

Our Journey to Finding God in Our Lives

When we found out we were expecting a second child, we thought it'd be as normal and smooth-sailing, and perhaps even non-eventful (in a good way), like how it was with our firstborn, Lucas. It turned out to be a journey described by many as tough, but to us, it was a journey that brought us so much love. It was life-changing.

First trimester

Throughout the first trimester, I continued to juggle between work and caring for Lucas. I had the occasional cramps and the gynae had advised against carrying Lucas, who was by then almost 10 months old. I refused to heed her advice. At 10 weeks, during a routine check, the gynae gave me the all-clear even though I had complained of relatively bad cramps that day. Two days later, while I was out alone at lunch, all ready to do some Christmas shopping before heading back to work, I started bleeding.

Blood could not stop flowing down my legs. The sight frightened many bystanders who had feared the worst. I was hysterical with fear and could not stop wailing. God was kind. He sent many good Samaritans to help me, and very soon, I was wheeled into the ambulance to be sent to the hospital. I had almost given up hope. I thought I had lost my baby for sure, judging by the amount of blood that was lost. But I prayed. I prayed the Hail Mary throughout the entire journey to the hospital. I also asked baby to please remain strong for I love him so much. I was utterly relieved when an ultrasound scan showed that baby was still moving well inside me and his heartbeat was good. I was hospitalised for the next four days, with a scare on Christmas Eve about his heartbeat dipping, but as I continued to pray the rosary, his condition improved and I was discharged on Christmas day.

Five days later, we did the OSCAR test to test for Down's Syndrome, as suggested by the gynae, and the result came back with an odds of 1:2 chance of our baby having Down's Syndrome. The gynae suggested we consider our 'options'. Devastated as we were, we refused to give up and we sought a second opinion – a reputable gynae whom my sister had gone to for both her pregnancies. The new gynae suggested I concentrate on recuperating from the bleeding episode first, and then undergo an amniocentesis test, which would be 99.9% accurate in testing for Down's Syndrome and other genetic / chromosome anomalies.

By this time, my loving aunts had rallied around me with their support and spiritual guidance. They taught me how to pray. They re-introduced me to God. For the first time in my life, I started understanding what having faith truly meant.

Second trimester

17 weeks

I underwent the amniocentesis procedure at 17 weeks. We waited two weeks for the result and finally, we received good news from our gynae – no Down's Syndrome, chromosomically normal. We are having another boy, and I knew then I was going to name him Matthew – God's gift. I prayed that the rest of the pregnancy journey would be more smooth-sailing from then on.

20 weeks

At 20 weeks, during a compulsory detailed scan which would allow the sonographers to check on Matthew's anatomies, organs, etc., the doctor suspected that Matthew's heart was asymmetrical and had a high likelihood of a congenital heart condition. In denial and disbelief, I had another detailed scan done the same day, albeit at another hospital. The finding was the same.

In order to allay our fears, our gynae scheduled for a detailed cardiac scan to be done by one of the top paediatric cardiologists in Singapore. I remained hopeful. But at the end of the scan, the cardiologist delivered crushing news to us - Matthew has a rare condition called hypoplastic left heart

syndrome, and would require multiple surgeries that would not guarantee his survival thereafter. My mind went blank. My heart turned cold upon hearing words like “would turn blue”, “would gasp for air”, “currently sustained by mother that’s why he is doing ok as a foetus” and “do consider termination, you have until 24 weeks to do a legal termination”. I ran out of his office crying. I thought God had deserted me at that point. There was no way I was giving up my baby, whose movements by then could be felt by me. How could I give up on him when I had earlier told him to stay strong inside of me?

And yet, the thought of him gasping for air when he’s born, and the pain of multiple surgeries, left me feeling totally helpless.

But by then, my mind was made up. Even if I were to hold him for just a mere moment, that moment was mine forever and no one could deny a mother and her son of that moment. I would go through anything and everything just for that moment.

However, many loved ones around me persuaded me to reconsider my decision. Even though my aunts told me to stand firm on their faith in God, I found it tough defending my baby and my decision from others’ unthinkable suggestion.

Ultimately, it didn’t matter what others said. Only one other person’s opinion mattered, and that was my husband. But as long as he remained torn and conflicted, I too felt his pain. We were both hurting and I prayed to God for a miracle. For a change in Matthew’s condition before 24 weeks was up, so that everyone around me would be convinced that truly, God can do all things.

God had other plans for us. He worked His miracle alright, but in His own way.

3 days after that diagnosis, my husband came to me looking very serene and happy. It was such a contrast from the pained expression I had seen in the days before that. He then proceeded to tell me that he had confided in his boss, a Christian, about Matthew’s condition, and his dilemma. How he couldn’t see things from my perspective. His boss, with God’s grace, managed to enlighten him, and by the time their conversation had ended, my husband’s mind was made up – he was bent on keeping Matthew come what may. And with that, he bent over and spoke to Matthew over my tummy, and told him he’s sorry for even considering the unthinkable, he loves him, and we’re keeping him no matter what.

At that moment, the burden weighing me down was lifted. My heart soared free. I no longer felt pain. I knew then that Matthew was healed and I cried tears of joy. God had worked His miracle when He managed to change my husband’s heart.

Final trimester

28 weeks

The days, weeks and months after the diagnosis, up till today, I started praying with trust and confidence in the Lord. With guidance from my aunts, I prayed the rosary, the Divine Mercy, and I learnt all about Eucharistic Adoration. I attended Masses too and many times, I found myself so touched by God’s love for us that I would just tear up.

My favourite time was during Eucharistic Adoration. To be in the company of our Lord is such a blessing. I found myself constantly pouring out my thoughts and worries to Him. I’d find my faith renewed and strengthened each time. Although I’m not baptised, I truly felt God’s love and was often in awe.

It was during this time that our gynae suggested we seek a second opinion from an esteemed professor highly regarded by many in the field for his knowledge on ultrasound scans. On the day of the scan, I was nervous about the outcome. And yet, I didn’t feel overwhelmed by my anxiety. As I was waiting for my turn, these words were spoken to me in my mind – “Why do you fear, Yoke? I am here with you.”

I knew then that the Lord was with me and I should have no fear. And rightfully so, when the professor told us that Matthew's heart anomaly is not that of hypoplastic left heart syndrome! Praise the Lord! He has created yet another miracle for us! We were informed that we could consider Matthew's heart a variation of a normal heart, and there was no reason why I couldn't treat this as a normal pregnancy.

Words cannot describe the joy I felt then. It wasn't an overly-thrilled kind of joy. It was a very peaceful and serene feeling that filled my heart. Even till today, I thank God that He gave me the strength and courage to never consider termination. If I had, I'd never ever in all lifetimes, be able to wash myself clean of the sin of taking my unborn child's life. Science didn't give him a chance at first, but God did, and truly, God can do all things as long as we place our faith, trust, love and confidence in Him. God did not disappoint, even though we are not worthy.

32 weeks

We returned to the professor for a follow-up when I was 32 weeks. This time, there was a new diagnosis – intrauterine growth restriction. It basically meant Matthew was not growing well inside of me, not being able to absorb my nutrients. He was 1kg then when he should have been about 1.8kg. Professor firmly insisted I transfer my antenatal care to him, so that he and his team would be able to closely monitor Matthew and I on a weekly basis. I agreed.

While I was saddened by the new diagnosis, I knew that all would be well with Matthew, for I could feel his movements constantly and I knew he was growing in his own way.

35 weeks

At 35 weeks, professor decided that 37 weeks was the latest I could keep Matthew inside of me without endangering his life. A Caesarean-section was scheduled for 21 June 2012. I was not comfortable with the idea, even though I knew that the doctors were being guided by the Holy Spirit and I would not go wrong following what they had said. I would have much preferred a natural delivery but the doctors were concerned about the stress on Matthew's heart if he had to make his own way through the birth canal. Eventually, I decided to surrender myself and Matthew, and the mode of delivery, to God. I told myself that if God intends for Matthew to be born via a natural delivery, then it would certainly happen before the scheduled Caesarean-section date.

One day at Eucharistic Adoration, I closed my eyes for a brief moment and saw the most beautiful face of a young lady. Her beauty startled me. That day, Matthew was very active inside of me. That day, was the Feast Day of the Visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The lady whom I saw, I was certain it was the Blessed Virgin Mary.

The Birth

On 21 June 2012, 9.16am, Matthew was delivered via Caesarean-section. He weighed a healthy 1.990kg. His first cries brought tears to me.

A team of neonatologists was on standby to thoroughly examine him and he was sent to the Special Care Nursery for close monitoring. But before that, my aunts had specially arranged for Matthew's baptism by Fr. Joachim. As Matthew was wheeled out of the operating theatre, Fr. Joachim was there and his baptism was carried out swiftly. As it was always intended to be, Matthew is now a son of God. Blessed is he, and blessed are we.

By evening of 21 June 2012, after an ultrasound scan and an MRI scan on his heart, it became apparent to the cardiologists that Matthew could have a heart condition called Coarctation of the Aortic Arch. They did not want to cause us undue concerns before they could be 100% sure, and informed us that they would be sending him to the Neonatal ICU for close monitoring. We suspected nothing.

The Manifestation

Matthew did well in the Neonatal ICU. He was on room air, he did not need any ventilator, and he was even able to suckle his milk from the bottle. And yet he remained there for observation.

Five days after he was born, the doctors finally informed us about his heart condition. I knew then that a surgery was unavoidable. I felt my entire world torn apart. My precious baby, who is already born small, would have to undergo heart surgery! The pain I felt in my heart was indescribable.

I asked the doctors if we could wait and see. Maybe God would work another miracle and his heart would heal and he wouldn't need surgery! I doubted the doctors' intentions and asked them bluntly if they would make Matthew go under the knife unnecessarily. I wasn't the nicest and easiest parent for the doctors to meet and update on a daily basis.

But my eyes weren't lying to me. Matthew was starting to have difficulties breathing. He couldn't drink his milk without getting breathless, as it was too taxing on his heart to do so. He was then put on tube feeding. In terms of his progress, we were starting to go backwards from where we had started. Watching this was just as painful as the thought of him undergoing surgery.

I questioned God for making Matthew carry this cross at such a tender age. The very things I had constantly prayed for not to happen – ICU, surgery, deprivation of the loving touch of his parents, missing out on the warmth of the place he should call home.... All of that were happening right before my eyes. I couldn't accept it, even as my aunts and sister continued to rally around me, telling me to have faith.

Eventually, I prayed to God for guidance once more. I asked for His will to be done. And one day, after speaking with the surgeons and cardiologist, I came to terms with Matthew's need for surgery. This surgery would give him a high chance of his heart being restored to fullness of health. Why should I not take it?

The surgeons then explained the procedures to us. Because of the unique structure of Matthew's heart, they were not 100% confident that they could operate on him via the usual lower risk way of entering from his side. They would still try, but if they realise that they are not able to, they would have to close up his side and perform a higher risk open heart surgery on him. I sobbed uncontrollably and came close to throwing up upon hearing this.

But God is merciful. He had assembled for us a very strong surgical team. And a very compassionate one at that. Seeing how distressed I was, the head surgeon, a renowned surgeon in Singapore, actually squatted down by my side, patted me on my shoulders and assured me he would do his best.

The Surgery

As one aunt had said to me, many people stormed heaven for Matthew with their prayers. How blessed are we to have loved ones and people who never knew us, praying for us. I was fortunate to have had Fr. Damian, Fr. Henry and Fr. William pray over me while I was still pregnant with Matthew and I was assured of their prayers. Fr. Damian subsequently anointed Matthew at the hospital days before his surgery. Many other priests had also prayed for Matthew to be safely brought into this world, and for the success of his surgery. My aunts and sister prayed constantly too, offering many Masses for Matthew, and had so much confidence that he would be ok.

I prayed in my own way. I talked to God a lot. I pleaded with Mother Mary for her intercession. I had faith that God would not make us carry a cross heavier than what we could bear. I knew what that limit was, and I prayed that God knew too. But at the same time, I was also a worried mother who couldn't stop crying as Matthew was wheeled into the operating theatre.

Barely three hours into the surgery, and my husband's mobile phone rang. My heart sank, for the surgeons had told us they would call only if Matthew needed to undergo the riskier open heart surgery. But it turned out to be good news from the head surgeon himself! The surgery was completed. It was a success! His heart was repaired; the surgeons were pleased with the outcome.

They were all smiles. Praise the Lord! Thanks be to God! My entire body shook with joy and relief as I burst into tears and thanked the surgeons profusely.

The Restoration

Even as I write this, the surgeons and doctors have been pleased with the progress of his recovery and have already discharged him from the ICU to a step down unit. The tubes and lines that were inserted to help him breathe, to monitor his vital signs, have also come off. I too have stopped crying. I finally understood that God did answer my prayers by restoring Matthew to fullness of health. Granted it wasn't in the way that I had demanded of Him, and why should it be? He had His own plans for us. Who was I to demand anything of the Lord? But God is merciful and He answered my prayers. Matthew is well.

If this trial hasn't brought me closer to God, then I don't know what would. I may never understand why He chose for me to undergo this trial, but I do know He wanted to establish my value. God tested me but at the same time, He sent me many supporters; without them, I may not have passed this trial at all. His love and mercy has humbled me tremendously and I pray that I could reach out to others who may be experiencing a difficult time, and inspire them to place their trust and confidence in the Lord. May this testimony be a start.

The night after the surgery, my husband asked me for the very first time, how to pray to God. As he stood in front of the altar and said his thanks to God and Mother Mary for her incessant intercessions, I knew then, that this family has changed forever. We would forever have God in our hearts, and we are slowly but surely becoming a family of faith.

Thanks be to God.

Testimony by Heng Yoke Khee
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