

Todd and Angela Owen
Pioneer Bible Translators
P.O. Box 997
Madang 511
PAPUA NEW GUINEA
toddowen@pioneerbible.org.pg



The Last Man Standing

When Angela and I married on August 17, 1991, there were three men standing with me: Kenny Chadic, who was a dear Bible college friend, Chris Cloud, a life-long friend from my youth in Baxter Springs, Kansas, and my best man, Cloyce Lee Owen—my Dad. For some of us, those men who stand with us at the wedding are the most important men of our lives—the ones with whom we want to and will have life-long friendships.

In 1993 Angela was pregnant with our first child (Andrew) and we were traveling all summer long, raising support for our graduate school years at the University of Texas, Arlington, where we were studying linguistics in preparation for Bible translation. Little did we know that before Andrew was born in January the following year, tragedy would find its way to us not once, but twice.

The Monday after we arrived in Texas, we received a phone call informing us that Kenny had died suddenly and unexpectedly of mixed inter-connective tissue disease. He was 28 years old. We traveled back to Kansas for Kenny's funeral on our second anniversary.

A few months later we were headed back to Kansas to celebrate Thanksgiving with family. We received word that Chris Cloud had been driving on a country road with his wife, Teri, and their car was broad-sided by another car. He was 29 years old. Instead of the traditional "day-after-Thanksgiving" shopping trip, we were burying Chris.

Not long after, Angela and I were looking through our wedding pictures and I came across the photo of me with my groomsmen. There we all were on that happy day, goofing around for the camera, teasing one another, having a good time. Kenny was informing me of the joys of marriage (read: joys of the honeymoon), Chris was singing (as he always did), Dad, in his quiet, reserved way was just proud—proud to be standing with me, proud to be receiving such a good daughter into the family, happy.

As we perused the photos, I prayed that the carnage would stop. Of the four of us in that picture, two remained. My prayer was heard and the two of us remained until Friday, June 13, 2003.

Angela and I had gone to bed late on Friday night and only three hours after getting to sleep the phone woke us. "You need to call your family, Todd's Dad died suddenly." I was sure that there was some mix up. Maybe they meant someone else's father. It took us an hour and a half to be able to connect with Mother—the international phone lines were not working right, the connection was terrible, etc. etc. We started trying to call sometime after 4 a.m. and finally made contact around 6 a.m. It was true. Dad had gone to work and a few hours later was complaining of a stomach ache and was feeling weak. He was taken to the front office where the nurse was preparing to check his blood pressure, when he began gasping for air then passed out. The EMT's arrived and began doing CPR, but there was nothing that could be done. He had already crossed the great divide between time and eternity.

Mom told me to just stay in Papua New Guinea, it would be too expensive to fly home. I knew, however, that if I did not go I might not ever heal from the trauma of losing Dad so unexpectedly. I had not seen him in three years—at the airport, hugging his neck, crying, saying goodbye, for what unknowingly would be the last time.

By 4 p.m. I was on a flight out of Madang to Port Moresby, where I would overnight so that I could make my international connection the first flight of the morning to Brisbane, Australia, through Auckland, New Zealand, then on to the U.S.

It was Father's Day when I awoke in Port Moresby. It would be the worst Father's Day of my life, as I hung suspended between heaven and earth, without my own children and without my Father. Worse, because I was flying east

across time zones, it was about a forty-four hour day.

Somewhere in the darkness over the Pacific, in a sleepless haze, I began scratching out some thoughts to share with our family and Dad's friends at the funeral. I knew Dad for thirty-three years of his sixty-six. How could I possibly reduce any of it to a few words of comfort and remembrance?

The day before the funeral, Mother and I went to the funeral home and I spent some time in the viewing room alone with Dad's body. There he lay, stretched out before me, no longer standing. Just lying there. John Derfelt, the mortician, had done a remarkably good job on Dad's remains and he looked as if he could have been sleeping. The only way I knew that this wasn't some elaborate joke was that he wasn't snoring!

As I was alone with Dad's used up vessel, it occurred to me that I am the last one standing. All of those men who stood with me to welcome me into the fellowship of husbands, have gone before me. They are together with the Father, waiting to welcome me into the fellowship of worshipers before the Throne.

During all of this, my pregnant wife and four children were undergoing not only the grief of losing my Dad, but also the grief of separation from me during this most difficult of times. Many missionaries are coming and going from the country right now and a PBT tradition is to see off and welcome folks at the airport. Every time Angela and kids would go to the airport, Hannah, our 2 year old expected to see Daddy, and was sorely disappointed when she didn't. (When she finally did, she just laughed, held me tight, and wouldn't let me go.)

How are we doing? Angela and the kids are doing much better having their husband and father back. I didn't sleep much during my 3 weeks away, so I was pretty comatose the first few days back. I'm pretty emotionally raw and don't really expect to come out of that for a while. We are returning to Uria village in a few days' time to pack up and close up the mission station as we are returning to the United States for our scheduled one-year furlough. We were having some difficult relationships to deal with in Uria, so it will be interesting to see what happens when the village folks find out that we are leaving for a while. Angela is still experiencing a lot of nausea with this pregnancy quite often. We are scheduled to get on the plane on August 11 and arrive in the U.S. on August 13.

While in the U.S., I was able to secure a rental house and get all of the utilities and phone taken care of, so when we return we will have a place to hang our hat. Things are coming together, as well, for our ministry plans while on home assignment. I'll be working with the staff at Christ's Church of Oronogo, our main supporting church, helping develop the congregation in the area of missionary care. I'll also be helping Angela home school our kids and hopefully working on a major academic paper (The Grammar of Somau Garia). We will also be traveling and spending time with our other supporting churches and friends, as well as spending time with family.

Pray for our family as we tie up loose ends here in Papua New Guinea, as we say our good-byes, and as we make the trip home to the U.S. Pray for wisdom as we help the Somau Garia translators set goals and get them set up to *rough draft* the gospel of Luke while we are away. Ask God to give those men confidence that they can carry out the work to which he has called them. Ask God bring unity of purpose and heart to the Somau Garia translation team. Satan has been fiercely opposing them, causing disunity and slowing the work. Ask God to give our family extra strength and endurance as it will probably be an emotional parting, coming so close upon the loss of my father. Major transitions (like moving across the world, having a baby, losing a family member) count for a lot of stress points on the chart. Ask God to prepare us for our time in the U.S. Undoubtedly, we will be experiencing reverse culture shock (I did while home for the funeral), adjustments, etc.

Finally, a word of thanks to those of you who sent cards, e-mails, money, or were able to be with me during the week surrounding the funeral. I deeply appreciated the love and support. Also, thank you for those who were able to be in contact with Angela during my absence from her. Our family felt deeply ministered to during that time.

We'll be able to hug many of you before you read another one of these monthly updates. Look for the next one shortly after we arrive in the U.S.

Grace and Peace to You,

Todd for Angela, Andrew, Samuel, Abigail, Hannah and ??