

The Apostle Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 15:54 "So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory." On January 22, 1997, the King family felt the victory of God's love in the face of death, when Russell, with pale skin and purple lips raised his weak body from his bed, looked up and smiled saying, "You don't understand ... no one understands," gasping his last breath.

At birth, Russell King, my identical twin, was diagnosed with a congenital heart defect that claimed two chambers of his heart. In addition to the single ventricle and common atrium, the doctors also discovered that his heart was transposed and his pulmonary system was incomplete. Life expectancy for Russell was a mere two to five years at that point. Having overcome the threat of death more than twice by the age of sixteen, the situation became suddenly grave for Russell and his close-knit family in September of 1996. It was determined that Russell was getting weaker and would possibly not live beyond two weeks.

Darla King, Russell's mother, broke the news to me, his twin brother, in a tearful, yet strong manner, while Russell was out with our grandfather on a routine comic store visit. She explained that she would be taking a leave of absence from her teaching job at Hawley Elementary to be with Russell at his doctor's suggestion.

Shortly after the explanation, Russell entered the living room of our two-bedroom apartment, where my mother and I sat attempting to appear strong. His blonde hair radiated like a halo above his parchment-white skin and glistening blue eyes, displaying a joy we didn't know how to gauge in light of the recent news. Behind him, our grandfather, Ray Dunavant, walked through the door with an equally calming aura that reinforced the joy

Russell so naturally exuded. The truth was that nobody, including Russell, knew what trials were ahead or how long God would work through his illness.

Two weeks passed, and though Russell showed increasing signs of weakness and shortness of breath, he remained joyful and strong in his faith. As October arrived, cold air began to fill the small city of Abilene, Texas, making it increasingly difficult for Russell to breathe. His heart lacked the strength to pump a healthy amount of blood to his lungs for oxygenation, further complicated by his single ventricle. His weakness became more pronounced with each passing day, and we made an effort to encourage him in the midst of his trials, unaware that God was planning to strengthen us through the dying, 16-year-old boy.

At night, he slept in our mother's room so that she could monitor his condition. He refused to cry in our presence; however, we could often hear soft weeping as he prayed to God alone in the bathroom, only in those rare moments when he had the strength to bathe himself. During these times, it was not uncommon to hear him cry angrily, "God, why me?" He came to my mother distressed with his vacillating emotions toward God, not wanting to disrespect him or his plans. But Russell was scared, tired and, yes, sometimes angry. Our mother explained that God knew what burdens he had allowed her son to bear and that God understood his cries.

It was a crisp autumn afternoon in October, a day in which Russell was feeling fairly well. Having heard about Russell, Bill Whitaker of the Abilene Reporter-News was coming to our house to interview him. He talked to Russell about how he had turned down a heart transplant option three months earlier, an operation that Russell felt he would not survive. He also asked about Russell's interests and about his relationship with me. The article appeared Oct. 22, just three days before our 17th birthday. It

received a high volume of response as a jarring situation within the community. Russell's ministry was about to grow.

In mid-November, as Thanksgiving approached, Russell's health took a sudden turn from bad to worse. He was taken to the hospital with little expectation of survival through the night. Our mother sat by his bedside, praying diligently. She recalls, "The next morning, Russell asked the doctor if staying through the day was really going to help him get better. When the doctor said it wasn't going to change the situation, Russell said he wanted to go home so he could die in his own bed."

Notably, his lungs had begun to fill up with fluid as his heart failure intensified, and he was terrified of "drowning". He began to pray, "Lord, you know that I will do whatever you want me to do, but I am just so scared of drowning, so please don't let that happen to me." Miraculously, his lower torso began to swell as it became engorged with fluid, and even though his breathing was extremely labored, he never felt like he was drowning in a lake of fluid. His little feet began to look like huge balloons, and they finally got many little ruptures from the immense pressure of the fluid in his tiny 70-pound body. He was in an extreme amount of pain but never lost heart. He wanted to walk to the den one evening; knowing what pain he was in, I offered to carry him but he replied, "No, I can do this. If Jesus could handle those nails through his feet, I can handle this pain." It was similar comments that continually amazed those around him. They had never witnessed such amazing, unwavering faith.

Russell's aunt, Jan Clark, reminisced about his faith in the midst of pain. "He told me that he accepted his suffering as if it was for the Lord. He said, 'Like the blind man in John 9, I was born like this so that the works of God could be seen in me.' He was so committed to telling others

'about Christ and was never embarrassed to share what he believed," she said. What an example he gave us to follow!

By December, it was obvious that God's plan was not for Russell to die by any mortal prediction. Russell used this time to witness and tell others about Jesus Christ, to tell his friends and family how much he loved them, to get his loved ones ready to part with him, and to prepare his funeral service. Christmas had come and gone, and we had seen a new year in with Russell. It was 5:00 a.m., January 22, when Russell awoke our mother and asked her to sing "Heaven Is A Wonderful Place" and some other childhood favorites; he asked her to read some Scripture, then said, "Okay, we can go back to sleep now. I just needed to hear some songs and verses from the Bible." It was routine for Grandpa to come every morning, and it was about noon when Grandpa kissed him goodbye for the last time. Russell asked mother, "Who is at our house?" She replied that no one but the two of them were there. "But, I hear a lot of voices," he said. Little did mother know that they were heavenly voices, and in the next moment Russell uttered those final words, "You don't understand! Nobody understands!" One thing we do understand, though, is that Russell King lived a life that death cannot silence.