

# Sorrowful, Yet Always Rejoicing

*A Fallen Soldier's Mother, Barbara Walsh*

Story by Carol Eskaros

It is the call every military mother dreads, the one that changes her life forever. Such was the call that Barbara Walsh received at 9:45 p.m. on St. Patrick's Day, March 17, 2007.

"Ma'am, do you have a son serving in the United States Army? We regret to inform you ..." That very moment would remain with Barbara through her life. Her 29-year-

old son, Army Sgt. Benjamin L. Sebban, had gone home to be with the Lord.

Within minutes of the phone call the Army chaplain and a major were sitting in her family room, explaining that Benjamin had been killed earlier that day when a vehicle laden with explosives detonated near his Army unit in Baqouba, Iraq. As the Army

chaplain spoke to her, all Barbara could think was, "Ben's with Jesus."

"I was just numb," Barbara recalled. Hours later, she began to make her own share of dreadful calls, dialing her sister and Ben's two younger brothers, David and Daniel, to tell them the news. "It was horrible. There's no other way to describe it. It was exactly like Job said after he learned of the death of his children, 'The thing I greatly feared has come upon me'" (Job 3:25a).

## Encouragement from Within

Barbara felt God continually encouraging her in the hours and days following Ben's death. Barbara received support from her pastor, Lloyd Pulley of CC Old Bridge, NJ, who had often prayed for Benjamin during his deployment.

"I used to always email Ben and tell him, 'Pastor Lloyd prayed for you at service today,' and Ben would write back asking the church to pray for the loved ones of fallen soldiers in his unit and others," Barbara recalled. When it came time for Barbara to be lifted up, God used His church to do just that.

As Barbara made preparations for Ben's memorial, God's people stood by her. "Pastor Lloyd stayed with me when Ben's body arrived. I remember it was bitterly cold so he gave me his scarf and just stayed with me. He stood up with me during the entire memorial service." She was encouraged by others in the fellowship as she grieved. Some assisted her with memorial arrangements and have followed up with her since.

## Encouragement from Without

Barbara was encouraged not only by her immediate church family, but also by many others, including military personnel, congressmen, and policemen from Iraq who learned about Ben's death through the media or various military communications. In the month following Ben's death, Barbara received 1,140 phone calls and countless bouquets, plants, emails, letters, and cards from people throughout the nation.

Other grieving mothers also sustained Barbara during the weeks that followed. Some sent her cards, and one even wrote a poem specifically to honor Benjamin. Other platoon mothers later sent Barbara a card on Ben's birthday to encourage her when they knew she would need it most.



Photo by Jenna Kim

Military

Barbara Walsh holds a photo of her son, Benjamin Sebban.

"I felt that God carried me through those horrible days by the flood of support I received," Barbara said. "It was similar to the Footprints in the Sand poem; looking back I see only God's feet because He carried me."

Barbara sensed that God even used a secular national newspaper to give her much needed information about Ben's death. In a detailed piece published in the *New York Times* on April 2, 2007, Barbara learned that Benjamin had seen the flatbed truck loaded with explosives racing toward his patrol base and warned his unit, shouting, "Everybody get down! Get down!" As a combat medic, Benjamin rushed to treat the injured immediately after the blast before succumbing to his own injuries.

Since the article's publication, Barbara has met some of the men who served with Ben; and they were able to confirm the newspaper's account—they were alive because of her son. His story of heroism in the face of death reminded her that Ben was called by God to serve his country and his fellow soldiers. After graduating from Word of Life Bible Institute in Schroon Lake, NY, Ben felt he was called to minister, and Barbara believes his greatest ministry was to his men on the battlefield.

"God's call on Ben's life was clear from the beginning. Benjamin and I used to talk often about the meaning of his name, which means 'son of my right hand,' and I see how God was using his service in Iraq to help



White House photo by Chris Greenberg

Barbara Walsh, mother of Sgt. First Class Benjamin Sebban, is comforted by President George W. Bush after he presented for gallantry at the 82nd Airborne Division Review in Fort Bragg, NC. Benjamin, a Senior Medic in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom, died of wounds received while trying to warn his comrades of an incoming suicide bomb attack. Despite his condition, he continued to treat others

her with her son's posthumous Silver Star until he succumbed to his injuries.



**Benjamin Sebban**

those who were in need in their final hours. It is a great comfort to know that Ben is now at God's side, in His presence."

One of the greatest sources of encouragement came from none other than the president of the United

States. President George W. Bush referred to Ben's extraordinary heroism in his 2007 Memorial Day radio address and invited Barbara to a ceremony in honor of Ben and other fallen soldiers. During that ceremony in 2008, the president honored Ben posthumously with the Silver Star for gallantry.

"I remember the president stopping in front of me [during the ceremony], saying, 'It's hard, isn't it?' And as I cried, he just hugged me and reassured me I would be all right," Barbara recalled. "I just thank God for that hug. I really needed it, and the president knew it."

### God's Voice Early

Looking back, Barbara feels that God specifically prepared her for Benjamin's death. "It may seem strange, but God spoke to me so clearly through a wreath that I had hanging on my door." Having ordered a purple, heart-shaped arrangement of dried flowers for her home just a couple of weeks before Benjamin's death, Barbara felt God telling her this was no simple wreath, but rather, a purple heart. She noted it at the time, but did not fully realize that God was preparing her for the Purple Heart her son would soon earn for his ultimate sacrifice in combat.

Then there was a gentle scriptural reminder. Weeks before Ben's death, God gave Barbara Ecclesiastes Chapter 3, part of which says, "To everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die ... a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance ... a time of war, and a time of peace." During Ben's memorial service and several times after Ben's death, Barbara reminded herself of those words and shared them to comfort others.

"I really didn't know it at the time, but God was preparing my heart for the heavy blow it was about to receive."

### God's Voice Often

In the two years since Ben's death, God has spoken His Word to Barbara to comfort her again and again.

"The Lord has often reminded me from Isaiah 53 that He was 'a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief,' and I have taken such great comfort in that. The Lord Himself knows my sorrow over Ben, and He experienced the same grief, losing His Son."

And through the periods of deep sorrow, including a difficult season as she recovered from knee surgery in February 2008, God continued to minister to her through His Word and through Calvary Chapel's online services. "I was able to listen to great teaching when I needed it most. I remembered again and again, 'In everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you' (1 Thessalonians 5:18). Even in the middle of all of that, God showed me to give thanks for Ben, and for His work in his life and mine."

The Scripture that perhaps best describes Barbara's walk with the Lord since Ben's death is 2 Corinthians 6:10a, "as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing." God has shown her that it is possible to be sorrowful for Ben's loss, and yet rejoice that he is with the Lord and that God is glorified through Ben's legacy.

### A Different Kind of Call

While Ben was clearly called to serve on the battlefield in Iraq, Barbara feels that God has called her to a different sort of battlefield. From the very start, Barbara prayed that God would be exalted through Ben's death, and that He would use her experience to bring others to Himself.

Her call to minister to others began with Ben's memorial service, where hundreds of loved ones, military personnel, and others gathered to remember Ben and learned about his Savior, Jesus Christ. "I knew Ben would have wanted that, so that's what we did," Barbara recalled. Pastor Lloyd presented the Gospel, and since then Barbara has shared hundreds of DVD copies of that memorial service with the men and women she meets throughout the country.

"God is using that DVD, and people all over are still getting the Gospel, even years after Ben's death," said Barbara.



Photos courtesy of the United States Army

Sergeant First Class Benjamin Sebban, center. Upper left, his mother Barbara Walsh is comforted at Arlington National Cemetery. Remainder of photos are from his memorial service in Iraq as his fellow soldiers grieve his loss.

Barbara has also shared her experience with parents she meets as a school nurse, and has been featured on several media outlets. She was invited to speak to hundreds of military family members assembled through the Army's Family Readiness Group. Afterwards, Barbara was able to specifically encourage another grieving mother, and came to feel that she has gone through her loss so she can support others who grieve.

"When I talk to those who have lost loved ones in battle—or even not in battle—I let them grieve and cry, and I listen. To them I say, 'Trust me. God wastes nothing. None of our pain, our loss, or our grief ... He will use it all for His glory.' I love that after the Lord miraculously fed the multitude, so much of the food was taken up so that nothing would be lost."

### An Enduring Legacy

Today, as a monument is being built in Ben's honor in South Amboy, NJ, Barbara continues to take comfort in God's continued work through her son. "Benjamin's body may be gone, but God isn't finished using his life," she said.

"I truly believe that God's very best is for those who leave their choices to Him. I have left my entire life, my children, my all to the Lord. He is my foundation, my rock, and no matter what storms may come—and Ben's death was the greatest storm for me—I will not be moved."

Pastor Lloyd spoke about Barbara's own legacy. "Here's a single mother, raising three boys completely on her own with very limited resources. She was going to school,

working, and raising her boys in Christ, and God used the seeds she planted to grow such awesome fruit through Ben. Her story should give hope to all. I never want to hear someone say, 'Oh, I am just a student, or just a mom, or just a whatever.' Look what God can do with just one life that is totally surrendered to Him."

As God continues to use her testimony, Barbara looks forward to seeing Benjamin again in the presence of God's glory. Until then, she is sorrowful, yet always rejoicing. ☺

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Photo by Jenna Kim

Barbara Walsh at the future site of her son's monument at South Amboy, NJ.