

My Heart Story

Danny Acuna

On August 25, 2022, I had a one-day business event in Chicago. My return flight was Friday morning 8/26, the following day. That morning, I woke up with a headache and was very tired. I attributed it to not having slept well due to the dry air of the hotel room. As I began packing, I started to feel nauseous as if I would throw up, and a few minutes later I did. As I was finishing up packing the feeling came back and I threw up a second time. At that point, my headache improved and I thought it was almost going away. I went downstairs and got an Uber. On the ride to the airport, I began to feel sick again. I told the driver I did not want to make a mess in the car and asked if he could pull over so I could throw up. He quickly pulled over; I threw up a third time, and we were on our way. A second time the same thing happened and this is when he suggested we stop by CVS to get me an electrolyte drink and something to neutralize my stomach. He parked, went inside the CVS, and came out with a drink and gum for me to chew. He told me "You are going to be alright. I have been praying for you. You are going to be fine." As we continued the trip to the airport I began to feel better. A few moments later, however, I began to feel pressure build up in my chest and I started sweating profusely. My shirt was sticking to my arms, and I was beside myself not knowing what was going on. This is when the Uber driver suggested we get help. He drove a few minutes to get closer to a local trauma hospital and then called 911. Parking at an intersection, he called 911 and identified himself as an Uber driver with a passenger in distress. He communicated his exact place in the intersection, his vehicle make, and model, and that he would have his hazards on. Once he got off the phone, he put on Christian music and began to pray for me. A few minutes later an ambulance arrived. Upon arrival, the EMTs guided me into the ambulance where they began asking me questions while they hooked me up to an EKG. Shortly after I began to feel sick again and threw up one more time. What followed was another episode with chest pressure and sweating and that is when I was given a nitroglycerin tablet under my tongue to reduce the heart's workload. The second episode did not last as long as the first. I was driven to the ER of Mt Sinai Hospital, a hospital on the south side of Chicago. Shortly after arriving, I was given blood thinners, connected to an EKG monitor, and was stabilized. They took blood to run tests and to see what was going on. When the blood results came back, I showed to have a Troponin level (an enzyme released by the heart when there is heart damage and under stress) of 88. The normal range is 0 – 20. So much had happened in such a short amount of time, I still was not sure what was happening to me. While I was waiting for another set of lab results to arrive, I asked the nurse if they knew what was going on. "You are having a heart attack", she said, "Your heart is under stress indicative of your troponin levels". That is when it finally hit me that I was going to miss my flight back to Houston and my future as I knew it was uncertain. As they continued to run tests throughout the afternoon, my level when from 88 to 632 and it would pick at 9200 Saturday morning.

As I was settled in the ER, I called Virginia. I told her what had happened where I was and that I was stable and was about to be admitted to the hospital. Virginia began to look at the possibility of flying either that night or the next morning. We were not sure if she could bring our daughter Lorena given possible visitation rules that would prevent her from bringing her. After weighing all the options, we decided that Lorena would stay behind with my brother and Virginia would travel alone. She quickly reached out to our families, our church, and circle of friends which initiated a non-stop blanket of prayer over our family. We also had people offer help in many ways, one of them offering to pay for Virginia's ticket to Chicago. **This was a lesson that God would teach me, to allow others to bless us. Sometimes in our affluence, we are self-sufficient in how we can afford things. We weigh options and face circumstances with our abilities and resources. But in doing so we rob others of participating in the blessing that it is to help our Christian brothers and sisters.** We gladly welcomed the help from this wonderful family. They not only paid for the ticket but also took care of all the logistics of booking the flight, so all Virginia had to do was get the itinerary and get to the airport. Virginia flew into Chicago that night

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and spent the night at her brother's home. The following morning, we spent trying to understand what had happened and weighing our options. The doctors mentioned that they wanted to do an angiogram so that they would see what blockage, if any, was in the heart, and if possible, place a stent. The only problem was that they couldn't do that over the weekend due to scheduling conflicts, so it was scheduled for Monday morning. At this point, Virginia got in contact with a family friend Lourdes, who is the Chair of Pain and Anesthesiology at a large trauma Hospital in Chicago. She calmly informed Virginia on what we needed to know, the questions we needed to ask, and the decisions we needed to understand regarding my condition. There were times when we did not know how to proceed and she would explain to us in a very calm demeanor to help us understand our options. Throughout our journey, we would experience a fog in front of us where we didn't know how to proceed. Lourdes would explain our options, we would pray, and the fog would lift, leading to the next step we would take with peace from God. Lourdes was a steady hand at the helm in the middle of the fog, God using her at every turn to give us the wisdom to decide and most importantly get His peace after having decided which way to go. Lourdes got in touch with a colleague of hers who is an anesthesiologist at Mt Sinai hospital to inquire about their Angiogram team. He confirmed that the team at the hospital was good and that getting the procedure done there presented no risk. The weekend was a waiting period for Monday's procedure.

Monday arrived and the procedure was pretty uneventful. I found myself in the recovery room waiting to see the cardiologist. Virginia arrived while I was in the procedure and was in the waiting area. When the doctor came to see me, I noticed he was visibly nervous. He said that the angiogram had gone well, but they had been unable to place a stent because my heart was severely blocked. What I didn't know at the time was that he had already talked to Virginia and had communicated with her that I had the LAD 100% blocked, and that I had 70% to 100% blockage in 5 to 6 arteries around my heart. This obviously took us by surprise. We thought that we were going to be facing a few stents, spend the night in the hospital, and then fly home late Tuesday night. The conversation with Lourdes now changed to finding a good hospital to get the surgery done in since we knew this hospital had a poor post-op reputation. She consulted with the chair of the cardio-thoracic unit at her hospital who recommended two top hospitals in Chicago. She would be able to get us a surgeon and bed at one of them that very day. While this certainly was a blessing, we really wanted to get back to Houston, to be back home to be with our family before, during, and after the surgery. The problem was that we didn't know any cardiac surgeons in Houston and were not even sure if I would be allowed to fly. I reached out to a former coworker of mine who works at Houston Methodist Hospital Research Institute and asked her for a good cardiac surgeon. She was floored when she heard my story and said that she would get back to me. She quickly replied with a name: Gerald Laurie. As we continue to ask in our other circles, his name popped up a couple of times. Virginia obtained his number and called the office. The office accepted my paperwork and said we could request him only at the hospital. Now the problem was coordinating a transfer from one state to the other. Hospitals can do transfers within a city or even within the state where an ambulance drives you to the receiving hospital. We quickly realized that doing a transfer was not going to be feasible. I was going to have to be discharged from Mount Sinai Hospital, get on a plane, fly to Houston, and be admitted to Houston Methodist Hospital where Dr. Lawrie would operate on me. The problem was that I needed to be allowed to leave the hospital. If I went against medical advice, I would run the risk of my medical insurance not covering any treatment done in Houston. This was another blessing from God because Mount Sinai Hospital is a very deficient hospital, not only in staff, and technology, but also in the way that they handle their entire standard operating procedures. Realizing that we had multiple doctors advising us on the entire matter, and that we had a surgeon in Houston waiting for us to get there, they did not require us to sign any Against Medical Advice forms. The crucial part now was being certain that I was okay to fly. Lourdes got on the phone with the Chair again and after telling him

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my situation in my condition asked him "If he was your brother, would you be ok with him flying?". He said that if I was stable, and didn't have any palpitations or shortness of breath, it was a calculated risk that we could take. I would have to be monitored until we were discharged, go straight to the airport, fly to Houston, and upon arrival, drive straight to the hospital to get admitted into the ER.

Monday night we had to tell our adult children, Andres and Ana about the findings and about our plans to get back to Houston. Neither seemed shaken up, but I knew it had to be hard for them. I had been reading 2 Corinthians during August and in chapter 1:8 Paul recounts how they had faced many afflictions to the point of fearing for their lives. Paul adds that this was so that they would rely not on themselves but on God, on whom they would set their hope. He also says that they (the Corinthians) must help them in prayer so that many will give thanks "...for the blessings granted us through the prayer of many." While talking with Ana I was sharing with her **another lesson I had learned through this ordeal. How important it was for us to share our burdens and circumstances with one another so that others could share with us in thanksgiving.** I encouraged her to share what she was going through with RA and her friends so that them being part of those praying for us, will eventually share in the thanksgiving as a result of God working all things out for His glory. Throughout the conversation with Ana, a custodian lady was cleaning the other side of the room after my roommate had been discharged. After getting off the phone she asked "Are you a minister?" I replied that I was not but asked her what made her think that. She said that she did not mean to eavesdrop, but that she had overheard my conversation. I gave her a quick summary of my story, and how I had been talking to my daughter, about **how when we ask for prayer, we allow others to participate in the blessing of seeing God act around us.** She said "I am getting chills just listening to you tell me this. God is so good." Here I was, encouraging my daughter while at the same time God was using the conversation to encourage and grow the faith of someone that I had just met. **God is always at work around us.**

Tuesday was all about gathering medical records, and much like Friday night, a logistical game of finding and booking a non-stop flight out of Chicago's Midway airport that we could make with enough time after being discharged. Again, our friends that had paid for Virginia's trip to Chicago arranged our flight back to Houston. Virginia had to drive an hour and a half to the northern suburbs where she was staying with her family, gather her belongings, and be driven back to the south side where I was to be taken to the airport. We had to get all this done with enough time to make it to the airport on time. My previous experience with hospital discharge procedures told me it would be many hours before getting discharged. I asked one of the doctors about the length of the discharge process, who assured me that it would take about an hour. The discharge process at that hospital took only 45 minutes. After being discharged, I waited for Virginia to make it to the north side, and back to the south side again. The entire round trip would take her 3 hours. As I waited sitting down in normal clothing (but still connected to their telemetric system that monitored my heart), I found myself in awe at how God, in so little time, had orchestrated such an amazing logistical feat. While I waited, I started wondering if I could get a hold of the Uber driver from Friday. A large portion of me being alive was due to his quick thinking in getting me help. After looking around in the app I discovered a feature designed to contact previous drivers in the event that an object is left behind. I called the driver and identified myself as *the guy that he had dropped off at the ambulance on Friday*. He said "Oh man, it is so good to hear your voice! I wondered what had happened to you. I am so glad you are ok!" I told him that he was Tile #1 in a story where God had displayed His amazing power, grace, and providence, a story that was still unfolding. I mentioned that we are planning on spending either Thanksgiving or Christmas visiting family in the Chicago area and that I would buy him coffee to tell him this entire story. He said he would take me up on the offer and said that his son was next to him in the car as they

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were going to practice and that God was using this story to strengthen his faith as well. He added “You don't know this, but I changed my name to Solomon Malachi Emmanuel. This means God’s Messenger of Peace.” This was another display of God's grace, mercy, and protection that for some reason decided to be instilled upon me in this ordeal. God orchestrated that at the beginning of this entire experience, I had God's Messenger of Peace giving me peace in the middle of the uncertainty.

Shortly thereafter, Virginia arrived at the hospital with our brother-in-law and we drove 20 minutes to the airport. Our flight back to Houston was uneventful and I spent it just thinking about the mercies of God, His providence, His grace, I just worshipping him for who He is. It was also another wonderful time for Virginia and I to talk and compare notes of the entire weekend, as well as her sharing some of the conversations she had been able to have with her family. Throughout all this, as she was spending time either with her brother or at her mom's she had been able to share not only what God was doing in our lives, but also the peace we had knowing that through this completely chaotic time, God was in complete control and giving us the peace that surpasses all understanding. Not being believers, this was completely foreign to them and something they could not square: how in the middle of the uncertainty, in the middle of this major crisis, Virginia was so calm, being able to trust in God that He was putting all the pieces together.

When we arrived in Houston my brother picked us up from the airport and drove us to Houston Methodist Hospital. We planned to go to the ER and after telling them our situation, hoped that I would be admitted to the hospital. On the way to the hospital, we called Lorena, our youngest, to tell her that had made it to Houston, but we would go straight to the hospital because I needed surgery. We had intentionally waited to be in Houston to talk to her because we didn’t know how at her age, she would take the news. As we talked to her on the way to Houston Methodist, she seemed very calm. Later we asked her how she took the news that I would be facing open-heart surgery. She said, “well, you didn’t seem worried, so I wasn’t worried either.” The peace of God that surpasses understanding allowed us to pass that to our children. God was in the middle of the entire thing.

As we drove to Houston Methodist, I knew in my mind that God had to act. Because I was asymptomatic, I feared they would not believe the gravity of my situation and would just turn me away and send me home, leaving me to have me talk to my doctor the following day as to what to do next. I began to pray for God to give me the right words to be able to summarize this very complex story in just one single sentence so that the nurse would understand and be able to see that I needed to be immediately admitted and monitored. When I walked up to the desk and was asked what was wrong, I managed to tell them that I had been on a business trip in Chicago, had a heart attack, had been in contact with Dr. Lawrie’s office, and had been advised to go to the ER so that I would be admitted into the hospital to have the surgery within the next few days. The nurse clarified “You mean Gerald Lowrie?”, to which I said yes. He then asked me to sit down. After two and a half hours, an EKG, and other tests, I got to see the ER cardiologist. He said that he had received an email from Dr. Lawrie and that they were expecting me. After seeing my records, he kept looking at me because he could not understand how someone in my condition, with that much blockage, was in such a stable condition, or even alive. He said “Yeah, it's really bad. You are blocked everywhere. We are going to admit you, and we are going to do surgery on you.” By 4:00 in the morning on Wednesday I was sitting in a bed at Houston Methodist Hospital Dunn Tower’s Cardiac Unit. By the grace of God, I had been saved from dying in an Uber on my way to the airport, I had been discharged from a really bad hospital on the south side of Chicago, blessed by so many with prayers, well wishes, and physical, tangible help, and had been guided literally over the air from Chicago to Houston and given a name of a surgeon that would do operate on me. The following day I Googled Dr. Lawrie. I found out

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that he was Dr. Michael DeBakey's, right-hand man. Dr. DeBakey had asked him to join his team and had spent 20 years performing surgeries next to this world-renowned cardiac surgeon. God had not only orchestrated my arrival to Houston arriving at one of the best cardiac hospitals in Houston Texas and the world, but also gave me one of the best cardiac surgeons alive.

Thursday afternoon Dr. Lawrie visited me with his team on Thursday. He is, unlike any surgeon I had encountered, a soft-spoken man, with a very gentle demeanor. He explained that we would need to give my heart time to be strong again and wean off blood thinners before the surgery. We would have the surgery the following Tuesday, September 6th.

Faced with about five days of waiting, I felt I needed to get with a daily routine. I would wake up, make my bed, read my bible and then read other books. Friday night as I lay in bed about to fall asleep, a fear come over me. What if I never get back to 100% after the surgery? What if my cognitive state is not the same? What if my condition worsens? What if I can't keep the same pace of life I had before? How much was all this going to cost? How was I going to be able to afford this? I began to ask God why I had this sudden fear. Why doubt? Then I began it to thank him for being alive, for my wonderful and amazing wife, for my family, for friends that constantly checked in and were praying for us, and for the friends that helped us along the way, all orchestrated by God. I had to remind myself that He is always there, always faithful and that I did not need to fear whatever came next.

Saturday morning as I woke up, I had an amazing peace over me. I had breakfast and opened my bible to read. I usually read my bible in silence, but for some reason that morning I felt I wanted to play Christian music as I read. I opened a worship music playlist on Spotify and selected random play. There is nothing random with God. The first song that played was David Leonard's *I will Wait* from his album *The Wait: Silence the noise*. The first words of the song go:

In the morning, I will rise up

Shed the darkness, and bathe in Your light

And I recount all, every blessing

The words You've spoken, that bring me new life

I am reminded from where You have brought me

And where You have placed me for today

And I won't forget that Your hand will hold me

Your love sustains me through the wait

I will wait on You, Lord

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God yet again, orchestrated that song through Spotify's random play feature, to encourage me in the middle of the wait, to remind me from where He had brought me, and to drown out the noise and wait on Him. The funny thing is that I do not recall ever having added it to the list.

On Sunday, friends of ours come to visit. I filled them in on details of the story and shared details they had not heard about. I also shared what I had gone through Friday night, and how one of my fears was all the unknowns about my situation, including not being able to afford this entire bill. One of them said "Well, you didn't go ahead and spend frivolously and get yourself in debt. This is God's plan, so this is God's bill, not yours" His words would serve to encourage me to continue to trust God.

I had surgery on September 6th, was discharged on September 12th, and went back to work on October 3rd. I have had good days and bad days but the one constant thing and steady force throughout my recovery has been the peace from God that surpasses all understanding. You would probably look at me today and have no idea of what I went through. Sometimes I forget myself. Often times at the end of the day when getting ready for bed I take my shirt off, and looking at myself in the mirror, I see the 11-inch scar on my chest. It is then that I am reminded from where He has brought me and where He has placed me for today.

Soli Deo Gloria,

Danny