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— *John Colyer, pastor, Ankeny (Iowa) Evangelical Free Church*

## **Unanswered Questions**

### **How God worked healing in Ankeny, Iowa**

**by Diane J. McDougall**

Renaë’s first steps out of the wheelchair looked painful—her bare feet still twisted and curled. Yet by holding onto someone’s arm, she was able to slowly start walking. Soon, the 22-year-old was walking the length of the church aisle with her father walking backward in front of her.

“I got this flashback of when she was a toddler, learning to walk,” Bob Norgaard says, “with all her family cheering her on. Yet here she was, my adult daughter, learning to walk again.”

Soon, however, Renaë Norgaard was doing more than walking; she was running—unaided, her wheelchair left behind. After five years of deteriorating health following a car accident; after years of prayers and unrelenting pain and a long, often-dark journey of faith; Renaë was tasting physical wholeness.

People approach Renaë’s story through their spiritual and emotional worldviews: *Does God still perform miracles today? Where do God, modern medicine and alternative therapies interact?*

But those who knew Renaë Norgaard both before May 5, 2007, and after—regardless of their worldviews—cannot deny that Renaë’s body seems to have been healed. The fact that Renaë even traveled out of the country on a mission trip when she hadn’t been out of a wheelchair for six months surely can only be called a grace from God.

*Healing* is not a word the Norgaards often heard or used in their lives before the 2002 accident that eventually imprisoned Renaë in a wheelchair. Bob, Renaë’s father, is an elder at Ankeny Evangelical Free Church, in small-town Iowa.

“I grew up in an independent Baptist church,” Bob says, “where we prayed for people all the time, but I don’t remember ever seeing someone healed. We recognized that the Holy Spirit lives within us and teaches us and gives us words to say, but we never talked about healing and the Spirit’s role.”

### **The beginning**

In February 2002, Renae’s 1993 Oldsmobile Achieva was rear-ended on a busy Des Moines interstate. Although the impact pushed her rear bumper clear into the back seat, her injuries initially seemed minor, and doctors found nothing on x-rays. But the pain, which had started in her neck and shoulders, quickly increased, progressing down her left arm. By the next day, some of the fingers in her left hand were numb.

Soon Renae, 17, could not hold a pencil or sit for long periods of time. Barely able to sleep because of the pain, she couldn’t concentrate, so she dropped out of her senior year at Bondurant-Farrar High School. She was then living at home in Ankeny with her parents and younger sister and brother. One older sister lived nearby and a third sister was attending school in Colorado. No one understood what was happening to Renae or how it would shape their lives and their faith.

As Renae’s symptoms worsened and became more puzzling—including extreme pain and a sensitivity to touch over much of her body—Bob and Dalene Norgaard took their daughter from doctor to doctor, seeking a name, a diagnosis, an answer.

Six months passed before they received one: *Reflex Sympathetic Dystrophy*. RSD.

Nothing could have prepared the Norgaards for that diagnosis. “When I went online, I was horrified,” Dalene says, overcome for a moment with emotion, “horrified at what I saw, because it was a debilitating disease with a tremendous amount of pain. I asked, *God, why has this happened?*”

## **The diagnosis**

RSD (also known as Complex Regional Pain Syndrome, or CRPS I) is a disease of the nervous system for which there is no known cure. Usually it's triggered by trauma to the body—a trauma that can even be relatively minor, according to neurologist and RSD specialist Dr. Masood Hashmi, who treated Renae.

“The best way to explain it in layman’s terms,” he adds, “is that because of the trauma, there is a short-circuiting of the nerves, [which] causes a person to experience constant pain. I consider it a chronic disease, like diabetes or hypertension. Once someone has it, they have it.”

Fortunate sufferers can keep the pain under control, even as it often spreads from extremity to extremity. Those not so fortunate will battle extreme pain every day, every moment.

Renae’s condition slowed its deterioration and seemed to stabilize for almost three-and-a-half years. She was able to walk and occasionally exercise. Pain management, however, had little effect—whether medical or natural.

Physical therapy also did little good, because the smallest of exercises shot her pain up to unbearable levels for days. In fact, her pain levels were so high that she soon became severely sleep-deprived, averaging only two hours a night. Doctors later pointed to that sleep-deprivation as one possible reason her condition began worsening.

Renae traveled to Florida in January 2006 to see Dr. Hashmi, whose practice is based there. She planned to stay for several months, on Dr. Hashmi’s orders; he didn’t want her to return to Iowa until the weather was warmer, because cold exacerbates the symptoms of RSD. So Renae lived with some family friends nearby.

After one month, however, these friends called Renae’s parents, alarmed at how she was now having difficulty walking. When Bob first saw his daughter upon her return to Iowa, he was shocked.

“It felt like someone had kicked me in the stomach,” he remembers. “She was dragging her feet, like elderly people you see shuffling. And she really went downhill in six months—what a normal person with that disease would do in a lifetime, according to the specialist.

“Dalene and I both said that if it were possible, either one of us would take her pain for her, but you can’t do that. There’s just something unnatural about watching your offspring suffer.”

### **Nontraditional medicine**

Fast forward to January 2007. Traditional medicine had reached its limit, so Renae was seeing Dr. Simon Yu—an internist in St. Louis, Mo., more than 300 miles away, who specializes in alternative, complementary medicine. For two months, Dr. Yu explored alternative treatments for lurking infections or imbalances that traditional medicine might have overlooked.

For example, his experience with Acupuncture Meridian Assessment revealed various conditions requiring treatment—including four impacted wisdom teeth. Her dentist confirmed the diagnosis, and all four teeth were soon removed.

Still, Dr. Yu was puzzled that Renae was not yet getting better. In her January visit, after one neural therapy session, Renae passed out from the pain and experienced seizure-like activity and an out-of-body experience. In those few moments, she sensed God telling her that she would soon see her complete healing.

That’s what she held onto even during a puzzling, rapid deterioration from January to May 2007. Soon, her parents or brother had to pick her up and transfer her from bed to wheelchair to bathroom or anywhere else. Her feet and hands curled in from disuse, and she often wore splints, to keep her hands from totally closing. She also experienced alarming drops in heart rate and blood pressure.

Renae didn’t make it to church from November on—the pain alone was debilitating, but the cold weather also made her symptoms worse. In fact, from January until early March, she remembers,

“I only left the house a few times—to go to the hospital or to see Dr. Yu in St. Louis. When I did go out of the house, I had to find a place to lie down right away.”

Renae was using a reclining wheelchair by now, because she lacked the strength to support her head. Another doctor was added to the list she had seen over the years—an internist who made home visits and specialized in hospice care.

### ***God, where are You?***

The entire family found their faith pulled to a breaking point. Each one believed that God was going to heal Renae, *but why was He delaying?* “I can’t put my finger on it,” Bob says, “but there was not a doubt in my mind that her healing was going to happen. Still, I didn’t have a whole lot of patience.”

“What was even harder [for me] than having faith for my healing,” Renae adds, “was believing the goodness of God. I would still come to Him and talk to Him, but I didn’t feel He was safe or just or fair. I had to believe those things by faith.”

Renae’s siblings hung on by faith too—even when their friends advised them not to get their hopes up. Each member of the family wrestled with what they read in the Bible, compared with what others said about healing and what they saw in front of them each day.

Right after the accident, Dalene would have described her faith as, *Maybe God will heal her.* “Then I saw Psalm 103, “ she says, “[where I read] He heals all our diseases. I started saying, *OK, Lord, if it says that You heal all diseases, then I want to trust that You are going to heal Renae.*

“These last few months became really hard for all of us, because she just became worse and worse and worse.”

Renae’s struggle to understand what God was doing was exacerbated by something that had happened in 2002, and that she now calls an incomplete healing.

***God, what are You doing?***

That fall, a group of friends had asked to pray for Renae's healing. Although another group had just recently done the same, with no visible results, Renae agreed. "I was desperate, open for anything," she remembers.

This time, within an hour, her pain disappeared. She lost 12 pounds overnight, shedding the excess water in her system, and gained more energy. Enthusiastic about her healing, Renae started visiting schools, churches, youth groups and people's homes, proclaiming what God had done for her.

But within about three months, her symptoms started returning. Renae fought it for a while, but eventually she knew that the RSD was back, and it was worse than before.

"I had some non-Christian friends at that time who were close to accepting Christ," she says, "and when my health got worse again, they said, 'Why would I want to have anything to do with God when you are believing so much for healing and you haven't seen it? Why would God allow you to suffer like that?' I would feel so responsible for that and so guilty. *God I don't understand this.*"

At one point in January 2004, as she sat angry and bitter in her chair, she found herself reciting verse after verse that spoke about health and healing. After declaring them aloud, she said, "God, something's not adding up here. I grew up believing that miracles and healings don't really happen today.

"But You say that You're the God who heals all diseases. And You say, 'I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a future and a hope.'

"God, I am in harm. The doctors say there's no cure, and I don't really have much of a hope and a future left with this disease.

“I want You to show me if there’s anything I grew up believing that’s not true. If I have to change my beliefs, I’m willing to do it; I’m willing to do whatever it takes to know absolute truth. And I want to know Your heart for healing.”

As Renae and her family were waiting for God to work His mercies in their lives, other believers in the Ankeny community were waiting on God as well, and watching Him start to work. Their stories were about to merge with Renae’s.

### **House of prayer, house of healing**

Bob and Dalene Norgaard’s pastor, John Colyer, had arrived at Ankeny EFC in 2003, when it was about to close its doors. John brought with him a passion for prayer that seeped into the entire church. Within four years, Ankeny EFC had grown from 40 people to 650, with as many as eight people being saved in one three-week period.

Still, John wanted more. He became consumed with the idea of being a prayer-saturated church, “that Ankeny would be known as the church that prays and God answers,” he says.

John couldn’t help but notice that even with all of God’s blessings, they had so many sick people, and few of their prayers for healing were being answered. So in spring 2007, John invited a couple named Pam and Phil Morgan to speak at the church one Sunday morning about Pam’s divine healing. He sensed a momentum building in this area of healing.

Then, just before the Morgans arrived, a member of Ankeny EFC’s mission team experienced an unexplainable healing of a broken arm while ministering in Mexico.

John and the church were at full attention. *What was God up to?*

At Heartland Assembly Church across town, yet another Ankeny pastor was praying and waiting and watching. Several of Renae’s sisters attended Heartland Assembly, and Renae and her mother had visited often, until Renae’s health no longer allowed it. Pastor Dave Olson had led his church to be praying and fasting over the previous four years, asking God to make *them* a

church of healing. And for two years, they'd seen an increase in physical healings that could only be called divine. Renae was on their prayer list, still waiting.

"I tell you," Dave says, "Dalene is a woman of faith, and she kept standing for her daughter's healing, saying, 'God is going to heal her.' But I'll be honest with you: As a Pentecostal pastor who believes in divine healing and has seen a dramatic increase in that in our church, I did not have the faith for that. I was praying more out of compassion than out of faith."

The weekend after Phil and Pam Morgan were scheduled to speak at Ankeny EFC, an evangelist named Leif Hetland was due to speak at Heartland Assembly. Renae Norgaard was praying for the physical strength to attend both.

### **Inner and outer healing**

Sunday morning, April 29, 2007, after the Morgans finished their presentations about God's heart for healing and Pam's healing from paraplegia, John Colyer came forward to the podium, overcome with emotion.

"He was so choked up he couldn't get any words out," Bob Norgaard remembers. "It took awhile to gain his composure. Then he asked, 'Why don't we hear more about this? Why don't we hear about people being healed today?'"

John remembers that morning as well and why it struck him so powerfully. "I'm not charismatic; I'm not Pentecostal. I'm Evangelical Free," he says. "I told our people, 'This isn't charismatic; this is God healing people. God can do this—we ought to expect it.'"

"So Bob's right: I was moved. My wife would say I'm a normal type-A personality who doesn't get too emotional. But I could hardly talk that morning."

When he finally regained his composure, John started naming people in their church who needed healing, including Renae. And people gathered around them and began to pray.

As they were praying, Renae felt some strength returning—enough so that her visiting nurse even noticed. The next Saturday, her sister Tabitha drove her to Heartland Assembly Church to hear Leif Hetland speak about an “orphan spirit”—the belief that God has good planned for others, but not you, and so you live out of a sense of lack, insecurity and striving.

Renae went forward for prayer for healing of her own orphan spirit, something she’d long battled as—from her wheelchair or in-home hospital bed—she’d watched life move on without her. After Leif prayed for her spirit, he asked if he could pray for the healing of her body.

All of a sudden, she could move her fingers and completely open her hands without pain. Soon, Renae could lift her arms all the way up in the air for the first time in months. “When we started seeing healing in one area,” Renae says, “Leif would pray there. After being able to raise my arms, he began to pray for my legs and feet.”

“Can you feel anything?” Leif asked her. Renae expected to physically feel *something* — a warmth, a tingling perhaps. She didn’t, but she did sense even more strength returning and what she calls a supernatural peace.

Leif, however, *was* feeling something. “Put your hand here,” he said to Pastor Olson, looking for confirmation. In amazement, Dave recalls, “It felt like there were 1-inch-thick cables running through her legs with electric shock.”

“Somehow I knew, Renae says, “that I had the strength to stand, so I told him, and he helped me up.”

Soon she was taking a few steps, “leaning into Leif and walking very slowly with her feet twisted,” Dave says.

As Renae started to walk, Tabitha was on the phone to the family, crying. Dalene was out of town, but Bob came immediately and watched in amazement as, surrounded by a loving church family, his 22-year-old daughter again took her “first” steps.

Soon, the children present that evening were encouraging Renae to run, to climb the stairs. One 8-year-old, who accompanied Renae on her laps around the church, later said to her mother: “This is the first miracle I have ever seen in my whole life!”

Within a week, Renae was working out at the gym, with no evidence of muscle atrophy even after some six months of confinement to her bed.

“It was amazing,” Dave Olson remembers about that evening. “We were crying like schoolgirls.”

### **No explanations, no easy answers**

Dave’s heart was pierced perhaps more deeply than most, because he and his wife, Kathy, have a 15-year-old daughter of their own in a wheelchair, crippled from birth by cerebral palsy. “You have all these hopes and dreams for your kids,” he says, “and you look at their physical condition and think, *Outside of a miracle, none of that is going to come to pass.*”

“Scripture says, ‘Hope deferred makes the heart sick.’ A sick heart is a heart that has been disappointed and therefore drops its expectation. My concern is that sometimes we theologize our disappointment; we create a theology that will bolster our doubt, so that we don’t have to get our hopes up again.

“So I’m living in that tension of ‘I believe it’s always God’s will for someone to be healed,’ yet I’m living with a daughter day in and day out who’s not healed.”

In June, Renae traveled to Cuba on a mission trip—the fulfillment of a childhood dream to help reach the nations with the story of her Jesus. As of August, she was still gaining strength and slowly weaning her body from its dependence on so much medication.

One of Renae’s doctors, Dr. Ben Collins, saw her two weeks after the service at Heartland Assembly, and he says he wasn’t completely surprised. Dr. Collins is the internist who had made

visits to the Norgaard home. “I believe in God and I believe in the power of prayers,” he says. “From the first day I met her, I fully expected her to be walking.

“In order to call something a miracle, I like to have a little more thorough background investigation, so I’d prefer to call it one of the mysteries of God. I firmly believe that God, her church and her family had a much greater role than anything I did as a physician. “

Dr. Simon Yu sees an undeniable connection between the medical and the spiritual. “I believe strongly in the power of prayer and faith in healing,” he says, noting that his various treatments helped prepare Renae’s body to respond to the power of prayer. “I corrected as many unsuspecting underlying problems as possible.”

Dr. Masood Hashmi—who has not seen Renae since May 2006—says that there *are* rare cases of RSD where symptoms disappear. Yet it’s most often a temporary reprieve of this chronic disease, with stress causing its return.

Clearly, no one has all the answers. Neither Renae nor her family. Neither the theologians nor the physicians. But God is at work in a lot of hearts and minds, just as He was at work in Renae’s body.

“I think we’ve only got a glimpse of God’s glory and majesty,” says Bob Norgaard. “You know, I thought I had this God thing all figured out: *He’ll do this but He won’t do that*. But God doesn’t want to be put in a box. I don’t have the answers, but what I can say is: My daughter couldn’t walk, and now she’s going to the gym.”

As John Colyer puts it: “I expect God to heal people now; I know it can happen. I believe God *will* heal everything, but a lot of it won’t be on this earth.

“At our church, we’re praying more intensely now for people on our prayer sheet, because we don’t know who will get healed right now. God really wants us to saturate our people with prayer. Put the two together, prayer and healing: I’m just sold on that.

“We put hands on people and pray, but I always tell them that it has nothing to do with our hands; it has nothing to do with the oil we rub on their forehead. It’s all God. When God wants to heal somebody, it’s all God.

“No praise to anybody but all praise to the Lord. He just decided to heal Renae. I believe He healed Renae because Ankeny needs to know Christ. God decided to shine upon us. That’s kind of neat, to be the beneficiary of that. He can do it wherever; He just happened to pick us right now.”

The Holy Spirit’s work in Ankeny, Iowa, is indeed emboldening people to tell others their good news—as evidenced by John’s comments, and by Renae’s passion to go to the world with news of her Savior.

*How* and *why* are questions still being asked by all who know Renae. But without a doubt, God played a part in healing His daughter, and He’s still waiting to be asked and praised and believed in for healing today.

*Please keep Renae and her family in your prayers as she regains strength and enjoys a full physical and spiritual rest with God.*

## Holy Spirit Resources

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*The Complete Worship Leader* and *The Complete Worship Service* (\$11.99 each), by Kevin J. Navarro. The first of these practical guides explains the elements crucial to becoming an effective worship leader: theology, discipleship, artistry and leadership. The second book acts as a follow-up, helping church leaders create a worship service where church members long for, prepare for and experience a taste of heaven.

*Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God*, by Jonathan Edwards (\$9.99). This classic of revival literature offers a thorough examination of the true and false signs of revival, based on in 1 John 4. Edwards concludes that while many a Spirit-led movement is accompanied by excesses and actions of a questionable nature, these negative signs do not necessarily disqualify it as authentic.

*He Who Gives Life: The doctrine of the Holy Spirit*, by Graham A. Cole (\$24.00). In this latest addition to the “Foundations of Evangelical Theology” series, Cole offers a comprehensive theology of the Holy Spirit.

*Hearing God: Developing a conversational relationship with God*, by Dallas Willard (\$12.00). How do we hear God’s voice? How can we be sure that what we think we hear is not our own subconscious? The key, according to the author, is to focus on building our personal relationship with our Creator.

*The Holy Spirit* (Contours of Christian Theology series) by Sinclair Ferguson (\$16.00). With this study, rooted in the scriptural story of the Spirit in Creation and Redemption, the author seeks to recover the *who* of the Spirit as much as the *what* and the *how*.

*The Holy Spirit*, by John Owen (\$7.20). A modernized abridgement of the author’s massive discourse concerning the Holy Spirit, dealing with the name, nature, personality and operations of the Spirit, and urging the need for gospel holiness.

*Just Walk Across the Room: Simple steps pointing people to faith*, by Bill Hybels (\$15.99). The author asserts that evangelism is as simple and as scary as walking across the room. In this book, he guides readers to a fresh understanding of how they can help others meet God.

*Keep in Step With the Spirit: Finding fullness in our walk with God*, by J.I. Packer (\$11.99). Packer restates the Christ-centeredness of the Spirit's ministry, reaffirms the biblical call to holiness, and evenhandedly assesses the charismatic movement.

*Listening to the God Who Speaks: Reflections on God's guidance from Scripture and the lives of God's people*, by Klaus Bockmuehl (\$12.76). The author cites places in Scripture where people heard from God not in words of what was then Scripture but in words that only later *became* Scripture. So, he points out, it is reasonable to suppose that God still speaks directly today.

*Showing the Spirit: A theological exposition of 1 Corinthians 12-14*, by D.A. Carson (\$22.00). A consideration of nuances in the Greek text of these three crucial chapters.

*Thoughts on Religious Experience*, by Archibald Alexander (\$15.99). On the basis of his experience both as pastor and as professor at Princeton Theological Seminary, the author deals with the work of the Holy Spirit in the heart in all its phases, from the new birth until final preparation for heaven.

*A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections*, by Jonathan Edwards (\$23.99). Edwards looks at the nature of true religion as well as the distinguishing notes of that virtue and holiness which is acceptable to God.

*Signs of the Spirit: An interpretation of Jonathan Edwards's "Religious Affections,"* by Sam C. Storms (\$12.79). In this book, one of evangelicalism's experts on Edwards attempts to bridge the gap between what Edwards said in the 18th century and how he might say it today.

*Unceasing Worship: Biblical perspectives on worship and the arts*, by Harold Best (\$12.00). God is, by His very nature, continuously outpouring Himself. Because we are created in His

image, we, too, are continually worshipping, continually pouring ourselves either toward God or toward false gods.

**Not available from NextStep:**

*The Hallelujah Factor*, by Jack R. Taylor (*check Amazon.com for pricing and availability*). An enriching exploration of praise—the full-time occupation of the angels—which will change a believer's life.