grief and Joy* (© 2010, B&H Publishing Group).

Walking Through Grief

Only a month after the Smiths lost Audrey, grief struck them again when Angie's 10-week-old nephew, Luke, died in his sleep. Still reeling from the loss of Audrey, this second death plunged Angie again into the agony of loss. Many have asked Angie: "What is it like to live life after losing a child and how do you cope?" Angie offers many thoughts in her book, *I Will Carry You*, but a few of these thoughts may help you or others walk through grief. Though she hastens to say, "None of us grieve the same way, and one of the best things we can do is to give ourselves permission to live that out."

Here are some things that Angie says helped her:

- Journaling or chronicling: Document as much as possible through journaling, photography, video, art or whatever medium works for you.
- Setting a time to be still with the Lord. I suggest choosing a topic (grace, mercy, loss, redemption,

gratitude, sadness) and begin to study what the Bible says about it.

- Learning to let others help. I had to start saying the sentence I have avoided for most of my life: "I need you to do this."
- Realizing we have a choice how we will relate to life's turns and circumstances. In his amazing work on loss, *Turn My Mourning into Dancing*, Henri Nouwen says something that has shaped many of my decisions since Audrey has been gone. He says, "Will I relate to my life resentfully or gratefully? Part of trying to cultivate a grateful heart is looking for opportunities to share the gospel through my loss and seeking ways to bring God glory through the loss."

With permission from B&H Publishing Group: Adapted from pages 154–156, *I Will Carry You, The Sacred Dance of Grief and Joy* (© 2010, B&H Publishing Group).